

ZEN OF THE PLAINS:
DISCOVERING SPACE, PLACE, AND SELF

by

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B.A., Dartmouth College, 2004

M.A., University of Wyoming, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Geography
College of Arts and Sciences

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

With their windswept ridges and wind-rent skies, prairies and plains have often been denigrated as nothing but nothing—empty, meaningless, valueless space. Mountains and forests, oceans and deserts have been praised and protected while vast expanses of undulating grasslands have been plowed under, grazed over, used, abused, maligned. Once the largest ecosystem on the North American continent, wild prairies now persist mainly in overlooked or unwanted fragments.

In part, it's a matter of psychology; some people see plains as visually unpleasing (too big, too boring) or physically alienating (too dry, too exposed). It's also part economics; prairies seem more productive, more valuable as anything but tangles of grass and sage. But at heart, it's a matter of sociocultural and individual biases; people seeking bucolic or sublime landscapes find “empty,” treeless skyscapes flat and dull, forgettable. Scientific, social, and especially aesthetic appreciation for plains requires a different perspective—a pause in place—an exploration of the horizon as well as an examination of the minutiae, few people have strived to understand and appreciate undifferentiated, untrammelled space.

This research seeks to change that by example, using conscientious, systematic reflection on first-hand experience to explore questions fundamental to phenomenology and geography—how do people experience the world? How do we shape places and how do places shape us?—in the context of plains landscapes. Written and illustrated from the perspective of a newcomer, a scholar, a National Park Service ranger, a walker, a watcher, a person wholly and unabashedly in love with wild places, the creative non-fiction narratives, photoessays, and hand-drawn maps address themes of landscape aesthetics, sense of place, and place-identity by tracing the natural, cultural, and managerial histories of and personal relationships with Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park, South Dakota's Badlands National Park, Kansas's Konza Prairie Long-Term Ecological Research Station, and Wyoming's Fossil Butte National Monument. Prosaic and photographic meditations on wildness and wilderness, travel and tourism, preservation and conservation, days and seasons, expectations and acceptance, even dreams and reality intertwine to evoke and illuminate the inspiring aesthetic of spacious places—Zen of the plains.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Kevin Blake

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Dedication

For my parents: Jon C. Olstad, who has instilled in me senses of freedom and curiosity and encouraged me to live life as an adventure; and Jane L. Olstad, who has been my rock, my map, my guide back to the world every time I've ventured too far.

With love,

t.

Preface : A Brief Meditation on Places, Plains, Expectations, and Emptiness

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

—A Cup of Tea, first of 101 Zen Stories from *Shaseki-shu* ("Collection of Stone and Sand")
Transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps (1957, 19)

This, says the novice, is how it will go:

"I will examine, describe, and discuss the characteristics of four grasslands, chosen for their variability, accessibility, and personal familiarity : Konza Prairie Preserve / Biological Research Station (tallgrass prairie located in Kansas, managed jointly by The Nature Conservancy and Kansas State University); Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland (mixedgrass prairie in South Dakota, managed by the National Park Service and US Forest Service, respectively); the Red Desert (shrub-steppe in Wyoming, overseen by the Bureau of Land Management); and, ultimately, Petrified Forest National Park and Wilderness Area (also shrub-steppe, but in Arizona and preserved by the National Park Service). In so doing, I will illuminate similarities and celebrate differences, arriving at a greater understanding of peoples' relationships with short-, mixed, and tallgrass prairie places."

Ha! The sage laughs, Wingless, you fall from the clouds.

(Translation: You live on the earth. You cannot contemplate places omnisciently from above or afar; you can only say what you know and believe. Before you ask others to elaborate on sociopolitical, psychological, ecological, and geographic constructs, you must cultivate understanding of yourself.)

Then this, the novice returns with bigger, brighter ideas, is how it will go:

"The ecosystem will be divided neatly into parcels of rock and earth, grass and trees, birds and bison, sky. Each of these biophysical attributes will be a vehicle for sociocultural sub-themes—an overview of American grasslands' environmental history, to begin with, then a discussion of landscape perception, interpretation of the aesthetic experience, et cetera, moving from the most solid of theories through to the most ethereal of ideas."

Ha! The sage sits, On a clear night, the moon is in every puddle.

(Translation: You cannot separate the sky from the earth, untangle roots from soil; you cannot say what the rain feels like without recognizing its shape and sound and taste. You, in fact, cannot do anything once excised from participation by passive verbs.)

This?, the novice, relentless, restless, starts to get a little anxious, *is how it will go?*:

“Having learned from masters such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Paul Gruchow, and Rick Bass, I will rearrange my notes to reflect the arc of a year. I will begin in the dead of winter, when the prairie is coldest, darkest, most desolate, then proceed through the riot of spring, the adventure of summer, and the urgency of autumn before settling back into the stillness and grace of a cold, white dawn. The spirit of each season will inform essays on place-attachment and place-identity and inspire appreciation for neglected landscapes, no?”

Ha! The sage rises to gaze out the window, *the snow is melting, but the geese have not yet returned.*

(Translation: As with space, time. You cannot expect the sparkle of a frosty trail in Kansas in January to be the same as the howl of a blizzard in Wyoming in December, the lush green carpet of mixedgrass in South Dakota in June to reconcile with the parched steppe of Arizona in July. You cannot pretend that nearly a decade’s worth of fleeting impressions accumulated in a tidy progression of hours, days, or months.)

This!, the novice gasps, grasps, losing any sense of control, *is how it will go!*

“I will interview my parents, re-read my letters to my grandmother, my emails to friends! I will scour sketchbooks, notebooks, dredge up every detail and untangle dreams from truths! I will recollect my first trip to the Great Plains; I will remember how I became involved with public land management, recreate my first internship at Petrified Forest National Park, then my second, third, fourth, fifth seasons as a Park Ranger; I will reflect on my work at Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland; I will reconsider Konza Prairie Preserve / Biological Research Station; I will revisit and revise previous research, finally face former demons, search books, journals, newspapers, attend lectures, meetings, talks, try to understand and synthesize principles and prolegomena of ecology, geology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, American history, American literature, religious studies, political science, photography, cartography, geography, anything and everything that can explain how and why I fell in love with wide-open, wild places! Then I will return to the Wilderness Area at Petrified Forest and, there, I will nestle in and make sense of all this data; there, I will corral ten years of scattered experiences into a cohesive, meaningful document; there, I will write, draw, map!”

Please! the novice begs, *How will it go?*

, the sage pauses, silent. Instead of shouting *MU!* or giving the novice a swift kick, she turns, smiles, walks away.

(Translation: Stop asking for translations.)

Ahh, the novice gives up and steps outside, out into the pale, cool prairie dawn, *This is how it went.*



Figure 0-1 : Map of relevant locations.

Extent of contiguous prairie based on The Nature Conservancy 2008 and Bailey 1980

Prologue : Flyover Country

Scottsbluff, Nebraska

Flat, brown, and plenty of it. This is how the land looks to many travelers crossing the plains.

— Kevin Blake, “First View” (2006, 10)

A hot, hazy afternoon. The June sun was glaring down on the dusty brown earth and distant black cattle and Dad and me, sitting in a Piper Cherokee, slowly buzzing our way west. It was our fourth day in that little plane. We had begun the trip full of enthusiasm, lifting off from KIAG (the Niagara County Municipal Airport) into a broken sky while the sun pierced through thick clouds to illuminate islands of light on Lake Erie. The next day, we had slipped between tidy white puffs and their neatly-spaced shadows on the checkerboard fields below—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin. Past the muddy meanders of the Mississippi (the Mississippi! I’d never seen the Mississippi!), the land began flattening out, drying browner, browner, brown brown brown. Thin strips of road cut unnaturally straight lines toward the horizon, occasionally intersecting in sharp, desperate 90-degree angles; tiny bovine dots clustered just as desperately at infrequent watering holes while bzzzz the engine droned on above them, were we actually moving or just hovering, suspended in time and space? It was hard to tell.

We were on our way to Colorado (Colorado!)—Rocky Mountain National Park. I had never been to Colorado, or even west of the Mississippi. Aside from a few trips to visit family in North Carolina, Ohio, Albany, I had rarely ventured far from the same house on the same street in the same semi-rural community in Western New York. When my parents offered to take me on a trip for a high school graduation present, *Colorado!*, I told them, I want to go to that legendary place called *Colorado!* To see *mountains!* Real, high, rocky *mountains!* (I think I’d seen a generic Western landscape photo in a calendar in third or fourth grade, dreamed of the Rockies ever since?)

Of course, to get to Colorado from Western New York, we had to cross the Great Plains—that sparse, dull, desolate stretch of grass and dirt that yawns across the middle of the continent. An Empty Quarter. The Great American Desert. Flyover Country.

The thought of flying over anywhere intrigues my father, who is a recreational pilot. He suggested that instead of taking a commercial flight, we could borrow a single-engine Piper Cherokee and fly ourselves. That way, as he put it, we could see a bit of the country along the way, go wherever our whims and the weather led us. It sounded fine to me (at that point in my life, I couldn’t comprehend how much distance, how much land, how much *space* stretched between New York and the Rocky Mountains), so I agreed to pack up a tent and boots and aviation charts and fly west.

At KAOH (the Allen County airport in Lima, Ohio) the first night, another pilot heard we were bound for Colorado and suggested aiming for Loveland. *There’s a National Park nearby*, he said. *Okay*, we replied, happy to have a destination. In KDPC (Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin) the next night, we ate fried catfish and watched the Mississippi meander by—a grand, muddy threshold to the West. By KYKN (Yankton, South Dakota), though, I was beginning to suspect that some of my universal concepts—“space,” “time,” “travel”—might need to be rethought.

And then, on the fourth afternoon—one of the longest afternoons of my life, hours and hours and hours in that loud stuffy cockpit, headset so tight on my brain, land and sky, land and sky, so harsh on my eyes, land and sky—I was tired. Thirsty. Had a headache. Ate an apple. Nearly a century after Willa Cather wrote *My Antonia* (1918), as yet, “the only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska.”

Finally, as the light began to stretch toward shades of early evening, Dad and I gave up hope of seeing mountains on the horizon and radioed in to KBFF—the Western Nebraska Regional Airport in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. As usual, we knew nothing about the town where we happened to land. *Where should we eat dinner?*, we asked the man who refueled the gas tanks, *where should we stay, anything in particular we should see or do?*

Well, there’s the actual Scotts Bluff, he replied, *you could go see that. It’s the main touristy thing here.*

We borrowed the airport’s courtesy car and drove out to the landmark. There might have been an entrance sign, a Visitor Center, something telling us we were in a National Monument (please stay on the trail, don’t harass the wildlife?), but really I don’t remember a thing about the place—nothing about geology, ecology, any cultural and historic significance. I only remember the *feel*—the air, cooling comfortably; the light, lingering softly; the space, so much *space*! We had just enough time to walk to the bluff, touch the earth, breathe the sky, before the purple-periwinkle dusk descended and there we were, out on the plains.

The sun touched the southwestern horizon. We stopped whatever we were doing and faced it.

‘Every night we go through this,’ Devin said without breaking eye contact with the sunset. ‘Everything’s going to be different here. In thirty seconds.’

...As the sun shrank, the light turned tepid. Devin pointed straight at the bright, sinking knob, saying, ‘Watch it. It doesn’t even pause. This whole thing is wound around us, some kind of great machine that’s about to close us out. There it goes. There...there...’ He inhaled when it happened. The light flashed out.

‘Done,’ he said. He turned to me. His voice was softer now, a little crazy. ‘Now, here we are.’

—Craig Childs, *Soul of Nowhere* (2002, 123)

When European and Euro-American soldiers, missionaries, fur traders, and emigrants made their first tentative tracks into the interior of the North American continent, they encountered a wasteland—a stark, desolate, uninhabitable “dreaded obstacle to be endured” (Sheppard 1995, 302; see also Kinsey 1995, 186; Rossum and Lavin 2000, 545; Shortridge 2005). The environment was so unfamiliar that people didn’t even know what noun to use to describe it at first: French fur traders borrowed a term for “woodland meadow”—*une prairie*—“as a kind of metaphor for this big, wide, sparsely wooded, windswept world” (Savage 2004, 3; see also Woiwode in Lopez and Gwartney 2006, 279). In 1820, Major Stephen Long published a map with the label “Great Desert,” suggesting that “the prairie was a sterile, barren, Godforsaken place, boring, monotonous, violent, and closed off from possibilities ...beyond redemption” (Scanlan 1990, 201; see also Sheppard 1995, 50). The reality—stretches of tall, dense grass

and/or scraggly brush—is something in between woodland meadow and true desert; ecologists today use the terms “grassland” and “steppe” (Askins *et al.* 2007; Samson, Knopf, and Ostlie 2004).

The terrain, meanwhile, often consists of rolling hills, ridges and ravines, wide rivers and thin washes, but is most often thought of as flat—purely, relentlessly, pancake-pan flat. Perceived lack of relief inspires another, not-quite-synonymous term: “plain.” Plain old planes—perhaps an apt description of two-dimensional expanses that generally lack landscape features. After Canadian Alexander Henry the Elder upgraded the pejorative “Plain” to ambivalent “Great-”ness in 1776, William Gilpin enthusiastically repeated and geographically expanded the toponym “Great Plains” in 1857; John Fremont’s cartographer formally added the vernacular region to a map in 1848 (Rossum and Lavin 2000, 545; see also Sheppard 1995).

Semantics aside, mid-nineteenth-century emigrants knew they faced a long haul across “barren, arid” stretches of country that separated them from their far western promised lands (National Park Service, Oregon Trail National Historic Trail 2005). After weeks of dirt, grass, and sky, travelers on the Oregon Trail welcomed the sight of Scottsbluff not least for the visual relief of vertical topography. Plains territories enjoyed a glowing if brief perceptual and demographic boom in the mid- to late-1800s when political, promotional, and climatic factors (passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, publication of numerous brochures depicting the Great Plains as an Edenic garden, and a multi-year stretch of slightly wetter weather) convinced thousands of settlers to try claiming their own 160 acres in the heart of the continent (Shortridge 2005; Rossum and Lavin 2000). Eager homesteaders rapidly privatized and plowed under the easternmost tall- and mixed-grass prairies, but realized that they would need to own and/or use larger tracts of land in order to survive on the short-grass prairies and semi-desert shrub-steppes of the western Great Plains, Great Basin, and Southwest—drier, rockier terrain that would barely support livestock (Flores 2001; Shortridge 2005). Though the federal government expanded available range parcels to 640 acres through the Desert Land Act of 1877 and Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916 (Hess 1992; Baden and Snow 1997; Loomis 2002), no amount of legislation could overcome the stark reality of “the nation's hottest summers and coldest winters, greatest temperature swings, worst hail and locusts and range fires, fiercest droughts and blizzards” (Popper and Popper 1987). When the Dust Bowl blew through, many settlers wearily conceded, “[w]e were mad to settle the West in [this] fashion... You cannot fight the sky” (Eiseley quoted in Norris 1993, 110).

At the same time that farmers and ranchers were trying to scratch a living out of the dusty soil and volatile seasons, wealthy Easterners were speeding across the plains in search of sublime scenery. With their imaginations ignited by late 19th and early 20th century promotional materials (travelogues, newspaper articles, landscape paintings, and, soon enough, photographs), an “ever larger and always curious national population” took trains to “a region of mythic character and a place where ordinary Americans could experience extraordinary things” (Wycoff and Dilsaver 1997, 1 and 2, respectively)—the West. Before reaching the rugged mountains, shadowed forests, and sparkling waters (as well as the luxurious resorts) promised by the railroad industry’s “See America First” campaign (Runte 1990; Shaffer 1996; Wycoff and Dilsaver 1997), however, tourists had to get across that unimaginable “immensity of open space,” notable only for its “overpowering sense of vastness... indescribable feeling of solitude, [and] mighty loneliness,” as Walter Marshall described it in his 1882 travelogue *Through America; Or, Nine Months in the United States* (quoted in Retzinger 1998, 223). According to Jean Retzinger, who analyzed a half-century’s

(1866-1906) worth of advertisements and first-hand accounts of railway journeys across Nebraska, “[f]or many [early tourists], the landscape possessed even fewer distinguishing characteristics; emptiness and absence seemed its most noticeable attributes” (1998, 224). So much open land, adds Dakotan Kathleen Norris, “evokes in many people a panicked desire to get through it as quickly as possible” (1993, 151).

Scorn for emptiness and absence—amplified by loneliness, sadness, and panic—continued to plague prairies during early- and mid-twentieth century tourism booms in America. Enabled by a growing road system and increasingly affordable personal automobiles, citizens went in search of the “sublime, picturesque, and uncanny” landscapes preserved in National Parks and reproduced in the rugged photographs of Ansel Adams and romantic paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran (Sheppard 1995, 302; Giblett 2007, 337). As historian Jerry Sheppard notes (1995, 302), “[f]lat and monotonous grasslands” could hardly compare. According to standards of landscape design, prairie lines are too simple, their form too flat, colors and textures too bland to be beautiful; “[n]othing is there,” scenic management specialist Neil Evernden explains the woes of wide horizons (1983), “no things to measure or enjoy...nothing to possess.” Even Aldo Leopold, that giant of environmental ethics, doesn’t know whether to chide or confess (quoted in Saito 1998, 101): “When hoping if not expecting to be entertained by the grand, amusing, and spectacular parts of nature (such as in national parks), we find the...plains ‘tedious.’”

A feedback loop between artistic interpretation, environmental preservation, and increased visitation has heightened the gap between scenic parks and the seemingly “unpaintable,” “unmonumental,” and plain planar Plains (Sheppard 1995, 359 and Kinsey *et al.* 1996, 274; Kinsey 1995, 186). The “early lack of appreciation” (Sheppard 1995, 305) persists today in the form of “westbound travelers [who] have little inclination to take the time needed to understand the simpler and smaller beauties of the plains. They want mountains” (Blake 2006).

Oh, right. Mountains.

The next day, Dad and I continued on to Rocky Mountain National Park. There, along with hordes of other tourists, we blithely claimed a campsite, headed to Estes for dinner, drove the scenic routes (parking our rental SUV in the middle of the road to snap photos of elk, need be), and, of course, tried to summit Longs Peak. (It was a little higher than I’d expected.)

What *had* I expected, though, other than to see some beautiful country, meet some interesting characters, perhaps learn and forget a few facts along the way? I can’t speak for Dad and am even less capable of remembering for myself, ten years and Arizona, Kansas, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Alaska later. I’m not really sure what I was expecting from that first trip to the grand, mountainous, capital-W West, if anything.

But it certainly wasn’t Scotts Bluff, Nebraska.

[W]hile I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls, the upper Yellowstone and the like, afford the greatest natural shows, I am not so sure but the prairies and plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, and precede all the rest...what most impress'd me, and will longest remain with me, are these same prairies.

—Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (1879)

Chapter 1 - Shortgrass / Semi-Desert Shrub-Steppe

1.1 Terra Incognita

Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

Beautiful! Beautiful! Magnificent desolation!

– Buzz Aldrin, the moon



Figure 1-1 : Dust storm in the Painted Desert (seen from Chinde Point, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona).

A cold morning, mid-November: wind whipping fiercely; grey clouds hanging low over miles and miles and miles of scrubby sagebrush flats and sandy arroyos and the occasional tumbleweed or dust devil or raven swooping by. At that time, though, I didn't have the words for "sagebrush" or "arroyo" or "raven," so was left with nothing but an empty horizon and big black birds.

I had been driving driving driving for hours, following Interstate 40 into northern Arizona, where I was to report for an internship at Petrified Forest National Park. Although I wanted a bit of adventure—anything other than another long cold winter at college in New Hampshire—I was beginning to wonder just what I was doing, where I was going, how I could possibly pass the next four months in such a place. (Such a place! Were there *any* people here? What *were* those birds?) Having spent my life comfortably surrounded by family and friends, maples and squirrels, rivers and roads, I was both intrigued and terrified by the yawning desolation of the landscape—a sense of nothing but cold, windy, open space.

Space.

When I finally saw the sign for Exit 311—white letters on a brown background announcing "Petrified Forest National Park"—I pulled off the Interstate, slowing from seventy miles per hour to thirty, then ten. The

slower I went, the scrubrier, dustier, more desolate the place looked. Interpretive displays at the Visitor Center tried to convince me that the semi-desert shrub-steppe brims with wonders, but a few paragraphs of text and nineteen minutes worth of introductory film hardly gave me time to internalize information. (*Antiquities Act? Artemisia? Aur-o-car-i-ox-y-what?*) My mind was reeling as I got back into my car and started to drive down the park's twenty-eight miles of neatly paved road. A half-mile or so later, just before the first scenic overlook, I came around a curve and felt the earth drop away or the sky lift up into a delicious, dizzy onset of agoraphilia.

There it was: the Painted Desert.



Figure 1-2 : Painted Desert Unit (Petrified Forest Wilderness Area).

The Painted Desert is a land of red-orange-purple-brown-beige-black-tan-striped clay hills, sharp sandstone ledges, winding washes and pockets of prairie that stretch in a polychromatic arc across northeastern Arizona. By formal classification standards, the region is not technically a “desert” but rather a shrub-steppe or shortgrass prairie, marked by an arid climate and predominance of low, woody vegetation (Bailey 1983; USDA Forest Service 2004). Long before ecological equations and regional maps could inform the public of this fact, Spanish explorers affixed the term “desierto”—“El Desierto Pintado”—to the barren but beautiful land they encountered on their quest to locate the Seven Cities of Gold for Francisco Vasquez de Coronado. Lieutenant Joseph Christmas Ives and his Colorado River Exploring Expedition formalized use of the toponym “Painted Desert” in 1858—five years after Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple wrote about “quite a forest of petrified trees” he had discovered while surveying the 35th parallel.

By the turn of the twentieth century, these fossil forests had become an attraction for railway travelers. An increasing number of early tourists were so intrigued and delighted by the colorful crystalline wood that they arranged to cart large chunks back home with them. Afraid that the dwindling deposits might disappear altogether, local enthusiasts—including John Muir, who moved to the arid southwest in an attempt to recover his health and well-being and interest in the world after a set of personal tragedies—urged President Theodore Roosevelt to exercise his newly-granted ability to preserve sites of superlative cultural and/or geologic merit for all present and future generations of American citizens (via the Antiquities Act of 1906). Thus Petrified Forest National Monument—one of America’s first Monuments—was born. Congress conferred National Park status in 1962, protecting the jumble of geologic curiosities as well as a diverse array of other significant resources: fossils dating to the dawn of the dinosaurs, centuries’ worth of Native American artifacts, tracts of shortgrass-steppe, and, of course, breathtakingly beautiful scenery.

The Painted Desert. To the Diné, or Navajo people, the southwestern swath of their reservation is not a noun but a clause: *Hal chiiitah*, “amidst the colors.” Hopi and Zuni descendants of earlier inhabitants—the Ancestral Puebloans—consider the region *Assam unda*, or the “country of departed spirits.” Meanwhile, if you look at a park map today, you’ll see not just “Petrified Forest” or “Painted Desert” but fifty-two-thousand-acres of capital-‘W’ Wilderness, established “for the permanent good of the whole people” (Public Law 88-577) by Congress and National Park Service officials on 23 October 1970.

Shrub-steppes and Spaniards; spirits and skeletons; Wilderness. That’s what I was looking at on that Novembery morning—Wilderness. A lot of wilderness. I knew no names, no list of attributes, no management plans or preconceptions of “place,” just tangled-earth, stormy-skied, meaningless, memory-less space.

Space.

Of course, there’s no such thing as “wilderness” or “empty space,” no terra incognita wholly unknown to and unaffected by man (Wright 1947; see also Cronon 1995; Foreman 1994). Scientists and surveyors, settlers and travelers have traipsed about if not tried to live on nearly every inch of the earth’s surface, including the Painted Desert. If the long legacy of place-names isn’t proof enough that people have known the area for ages, it’s open for public consumption in professional journals and postcard booklets, photo albums and travelogues, satellite images

and a 1:24000, 7.5 minute topographic map, available for purchase at the Painted Desert Visitor Center. Moreover, the land itself riddled with physical traces of inhabitation and use—petroglyphs and pottery sherds, stone tools and building blocks, railroad tracks and Route 66, roads and buildings and bridges. The Painted Desert is not a geographic unknown.

But it was unknown to me.

As J.K. Wright happily champions the place of the imagination in geography (1947, 2), “[w]hether or not a particular area may be called ‘unknown’ depends both on whose knowledge and what kind of knowledge is taken into account.” Observed or derived, physical or abstract, personal or cultural, what do people “know” of their backyards much less the entire globe? Society in general may be aware a place called the Painted Desert exists, but that doesn’t mean that every American can locate it on a map; scientists may be able to list species and soil types, but will never be able to identify and explain all of the phenomena that make up the smallest patch of prairie. I could spend the rest of my life exploring the 43,020 acres of the northern Wilderness unit, hiking every wash, touching every rock, greeting every bird every bush every rare and beautiful raindrop in winter spring summer fall and there would always be more to see, to learn, to know, to feel.

Feeling is believing, philosopher-geographer Edmunds Bunkše writes (2007), playing with a multiplicity of “feelings”—“feeling” as the sensory process by which a person experiences the external environment and “feeling” as the emotional expression of an individual’s inner way of being. Emotions are tactile, he suggests—based in real-world phenomena. Put more personally, the Painted Desert wasn’t real until I touched it. I couldn’t even begin to suspect how very real the place was, how much a part of me it would become, until I felt it, knew it in my bones.

When I first stood at the Tiponi Point overlook, I could see almost anything and everything that was out in that naked landscape—a low grey sky; a labyrinth of color; a big black knoll defining and dominating the border between the two. Seeing only engaged one sense, however, and from a distance, at that; from a high vantage, the scene merely seemed bigger and slightly more dimensional than that which I’d ogled on postcards and in the interpretive film in the Visitor Center. Although I may have been intrigued by the miles and miles of unknown terrain, experienced “a pleasurable sense of the mysterious” (Wright 1947), or seen “a blank spot on the map [as] an invitation to encounter the natural world” (Tempest Williams 1991, 244), I wasn’t consciously trying to endow undifferentiated space with value (Tuan 1974, 6). I wasn’t consciously seeking to have my character shaped by the landscape (Tempest Williams 1991, 244). I wasn’t wondering ‘how can such an alienating place “become a complementary part of one’s inner being through the employment of all the senses?”’ (Bunkše 2007b, 220) or suggesting that “we do not have the same understanding of those emotional reactions which arise from our experience of our inanimate environment as we have of grief, anger, joy, etc., resulting from our relations with other people” (Appleton 1975, 21), much less expecting to fall in love with the Painted Desert, return to it again and again, have it haunt my dreams. I’d just been sitting sealed in a car for too long, wanted to stretch my legs, get some fresh air. I just needed to go for a walk.

The Petrified Forest Wilderness Area can be accessed via a trail located just west of the Painted Desert Inn Museum, about two miles into the park. Having read the informational / warning sign located at the access trailhead (“Beware of rattlesnakes,” it reads, “Never reach where you can’t see. Wear sturdy boots,” and, in bold, “**you must be prepared**”), I strapped on my hiking boots, zipped up my windbreaker, and slipped off the edge of the flat, dusty, shrub-filled plains. The path switchbacked down through dark outcrops of basalt, pale ledges of sandstone, and crumbles of rust-red clay; down past clumps of grass and brush and three lonely piñon pines; down from the breathtaking plains panorama to a narrow V-shaped drainage, nothing to see but elephant-skin walls of bentonite. And striped mud. And petrified wood. And wildflowers. Ten thousand nameless wonders.

I meandered happily along, marveling at the texture of the clay, the crunch of cobbles, the mystery that each twist brought. But then I turned a corner and *Whoosh!* a cold dry wind tore the breath from my lungs. (Couldn’t breathe. Breathtaking.) I had popped out of the safe, sheltered channel and now stood at the edge of a giant field—nothing but rocks and bushes, bushes and cliffs, cliffs of clay, above them sky. Grey grey sky. (“And the SKY,” Georgia O’Keeffe once wrote, “Anita you have never seen SKY,” 1916, 184.)

No more trail—just an unmaintained social path, a trace of trampled dirt and a few cairn-like piles. No more landmarks, at least none that I could recognize in that jumble of wildness. Nothing but me. And that space. Was I supposed to step out into *that*? In my thin red windbreaker, my scuffed and broken boots? I might as well have stepped off into the ocean. Too much. Sensory overload. Cognitive dissonance. (Utter fear.)

Retreat! I turned around, huddled into the drainage, raced back up the trail. Returned to my car, my safe familiar shell from which I could see the remaining twenty-six miles of scenery.

It was pretty.



Figure 1-3: Rain and wind over the Painted Desert.

1.2 Can't Get Lost

Painted Desert Wilderness Area, Arizona

Ours is largely a two-dimensional world. We are not creatures who look up often.

—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986, 123)

“You can't get lost,” the ranger chortled at my naïveté, “you can always see where you came from.”

True, perhaps. With low vegetation and undulating or flat topography, prairies are all “prospect,” offering observers “an unimpeded opportunity to see” forward and back to the horizon (Appleton 1975, 73; see also Kinsey, Roberts, and Sayer 1996); there's no need to worry about trees or mountains or buildings obfuscating the view.

Then again, external sensory cues are crucial for navigation. When in unfamiliar space and especially when returning to remembered places, people need landmarks or focal points by which we can orient ourselves (Wolbers and Hegarty 2010, Philbeck and O'Leary 2005; Wang and Spelke 2002). Without some sort of geographic marker to tell us where we are—a road, a slight rise, even just the sun arcing through the sky—we wander aimlessly in circles. (Literally. Researchers have tracked and documented blindfolded participants' clueless looping, Souman *et al.* 2009.) Unabashedly stark, unforgivingly horizontal, indistinguishably landmark-less plains evoke panic in people who find themselves stranded between infinite empties of grass and sky.

But in the Painted Desert, you can't get lost. If you're not sure where you are, the ranger explained, just find the nearest little knoll and look around. The Painted Desert Inn Museum punctuates the horizon from atop the cliff, marking the start of the Wilderness Access Trail; you can always see where you came from.

As for where you're going? That's another story.



Figure 1-4 : Dry wash somewhere between Pilot Rock and Kachina Point.

Looking back, I have to laugh at myself too—at my first timid pretempts [pretenses + attempts] to explore the Painted Desert Wilderness. Was there really a time when I was too timid to step off the trail? Was there really a time when I couldn't distinguish the tidy rooflines of the Painted Desert Inn Museum from the hodgepodge of hills below? Was there really a time when Pilot Rock—that big, dark, mound on the horizon, Pilot Rock, Pilot Rock—didn't anchor the farthest corner of my geographic self?

Yes.

The second time I went hiking in the Painted Desert Wilderness Area at Petrified Forest National Park, I was armed with a copy of the park's topographic map, a list of destinations, and descriptions of routes out and back. I traversed the first mile with confidence, following the social trail as it clung to the base of the mesa then terminated near the edge of a wide dry riverbed. Aha!, I consulted the map, "Lithodendron Wash"—the "stone tree wash"—an appropriate name for an intermittent waterway winding through a land of petrified logs.

Also, I noted, squinting at the paper in my hand, the only named feature nearby. "Chinde Mesa" sat on the northern border, five or six miles away; "Pilot Rock" was even farther, seven or eight miles as the raven flies. Somewhere, according to another ranger—a desert rat whose bleached blue eyes had crinkled with delight when I'd asked for hiking recommendations—there were also places called "Angels Garden" and "Black Forest" out there—wondrous concentrations of heavenly hoodoos and scatters of dark stone trunks. I was aiming for "Onyx Bridge," only two miles out, he'd promised, putting a neat "x" on the map near the second, no, third? twist of Lithodendron Wash. For the most part, though, the 43,020 acres of Wilderness were depicted as an unnamable, illegible tangle of topographic lines. At a scale of 1:50,000 and contour interval of 10 meters, undulating expanses and tight ridges are rendered meaningless.

Looking up from the map, I realized that the terrain was also illegible at a scale of 1:1. There was the indubitable Wash. Beyond it? Well, a rise of clay capped with tumbles of sandstone. A stretch of mud clumped with shrubs. Wind, then, wind beginning to stir swirls of red earth. Clouds closing in, sky sitting down. My faith in names and charts faltered. Almost involuntarily, I turned back to see where I'd come from. There was the Painted Desert Inn Museum, a beacon crowning the switchbacks of the access trail. How safe and civilized it looked! I looked out, back, out, back, out, around, and then retreated, again, following the social path along the bottom of the hills, through the small drainage, and up the side of the mesa, grateful for every tiny little cairn.

Once I had safely reached the trailhead, I again consulted the Wilderness Area sign with its bold "**be prepared**" and optimistic "Use landmarks for direction." In so doing, I realized that, according to official designations, I hadn't even stepped foot in the Wilderness Area. The trail is in "backcountry;" true Wilderness starts on the other side of the Lithodendron Wash.

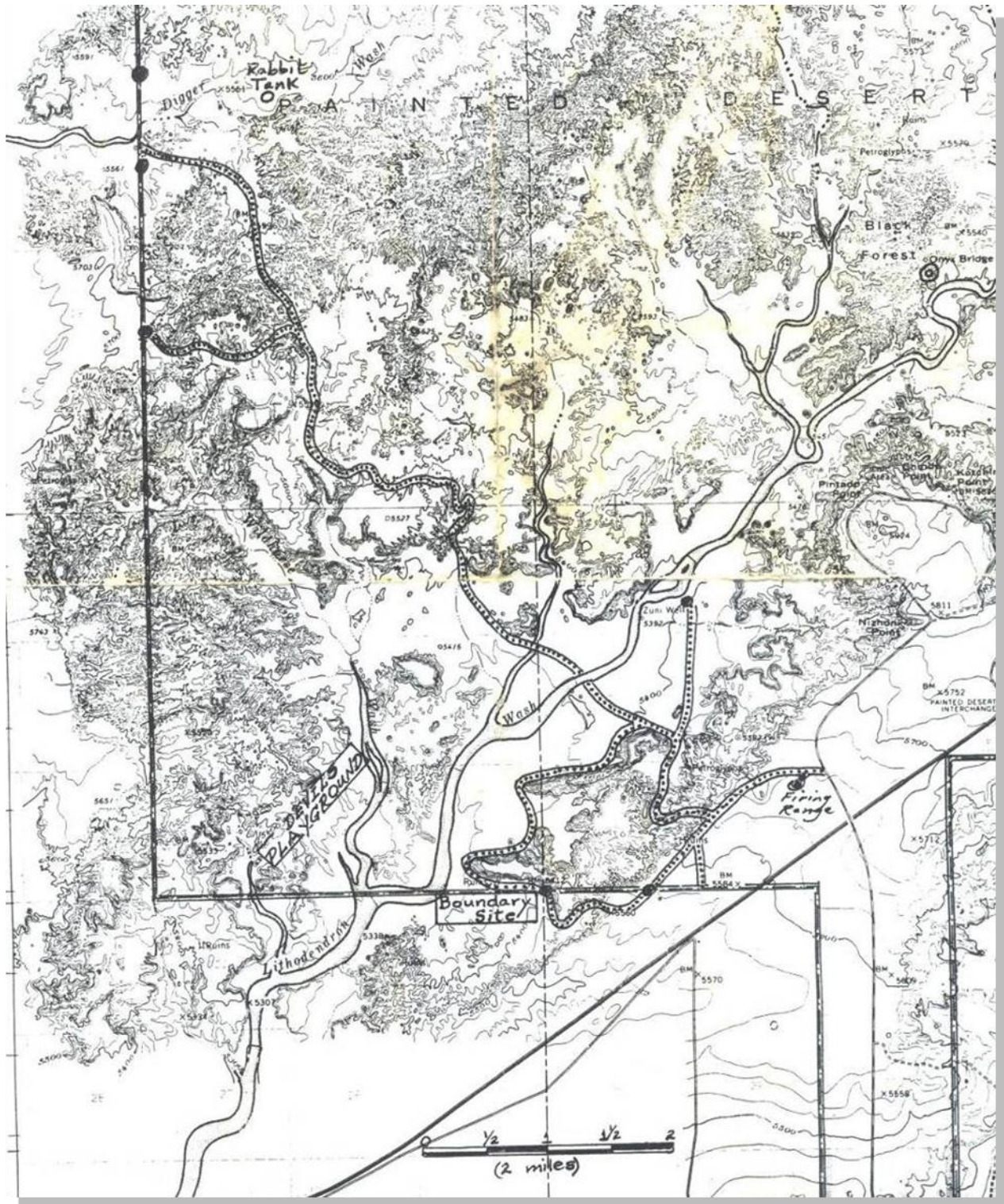


Figure 1-5 : A famous “Ted Map” of the Painted Desert Unit of the Wilderness Area, labeled and photocopied and handed out with glee by Ranger T; well-appreciated if not well-used by me.

Based on U. S. Geological Survey 1981. Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona.

“Maps are geocentric,” write cognitive scientists Ranxiao Wang and Elizabeth Spelke (2002, 378), “but the representations that underlie place recognition are egocentric: they specify the appearance of landmarks from the vantage point of the navigating animal.” Put more simply, people must find their way *within* the spatial environment and cannot fully experience it like a satellite image or geometric chart (Olivia *et al.* 2011, 108; Carlson 2010; Tuan 1979, 90). Animals’ brains are wired to process sensory cues—sights, sounds, and smells, in particular, (Adams 2001)—in order to arrive at an understanding of our location and orientation relative to our environment (Wolbers and Hegarty 2010, 139). We are not meant to live between two-dimensional squiggles on a thin sheet of paper.

Beyond our automatic biophysical response to space, we also engage elements of consciousness—“non-sensory factors, such as goals, expectations, and stored representations of the local environment” (Philbeck and O’Leary 2005, 8; Bunkše 2007; Aoki 1999)—to process interpretations of place. Goals, expectations, stored representations: what do people want from a place; what do we think we will find in a place; how do we remember, recall, and recreate our presence in a place?

In 1975, geographer Jay Appleton revolutionized the field of landscape perception with his “prospect-refuge” theory, in which he suggested that vestiges of early hominids’ evolution on African savannas remain in the minds of modern *Homo sapiens*. We desire, he wrote, to experience “environmental conditions favourable to biological survival” (vii), namely a balance between the ability to see (to have a *prospect*) without being seen (to hide, or take *refuge*). Agreeing with and elaborating upon this hypothesis, psychophysicist Stephen Kaplan identified a number of qualities that people seek in a landscape (1979, 244): “Complexity,” for example, along with “Mystery”—allure of the anticipated unknown.

Kaplan is careful to distinguish, though, between complexity and incoherence, mystery and surprise. People want and need to be able to recognize some sort of spatial structure in a landscape, he claims (Kaplan 1979, 245; see also Kaplan 1987, 10; Herzog and Barnes 1999); the ease with which a person can interpret a particular space, find their way, and, “not trivially,” find their way back determines affective response to a place. Legibility—“the inference that being able to predict and maintain orientation will be possible as one wanders more deeply into the scene” (Kaplan 1987, 11)—trumps interest.

The Painted Desert is illegible. It hovers at perceptual extremes: look one way, you see a vast plain completely void of any distinguishing feature; turn, and see nothing but a jumble of rock and brush. Too simple, too complex. Too boring, too mysterious. What can one ask for, hope for in such an ambivalent landscape?

Kaplan offers hope (2000, 501): “As one increases one’s skill at knowing what to look for, an environment that might have been confusing, or boring, even, becomes transformed into one rich in things to see, explore, and think about.” Thus “stored representations”—memories, meanings, cognitive maps—rewire our neural connectomes and allow us to understand and appreciate space (Sebastian Seung, 28 Sept 2010).

The plains have plenty of space to appreciate—more space than memories, meanings, and maps can ever cover.



Figure 1-6 : Twist number three, Lithodendron Wash.

In my first attempt to explore the Painted Desert, I descended from the comfortable vantage of the “scenic view,” stepped out of a sheltered wash, and realized that my windbreaker—the bright red windbreaker that I’d worn from the mountains of New Hampshire to the shores of the Pacific Ocean—was like paper against a prairie wind. Take two: I made it to banks of the Lithodendron Wash, clutched a map, and realized that I knew nothing of the real red grey blue world. After that—my third, fourth, fiftsixthseventh expeditions—I hiked ever farther, wider, following the mud-cracked meanders of the Litho to the northeast, to the southwest, on cold overcast days and, more often, under the uncompromising glare of a wintry desert sun. During workdays, when I wasn’t out pacing the park’s established trails or helping catalogue 220-million-year-old clamshells, I studied the desert-steppe-backcountry-wilderness from the picture windows of the Inn, trying to correlate the map’s lines and x-es with the world of rock and clay below. Every weekend, though, when I laced up my hiking boots, headed down the access trail, and entered into the landscape, all thoughts of glorious exploration collapsed and I just walked walked walked the dry riverbed for hours. I dared to veer slightly on a couple of occasions—in an attempt to find Onyx Bridge or a petroglyph panel—but was still afraid to stray far from my reliable landmark. Goals; expectations; moments lost, forgotten.



Figure 1-7 : Lithodendron Wash, seen from the Black Forest.

Then one day—a pale, sunny day, unseasonably warm for January—I aimed for the field of petrified stumps that supposedly stood about four miles right, left, right, left, right, straight-just-before-left alongside the Litho. After an hour or two of hiking, I had to admit that I'd gone too far north, too far east, too far...I had no idea. As usual. I sighed and consulted the map. Was I at this turn, near this rise? Had I passed these lines, did those represent the lumps in front of me? The hills were whitish, capped with gritty swirls of sandstone; the sky was blue, etched with sweeping horsetails; the sun was bright, shadows short, how did that help me know where I was—where was I?

Before turning around—retreat!, as usual—I took one last look at the northern horizon. There was Chinde Mesa, closer than I'd ever seen it—so close that I could pick out green splotches of cedar growing in pockets on the striped wall. Pilot Rock, too, loomed larger, darker, even more imposing than before. And there... *what is that?* I remember thinking when my eye snagged on a curious line, *a vertical?*

Mystery! What little thing would be so bold as to stand up tall in a land of horizontals? How could such a slight mark look so prominent in the expanse of unnamed unknowns? What *was* that slender dash daring to point toward the great prairie sky?

I reset my internal compass and stepped out of the wash. Curious. No idea what to expect. No expectations.

Two hours later, I would write, if my goal was to describe cross-country travel in the semi-desert shrub-steppe, my calves were sore from traversing a deceptively wide stretch of sandy rises and blow-outs; my knees and elbows were bruised and scratched from tumbly attempts to climb up bentonite hills.

Know, I would continue, sharing hard-earned advice, that walking on desert pavement and clay 'popcorn' is like walking on marbles. Know that sage catches sand. Know that maps are meaningless.

Everything, I should conclude, is farther away than it looks. Then a quote from William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* (1991, 82): "There are several ways not to walk in the prairie, and one of them is with your eye on a far goal, because you then begin to believe you're not closing the distance any more than you would with a mirage...On the prairie, distance and the miles of air turn movement to stasis."

But none of that matters: distance, description, conclusion. Just the tree. The old dead juniper.

Trees have always commanded respect in open landscapes, perhaps because they're such singular wonders: "in the desert, every living thing is proudly itself, separated by space from other living things" (Tuan 2001). From an Appletonian perspective, they signal a touch of refuge—shade, wood, relief from the omnipresent wind (Least Heat-Moon 1991, 331). Kaplan and colleagues, meanwhile, champion features that provide focus and structure to a scene, defying undifferentiated openness and giving onlookers the chance to gauge depth or distance in a scene (Herzog and Barnes 1999, 173; Amedeo *et al.* 1989). As organizers of the "Lone Tree Exhibit" (a series of photographs featuring a tree from each of the National Grasslands) write (US Forest Service 2010), "for those who feel vulnerable and exposed the lone tree can bring comfort to the soul and relief to the eye in the vastness of the landscape."



Figure 1-8 : (Live) juniper, south wilderness area, Petrified Forest.



Figure 1-9 : Cottonwood at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, Kansas; March.



Figure 1-10 : Juniper on top of Fossil Butte, Wyoming; November.



Figure 1-11 : Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest, a hand-planted woodland in Nebraska's Sand Hills. "Plant for shade; plant for protection; plant for beauty; plant for wood; and plant for the conservation of moisture," was the rallying cry of the tree-planting crusader Charles Bessey (quoted in Gardner 2009, 282).



Figure 1-12 : Summit marker and sky over Mt. Sunflower, the highest point in Kansas.

All sensible reasons to revere a tree. Or any vertical, really. Confronted with the vacancy and wildness of wide open plains, early settlers “filled their homesteads with as many vertical elements as possible” in order to comfort themselves (paraphrased from Kinsey *et al.* 1996, 265; Gardner 2009; see also Shortridge 2005; Flores 2001). Contemporary travelers race toward mountains or mesas. Photographers eye “vertical intrusions, such as trees, fences or telephone posts, or windmills, [to] draw the viewer’s attention while reinforcing the landscape’s solitude and contemplative characteristics” against the dominant sweep of the horizon, the “seemingly endless grassland below a vast and awe inspiring sky” (Reichman 1989, cited in Sheppard 1995, 366). Authors “need vertical landmarks on which their characters can fix” (Sheppard 1995, 333-334). Philosophers seek fellow upright figures to ease the “existential dilemma of finding meaning in an indifferent, even hostile universe” (Ricou 1973, cited in Scanlan 1994, 248). Quite simply, as Wright Morris puts it in *The Home Place* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948, 75-6, quoted in Sheppard 1995, 335), when faced with “too much sky...too much horizontal, too many lines without stops,” people want to, have to believe that “the exclamation, the perpendicular, ha[s] to come...It’s a problem of being. Of knowing you are there.”

Being. There.

Where?

One day, a pale, sunny, otherwise unremarkable day, I found myself at the edge of a precipice, rock underfoot, sky overhead, nothing but the horizon the horizon the horizon and the strong, silvery trunk of an old dead juniper to which to cling.

The old dead juniper was smooth as driftwood—desert driftwood, washed securely into place. Its roots gnarled up out of the stone, twisting and flowing, feeling their way into the open air. Its branches were weathering away—splintering, shimmering, as the ground exhaled waves of winter warmth. Who knows for how long it had been dead, the old juniper, had it ever been alive?

I can still feel my hand on the trunk—that’s the most indelible memory I have of the old dead juniper—my hand, chapped knuckles and scraped palms on the warm, silky trunk. I can see, too, the lower branch lifting toward Pilot Rock; another, slightly higher, pointing back at the Painted Desert Inn; and the top, too high to touch, yawning out, stretching up, reaching for clouds, channeling light from the sun into the earth and my attention from the earth into the air. Had I known then the prayer that Lakota elder Black Elk offered his tree (*The Sacred Pipe*, 1953, quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 306)—a Cottonwood—I would have echoed his words, “O [smooth silent juniper]...May we two-leggeds always follow your sacred example, for we see that you are always looking upwards into the heavens.”

This tree, this vertical was not a hopeful comrade or lonely sentinel or existential cue; it was an axis mundi, anchored to earth, starting in sky.



Figure 1-13 : An old dead juniper. Not *The Old Dead Juniper*, note;
I neither desire nor dare to photograph it.

1.3 Blank

Painted Desert Wilderness Area, Arizona

*When I found my tracks in the snow / I followed, thinking that they might / lead me back to where I was. But
/ they turned the wrong way and went on.*

— Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser, *Braided Creek* (2003, 12)



Figure 1-14 : Hello, Painted Desert, I announce; I am here!
(Then spend the rest of a hike trying to scrape muck off my hands.)

After discovering the old dead juniper, my relationship with the Painted Desert changed. Something had opened up, a whole world beyond that which maps can depict and senses perceive. I was no longer tied to the Lithodendron Wash, no longer planned what I wanted much less expected to see, but rather was happy to set small goals and let destinations find me (paraphrased from Least Heat-Moon 1991, 279). Onyx Bridge? Pilot Rock? No, where did the coyote go, how did the wind howl? I ran, I crawled, I stammered, I skipped my way across fields and through sagebrush flats, up ridges and along ravines. I built understanding and deepened exploration, recognized coherence and courted mystery. I became a wanderer.

Wandering is a little-known art, a seldom-sought skill. John Muir sauntered; Henry David Thoreau ruminated; the seventeenth-century Zen poet Basho “perfected an aesthetics of wandering” (Heyd 2003, 292). In wandering, a person remains conscious of self and place, yet lets the landscape take them wherever it is they are to go; they walk with their mind as open as the place, bowing to birds and clapping for flowers (Lopez 1986).

The practice can go by different names. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes the experience of an “unstructured field trip”—a desire “just to see what’s out there, with no prior questions in mind” (2004, 42)—from more deliberate, reflexive activity, while Paul Adams (2001, 188) prefers the phrase “peripatetic sense of place” (from the Greek roots peri- and patein-, “around” and “to walk,” respectively): “to walk through a place is to become involved in that place with sight, hearing, touch, smell, the kinetic sense called proprioception, and even taste.” Archaeologist Jonathan Till “reads a place” by “walk[ing] in a halting sort of way...stopping, hands hanging limp but open, as if he were feeling the air...sometimes walking back on himself before turning around again, or pausing for long minutes without moving” (Childs 2006, 202), while writer-scholar Mark Tredinnick endorses “steeping oneself in landscape and subject, and then...making oneself present enough for the story to rise” (2005, 64-65).

It’s an “old business,” according to Barry Lopez (1986, 227), this practice of “walking slowly over the land with an appreciation of its immediacy to the senses and in anticipation of what lies hidden in it.” He shares the wisdom of a friend (1986, 230), who approaches a new place thus: “‘I listen.’ That’s all. I listen, he meant, to what the land is saying. I walk around in it and strain my senses in appreciation of it for a long time before I, myself, ever speak a word. Entered in such a respectful manner, he believed, the land would open to him.”

Listening, feeling; seeing, steeping. Walking.

Wandering.



Figure 1-15 : Coyote tracks!, I believed. Years later, I was informed that that they are, in fact, the prints of a bobcat.
Was everything even more magical than I'd imagined?



Figure 1-16 : Map, Painted Desert Wilderness.

Amazing, the things one can find if one stops looking for things to find. I became enamoured with sweeps of sandstone and cracks in mudstone—abstract patterns that speak of the elegance of underlying processes. Then I began recognizing rocks for the secrets they hold: the iron-rich claystones and mudstones of the Painted Desert’s Chinle Formation harbor not just giant agatized *Aurocaryoxylon arizonicum* specimens but traces of an entire Triassic ecosystem; sediments of the Wilderness Area’s Black Forest (which are slightly younger than the more famous Jasper, Crystal, and Rainbow “Forests” farther south) contain several arboreal species as well as remains of archosaurs—giant lizard- and salamander-like creatures that slithered and stomped through fluvial floodplains at the dawn of the dinosaurs. It didn’t take long for me to recognize the pock-marked surface of *Woodworthia*, the radiating interior of *Schilderia*, the purpley-cream, sometimes pearlescent sheen of bone. So too my eye quickly learned to pick up patterns chipped into dark, “varnished” sandstone slabs—petroglyphs (from the Greek words for “stone” and “symbol”). Sometimes I’d encounter elaborate panels featuring lizards and lewd anthropomorphics, squiggles and spirals; other times, just a lonely hand or sheep. Once or twice, I sat to sketch the centuries-old art and found pottery sherds—black on white, red-slip, corrugated—at my feet—more tangible, practical traces of those who came before.



Figure 1-17 : Playing with swirls of sandstone, gritty and warm.



Figure 1-18 : Sprout in mudcracks.



Figure 1-19 : Close-up of permineralized wood, Crystal Forest Trail.



Figure 1-20 : Part of a bone scatter found eroding out of a wash.



Figure 1-21 : Petroglyph panel with zoomorphs, tracks, sunburst, and geometrics, in south wilderness area.

My most unexpected discovery was neither fossil nor artifact, but a US Geological Survey marker. Yes, forty-three thousand twenty acres of wilderness, of sandstone and clay, juniper and sage, two hundred twenty million year old phytosaurs and thirteenth-century pottery sherds, and I, one day, out traipsing aimlessly about, tripped over a 3-inch wide metal disc with the words “US GEOLOGICAL SURVEY BENCHMARK” and, in smaller lettering, “\$250 FINE OR IMPRISONMENT FOR DISTURBING THIS MARK” stamped into its surface. (So much for the imprints of man’s work remaining substantially unnoticeable [Public Law 88-577]. The scientific need to map known territory trumps the romantic mystery of unknown space.)



Figure 1-22 : US Geological Survey benchmark, more permanent than the sandstone into which it’s hammered.

By the end of February, I thought I knew the Painted Desert. I had spent months learning, exploring, explaining its geological, paleontological, archaeological, biological, ecological, logical-ological attributes. After spending every weekend hiking, sketching, prowling its hills and hollows, cliffs and caves, shadows and sky, I knew the stone trees and fossilized reptiles, the sandstone swirls and ashy piles, the iron and manganese, the rock. I knew what routes to take to get to the old dead juniper or to ancient petroglyphs; to villages of hoodoos, to valleys of bone. I knew where the ground and sky collided, and where they opened up. I knew the Painted Desert.

Then one weekend, when I headed up to the trailhead eager to wander, all too aware that there wasn't much time left in my internship, I stepped to the edge of the mesa and found that the desert had disappeared. The landscape had been erased. Reds oranges purples blacks? The bones the glyphs the odd metal markers? All buried in white white white. Overnight, while I had been sleeping, dreaming, the sky had opened, fallen in soft crystalline flakes. It had...snowed?

The Wilderness Area was a giant mirror: blue-white sky reflecting the ground, white-blue ground reflecting the sky. I stood between the two, blinking, blinded, until I mustered the resolve to go ahead and hike anyway (*not much time, not much time*). Down I slipped and skidded—down the icy switchbacks, into the frozen drainage, across the snowy expanse, hoping to find some trace of my desert still there, underneath. But the contours were unrecognizable—white lumps, sleeping giants—where *was* I, lost again? Lost in this blank, empty space?

“Space,” the United States Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management declares (2007), is “the three-dimensional arrangement of objects and voids” that determine a landscape composition.

“Space,” neurobiologists Aude Oliva, S. Park, and T. Konkle decide (2011, 128), “is composed of structural and semantic properties...[A] space has a function, a purpose, a typical view, and a geometrical shape. The shape of space stands as an entity that, like the shape of an object or a face, can be described by its contours and surface properties.”

“Space,” philosopher-geographer Edward Casey insists (2001, 683), is the “volumetric void in which things are positioned. There is no landscape of space,” he continues (2001, 689-90):

Phrases such as ‘wide open spaces’ that we apply unthinkingly to landscape only confuse the issue...[A]n open landscape does not fade into space. A landscape may indeed be vast...yet it will never *become* space...No matter how capacious a landscape may be, it remains a composition of places, their intertangled skein.

Scholars concur: unlike sensual, experiential, knowable “place,” space has no materiality, no physicality, no thing-ness (Heyd 2003; see also Casey 2001; Evernden 1983); space is an abstract concept, a reference to absolute geographical measurements devoid of sociocultural, political, and/or personal meaning (Tuan 1989, Tredinnick 2005). People live in places and dream of space.

Yet, ecocritic Gary Treddinick muses (2005, 58), even if “space is abstract, immaterial, and voluminous distance” and “*a place* [is] a locale, the land *here*, the enfolded natural and cultural histories, . . .”

“[A] place will possess, among other things, a characteristic space or amplitude. . . Its space is the way the light sits and the winds move, the way sounds travel. Its space is the quality of the intervals between its many pieces, between the great horned owl and the jackrabbit, between the notes of the raven’s song, right down to the vibrant voids between the atoms in the grains of its sandstones or its granites. Its space is. . . what holds a place’s pieces apart. It is the tone of its millions of interrelationships.”

Space.

To those who claim that there is no such thing as experiential space, that the individual is always doomed to be in what Edmunds Bunkše calls geographical place (2007, 222): I invite you to walk in a snow-covered steppe. Venture into a blank, wide wilderness. Experience the Painted Desert painted white. It’s not a matter of gauging distance (Oliva *et al.* 2010, Cosgrove 1985, Kaplan 1979) or filling emptiness (Kaplan 1987; Evernden 1983; Kinsey *et al.* 2001)—a “struggle to understand the prairie and figure out what to make of it intellectually and artistically” (Thaker 1989, cited in Scanlan 1994, 248)—but rather a full, rich, sensual, deliriously delightful disembodiment. Dis-place-ment.

I have no idea how far or for how long I walked in the white white blue-white world before a pattern, a line, a series of shadowed pawprints startled me out of my placeless, timeless curiosity: coyote.

Yes, coyote, that ubiquitous symbol of the Southwest—that trickster who trots through legends and cartoons; that spirit who’s evoked in fetishes and knickknacks; that singer, scavenger, emblem of the wildest of wild creatures. Many people know coyote for his howl (transient, lingering in the air, adding dimension to moonlight) or his tawny tail (bushy, tattered, dusted with sage and sand) or, especially, for his sly, happy grin, but I speak of his tracks. Of his signature, left in snow and mud, laughing, *I was here. I am here.* Of his pawprints, dancing onward across stone and between juniper, leading me off into the snow-covered plains, promising, Come *here*: Wander! Wonders!



Figure 1-23 : Pawprint, Crystal Forest area.

Coyote as trickster: he might have been laughing at me, trying to get me lost, to convince me to range beyond my natural habitat? But I read in his tracks an indomitable spirit, a wise wanderer, a happy scribe. Moreover, coyote was not the only print-maker: rabbit had romped with fellow rabbits; some sort of bird had landed and fluttered in giddy little circles; pronghorn had trampled through, grazed, waltzed, left their hoofed trail. Signatures, prints, traces of animals, birds, plants. A veritable zoo, a jungle. A desert of life.

And *I* was in that desert, too.

I took a step—one tentative little shuffle into the blank world of wild creatures. The snow rustled, whispered, sighed beneath my boot. Another step. It crackled, crunched, chortled. Just like that, I was running, skipping, leaping without path or purpose beyond the symphony beneath my feet. Up and on and forward until I fell gasping in a great noisy field of sparkles. Snowflakes tingled on the back of my neck and into the wrists of my coat, melted into little rivulets and ran into my sweater, my mittens. I stretched out—swept my arms and legs in smooth arcs and listened to the heavenly swish swish swish, then rolled over, nose to the snow, considered its close blue shimmer, frozen light.

When I started shivering, I stood up, a little dazed, a little woozy, and looked back to see where I had come from. Lithodendron Wash? No. Access trail? Somewhere. Painted Desert Inn, at least, Painted Desert Inn? Perhaps, but I was blinded by the sky and snow, snow and sky, sunshine. All I could see was an odd line of splotches, daubs of shadow, crooked tracks careening through the otherwise clean, elegant field. Had *I* left those blemishes? Surely not *mine*, those abstract expressionist prints.

Yes they were mine. Mine mine, I don't know where the idea came from, much less why, but I turned again, away from the access trail, the overlooks, and out toward Chinde Mesa, Pilot Rock, the big bright snow-covered prairie. I stepped forward, purposefully swinging my leg out to the side to carve a C-shaped swath in the snow. Pleased, I swept an arc with my other leg. And again, again. Steps. Footprints, tracks, strokes. Backwards, forwards, one-footed; rolling, cartwheeling, onward into the blank white desert, onward onto the great white plane, personalizing it with swishes and swooshes, swirls in snow.

I'm here too! I sang with coyote, scribed, I'm here!

Charles Bowden's rules for being in the desert (quoted in Childs 2010, 144):

1. You are in the right place.
2. You do not belong here.
3. Deal with this fact.
4. Time's up.

Time's up.

The sun was warm and the ground thirsty. By noon, great hot spots had begun to melt out of the snow, slowly and surreptitiously at first, then spreading hungrily like flames through a canvas. Hilltops peeked out from under their wintry blanket; streamlets trickled down crevasses; pawprints and bootprints alike turned red—mud red, wet-rusty-earth red, boot-sucking red.

Snow melting, euphoria broken, reality resuming, I began looping back toward the Litho, the access trail, civilization. Just in time. I barely made it back across the Wash, which was, of course, flowing. I should have known—all of that snow! Of course it would melt, would have to go somewhere; of course it would follow the

Wash, trace the edge of the Wilderness. I should have known. (Ah, but that's the mistake. Just when you think you know a place, discovered the last of its little secrets, claimed and commanded your presence, well, then, ten thousand nameless wonders fall from the sky and melt into the ground, magic.)

As a deepening glow of late afternoon buoyed up through the late winter sky, I paused at the top of the Wilderness Trail to catch my breath and look back across the Painted Desert. The land was sweating, steaming, glowing; colors lay rich and moist in thick layers of red, orange, purple. Snow persisted in a few shadowy pockets, but for the most part, the place was back: there were the sinuous bends of Lithodendron Wash; there the hills of the Black Forest; Chinde Mesa ever on the horizon; and Pilot Rock Pilot Rock Pilot Rock.

My footprints? Gone, forgotten.



Figure 1-24 : Lithodendron Wash after a storm (seen from Pintado Point).

1.3-4 Interim: Highway 36

Northwestern Kansas

Yet, not all unscenic parts of nature are dangerous or disgusting; some are merely boring. I gather that driving across Kansas does not, for most people, afford a positive aesthetic experience.

—R. Fudge, “Imagination and the Science-Based Aesthetic Appreciation of Unscenic Nature” (2001, 276)

What’s with all of the *trees*? I whined, after my internship ended and I returned to safe, comfortable routines back East; worse yet, *buildings*, where’s the *sky*? How do you *breathe*? A mere four months at Petrified Forest National Park had made the previous twenty years of my life feel foreign and faded, tamed and trampled. I bored family and friends with tales of adventures in the Painted Desert. I surrounded myself with photographs of rocks and clouds. I tacked a rather tattered topographic map to my bedroom wall and let its squiggles and squirms, scrunches of lines seep into my dreams. I researched wilderness and Wilderness, wrote of junipers and snow, in many ways reimagined my relationship with the place from a geographic and temporal distance. Then, a year and a half after I had packed my car, bid friends and colleagues at the park farewell, and whispered *good-bye*—that’s it, once, quietly, *good-bye*—to the sage, to the rabbits, to Pilot Rock, I unexpectedly found myself heading west—West again! (Thoreau: Westward I go free!)—to another internship at Petrified Forest.

My mother offered to join me for part of the long drive from Western New York—at least as far as the Denver airport. I welcomed her company, any company, rightly suspecting that the Midwest would feel even bigger, slower, more exposed when seen by car than it had by airplane four years earlier. We tried to break up the trip a little—swung through Indiana Dunes, visited a friend outside of Chicago, stopped for chocolate cake somewhere past Des Moines—but I didn’t really pay attention until we reached Nebraska, where the ground began to unfurl, emerge, assert itself underneath a sky of big, billowy puffs. Nebraska! Back in Nebraska! Red Cloud, Nebraska—that’s the town for which we’d been aiming—the home of Willa Cather.

Willa Cather. I can’t write about perceptions of the plains without mentioning Willa Cather, but, honestly, I hadn’t felt an immediate affinity with her work. While in high school, I’d found a copy of *My Antonia* on the bookshelves at home—a dusty paperback sitting alongside Robert Louis Stevenson (“[the Plains are] a world almost without feature; an empty sky, an empty earth, front and back”), Charles Dickens (“the great blank” is “oppressive in its barren monotony”), and William Faulkner (“Wonder. Go on and wonder,” space is just as unknowable as time). I began reading it, thought it interesting enough to continue and finish, but for the life of me can’t recall anything except the cover—a painting of a strong, beautiful woman standing in deep, golden grass, skirt blowing in the wind, child clinging to her hand—and a side plot involving wolves. Sometime, though, between those wide, dusky hours at Scotts Bluff and those wild, wondrous months at Petrified Forest, I came to understand and deeply appreciate Cather’s oft-quoted lines from *Death Comes for the Archbishop*:

The plain was there, under one's feet, but what one saw when one looked about was that brilliant blue world of stinging air and moving clouds... Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when on was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!

Stinging air! Moving clouds! What place had birthed such beautiful words? I wanted to experience Cather's world of sky, so convinced Mom to veer onto state then county highways, pausing only in Beatrice, Nebraska for Homestead National Monument and the local Dairy Queen. (It was August. Hot. Dry.) Then...



Figure 1-25 : Somewhere in southwestern Nebraska, early June.

This, of course, is when I'm supposed to describe the scene as we rolled into Red Cloud—the time of day, the season, the feel of the air, our first glimpse of the brick buildings lining Main Street, proudly defying the immensity of the surrounding countryside.

But.

Memory works in funny ways.

What you stick to counts less than what sticks to you, like burrs and porcupine quills

— Robert Frost, *The Collected Notebooks of Robert Frost*, Robert Faggan, ed. (1996, 210)

Though we had a destination—an end goal, a justification—my mother and I had turned our journey into a vacation—an unstructured, unscrutinized, unabashed diversion “from the boredom and meaninglessness of routine, everyday existence,” as Erik Cohen puts it (1979, p 185-186). We weren't about to go on any arduous treks or take notes for travelogues—we just wanted the tires to roll smoothly down back roads under Cather's brilliant blue sky, leaving us free to enjoy the sights and have interesting experiences (paraphrased from Bunkše 2007 7). At least, according to Cohen's rubric of touristic experiences, our willingness to slow down and encounter “authentic” details in an attempt to enhance our overall understanding of cultural and literary history put us a step up from the Recreational tourist. But unlike the journal-keeping, souvenir-collecting, and, above all, photograph-taking tourist that many theorists describe and psychoanalyze (see Urry 1992. Carlson 1979a and 1979b), I neglected to record my impressions along the way. My memory was on vacation too. Red Cloud, Nebraska? Forgotten, along with Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. Instead of Red Cloud, I remember a placeless moment, a random road, a sharp, beautiful instant somewhere in northwestern Kansas.

We'd left Nebraska and were cutting diagonally across a corner of the state in an attempt to get back on track, post-Cather detour. I was behind the wheel, sporadically swerving to avoid suicidal sparrows that kept darting out from eye-high patches of sunflowers. Sunset was lingering—pastel, soft, sleepy. Suddenly, out of nowhere or out of everywhere, a deep happiness, an unexpected appreciation rose in me—happiness, appreciation for undulating hills, fresh breeze, the magic light of dusk, even those darn little sparrows.

Such *wildness!*, I beamed, back in the plains after more than a year's exile in tight, loud locations back east, Such *space!* Such ineffable *beauty*, there, then, the purpley-beige plains of western Kansas. That's what I remember, not Red Cloud.

I also remember thinking how curious it was that Mom—my very own mother, sitting right next to me, looking at the very same landscape—did not share my enthusiasm for western Kansas. Yes, she agreed, it was pretty, but good god, couldn't I just stop somewhere, find us a motel, wasn't there *anywhere, anything* in these empty, godforsaken plains?



Figure 1-26 : The “scenic route” to Agate Fossil Beds National Monument. Beautiful, but not recommended for poor little low-clearance, 2WD vehicles after a series of spring rains.

Such difference of perception could be attributed to particulars in landscape preference and/or personality: maybe I was slowly learning that, like Paul Gruchow (1985, 103), Dan O’Brien (2001), and William Least Heat-Moon (1991, 28), “I am a prairie person,” a “fellow [/ gal] of the grasslands,” happy to have returned to a place where I get my sense of distance back (paraphrased from Gruchow 1985, 103). Or perhaps I was not, in fact, a tourist, but actually a traveler—a whole different breed. “Travellers,” philosopher-geographer Edmunds Bunkše differentiates between the recreational character and those who seek deeper, more meaningful experiences (2007, 6), “seek *epiphanies*—moments of sudden expansion of consciousness and transformation during which the traveller sees herself or himself in some wider frame of reference.”

That sounds right. I was definitely seeing myself in some wider frame of reference—that great big sky, that great big earth, that strip of road, those happy sparrows darting into and out of my world—but how could one *not* see oneself in a wider frame of reference when crossing the open prairie? For all of the crushing loneliness, palpable sadness, and infinite boredom heaped on the plains, one would “expect to find utter emptiness. There should be nothing but the barren end of the world here” (Childs 2002, 12). Instead, as Craig Childs finds in the similarly

denigrated desert southwest (2002, 12), there is “an inalienable, voracious presence” in seemingly empty landscapes—a Soul of Nowhere.

Some explorers, homesteaders, emigrants, and, yes, travelers, have tried to express the sense of awe. Nineteenth-century traveler Henry Sienkiewicz glowed (quoted in Retzinger 1998, 223): “Not only one’s sight but even one’s soul and thoughts lose themselves in the prairie. The soul abandons familiar paths, forgets its own identity, merges with the environment, and soon ceases to be a thing apart, having been absorbed by the powerful presence of the prairie like a drop of water in the sea.” Likewise, “the Venerable Tashmoo” tells his friend William Least Heat-Moon (quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 614): “I felt insignificant [while walking across central Nebraska], but never nonexistent: my point is that I felt *more* existent” in such a desolate, unknown landscape. Kathleen Norris insists too that “walking in a hard Dakota wind can be like staring at the ocean: humbled before its immensity, I also have a sense of being at home on this planet, . . . my every cell partaking of air” (1993, 41).

From loss of thoughts and soul to a sense of immersion and absorption, an intimidating immensity to an acute awareness of existence, a humbling wind to a sense of planet, prairies offer a bewildering juxtaposition that rhetorician Tom Scanlan describes as a problem for the imagination (1990, 201): “What sort of reaction can one have to a land that both dwarfs one with its scale and at the same time concentrates the psyche on the only point of reference, the self?” I reacted with delight; Mom with disinterest. *What does that mean?*, I wondered then, wonder still, *why doesn’t everyone long for a landscape of sky?* (“[W]hy should the light of sunrise and sunset be more poignant than that of the noon?” [Appleton 1975, 21].)

Two factors I was neglecting to take into account: first, Mom had already driven back and forth across the Plains before; they weren’t a new experience, an opening, a revelation to her. Second, and perhaps more importantly, she had a migraine, likely exacerbated as much by my bursts of admiration (“The *sunflowers!* The *sunset!* Isn’t it *gorgeous!*”) as the ups and downs of the road and the sudden flits of the sparrows. As Barry Lopez notes (1986, 243), “[w]hat one thinks of in any region, while traveling through, is the result of at least three things: what one knows, what one imagines, and how one is disposed.”

What did I know? Nothing. I had no idea where I was or what I was doing there. Driving. Dusk.

What did I imagine? Nothing. Maybe everything. Light. The texture of the road against the tires made a sound like the singing of whales.

How was I disposed? *Kensho*, to borrow a Buddhist term: a brief glimpse of enlightenment. Euphoria. I was back on the plains.



Figure 1-27 : Sunset with sunflower and deadly nightshade, alongside old Route 66.

1.4 Slow down!

Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

Is it possible to make a living by simply watching light?....

Perhaps this is what I desire most, to sit and watch the shifting shadows cross the cliff face of sandstone.

—Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2002, 141)

Pedal pedal pedal, breathe. Breathe, try to make it up the hill, this long, slow hill.

Yes, there are hills in the plains. Even in those places without pronounced mesas and buttes, ridges and ravines, there are hills and valleys—slight undulations, swelling and sinking leisurely across great stretches of space. While driving, you may not notice your toes pressing lightly on the accelerator or relaxing onto the breaks; while walking, your stride may be imperceptibly shortened or released, the slopes are so gradual, so smooth. But bicycling? Up a hill? Kinesthesia kicks in: shift down a gear; pedal, pedal, pedal, breathe.

I knew this hill. I hadn't noticed it during my first internship at Petrified Forest National Park—there had been so many other things to see and learn! (And it had been winter.) (And I hadn't had a bike)—but when I returned, in August, with a bike, why, I was out riding as often as possible, experiencing the place from a different perspective, at a different pace. Every time I went for a ride, morning or evening, weekday or weekend, I had to come back up this hill: pedal, pedal, pedal, breathe.

I somehow forgot about it, though, whenever I decided to roll away from my housing near park headquarters and onto the park road. As do visitors whenever they take the detour off Interstate 40, I followed the scenic drive northward for a few miles, passing Tiponi Point (the first scenic overlook, named for figurines Hopi people use to represent the corn goddess), Tawa Point (the Hopi sun spirit), Kachina Point (Puebloan peoples' term for supernatural life forms, as well as the dancers and dolls that assume their spirits; also the location of the Painted Desert Inn), Chinde Point (as with the distant Mesa, a Navajo reference to malevolent ghosts), and, ultimately, Pintado Point. Once called 350-Degree Point, Pintado perches high atop basalt outcrops, affording a nearly-full panoramic view of the colorfully “painted” hills and sage-mottled plains below. From there, the park road turns south and begins to roll down a long drawn-out slope—downhill all the way to the Puerco River some 7 miles distant, invisible even from this high vantage point.

There are three more scenic pull-outs along the way—Nizhoni Point (a Navajo word that can be translated as “beautiful,” but carries the richer connotation of “beauty and wholeness”), Whipple Point (named for Lt. Amiel Weeks Whipple), and Lacey Point (in honor of Congressman John Fletcher Lacey, who drafted and campaigned for the Antiquities Act of 1906), all clumped together along the steep ledge where dusty, open prairie drops into barren, tangled badlands. After those, there's a quick hop over the Interstate then nothing but plains—low bushes, grasses, the occasional tumbleweed or pronghorn or jackrabbit—until a lone cottonwood, a bridge over the railroad (Burlington Northern Santa Fe), and, finally, the mighty Puerco River (Spanish for “pig” as well as “muddy,”

though even the latter would imply a generous amount of moisture for the mostly-subsurface channel.) As the most significant, semi-permanent waterway in the area, the Puerco had been an important resource for Ancestral Puebloan people several centuries earlier. Remnants from a hundred-plus-room city—what Euro-Americans dub “Puerco Pueblo”—still sit within easy walking distance of the river, while tens of dozens of enigmatic petroglyph panels, including a “Newspaper Rock” rivaling any others in the Southwest, line the banks.

I had a tendency to roll happily all the way downhill from Pintado Point to Puerco, pedaling easily despite unpredictable gusts of wind. Just after the Interstate, about where the brush-studded horizon smoothed out, crimping only for Twin Buttes far to the west and Black Knoll far to the east, I would sit up, relax, let my legs whirl in pace with the wheels and mind drift or skitter along with the clouds. Floating through such an expansive landscape, sage-scented air whooshing past my ears and into my lungs, I felt even the infinite was possible: *Aah*, I breathed, practically flew, *why not keep going?* Why not bike all the way to the Rainbow Forest Museum, another 15 miles beyond the parking area for Puerco Pueblo? Or to Holbrook, the nearest town, another 19 or 20? The Mogollon Rim! Tucson! Mexico! The edge of the earth, how far was that?

This was my favorite stretch of prairie.



Figure 1-28 : Steppe-scape just past Lacey Point. Note the dark lump lurking in the distance. (Pilot Rock).

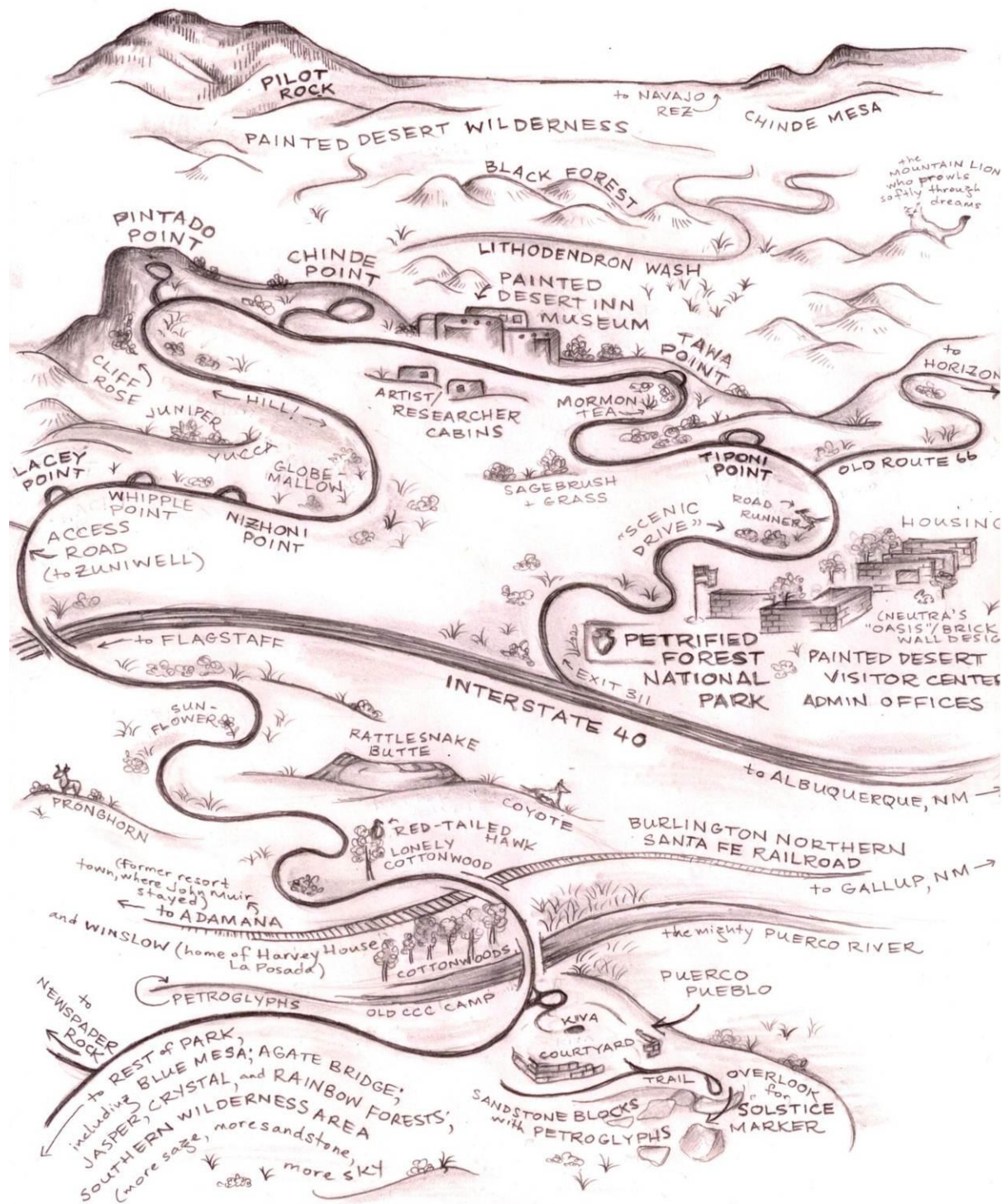


Figure 1-29 : Map of relevant locations in Petrified Forest National Park.

The “expansive possibilities” of a prairie landscape are “both inviting and strange, combining freedom and loneliness, motion with emptiness...the emphasis [i]s on space.

— Thomas Scanlan, *The Prairie Eye* (1994, 247)

Space.

Space again, motion and emptiness, distant horizons, possibility. “Space,” writes Terry Tempest Williams in her *Ode to Slowness* (2002, 147), “is the twin sister of time. If we have open space then we have open time to breathe, to dream, to dare, to play, to pray to move freely, so freely, in a world our minds have forgotten, but our bodies remember. Time and space.”

Ahh, the other variable: time. That’s the problem with plains, many argue—it takes so much time to appreciate them. Residents understand the complexity and integrity of the minutiae and appreciate the rhythms and cycles of days and seasons (see, for example, Lillegraven 2010; Shortridge 2005; O’Brien 2001; Norris 1993; DeBres *et al.* 1993), but travelers and newcomers accustomed to trees and mountains, buildings and roads see nothing but that distant horizon. Unless they happen to be there at a particularly moving moment—towering thunderstorm! Sweeping sunset! Great crane migration!—well, then, people need to be convinced to stop, sit, and contemplate the rocks, the flowers, the starry night sky, or they need to return again and again, sunrise, sunset, season after season in order to appreciate the subtle secrets of wide open spaces, right?

“Much of the grassland flora and fauna is too subtle to be seen from a passing car,” officials at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve proclaim in a bulletin, adding, “but careful scrutiny reveals the special beauty, wonder, and complexity of the prairie.” It’s not just a matter of scrutiny, though: right off the bat, the brochure for the Tallgrass Prairie Parkway Wildlife and Natural Heritage Trail Guide avers, “this land is best enjoyed when experienced in every season, in many different ways,” while Nebraska’s Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway advises travelers to “take all the time you need...Luxuriate in the scenic wonders [such as] majestic cottonwoods... glimpses of wildlife, large cattle drives, historic markers with remembrances of early settlers, and more stars than you have ever seen.” Don’t forget the Breathtaking Sunsets! The windmills! And, of course, the large flock of wild turkeys that crosses Highway 2 and the football field in Dunning early in the morning and early in the evening. “Return every year.” (Rhythms, cycles; time and space).



Figure 1-30 : Sky, prairie, road, sign, and, if you look carefully, dead snake.

But can brochures and Byways teach people to slow down? It's a matter of both aesthetics and ethics, according to Rex Funk (1996, paraphrased): people need to learn a certain set of skills, perspectives, and attitudes to see and understand the unique beauty and diversity of seemingly featureless, barren, empty landscapes. Yes, conscious appreciation for "Art in the Landscape"—design "elements of color, texture, pattern, line, form, movement, contrast, and light"—is part of perception, but so is recognition for less formal and far less permanent attributes such as "Processes and Cycles" and "Continuity and Change." (You can't see those from a car.) For the most part, it's a matter of "Scale" and "Tempo (Time And Motion)": "In crossing great spaces the temptation is to move faster," Funk warns, with the admonishment, "[b]y moving faster, one sees less... In order to appreciate this landscape, take time and get closer."

Take time, take time—take, take, it's always "take," as if time is something you need to steal or squirrel away in order to "get" closer. What about "is"?—it *is* time. It is time "to drop out of the fast lane," Candace Savage introduces *Prairie: A Natural History* (2004, 3-4)—time to slow down "and give the prairies, our prairies, a second, loving look."

That's even better: to *give*.

Pedaling back up that hill at Petrified Forest, I certainly dropped out of the fast lane, but can't say I gave the plains a loving look. I remained vaguely aware of particular patches of globemallow and little brown mile markers alongside the road (10...9...8, increasingly far apart) just to confirm that I was actually moving. Other than that, I spent most of the long, slow ride back up hunched over the handlebars, cursing the wind. (And myself, for not remembering just how darn far it was back to quarters.)

I want to advocate slowing down—*slow down!*—to insist that in order to see any place, particularly the prairie, even more particularly the semi-desert sagebrush-steppe, you have to SLOW DOWN. Get out of your car. Get on your bicycle or put on your boots. Take a field guide with you. And binoculars. And a notebook. Bike or walk until you feel like you are in the middle of nowhere, the very heart of nowhere, the center of everywhere, then sit. Sit like a rabbit or a rock. Breathe. *Zazen*, it's called in Zen Buddhism—sitting meditation.

But that's not something that can be told, taught, or taken.



Figure 1-31 : Warning / recommendation along Scenic Drive. Note the 4-wing saltbrush, sagebrush, wheatgrass, ryegrass, princes plume, and globemallow rippling in the wind.

This is how it goes: you are pedaling, pedaling, pedaling, up a strip of hot, dark chip-sealed pavement lined with faded strips of white and double-yellow. Grasses—wheatgrass, ryegrass, cheatgrass—bob alongside the road; beyond that, nothing but brush and a desert rose or two tucked in basalt-lined crevices. Maybe you pass a snake or toad, splattered near the sign reading “Speed Limit: 35.” (That seems to be the most popular place for roadkill).

You have made it through the longest, emptiest stretch of prairie, over the Interstate, around past Lacey, Whipple, Nizhoni, and have only this steepest section left. By now, though, your thighs are burning, your shoulders aching, the gears are making funny noises, and overhead, ravens are laughing at you, cackling, gurgling: *you’ll never make it, crawl! crawl!*

That’s what it’s really like—the prairie, experienced at a slower pace. No matter how often you ride, morning or evening, August, September, as the weather permits, into October, deep fall. It’s bigger than you think, uphill.

Does this make you want to slow down? Do you feel like getting out of your car and onto a bike?

How about this, then: just as you’re ready to believe the birds, get off and walk the rest of the way, pedal, pedal, breathe, you come up over a little rise and, *gasp!*

Wilderness! Wildness! The Painted Desert, that desolate empty basin! Those reds and browns and purples, those mesas and buttes and ridges! Pilot Rock, Pilot Rock, Pilot Rock!

Every single time. El Desierto Pintado.



Figure 1-32 : View from Pintado Point.

Pintado Point is Petrified Forest's version of what other parks call "Panorama Point" or "Artists Palette" or "Kodachrome Basin." Really, though, what name could befit such a sweeping view? The entirety of the Wilderness Area and beyond—north, the Navajo Reservation and the basalt necks of the Hopi Buttes; south, the park road and desert grasslands all the way to the White Mountains, 40-odd miles away; west, the railroad, the Interstate, stretching clear to Flagstaff and the San Francisco Peaks' pale, hazy shadows 120 miles distant; and east, dawn. (If you tried to calculate the amount of space you can see from Pintado Point—[30 miles north + say 45 miles south] \times [120 miles west + ...]—you would have to figure in the distance to the sun.) (And properly weight the 43,020 acres of Wilderness.) (And Pilot Rock—it's like a vortex for sky; how does that fit into the equation?)

Calculations aside, I earned that view. Especially after biking up, up, up, tired, sweaty, every time, even if I ought to be getting ready for work, I would pull into the parking area, unclip my shoes, lean my bike against the low stone wall, walk up to the interpretive sign, and sit. Sit. Stare. Listen. Breathe. "Simply by looking into the blue sky beyond clouds, *the serenity*" (from Vigyan Bhairava, Sochanda Tantra, and Malini Vijaya Tantra, transcribed by Repts 1957, 202).

The interpretive sign at Pintado Point says something banal about the amazing view, but what it really wants to talk about is air quality: "...vistas of remarkable clarity extend far beyond park boundaries because the air quality in and surrounding Petrified Forest is among the purest..." To prove the point, it includes a panorama labeled with mileage to distant landscape features: Pilot Rock—7; San Francisco Peaks—120. One hundred twenty! When visitors would pull into the parking area, get out of their cars or RVs or off their motorcycles, and walk up to the wayside, invariably someone would exclaim, *120 miles! Wow! Is it really that far?*

Yes, it really is that far, I wanted to exclaim back, *Space! Space!* I could have quoted Cather (1927, 94) at visitors: in plains, the "great rock mesas...[a]re not crowded together in disorder, but placed in wide spaces, long vistas between." Or I could have cited Oliva and colleagues (2011, 116): "[b]eyond a few tens of meters is vista space, where observers perception of distances to and between surfaces can become greatly inaccurate, with a dramatic accelerating foreshortening of space perception with distances over 100 meters. William Least Heat-Moon (1991, 82): "good god, look at all this air!" But I stayed silent; smiled; nodded. (I was normally thinking about Pilot Rock, anyway—so far to Pilot Rock!)

Likewise when anyone marveled *How beautiful!* I wanted to leap up and shout, *Yes! "This,"* to quote Edward Abbey (1968, 1, emphasis added), "*is the most beautiful place on earth!*" *Look* –the Lithodendron Wash! *Look* –Chinde Mesa! *Look* –Black Forest, Angels Garden, Devils Playground! *Look!*

But who wants to be assaulted by exclamation points? I stayed on my little stone perch, nodding, smiling, knowing that "beautiful" doesn't describe it; such landscapes are ineffable (Meinig 1979), especially when imbued with both memory and meaning (Tuan 1979). Then the inevitable: I'd be sitting there, a spandex-clad gargoyle, glowing with pride, as though I personally had stretched this skin of brush and buttes wide across the skeleton of the earth, when a tourist would turn to their husband or friend or child and say, *did you bring the camera / go get the camera / stand over there / smile!*

Whrrr, click! That's all it takes—*whrrrr, click!* *Whrrr* silence shattered; *click*, beauty trapped. *Whrrr, click*, then move on—turn around and walk away, get back in the car, race through the park, reach the next town, continue on to the final destination, someday develop or download memories and nod, hmm, pretty, where was I?

Granted, that's not giving people much credit. Maybe visitors will remember where they were when they took their pictures. (Especially since so many of them snap photos of the sign with its neatly-labeled landmarks.) After all, as Michael Crang argues (1997, 368), photos are a sort of “mnemotechnology” “providing visual prompts and locations for memories and stories.” William Henry Fox Talbot “believed the photograph to be a copy of the memory of light, nothing more,” writes Peter Goin (2001), asking, “[c]an we truly understand a sense of place without thinking about light memory?”

Light memory. Memory, lite. The problem, Gifford (1993, 136) points out, is that “the camera offers another insidious possibility: I'll snap a picture of it now and really look at it later”; photography is a means of “sacrificing the immediacy of experience and orientating activities to (future, distant) viewers. Events are framed for the future perfect, to have been” (Crang 1997, 365). When people take pictures (there it is again—*take, steal*, like sucking the soul from a place), we literally lose touch with the few precious minutes we have there, focusing on the visual display as artificially framed in a flat screen and neglecting the whole experience—the sounds, the smells, the wind, none of which can be (re)captured or recalled in small, static pixels or print later on.

That might be part of the point. It can be construed as a matter of human instinct, survival even, enabled by modern technology: when we feel disoriented or bewildered by a bombardment of stimuli, why, we need merely “take out our cameras and drastically reduce the flood of sensations and impressions by looking at a framed landscape through a tiny hole” (Tuan 2004, 42). Wilderness, in particular—that cacophony of ridges and washes; those frighteningly exposed stretches of sage—can “be tamed and rendered visibly manageable” through the careful composition of a photograph (Willis 1998, 60 quoted in Giblett 2007, 338).

This is especially true for tourists—people on break from their daily lives, hoping to simply “see the sights and...have worry-free pleasure, ease, relaxation, recreation, and “fun” (Bunkše 2007a, 7). Vacation is for vacating the busy, noisy, real world of now; *whrrr, click*, it can be safely confronted later, from a temporal and spatial distance. “Tourism in general and photography in particular,” according to John Urry (1992, 182), “serve to organize one's experience of time and space.” In his book *The Tourist Gaze*, Urry writes of a “way of seeing’ the world that is enforced on tourists and essentially conditioned by the imagery created for tourism destinations by the tourism industry.” Brian Garrod explicates (2009, 347):

The fundamental motivation of tourists traveling to such destinations, then, is to gaze on the panoramas, landscapes, buildings, people, and other manifestations of place they have been led to expect to find there through exposure to visual representations carried in tourism advertisements, television broadcasts, movies, brochures, travel books, and...picture postcards.

In other words, a tourist may see a pretty image and be inspired to go visit the place. There, they stop at a ‘scenic viewpoint,’ which has been carefully designated to optimize distance and viewing angle so as to facilitate aesthetic appreciation (Carlson 1979a, 103). To perpetuate the orderly ideal and, later, prove they had, in fact, been there, the tourist gets out their camera and takes a pretty image. Then they leave.

Is this but “an essential aspect of tourism,” as Bunkše forgives those who seek to collect places, artifacts, souvenirs, videos, and photographs (2007, 7)? Or, to use Giblett’s expression (2007, 339), is it “ubiquitous touristic landscape pornography”? What can visitors possibly remember of the few seconds or minutes they spent at Pintado Point if all they did was look at the place as filtered through the tiny lens or screen of a camera? And what can the resulting images possibly mean to those who took them and those who later ogle them?

(How can I dare to ask these questions when I’m just as guilty as the rest? “Somewhere in southwestern Oklahoma,” I label pictures; “somewhere, Arizona,” “somewhere, West Texas,” “somewhere, Colorado, somewhereKansassomewherewherewhere)



Figure 1-33 a-f : Driving through prairies and plains, somewhere in Oklahoma, West Texas, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

“The prairie,” Paul Gruchow writes (1985, 2), “is one of those plainly visible things that you can’t photograph. No camera lens can take in a big enough piece of it. The prairie landscape embraces the whole of the sky... Any undistorted image is too flat to represent the impression of immersion that is central to being on the prairie.” In other words, not only is it difficult to inspire people to take the time to really see a prairie when the main medium of communication and inspiration (the photograph) fails to convey the its main feature (space), but if, by some chance, tourists do choose to visit a prairie park, their main tool for comprehension (the camera) cannot take in, much less organize that space. It is a waste of time, a lost opportunity, a loss of presence to try to take a small, static photograph of huge, featureless scenery.

Scenery. Scene. Obscene.

Meaningless space, wasted time. ?

I know most people don’t have the luxury of living in a Park. I know most people live in cities and suburbs, at best visit the wilderness but do not remain. I know people have likes and dislikes, goals and priorities, somewhere to be other than Pintado Point. I know I should be happy that visitors are even willing to stop, get out of their car, walk to the overlook, read the sign, and take a photo before going on to other, more important things. But *please*, I wanted to throw their cameras off the cliff, *sit! Stay! LOOK, will you LOOK*. Oh, Ed Abbey (1968, 233), the more I biked the road, the more I sat on that stone wall, the more I cared for that park, my park, the more I too wondered desperately, “What can I tell them? ...Look here, I want to say, for godsake folks,...look around; throw away those goddamned idiotic cameras! For chrissake folks what is this life if full of care we have no time to stand and stare? eh?”



Figure 1-34 : See Figure 1-30 : Sky, prairie, road, sign, and, if you look carefully, dead snake.

Time. Time to stand and stare. Sage advice: “Better to idle through one park in two weeks, than to try to race through a dozen in the same amount of time” (Abbey 1968, 54)



Figure 1-35 : Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, Nebraska.

There are nearly four hundred units in the National Park Service, including more than fifty true National Parks, several hundred National Monuments, dozens of preserves, historic sites and battlefields, seashores and lakeshores, rivers and recreation areas. The Forest Service manages nineteen National Grasslands. The Fish and Wildlife Service has five hundred fifty three National Wildlife Refuges. The Bureau of Land Management oversees two hundred fifty three million acres, including several Monuments and National Conservation Areas designated part of the National Landscape Conservation System. Beyond National units, there are several hundred if not thousands of State Parks and even more County and City Parks. Then there are non-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society, universities, and private museums that manage wild and semi-wild lands in America and around the world.

Around the world! Other countries have parks and preserves, reserves and conserves, World Heritage Sites and National Parks—so many places! So many beautiful, wild, wonder-full places!

It’s impossible to stand and stare at them all.

As much as I enjoyed wandering around the Painted Desert during my first internship, I didn't ever expect to go back to Petrified Forest National Park. The world was wide; I was young. I had other plans. They fell through. I scrambled for something to do, anywhere to go, and so found myself returning to northern Arizona. Re-turn. Try again. This time, I told myself, I'll slow down. I'll bike. I'll camp. I'll find more petroglyph panels. I'll learn all of the grass species. I'll see a mountain lion.

I will hike to Pilot Rock.



Figure 1-36 : Clay hills below Lacey Point. Note the dark lump in the horizon (Pilot Rock, omnipresent.)

During those four months at Petrified Forest—August through December—I camped, I biked, I slowed down, I sat. One day, while sitting at Pintado Point, I heard a man complaining to his wife about the speed limit on the stretch between the Puerco and Lacey Point, set at 45 miles per hour. “I mean, 45?” he grumbled, making me wonder if he'd been ticketed for speeding, “It should be at least 65. There's nothing to see.”

Nothing to see. Nothing but the earth, the grass, the clouds, the sky, the “ever-changing light” (Norris 1993, 155). What was I supposed to do, quote Paul Gobster (1999, 58) at him: “The dramatic, visual elements of the picturesque continue to give aesthetic pleasure, but so do the more subtle and ordinary landscapes”? Or Larry McMurtry (quoted in Lopez and Gwartney 2006, 271): “To those not attuned to their subtleties the plains are merely monotonous emptiness. But to those who love them, the plains are endlessly fascinating, a place where the constant interplay of land and sky is always dramatic; gloomy sometimes, but more often uplifting”? Shout that I think the speed limit should be 25? Or 15? Better yet, no cars allowed, just bicyclists, equestrians, hopeless peripatetics? Shake him and say *LOOK?*

All the quotes and photographs and interpretive signs and inspirational movies and lists of animals and plants and fossils and artifacts in the world can't possibly convince some people that prairies are anything except empty. Better to let them just speed on through, speed on by, the faster the better, go. Leave my places alone.

Silently, I unfolded my legs, stood up (stand and stare!), got back on my bike, and rolled slowly home.



Figure 1-37 : Pilot Rock, as seen from Pintado Point. Dusk.

1.5 Rhythms, Cycles, Spirals

Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

Part I : Sun-sitting

I get that feeling [that I could stay outside and somehow become part of that world, grass, wind and trees, day and night itself] when I'm out in the open...The land, the 360 degrees of unobstructed horizon, invites you to keep on walking...A person could stand and watch this changing land and sky forever.

– Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993, 178)

I spend a lot of time / outside / myself, / looking around.

– Byrd Baylor, *I'm in Charge of Celebrations* (1986)



Figure 1-38 : Rhythms, Cycles, Spirals, Part I.

“No one can say for sure,” writes Rick Bass in *The Book of Yaak* (1996, p 6–7), “when a place becomes your home, or when a fit is achieved, or peace.”

But oh, dear Rick Bass, I can. I can.

After a brief attempt to live in a city and work a nine-to-five job in a windowless office, I returned to Petrified Forest National Park for the summer. It was my first summer there as well as my first time as a real, honest-to-goodness Park Ranger. (Many people may not notice the difference between interns and employees, much less Park Ranger and Forest Ranger, but I was proud of my grey shirt and green pants, arrowhead badge, perpetually unpolishable boots, and, of course, “Smokey Bear”-style flat hat, even though it’s hot and tight and rolls like a tumbleweed when caught by the breeze).

For three months, I stood happily in the Visitor Center, welcoming road-weary travelers and answering their questions—28 miles (road length); *the Painted Desert Inn, Pintado Point, Puerco Pueblo, Blue Mesa, and Rainbow Forest Museum* (recommended stops); *logs buried in mud, smothered by volcanic ash, replaced cell by cell with silica* (petrification); *back outside, around to the left* (bathrooms). After a simple orientation, I would start the orientation film “Land of Stone and Light,” sell a few postcards, and wish them a good day. As the schedule dictated, I went to the Inn and/or Puerco Pueblo, Giant Logs and/or Crystal Forest to facilitate emotional and intellectual connections to the park’s natural and cultural resources (i.e., give a talk or “rove,” making myself available for spontaneous, informal contacts: *See the pronghorn?/ Yes, it’s always this windy. / How are you today?/ Hello!*) About once a week, I had “project time,” during which I attended to my designated duty of preparing pen-and-ink illustrations of the park’s most common and charismatic flora. (I drew flowers.)

I didn’t just draw flowers, though—accurate botanical illustration requires research. The tiny, slender leaves of blue flax (*Linum lewisii*) alternate, for example, while the fuzzy lobes of globemallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*) grow larger closer to the ground. That blazing red of Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja*)? Not actually the plant’s flower; rather, the bracts. I could point these attributes out to visitors, too, when they saw me sitting near a trail, trying to look proper and scientific but more often sprawled akimbo, hat skewed to block the sun, identification guides and pads of paper flapping in the breeze, and asked, what are you doing? (*What are you doing? Or what are you doing?*)

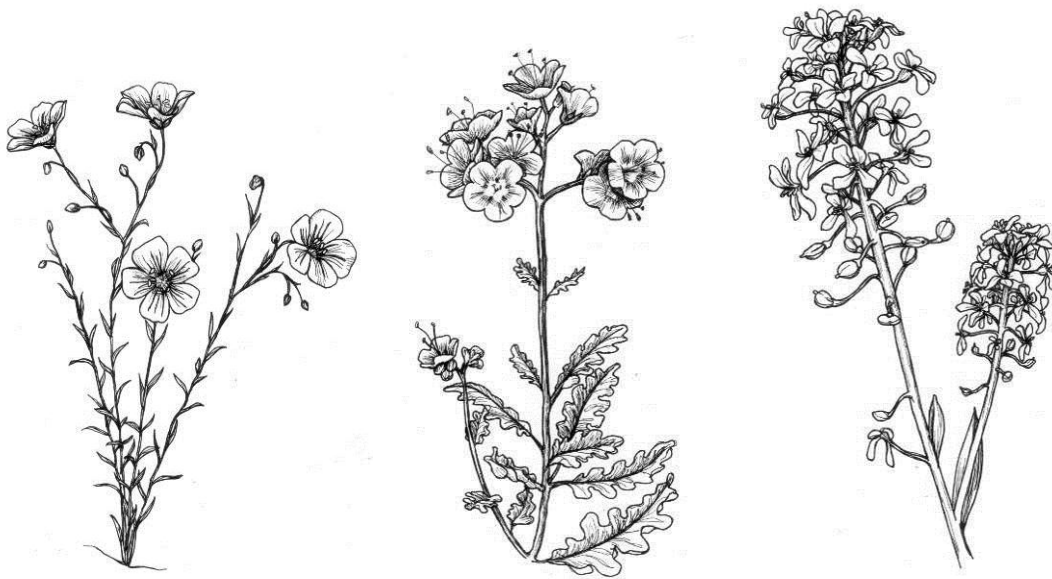


Figure 1-39 a-c: Blue flax (*Linum lewisii*), scorpionweed (*Phacelia*), Rocky Mountain beeplant (*Cleome serrulata*).

“Drawing flowers,” I would look up and smile. Well, what kind of flower? Why? What’s this one over here? Half an hour later, I would have explained not only the natural history of sacred datura (*Datura wrightii*) but its relationship to deadly nightshade and the medicinal uses of sage.

I especially liked to draw flowers at Puerco Pueblo, where casual conversations about yellow buckwheat (*Eriogonum*) flow seamlessly into animated discussions about agriculture and the Ancestral Puebloans who had cultivated their corn, beans, and squash in fields nearby. “Yes, the climate may have been wetter in the twelfth century,” I told twenty-first century visitors who looked at the desiccated landscape and marveled at the idea that anyone could possibly choose to live there, “but the people were also smarter about their use of resources; they’d accumulated several generations’ worth of knowledge about the place.” They knew where to get raw materials—agate and chert, cottonwood, sandstone—for tools and shelter; they knew why to build on a slight rise and with a corner pointed at the predominant wind; they knew how to supplement their diet with wild herbs and game; they knew when to plant and when to reap, when to stay and when to go. With the river, the trees, the brush, the rock, the deposits of iron-red and manganese-purple stone all nearby, really, it’s a great place to make a home.



Figure 1-40 : *Triticum*—a wild wheat.

“Let me show you,” I would say, if the visitors seemed interested, engaged, curious not just about the pretty flowers or the drawing ranger but about the wisdom and beauty of living in such a place. I would lead them through what’s left of the Pueblo—unassuming piles of rubble that were partially reconstructed to convey the size and shape of a central courtyard surrounded by a hundred-plus rooms—pointing out features like a ceremonial kiva (square with round corners, evidence of a confluence of cultural influences), maybe finding a pottery sherd or lithic flake, trying to explain how archaeologists find and interpret clues to the past. When we came to the highest point on the trail, I would gesture to the sweeping landscape and describe the importance of viewsheds to inhabitants and travelers along prehistoric trade and migration corridors. Then we would follow the pavement down, away from the Pueblo—not far, just to the edge of the sandstone ridge, where a metal railing politely told us to stop.

“Stop,” I would say, “what do you see?”

Most of the time, people looked up and out—that instinctive tendency to scan the horizon. (There’s not much there. Another sandstone-capped ridge, a bit of a spring, some greenery, horsetails wisping through the upper atmosphere.) Then they would lower their gaze to focus on boulders nearby. Sooner or later, someone would gasp, oh! Rock art!

“Petroglyphs,” I would corroborate, explaining that the “stone symbols” are, indeed, a form of creative expression, not a written language like hieroglyphics. Some people think they look rather crude or childish, but, judging from the amount of effort they took to create, the carvings were likely imbued with much more importance than mere graffiti: “Their maker had had to exercise a fair amount of control and patience,” I would explain the process, “in order to chip carefully away at the dark “desert varnish”—a manganese-rich compound that bacteria fix to exposed surfaces in arid places—to reveal light-colored stone underneath.” Then I would cite Ekkehart Malotki, an anthropologist who has worked extensively in and around Petrified Forest (2002, xxiii): “Most Colorado Plateau rock art...constitutes attempts to appropriate the gods and other supernatural forces to ensure individual or collective well-being. Intrinsicly, therefore, rock art is a product of ceremonial and ritual activities.”



Figure 1-41 : Zoomorphs, southern Wilderness Area.

Anthropologists have “identified” some of the symbols by consulting the legends and lore of modern Puebloan people, particularly the Hopi and Zuni. For example, a highly visible “stork carrying a baby” glyph at Puerco Pueblo might illustrate a story about a giant bird-man that carries off naughty children (or it could just be an ibis with a frog in its beak). Female anthropomorphs surrounded by bighorn sheep and pawprints suggest “game mothers.” The image of a seed-carrying, hunchbacked flute player—Kokopelli—found throughout the Southwest (and, thanks to the modern souvenir industry, on Southwestern-style pendants and bookmarks and lampstands around the world) makes several appearances in the Painted Desert. All of these symbols, notably, invoke ideas of fertility—appreciation and/or desire for food, water, and virility. Universal concepts.



Figure 1-42 : Zoomorphs, geometrics, and tracks on banks of Lithodendron Wash, Painted Desert Wilderness. Note not just the handprints, but the elaborate branching structure just below the flake in the upper left.

My personal favorites are the handprints and footprints—they evoke a visceral connection to humanness and humanity, though no contemporary scientist can say exactly why they were made. So too, lonely cougars—are they meant to express power, awe, danger that lurks with soft paws and tawny eyes? Most enigmatic and elegant are the geometrics—abstract symbols—dots and bursts, triangles and squares, spirals and mazes, mazes and spirals, in and out, around around around.



Figure 1-43 : Bottom of Lithodendron Panel, mostly tracks and geoglyphs.

Craig Childs (2006, 109): “It was as if we were looking for the center of a whirling spiral. Every time we found the center, it slowly dissolved from under us, and we left to follow it elsewhere.”

Terry Tempest Williams (2001, 312-313): “The spiral becomes this expansion and contraction of energy...It is an outward motion in its evolutionary reach and an inward motion in its emotional drain. A spiral moves in both directions – clockwise and counterclockwise.”

Lao Tzu (*Tao Te Ching*, translated by Hamill 2004, 22):

Beauty and ugliness have one origin.
Name beauty and ugliness is.
Is and *is not* produce one another.
The difficult is born in the easy,
Long is defined by short, the high by the low...

“Do you see the spiral?” I would point to a small petroglyph etched into a boulder just below the railing.

“Where? Oh yes, that. Hmm,” Visitors nodded politely, likely wondering why I bothered with such an unassuming mark while Kokopelli danced nearby.

“Any guesses what that means?”

“Um.” They would reply.

On a “Newspaper Rock” a mile up the road, people can see spirals and lines zigging and zagging in what anthropologists have interpreted as ancient travelogues and/or travel guides. Out in the Wilderness Area, hikers may encounter one of several different panels featuring spirals with a dizzying number of precisely-cut whorls—eight, nine, you lose count after that. That June, a few other rangers and I woke at 3:30 a.m. (cold and dark), piled into a truck (moon hovering low and orange on the horizon), drove twenty-odd miles (stars beginning to fade), parked where a fork of Dry Wash dips under the road (familiar landmarks beginning to appear), hiked out along the slender strand of clay (pale glow in the lightening sky), then stopped at the base of Martha’s Butte and waited for the sun to rise—all part of a pilgrimage to see a spiral petroglyph.

A spiral. At dawn. On the summer solstice.

“It had to be / sunrise. / And it had to be / that / first / sudden moment. / That’s / when all / the power of / life / is in the / sky” (Baylor 1978)

Any guesses what that means?



Figure 1-44 : A spiral at dawn on the summer solstice.

If you were to sit on the same rock day after day, watching the sun rise and set, rise and set, rise and set, you would notice that it appears and disappears not just at different *times* each day, but so too in different *places*. Instead of popping up at exactly 90 degrees East, tracing a perpendicular semicircle through the sky, and tucking obediently back in at 270 West, the sun rises and sets at points farther north in the summer, farther south in the winter, and swings at an angle relative to the latitude. (Though, to be fair, it's not the sun's fault. Rather, it's a matter of the earth's axial tilt and annual orbit.) Seasons, spirals.

If you were to sit on the same rock day after day, year after year, you would also notice that the sun's horizon-crossing location does not vary at a regular pace. Rather, like a pendulum, it starts at one extreme, gathers momentum and speed on through the middle, then begins to slow, eventually pauses, lingers, turns to begin the process again in the other direction. ("As breath turns from down to up, and again as breath curves up to down—through both these turns, *realize*. / Or, whenever in-breath and out-breath fuse, at this instant touch the energy-less, energy-filled center" [Vigyan Bhairava, Sochanda Tantra, and Malini Vijaya Tantra, transcribed by Repts 1957, 196.]

If you were to sit on the same rock day after day, year after year, you might learn to pay particular attention to these moments of extreme pause—the solstices. It might become, according to a man interviewed by Craig Childs (2006, 31),

like morning prayer, to go to spots where, at certain times of the year, [you know] the sunrise [will] be dramatically framed by shapes on the horizon... this pursuit [feels] natural in this particular land, with the sky so huge overhead and the horizon picketed with cliffs and buttes. You can't help looking for the peculiar way the sun rises from one day to the next.

You might even want to create some sort of marker for the moment. It wouldn't have to be something huge—no need for ziggurats or stone henges, just a row of doors or windows, neatly lined to channel the light on a solstice morning. Or a simple glyph, positioned so as to catch shadows or spaces between shadows cast by features nearby. That's all it takes to make a calendar—attention, time, and a few loops or whorls, spiraling in, out, both.



Figure 1-45 : Revisiting the same spiral, midday, autumn, ravens circling overhead.

The solstice marker at Puerco Pueblo amazes visitors. For good reason—it proves that Puebloans achieved a level of natural acuity exceeding that of most modern people. In fact, westerners weren't even aware that ancient Southwestern societies had oriented elements of their lives—buildings, roads, rock art—to celestial features until the 1970s, when archaeologists and astronomers began noticing the alignment of the solstice sun and Puebloan structures at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. Writing of “A Unique Solar Marking Construct” at Fajada Butte, first observed by Anna Sofaer on 29 June 1977, Sofaer and colleagues Volker Zinser and Rolf Sinclair describe a “Sun Dagger” site that tracks solar movement throughout the year (1979). Creating such a glyph, they marvel (1979, 283), “required a sophisticated appreciation of astronomy and geometry for its realization.”



Figure 1-46 : A possible “calendar,” Southern Wilderness Area.

As in Chaco Canyon, there are several recorded archaeoastronomical sites in and near Petrified Forest—not just summer solstice spirals, but glyphs for winter, other important dates, possibly the movement of stars or planets or even elaborate lunar calendars. Almost all are in the backcountry, some in sensitive locations that few people (not including me) are allowed to know. The marker at Puerco Pueblo is readily accessible, however, and the Park Service is proud to point it out to visitors, especially in the weeks before and after June 21st or 22nd.

That was another delightful assignment—being sent to stand at Puerco early in the morning, watching as the sun rose and shone through a crack in a nearby boulder, casting a “dagger of light” (why is it always a “dagger” rather than a sabre or stylus?) toward the center of the spiral. Most days there, I met a smattering of visitors, sometimes great hordes—too many to talk with all at once. But there were also stretches of solitude—long, beautiful hours, just me and the ravens and the wind. Trains rumbling by. The spiral and a cloudless sky.

Hundreds of years ago, I would think to myself while leaning into the hot metal railing and watching the shadows part ever so slowly, so naturally, somebody stood at the same exact spot and watched. Watched the sun as it rose every morning, watched the light as it played on the stone; watched the skies storm and clear, watched the wildlife come and go. Watched.

That would have been me, I still like to think to myself, that would have been *my* job. I would have been a site-watcher (Least Heat-Moon 1991, 289), a specialist in sunrises (Childs 2006, 31).

I may be yet.



Figure 1-47 : Self-portrait with sun.

Part II : A Day

When not watching rocks, drawing flowers, giving talks, or selling postcards, I was out walking. Sometimes I think that's all I did that summer—work and walk, walk and work, walk work walk sleep walk. Every morning, every evening, and anytime I could in between, I was out walking. The same route. The same old broken road through the same old dusty plains at least twice every day. I didn't stop exploring the Wilderness and I still biked often enough, but, as Gary Snyder explains (1990, 178), "Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind. Walking is the exact balance of spirit and humility."

Spirit, humility, balance. Left, right, left, right, step step step step, breathe.

...Everything begins as a promise.

—Charles Bowden, "The Emptied Prairie" *National Geographic Magazine* (2008)

A morning:

4:30 a.m. Wake. Strap on sandals, slip on a coat, step out. Sky still deep and dark, maybe a sliver of moon, Venus ever bright. Purple-periwinkle, smells of sage.

About a quarter mile from headquarters, turn right onto a dirt road aiming east. This was once Route 66—America's beloved Mother Road, connecting Chicago to L.A.. (Get your kicks!) It now leads to piles of gravel; beyond those, weeds. You would never notice it if you didn't know to look.

4:50. Sparrows begin to stir and sing. Rabbits rustle and hop—excited, nervous, ears and noses twitching with anticipation. From here, you can see a line of white lights and another of red, together streaming all the way to the horizon. (Truckers zipping along I-40. If the wind's right, the traffic is audible too.)

Soon, you're beyond the large shrub that marks a mile. Beyond the old key embedded in the tar. Beyond the spot where I once saw a rattlesnake and another where I encountered a mountain lion track. (That was it—a single print, the size of my hand. I wonder how much time had passed between the moment when the cat bounded across the dirt and the moment when I stopped to look, bent over, touched the track, spread my fingers as wide as the pads of the lion's paw. Was it watching from the grass?)

5:10. Arrive at the fencepost where, by some act of Cartesian cartography and the politics of land ownership, the Park's border jags in and out. The actual end of the park—a gate, a fence across the road—is only another mile away, but this is far enough. Greet the post and turn around, head for home.

It's fairly light now, sky awash in pinks. Any lingering clouds dissipate rapidly. There's already a breeze, westerly; even the air rushes to greet the sun.

The sun! "Some people / say / there is / a new sun / every day. / They say / you have to / welcome it" (Baylor 1978). Welcome it by walking, walking, walking, taking huge steps, feeling the earth rotate beneath your feet (Dillard 1974, 5), breathing deeply of the pre-dawn air, then stopping. Stop!

Here it comes! Hold your breath! 5:20 or 30, lighter, lighter, rays of light shoot up then out, skittering across the steppe, snagging on the sage, blinding, brilliant. There it is!

Good morning, sun.



Figure 1-48 : That liminal moment of pause and delight (in other words, sunrise. Seen from the Rim Trail.)

5:45 a.m. Sunrise is a time of possibility, of promise, of hope. Aldo Leopold knew this, writing in his Sand County Almanac (1949, 41):

at daybreak I am the sole owner of all the acres I can walk over. It is not only boundaries that disappear, but also the thought of being bounded. Expanses unknown to deed or map are known to every dawn, and solitude...extends on every hand as far as the dew can reach.

This effect—let’s call it the Dawn Effect—is even more pronounced in sweeping prairies and plains where, as N. Scott Momaday notes (1968, 112-113), “you can see to the end of the world. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.” How can you *not* feel joy with a new sun, created every day, to illuminate the wild wonderful expanse? Imagination and spirit soar. “It’s an old emotion,” writes Dan Flores (2001, 169, his emphasis), “*euphoria at spaciousness.*”



Figure 1-49 : Sunrise from Tawa Point.

Summer days on the plains can quickly become hot and dull, however. Each morning, I made it back to the park's housing complex with just enough time to transition back to the real world. If I had to open the Visitor Center, I would take a quick shower, gulp down breakfast, and leave before one of my roommates even woke up. If I was scheduled to close, I had several hours—time to bike up to Pintado Point then return to make pancakes. On weekends, I tossed snacks and water bottles into my pack and tried to head out to the Wilderness before it got unbearably hot.

It was unbearably hot by 9 a.m.



Figure 1-50 : Access road toward Zuni Well, returning from hike to Boundary Site, not yet mid-morning.



Figure 1-51 : Mini-playa with petrified wood and Pilot Rock, off Lacey Point. Mid-morning.

By 10:00 a.m., the sky is stark, the air hazy; the ground shimmers with irradiated heat. There's not a breath of air. Even the snakeweed looks dehydrated and visitors are short-tempered. ("It takes a whole *hour* just to *drive* through? *Ten dollars* a car? Why haven't we seen any *antelope*?")

Noon. Just as we consider closing the park ("Sorry, you can't go in, the road melted"), wisps of cloud tickle the horizon, so far away, so faint, that they're less substantial than mirages.



Figure 1-52 : Dust devil in Lithodendron Wash, seen from Nizhoni Point.

"The prairie landscape is so completely dominated by its skies that sometimes there seems to be no middle ground," Paul Gruchow notes of rural Minnesota (1985, 67),

There are summer days when the blue of the prairie sky permeates everything, when land and plants and air and water seem all to be molded from an identical blue material. The air on such days shimmers; it is difficult to say precisely where the horizon quits and the heavens begin.

It's like that almost every day on the Southwestern sagebrush-steppe. May, June, and the beginning of July melt together into a blur of hot, dry, empty blue. It would feel intolerable but for the knowledge that the hotter and drier these months are, the thirstier the ground gets; the thirstier the ground gets, the more likely it is to suck moist air masses up and over from the Gulf of California. These, in turn, manifest themselves in tremendous storms that sweep in like clockwork every afternoon for weeks at a time from August into September. Monsoons.

2:00 p. m. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, wisps build into puffs, even begin to multiply and cast speckles of shadow on distant mesas. Patches of cool shade sweep across the plains, then the clouds begins develop depth and drama. The land becomes a mere accomplice to the sky, there “to change and glow and darken under it” (Wallace Stegner, quoted in Evernden 1983).

4:00 Although there might still be sunshine directly overhead, thunderheads unfurl to the east and north and west and south—black-bottomed, white-crowned billows that suck hot air from the ground and circulate it up to the stratosphere. Yes, Kathleen Norris (1993, 179), maybe it *is* our sky that makes us crazy: “[w]e can see the weather coming, and we like it that way.”



Figure 1-53 : Looking north from Newspaper Rock. (In gauging the depth of the sky, don't forget the land; note the dark lump on the distant horizon, far behind the glowing butte).

5:00 Energy builds, along with tension and anticipation; it's darker, darker, dark. Eerie, beautiful blue-black dark. Tendrils of virga sweep down, tantalizing the parched earth. Through the darkness, a flicker and a whoosh—lightning!

Lightning!

... Lightning!

... Lightning!

It's rare to hear thunder—usually the storms are too far away for sound, but sometimes the clouds grumble and roar. Dust devils whirl furiously along dry washes. Clockwise?—all is well; stand and watch. Counterclockwise?—go inside, batten down. The air crackles in anticipation.



Figure 1-54 : Sacred datura, opening for storm.

A whiff of ozone—fried air. Mix into that the indescribable pungency of sage. And, if you're lucky—very, very lucky—one cool drop, sploosh!, on your brow. Then another, splash! at your feet.

Plock, plock, big fat pockets of moisture, how could the sky have held anything that size?,
plock, plock, plockplockplock, patterpatterpatter,
pitterpatterpitterpatterpitterpatter,
and you're soaked, cold, drowned, happy.



Figure 1-55 : Dust! Waves of dust sweeping along a dry Lithodendron Wash, waiting for rain.



Figure 1-56 : Rain! Rain! So thick that you can barely see past the Painted Desert Inn from Tawa Point.
And oh the air is saturated with the scent of rain-drenched juniper.

5:20. The world is fresh and new. Frogs are singing. Clouds breaking. Sky lightening, light.
(Ha!, one last kaboom.)

'I come from brilliancy / And return to brilliancy. / What is this?'

...[Hoshin] shouted 'Kaa!' and was gone.

– Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (1957, 29)



Figure 1-57 : Clearing after a late summer storm.



Figure 1-58 : Old Route 66, the morning after a storm.

I didn't know there were frogs in the desert. (Technically, spadefoot toads, *Spea bombifrons*, who boast the remarkable ability to burrow deep into the cool mud and wait until they sense rain to emerge and breed.)

I didn't know what "virga" was, or that, according to Navajo lore, one can identify a malevolent dust devil by its counterclockwise rotation. I didn't know that rainbows could be full, that the sky can turn green, that lightning can fuse sand into twisted globules of glass.

I didn't know that you can live your whole day, every day, for just three moments: sunrise, sunset, and the first scent of rain.

Pure joy.

After a storm passes, the sky becomes blue again, but a quieter, more content blue than noon's parched exhaustion or afternoon's darkening billows. Even if there hasn't been a storm—if the day has just stretched long and hot and flat—still, by late afternoon, there's a feeling of readiness, resignation, *wu wei*. Minutes linger, not because they're loathe to pass but because they're content to know the next will come soon enough. The sun will set, the earth will whirl. "In the reprieve at the end of a day, in the stillness of a summer evening, the world sheds its categories, the insistence of its future, and is suspended solely in the lilt of its desire" (Lopez 1986, 66).

To step out into this blueness—a blue tinged with pinks and purples and golds—is to experience a release. Rhythm. Exhalation, inhalation. Continuity and change, if not infinity.

It's time for a walk.



Figure 1-59 : Old Route 66, late afternoon, monsoon season.



Figure 1-60 : Late summer, gold.

6:20. Turn onto the same old path; pass the same little landmarks. But now, as William A Quayle promises in *The Prairie and the Sea* (1905, quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 607), “[t]he prairie path leads to the sky path. The paths are one: the continents are two; and you must make your journey from the prairies to the sky.”

It wouldn’t be hard to walk up instead of across. The air is buoyant; the earth exhaling. Grasses ripple in the breeze. The grass! That’s the only sensual tether to earth—the slight rustle and soft touch of tall wheat lining the path. As the sun dips lower, it caresses the vegetation with its long rays, making everything—alive or inanimate, rain-soaked or dry, real or imagined—glow like copper and gold. Cicadas start to sing.

Fragrant grasses and white clouds / hold me here. / What holds you there, / world-dweller?

Chiao Jan, 8th century Buddhist monk (translated by J. P. Seaton 2004, p. 57)

6:40. If there are wildfires to the west, the particulates catch reds and oranges so bright that the color of the sky stings as much as the smoke. If thunderheads are still rumbling through, great shafts of light pierce through holes in the cloud layer and race as bright splotches across the plains. If the sky is empty, fantastically empty, just ether and light, then all you have to watch is the great glowing sun, is it sinking or are the mesas stretching up to catch it? Beautiful, breathtaking, but so urgent that it makes you dizzy, or anxious, even—jealous, possessive. *Stop!* You want to shout at every fleeting moment, let me *look*, let me *see!*



Figure 1-61 : Sunset from Pintado Point.

I actually did shout “stop!” one evening, out loud, at the sun, desperate to make time stand still. Having just slipped away from a group at quarters (*Can’t miss the sunset*, my excuse; *but the sun sets every night*, the response), I was determined to have the world justify my choice. I raced out old Route 66, wanting as much space as possible. When I stopped to catch my breath, I realized that the view was extraordinary just then: deep blue-purple mesas, deep blue-purple clouds, and, in between, a strip of light, Pilot Rock, wisps of virga dripped in gold. The prairie was newly washed, sage sparkling. Flowers were actively sprouting up from the soil and bursting into bloom; I could hear their petals opening, no? Larks were larking, rabbits hopping, I should have broken out in song, gone skipping or dancing off into the prairie, mud between my toes, but instead I shouted “stop!”

Stop! Hit pause, run back to quarters, drag everyone outside, out into that blazing evening, so alive, so alive, and say, *see?* Don’t you *see?*

Stop! Let me see, let me stare, let me memorize every beautiful color and line. Let me sear the scene into my brain or seal it in a bottle or a box so that I can look at it whenever I want (or maybe just shake it sometimes, hear it rattle, remember it was real, had happened, was happening.)

Stop! It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and soon it would be lost. I would never see anything that beautiful again. I would forget, forget, it would blur into the summer's worth of sunsets, sunrises, days and nights, moments, dreams, lost, forgotten. I burst into tears.

What else can you do? There's a tinge of desperation in every sunset. Sunrise is for anticipation, then awe (*rise, sun, rise!....Oh!*). Midday hours blend together in a bright, brilliant glare. Come late afternoon, though, as the light begins to lengthen, you know the sun is going to slip back behind the earth, slowly, surely, whether you want it to or not, whether you will it to or not, and then it will be dark. Dark dark dark, you'll have to face a universe filled with far more empty space than solid matter.

"The Golden Hour," or even "Magic," photographers and cinematographers call it—those moments when the sun lingers near the horizon, embracing subjects in its rich, warm glow. Who hasn't raced out to snap a shot of a brilliant dawn or fiery dusk? Though the images might look the same—you can't tell the difference between a rising sun and a setting sun unless you know whether landmarks face east or west—the experience is entirely different. The rise comes with a bit of a pop—an inhalation, a celebration, *oh!* Sunset: *Om*, you exhale.

Though the meaning of such moments may never be found in words (paraphrased from Reps 1957, 13), if you delight in definitions: "awe," according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971, cited in Konečni 2010, 149), is "reverential or respectful fear; the attitude of a mind subdued to profound reverence in the presence of supreme authority, moral greatness or sublimity, or mysterious sacredness." Awe can be a "peak experience"—a state of being moved with fear and joy, boundlessness and humility (Konečni 2010)—or a simple beauty, admiration, reverence, or respect (Keltner and Haidt 2003). When filled with awe, people find their minds "expand to accommodate truths never before known" (Keltner and Haidt 2003, 304; see also Konečni 2010); they feel a part of larger phenomena—the great wide world, the infinite whirl of time, all that is sacred and divine. (N. Scott Momaday [1968, 115]: "The sun is at home on the plains. Precisely there does it have the certain character of a god"). Truth, admiration, reverence are for Aurora, the goddess of dawn, that bright beautiful sun peeking over the horizon once again. Au-rora. Awe.

Sunset, then, could be considered sublime. Not "sublime" as in a change of phase from solid to gas (though that would seem to happen each night), nor "sub-liminal" as in below-threshold (though that would aptly describe the sun's nightly drop behind the horizon). Rather, "sublime" as defined by eighteenth-century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (cited in Keltner and Haidt 2003, 300): "the feeling of expanded thought and greatness of mind" provoked by an encounter with objects with great and ineffable power. Power—a dimension of threat and terror—is what distinguishes that which is sublime from the merely beautiful (Carlson 2010): Immanuel Kant (described in Forsey 2007) cites an emotional reaction to a display of nature's power, while Sigmund Freud (cited in Konečni 2010) describes an "'oceanic' feeling... a flowing out of the ego and into the totality of things." Simultaneous awareness of one's own presence and one's own mortality. "What sort of reaction can one have," Tom Scanlan asks of "the problem the prairie creates for the imagination" (1990, 201), "to a land that both dwarfs one with its scale and at the same time concentrates the psyche on the only point of reference, the self?"

Well, you can burst into tears. Every night. Around 6:45 or 7 p. m. during the summer; more toward 5 during the winter. Or you can just watch, with enchantment. “Enchantment” invites no dread, no terror, no thoughts of ego or Truth; no desire to pause or capture or cling. Nothing but beauty and peace. “To be enchanted,” according to Jane Bennet (2001, 5, cited in Benediktsson 2007, 214), is to be “transfixed, spellbound... Thoughts... are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear. You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify.”

Let go of the mind, then, “the thousand blue / story fragments we tell ourselves / each day to keep the world underfoot” (Harrison and Kooser 2003, 18). Let your thoughts rest as blues changes color. The sky grows vivid, glows, glows! as the breeze and the flowers and the sweet chirps of insects rise lightly from the land. The sun lingers on distant mesas, then is gone.

Magic.



Figure 1-62 : Enchantment.

According to some theorists, magic eventually gets dusty, dulls, thins: the sun sets each evening, day after day, year after year; after a point, who cares? “As experience increases, experience of the ordinary increases, and thus the odds of experiencing the exceptional decreases,” Stan Godlovitch pontificates (1998, 115); “[m]any exceptional things have only one chance to be exceptional. Repeat them often and they become ordinary.” Ordinary. Boring. Plain.

And yet, in researching the “Aesthetic Experience”—moments when “we feel as though life had suddenly become arrested... We are wholly in the present with no thought of the past or future. There is no purpose or motivation behind our experience other than just having the experience for its own sake”—Richard Chenowith and Paul Gobster (1990, 5) found that intense beauty can be and is often encountered in familiar places and ordinary landscapes. Research subjects cited lakes, birds (especially ducks), sunsets, seasons, and storms as being particularly inspirational. Conclusion: there’s no need for the stimulation of busy city streets or rugged, the splendor of forested mountains, just an ability to appreciate quiet natural beauty. (Or a duck.)

In fact, the better a person comes to know a place, the more attuned they may become to its subtle rhythms, its rhymes. Even “less spectacular landscapes,” Benediktsson concedes (2007, 214), afford a state of heightened emotional and aesthetic awareness “once one allows oneself to dwell therein.”

Dwell therein: “Abide in some place *endlessly spacious*, clear of trees, hills, habitations... Thence comes the end of mind pressures” (Vigyan Bhairava, Sochanda Tantra, and Malini Vijaya Tantra offering one of 112 ways to open the invisible doors of consciousness, transcribed by Repts 1957, 199). Allow oneself to dwell therein: discover “that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something that has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear” (Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, 144). Once one allows oneself to dwell therein: once one has emptied the mind—empty of expectations, beliefs, easily-acquired abstract knowledge and visual effects—one is open to the feel of a place. “The ‘feel’ of a place,” according to Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 183), is

made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. The ‘feel’ of a place... is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play.

To experience the rhythm of space, stand out on the plains at dusk. After suffering long hours of harsh sunlight and/or the intense swirls of storms, the earth exhales with gentle relief. Release. Heat waves shimmer into the deepening air. Snakes and spiders crawl out to warm themselves on the pavement. Crickets chirp and stars begin to twinkle, one by one. Perhaps an owl, *howwho?*, or a meteorite, tracing a fleeting arc through the growing darkness.

Perhaps nothing.



Figure 1-63 : Porchlights of the Painted Desert Inn glowing on a summer night.

I know I was lucky to get to see sunrises and sunsets and the night sky at Petrified Forest. The park is one of the few units that closes each evening—not just the Visitor Center, but the road. Law Enforcement personnel gently nudge visitors out at a designated time, then close and lock a gate behind them. Although this is done for resource protection (people continue to attempt to steal fairly significant amounts of petrified wood; they would take even more if they could come and go under the cover of darkness), I can see why it might get some visitors upset. After all, the park is public land, ostensibly owned by all citizens; shouldn't every taxpayer have the right to see dusky light lingering on the Painted Desert?

“You can, in fact, see the sunset from any number of locations outside the park,” I would tell visitors who were unable or unwilling to apply for a free backcountry permit and hike out a mile into the Wilderness (the only way, aside from working there, to legally be inside the boundary after hours), “there are Painted Desert overlooks north of Winslow and Flagstaff.”

That's what I would *say*, nodding with polite understanding, but I'm secretly glad that I had sunrises and sunsets to myself—just me and the coyotes, singing the world to sleep (paraphrased from Kathleen Norris 1993, 217). Less secretly, I'm appreciative that I was able to experience not just one sunrise or storm or morning at the

solstice marker, but a whole summer's worth, and autumns' and winters'. Months, years, of "clean air to breathe," as Abbey extols the intangible benefits of working and living in a National Park (1968, 39):

stillness, solitude, and space; an unobstructed view every day and every night of sun, sky, stars, clouds, mountains, moon, cliffrock and canyons; a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back; the discovery of something intimate—though impossible to name—in the remote.

Of course, you may be thinking, if *I* could live in a park for a summer, I too would learn the names of the flowers and cycles of the day. I too would walk walk walk out to where the path disappears into sky, would visit the petroglyph panels, let the wheatgrass whisper between my fingers. I too would find a sense of peace, of home.

To that, I wonder: would you?

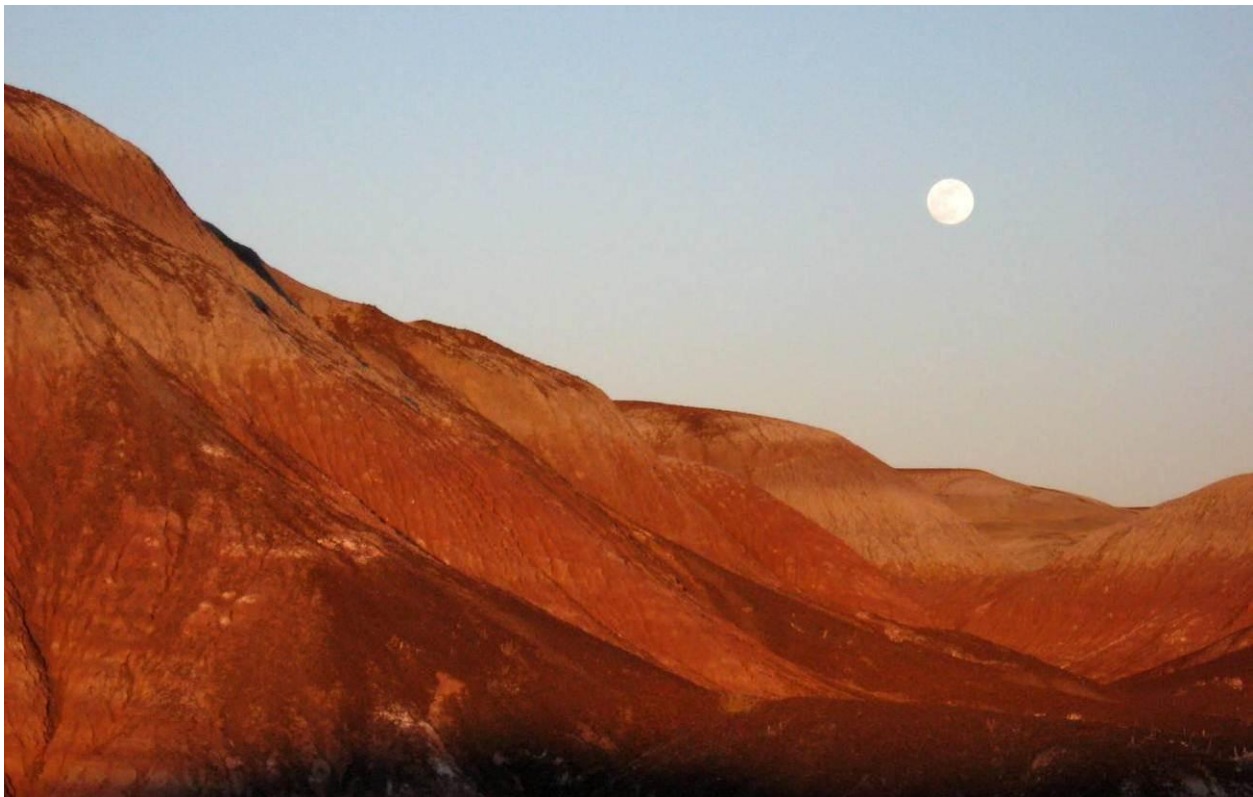


Figure 1-64 : Full moon over the Teepees.

I would like to say it's just a matter of time—time and an open mind—that's all it takes for a place to become your home, for a fit to be achieved, or peace (paraphrased from Bass 1996, p 6–7); if you let yourself dwell therein, any landscape can feel spectacular. Yes, I would like to say so, but I can't. There's something of our identity embedded in place. Where we choose to live says something about who we are (or who we want to be). Rick Bass is at home in the Yaak. Ed Abbey in the desert. Annie Dillard at Tinker Creek, Aldo Leopold by his shack, the Muries in the Far North, John Muir in the Sierras, Henry David Thoreau on the shores of Walden Pond. Dan O'Brien is "cursed to love" South Dakota (2001, 4), Kathleen Norris finds North sacred (1993), and in

Minnesota, Paul Gruchow “listen[s] to the coyotes howling in the nights and to the crows cawing in the mornings and to the wind washing in the leaves of the cottonwoods in the evenings, and...know[s] that [he has] not really heard anything of it except the mystery in it. But the mystery has captivated [him]” (1985, 7).

(“This sameness is the mystery, / Mystery within mystery; / The door to all marvels” — Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Muller trans. 1991, 1)

Barry Lopez writes of the Arctic (1986, 368):

It is possible to travel...and concentrate only on the physical landscape – on the animals, on the realms of light and dark, on movements that excite some consideration of the ways we conceive of time and space, history, maps, and art...But the ethereal and timeless power of the land, that union of what is beautiful with what is terrifying, is insistent....The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.

What does this mean?

What will we do about it?



Figure 1-65 : Bluffs west of Agate Bridge. Ah, Matsuo Basho, how much I too desire!: “Inside my little satchel, / the moon, and flowers” (translated by Hamill 1957, p. 153).

1.5-6 Interim : Sense of Place

The Red Desert, Wyoming

Enough navel-gazing! And yet...it's hard to stop the mind's sluggish, even feeble stirrings.

With appreciation, not petulance, you want to ask Why? To everything...there are no real and final answers, only an unending succession of the same refrain – one Why? leading only to the next Why?...

—Rick Bass, *The Wild Marsh* (2009, 121)

Why do some people find seemingly dull, desolate plains landscapes beautiful? How do some people become attached to wild places and wide open space? And what do we do about it?

My first attempt to unravel these mysteries was muddled by preconceptions, misconceptions, conceptions in general. First, I gave myself a crash course in academic definitions of “place” and “space.” After starting with Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (“What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we endow it with value” 1977, 6), I progressed through his *Topophilia* (“the affective bond between people and place,” 1974, 4), Paul Faulstich’s “Geophilia” (“a human tendency to emotionally connect with landscape” 1998, 82), and a spate of theories on place-attachment, place-identity, and place-dependence (terms that describe how people attach to, identify with, and depend on particular locations) before finally settling on Antony Cheng, Linda Kruger, and Steven Daniels’ (2003) review of “‘Place’ as an Integrating Concept in Natural Resource Politics.” Their research depicts a relationship between people’s perceptions, management decisions, and land itself, locating “place” at the nexus of Biophysical Attributes and Processes, Social and Cultural Meanings, and Social and Political Processes. Hooray!, I thought, a Venn diagram! Something into which I can neatly corral all of my wild, wide-ranging ideas!

Armed with a rudimentary understanding of “place,” I blundered on in an attempt to distinguish phenomenological epistemology from that of social constructionism. From what I could tell (or at least quote), the former is “analysis and interpretation of consciousness, particularly the conscious cognition of direct experience” (Buttimer 1976, 279), while the latter pertains more to “shared meanings and expectations of appropriate behaviors to a place (Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels 2003, 93; see also Altman and Low 1992; Stokols and Shumaker 1981). In other words, one explores an individual’s encounters with the real world; the other, concepts created and maintained in the public sphere. Both perspectives seemed valuable to me, so I amended Cheng et. al’s Figure 1 (2003, 90) to include a loop for personal experience—the sensations, perceptions, and ideas that form and inform an individual’s relationships with a place.

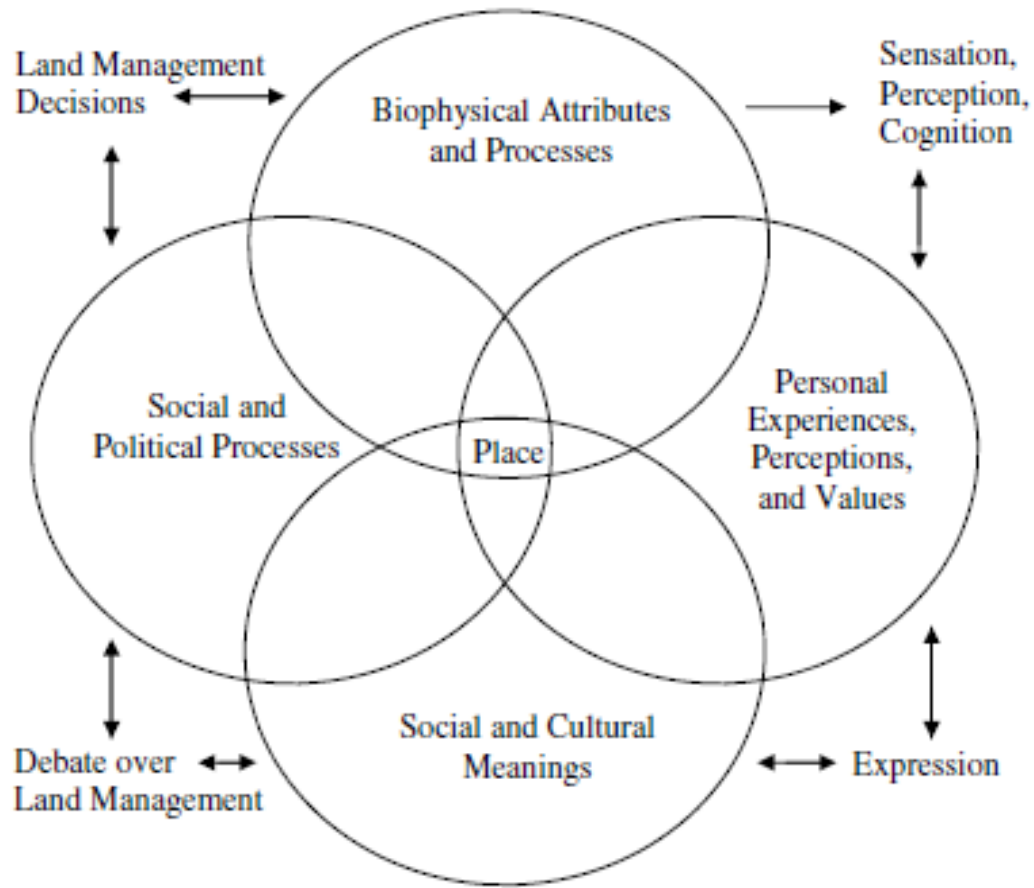


Figure 1-66 : “Dimensions of Place” (Olstad 2007, 27).

Definitions and diagrams in hand, I was ready to deconstruct “place.” Believing that I must maintain at least a veneer of subjectivity, I decided not to delve deeply into the natural and human history of the Painted Desert—‘my’ desert; that patch of prairie I had come to love—but rather began looking for a proper “study area”—some other stretch of semi-desert sagebrush steppe that I knew and cared nothing about. A blank slate; an empty place.

“Wyoming’s Red Desert was chosen as a study area for two main reasons,” I passively excluded myself from the responsibility of choosing (2007, 9), “recent debates over land management priorities in the region and the natural landscape itself.”

The Red Desert is a windswept patch of clay soils and dusty shrubs, ranchland and public lands, few roads and even fewer towns nested between forks of the Continental Divide in south central Wyoming's 2.5 million acre endorheic Great Divide Basin (Thompson 2008, 115). Or, as some locals put it, the Red Desert is “miles and miles of nothing but miles” (quoted in Olstad 2007, 16). It does, in fact, share many biophysical features with the Painted Desert: both are, for the most part, low-relief plains, horizons punctuated by distant mountains and buttes as well as distinct basaltic landmarks—the Neogene Leucite Hills (including the photogenic “Boars Tusk”) in the former and the slightly older Bidahochi volcanic field (Pilot Rock!) in the latter (Ferguson 2008, Petrified Forest National Park 2009). Aridisols dominate both areas, overlain with quaternary alluvial and aeolian deposits (McNab and Avers 1994, Petrified Forest National Park 2009, Ferguson 2008) and spectacular stretches of badlands. Both the Red Desert and the Painted Desert receive about 7.5 to 10 inches of precipitation per year (the former receives a fair balance of summer rains and winter snows [McNab and Avers 1994, Beauvais 2008, and Daly and Taylor 2000], while the latter has distinct seasonal variability [Daly and Taylor 2000, Petrified Forest National Park 2011]) and are classified as “semi-deserts,” “shrub-steppes,” and/or “shortgrass prairies” dominated by widely-spaced grasses, forbs, and xeric shrubs (Beauvais 2008, Petrified Forest National Park 2011).

Artemisia tridentata (big sagebrush)? Check. *Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus* (rabbitbrush)? Check. *Atriplex confertifolia* (saltbush), *Opuntia polyacantha* (prickly-pear cactus)? Check, check, along with exotics *Bromus tectorum* (cheatgrass) and *Salsola tragus* (Russian thistle, better known as tumbleweed) (Jones 2008, Beauvais 2008, Olstad 2007, 13). The main difference, vegetation-wise, is that the Red Desert has a significant amount of *Sarcobatus vermiculatus* (greasewood) while the Painted Desert boasts more grasses, such as *Bouteloua gracilis* (blue grama) and *Bouteloua curtipendula* (sideoats grama) as well as the succulent *Ephedra viridis* (mormon tea).

Turning to animals, the Greater Green River Basin is home to several large vertebrates, mainly *Antilocapra americana* (pronghorn) and *Odocoileus hemionus* (mule deer)—of which there are an estimated 50,000 each (Biodiversity Conservation Alliance 2009). More charismatic species include the occasional *Cervus elaphus* (elk); carnivores such as *Taxidea taxus* (badger), *Lynx rufus* (bobcat), *Puma concolor* (mountain lion), and the ubiquitous *Canis latrans* (coyote); and the exotic but well-loved *Equus caballus* (wild horse), sheep, goats, and cattle. Notable smaller mammals include *Peromyscus maniculatus* (deer mouse) and *Lepus townsendii* (jacktail rabbit) as well as the endemic *Cynomys leucurus* (white-tailed prairie dog), *Thomomys clusius* (Wyoming pocket gopher), *Spermophilus elegans* (Wyoming ground squirrel). Avian species such as *Athene cunicularia* (burrowing owl), *Aquila chrysaetos* (Golden eagle), *Buteo regalis* (ferruginous hawk), and of course *Corvus corax* (raven) are present year-round, while several migrating waterfowl, including *Anus platyrhynchos* (mallard), *Anas crecca* (green-winged teal), and *Branta canadensis* (Canada goose), use wetter pockets for breeding grounds (Orabona 2008); *Centrocercus urophasianus* (Greater sage grouse) are considered “the most abundant upland game bird and an “umbrella” species (Biodiversity Conservation Alliance 2009 and Beauvais 2008, respectively). Typical reptilian species include *Pituophis melanoleucus* (gopher snake), *Crotalis viridis* (prairie rattlesnake), *Sceloporus graciosus* (sagebrush lizard), and *Phrynosoma hernandesi* (horned lizard). Although the region is estimated to host several thousand insect species, including multiple types of endemic grasshoppers, entomologists have not yet catalogued

many of them. (Indeed, writer and grasshopper expert Jeffrey Lockwood calls the Red Desert “an exercise in scientific humility” [2008]).

While the Painted Desert does not host the same number of larger animals, members of the same families are present, with *Sylvilagus audubonii* (desert cottontail), *Lepus californicus* (black-tailed jackrabbit), *Ammospermophilus leucurus* (antelope ground-squirrels), and *Cynomys gunnisoni* (Gunnison’s prairie dog) replacing their counterparts to the north. Adding to the list of birds, reptiles, and insects: that southwestern icon *Geococcyx californianus* (roadrunner), showy *Crotaphytus collaris* (collared lizard), *Cnemidophorus* (whiptail), *Lampropeltis getula* (kingsnake), and the storm-serenader *Spea bombifrons* (spadefoot toad). *Theraphosidae* (tarantula) are also present, though not quite as prominent in Park Service publications (McNab and Avers 1994, Petrified Forest National Park 2009, Thompson 2006, personal observation.)

You get the idea. Formal descriptions of biophysical attributes; checklists of animals, plants, climate, relief—what makes a place a place?

Susan Dakin (2003, 190) writes that “[p]eople are not mere viewers of landscape: they participate in a way that influences their understanding.” Among many others (see, for example, Meinig 1979, Tuan 1979, Cosgrove 1985), Emily Brady (2002) agrees: “there is no meaning internal to landscapes. We bring meaning to them.”

People—is it *people*—history, culture, society that make a place a place?

As with the Painted Desert, people have been living in the Red Desert for millennia (Proulx 2008). Plains tribes followed herds of animals from place to place (the northern landscape was more amenable to a nomadic lifestyle than to agriculture), embedding their geographic knowledge and beliefs as deeply in the landscape as did Puebloan farmers; Ute and Shoshone people still consider the region “a sacred place of worship” (Friends of the Red Desert). In historic times, Euro-American mountain men, explorers, and settlers preferred to pass on through, following branches of the Oregon Trail, Cherokee Trail, and Overland Trail to more hospitable lands. Railroads brought more people and, with them, a need for supply stations at particular distances along the easiest route—now cities such as Rock Springs and Rawlins. Aside from the occasional attempt to mine gold, silver, or uranium, grazing seemed to be the only suitable use for the land; the Red Desert boasts a ranching heritage stretching back several generations. That still sounds like the Painted Desert, crossed by the Santa Fe Trail and the Camel Corps and the railroad, punctuated by railroad towns such as Holbrook and Mormon-camp-turned-railroad-towns such as Joseph City, and still surrounded by ranchland.

When you bring in the “desert values,” as expressed by the conservation group Friends of the Red Desert (2009), why they read just like my pleas for the Painted Desert (replace “scope” with “sketchbook”):

The Red Desert is a land of contrasts. Its emptiness and incessant wind can overwhelm visitors at first, but as you explore and look more closely, the desert has a way of drawing you in. It may be the unexpected flash of pink bitterroot poking up through barren sand, or the sight of a herd of wild horses racing across the sagebrush. It may be sighting a pronghorn buck in your scope after hours of crawling stealthily on your belly through the sage. Whatever it is, the Red Desert has captivated hundreds of thousands of people over the years...

“...But now”—here’s an important distinction—“this area faces threats—in the form of oil and gas development—that may change it forever.”

Oil and gas development. Due to accidents of geology and not-unrelated issues of land ownership, a significant portion of the Painted Desert, with its petrified wood and phytosaur fossils, has been preserved by the National Park Service for more than a century. The Red Desert, meanwhile, long seen as nothing but scrubby rangeland and habitat for some birds and antelope, became a checkerboard mix of private, state, and public lands left to the care of the Rawlins and Rock Springs Offices of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—a federal agency whose pejorative nickname (the “Bureau of Livestock and Mines”) suggests where management priorities used to lie. Though local citizens have, through the decades, made sporadic efforts to designate the Red Desert a game preserve or wildlife refuge, few people outside of Wyoming knew much less cared about the region until extensive deposits of oil and gas were discovered. Then it became a battleground—ground of and for “an ideological battle...among those who value what is here. Some value what lies on the surface; some value what lies beneath” (Clifford 2002).

When the BLM expressed interest in expanding oil and gas leasing in the Red Desert, local conservation groups Wyoming Outdoor Council and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance campaigned for a Citizens' Red Desert Protection Alternative that would prohibit any further energy development in sensitive areas. In September, 2000, the BLM received more than 12,000 public comments regarding their draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Jack Morrow Hills Coordinated Activity Plan (JMHCAP), many of which supported the Protection Alternative. The following summer, national organizations such as the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society joined the push for designation of Jack Morrow Hills—a 620,000-acre stretch of wildlife habitat and active sand dunes (BCA 2011)—as a Natural Conservation Area. By the time the comment period on the JMHCAP closed, the BLM had received a record number of statements, many of which expressed the fear that oil and gas development would bring fencing, roads, and fragmentation along with it (Freilich et al 2003, 761), directly altering habitat, disrupting migratory patterns, and introducing several pollutants throughout a larger “road-effect zone” (Friends of the Red Desert 2009, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance 2009; for research into the impacts of roads, see also Forman 2000). As Friends of the Red Desert records the ensuing actions, the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Jack Morrow Hills, released in July 2004,

...allow[ed] for the 255 natural gas and coalbed methane wells proposed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The 255 wells is the minimum number to be drilled and therefore it is not a cap, which leaves the area vulnerable to even greater industrialization. Friends of the Red Desert is highly disappointed with the BLM’s decision that discounted over 80,000 comments calling for no mineral extraction in the Jack Morrow Hills and the lack of acknowledgement that Wyoming’s citizens want some unique and special lands left for themselves, for wildlife, for wildlife habitat, and for open space.

Open space.

Wildlife, wildlife habitat, and open space. “The Red Desert is a land of contrasts. Its emptiness and incessant wind can overwhelm visitors at first, but as you explore and look more closely, the desert has a way of drawing you in” (Friends of the Red Desert 2009).

When I moved to Wyoming to begin graduate school, I had never heard of the Red Desert. It was in central Wyoming; I was in eastern. It offered no notable attraction; I was happy hiking the Medicine Bows and climbing Vedauwoo. But as controversy over management principles and practices in some place called the “Red Desert” infiltrated local and national media, I began to pay attention. Radio segments. Newspaper articles. Travel guides, letters-to-the-editor, and, especially, websites—the more I learned, the more intrigued I became. The descriptions, the photographs—why, the place looked just like my Painted Desert! Open space, wild beauty—other people were expressing their attachment to sagebrush steppe! Why and how had they come to care for a forgotten patch of windswept plains? How did they assert the value of emptiness and desolation, that feeling of grandeur that plains afford? Perception, communication, magnificent, magnificent desolation!

I had a study area.

It seemed simple enough. Step 1: Read available documents—everything from biological reports to land management records, op-ed articles to environmentalist brochures. Step 2: Talk with stakeholders and decision-makers in an attempt to ferret out personal opinions from professional positions. Step 3: Find and focus on common themes, recalibrate readings and transcripts. Step 4: Synthesize results. Good, solid, thorough scholarship.

But as soon as I began the early steps, I learned that the Red Desert is, as one official told me, “a state of mind, not a geographic spot” (Olstad 2007, 11). To be sure, there is a town called Red Desert, located in south-central Wyoming, just off Interstate-80. There is also a topographic quadrangle titled “Red Desert Basin” and the toponym sprawls in large letters across state highway maps. The Red Desert is touted in tourism brochures, cited in scientific studies, dissected in energy development projects, defended in environmentalist brochures, and debated in newspaper columns, magazine articles, radio programs, and short films (paraphrased from Olstad 2007, 11). Two recently-published books have “Red Desert” in the title—one a comprehensive if somewhat resigned overview of the region’s natural and cultural history, edited by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Proulx (2008), the other an unabashedly loving (and stunning) photographic journey compiled by the longtime defender and Executive Director of Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, Erik Molvar (2010). The BLM’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement discussing oil and gas development in the “Green River Resource Area,” but the barrage of comments focused on the fate of the “Red Desert.” No one seems to know exactly where such a place is. Or rather, everyone thinks they know where it is, but the borders, whether mapped or not, rarely coincide. (“Researcher: ‘Well, to start, where is the Red Desert?’ Rancher: [laughs] ‘That’s a good one!...’” Olstad 2007, 11).

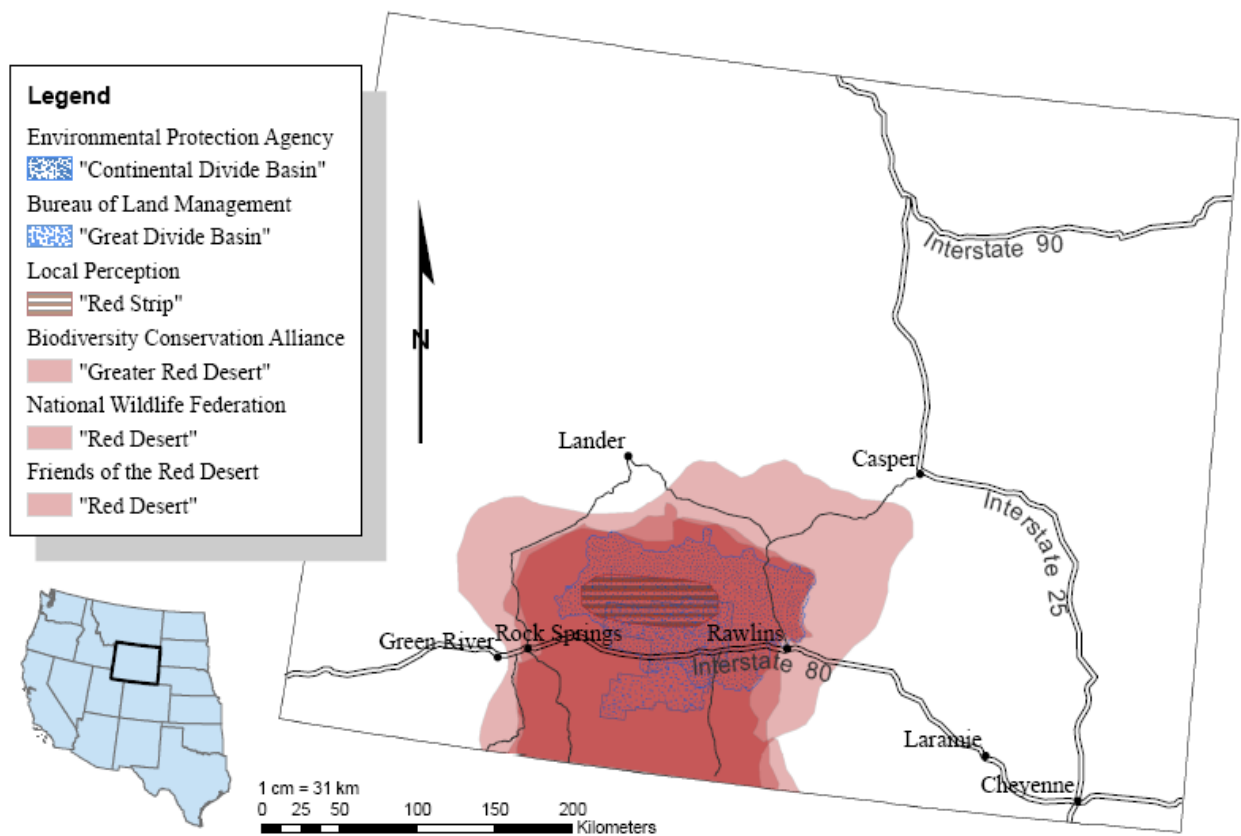


Figure 1-67 : Perceptions of the location and extent of the “Red Desert, Wyoming” (Adapted from figure 1. Olstad 2007, 15). Darker reds signify greater agreement.

You’d think that if you can’t say exactly *where* a place is, it would be hard to discuss *what* it is, much less what it should be. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Toponyms are place-holders, holding conceptions of a place.

To those who are campaigning for environmental protection, “Red Desert” stands for pronghorn and mule deer and sage grouse; volcanic necks, sand dunes, and fossils; petroglyphs, trails; our public lands; wild horses, wild horses, wild horses! In an attempt to “educat[e] the public and show them what’s out there, so that we can burst this myth that it’s just this empty void that’s just waiting for drilling rigs and bulldozers to make dollars out of it” (quoted in Olstad 2007, 28), conservation groups had flooded the media with species lists and economic statistics and political histories as well as glossy photographs depicting gorgeous sunsets and thunderstorms (Friends of the Red Desert 2006, Biodiversity Associates 2001). Articles and brochures juxtapose images of wide open plains with grim shots of development pads and powerlines, with the intent to, as Cheng *et al.* (2003, 97) theorize, “generate a response from people, even among people who have never even been to the place in dispute.” (Cheng *et al.* Proposition 3 [96]: Social Groups That Seemingly Emerge Around Using, Protecting, or Altering the Physical Attributes of a Location May Be Engaging in More Fundamental Processes of Defining Significant Social and

Cultural Meanings to That Place” (96); and Proposition 5 [97]: Groups Intentionally Manipulate the Meanings of Places Hoping to Influence the Outcome of Natural Resource Controversies).

To people who see or read the materials, “Red Desert” becomes a symbol—a symbol for the rugged, spectacular “Wild Heart of the West,” (BCA) for “one of the last great blank spots, where you can feel like you’re exploring for the first time, seeing with new eyes” (quoted in Olstad 2007, 17). It is a rallying cry for those who strive to “balance industrial uses of my public lands with the needs of public recreation, clean air and water, and desert wildlife” (Friends of the Red Desert letter template, 2008).

But to interviewees, reference to the “Red Desert” evoked memories of experiences at particular locations—The Haystacks! Honeycomb Buttes! Most often and most passionately, Adobe Town! (A Wilderness Study Area of spectacular clay canyons and hoodoos, abutting the “Desolation Flats” Project Area—how’s that for a symbolic name?) Once people set aside their political positions (“Well I have a personal opinion and I have a professional opinion...,” quoted in Olstad 2007, 24), they happily shared stories about hiking or camping or driving “out in the Red”—stories about encounters with golden eagles or moose or wayward tourists; stories of first impressions and mornings in camp (see, for example, Wyoming Wilderness Association 2006, Jones 2005, Clifford 2002). (Cheng *et al.* 2003, 96 Proposition 2: “People Perceive and Evaluate the Environment as Different Places Rather Than an Assemblage of Individual Biophysical Attributes”). Trusting in the power of stories, Friends of the Red Desert (2006) urged people to write to their governmental representatives “about personal experiences and what you enjoy doing in the Red Desert.” In case people hadn’t yet had “the thrill and enchantment of hiking through the maze of Honeycomb Buttes without another person or sound but that of the wind,” as the Wyoming Wilderness Association (2006) insists, “[e]very Wyoming outdoors person must take a trip soon to the Red Desert.” Biodiversity Conservation Alliance offers guided field trips.

That’s all it takes!, one interviewee explained (quoted in Olstad 2007, 19):

The best way for people to feel investment in these landscapes and to understand the need to protect them is not to send them a ten-page diatribe or talk on the radio or be in the newspaper – that doesn’t convey it. All you have to do is set people in front of this landscape, and without saying anything to them at all, they get it.

They get it! I nodded eagerly, all you have to do!—just let the “sense of the space, the sound of the grass, the smell of the wind” (Lillegraven, quoted in Olstad 2007, 21) work its magic; who wouldn’t be amazed by the wonders of “wide open spaces...spectacular geological landforms...an abundance of wildlife...endless views to the horizon...clean air...[and] silence” (quoted in Olstad 2007, 17)? The Red Desert!

Confession: I didn’t interview any of the people who wrote to the BLM to say, effectively, “It’s just the desert. If you gotta wreck someplace, it oughta be this place” (BLM employee, paraphrasing comment letters, quoted in Olstad 2007, 34). I didn’t try to understand people who might have told me “there’s so much open space out there, so much undeveloped space that we can afford to just carve it up willy-nilly” (Artist, paraphrasing others, quoted in Olstad 2007, 35). I didn’t lurk along I-70, flagging down travelers and asking them what or, worse yet, *if* they thought of the landscape—the flat, empty, barren non-landscape. They just didn’t get it.

My unintentional intent was to probe Cheng *et al.*'s (2003, 96) Proposition 1: "People's Perceptions and Evaluations of the Environment Are Expressions of Place-Based Self-Identity." I wanted to analyze individuals who identified with the Red Desert, or at least those who defended it most vociferously into the public sphere. I tried to sort out personal perceptions from political positions and assert the importance of personal experience and emotional attachment. (Had I then known Rick Bass's *Book of Yaak*, I would have used this quotation [1996, 6] to open a line of research: "I realize that the point at which what was being done to the valley began to hurt me deeply was the time I first began to feel that I was starting to fit: that the landscape and I were engaged in a relationship...As it became my home, the wounds that were being inflicted upon it – the insults – became my own.") I rallied against Brown's (1984, 233) dismissal of "value in the relational realm" as mere interaction between a person and place rather than some intrinsic quality; to his claim that relational value is unobservable and "only at the feeling level," I wanted to shout: *only* at the feeling level? What is there *but* the feeling level? Granted, humans are rational, social animals, but we are also individuals with individual *feelings*. The whole point of researching the fight for the Red Desert was to understand how and why people could feel such love for a seemingly empty, desolate, deliciously spacious place.

In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Douglas Massey chided his peers (2002, 2):

Sociologists have unwisely elevated the rational over the emotional in attempting to understand and explain human behavior. It's not that human beings are not rational—we are. The point is that we are not *only* rational. What makes us human is the *addition* of a rational mind to a preexisting emotional base. Sociology's focus should be on the *interplay* between rationality and emotionality, not on theorizing the former while ignoring the latter or posing one as the opposite of the other. Attempting to understand human behavior as the outcome of rational cognition alone is not only incorrect—it leads to fundamental misunderstandings of the human condition.

He may well have been speaking to land managers (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna [2000, 423]: "Emotional attachments to place are a type of sense of place that is based on an appreciation for the land that goes beyond its use value"), landscape architects (Appleton [1975, 21]: "we do not have the same understanding of those emotional reactions which arise from our experience of our inanimate environment as we have of grief, anger, joy, etc., resulting from our relations with other people"), and, especially, geographers. J.K. Wright's words, spoken more than 60 years ago (1947), still ring true: "Budding geographers have been cautioned...against employing such adjectives [that carry emotional connotations] on the ground that they reflect the personal emotions of the writer and are not universal common denominators in the symbolism of science." Though some have continued in the humanist vein pioneered by Anne Buttimer, Edward Relph, and Yi-Fu Tuan, many scholars squirm at the seemingly unprofessional "I." It feels like an act of not just release but outright defiance to "turn to the individual being," as does Edmunds Bunkše (2007, 220), "first discovering new emotional and intellectual territories for myself before I could attempt to add something to the wider discourse on landscapes."

Thinking it might be interesting to compare the current campaign for a Conservation Area in Wyoming to the historic fight for a Wilderness in the Painted Desert, I read Public Law 88-577—the "official report of the proceedings of the Wilderness hearing in the matter of Petrified Forest National Park, 23 May 1967." It seemed

promising, even inspirational at first: citizens testified that “[t]he Painted Desert country has a character of ...openness and the hint of loneliness...” *Yes! Openness! That wistful hint of loneliness! Character!* But then, to my horror, emotionally resonant statements dissolved into bland facts: “...due to lack of vegetation and strong topographic relief.” The Wilderness Society (the Society, note—a national organization, not a living, breathing person) provided a checklist of attributes and recited statistics. (Oh, Aldo Leopold, Howard Zahniser, Mardy Murie, what has happened?) A representative for the Sierra Club, meanwhile, made a plea for “a place, where, once you get close to the land...you can truly learn what it is to walk through color, learn how full of interest and beauty a ‘barren waste’ can be.”

To walk through color (*Hal chiiitah*), how beautiful! How true! Such interests and beauties that lay like hidden jewels in a ‘barren waste’—the representative for the Sierra Club *said* all the right things, and said them terribly eloquently, but did they *care*? Had they *walked*, had they *crawled*, for years, was dirt caked redly in their knuckles and knees? I’m sure they believed deeply in abstract ideals of wildness and open space, but did they care for *the Painted Desert*? For *my* Painted Desert?

It’s important to distinguish between two types of place attachment, Daniel Williams, Michael Patterson, Joseph Roggenbuck, and Alan Watson warn (1992, 19): “attachment to the specific area itself and attachment to the type of area it represents.” Dave Foreman puts it slightly more crankily (1994, 225): “wildness” is an idea; “wilderness” is a place. That is, a real-world, hard-rock, bright-sky, lived-in, breathed-in tangible place. Place place place. Gary Snyder (1990, 39): “Our relation to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience.”

Information *and* experience.

After several months of research, I could draw an outline of particular features and map the location of important points in the Red Desert; I could rattle off names of charismatic species, list pertinent federal regulations, even classify different statements into sociocultural and sociopolitical theories. But I didn’t know the texture of Boars Tusk, the aura of Adobe Town at dawn. I didn’t know the sound of a hawk or the dust of an access road. I had come to care about the imminent loss of abstract wildness, but found it hard to care for the Red Desert as a place. I had never experienced it firsthand.

Finally, mid-May, I equipped myself with directions, maps, extra water, a spare tire, and a whole host of expectations if not preconceptions. I planned to start in Rock Springs, spend a few days (a few days, as if you can learn all you need to know in just a few days!) exploring some of the more notable sites north of the Interstate, then wander south from Rawlins. I would see those petroglyphs! The wild horses! Killpecker dunes, the Haystacks, even Adobe Town and “Desolation Flats”! The Red Desert!

Instead, I got a lesson on Wyoming weather. Sometime during the night, while I was huddling sleeplessly in my cold little car (all the hotel rooms in Rock Springs were sold out, thanks to the oil and gas boom), the wind started howling and a front swept in. As I later noted (Olstad 2012),

day dawned to a landscape of featureless whiteness buried under a shadowless grey sky. I stubbornly tried maneuvering the ‘Wild Horse Loop,’ but when my car rebelled against the mix of clay and ice I returned to the main road and headed northeast away from Rock Springs. At some

point, I passed the most photogenic features—Killpecker Dunes and Boars Tusk—but I don't know when or where; I couldn't see through the storm. Turning vaguely eastward, I stopped to read a historic marker, but the winds were so fierce that I didn't get out of the car. A Visitor Center in Lander was closed, so on southeast to Rawlins, where I merged back on to Interstate 80 and found myself again [whipping across] the heart of the Red Desert.

So much for experience. Friends of the Red Desert insist (2006) that their place... 'invite[es] you to explore its mysteries,' but it was telling me to go away.

I went away. Fled south. Cold, tired, hungry, I didn't care any more about theories of social constructionism and phenomenology, lists of environmental attributes and iterations of management plans. I didn't care about people's attachment to some place called the Red Desert. None of that mattered.

I was on my way back to my Painted Desert.

A couple of years ago I spent a day with a sheep rancher from Rock Springs, Wyoming...

Many people from the coasts don't like this part of Wyoming, or what they see of it from Interstate 80. It is dry, and a lot of it is flat. Late in the day, however, we came up over the top of one of the great ridges that surround Rock Springs, and when I mentioned the coastal opinion of sagebrush, he flared up and said, "Christ, I love this country."

— Bret Wallach, *The return of the prairie* (1985)



Figure 1-68 : Boar's Tusk, Red Desert, Wyoming. Finally seen, several years later (when it wasn't snowing).

1.6 The Quest

Pilot Rock, Painted Desert Wilderness Area, Arizona

Maybe we have lived only to be here now.

—Shipwrecked companion of Rockwell Kent,
quoted in Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986, 351)

In the larger scheme of life, a few months—a winter here, an autumn there, one all-too-short but oh-so-beautiful summer followed by another—is not much time. How quickly, really, you can memorize and forget mathematical formulas and scientific nomenclature, float into and out of friendships, move to and away from a place you may call home. Time, gone, with barely a trace.

Then again, a lot can happen in a few months. Or weeks, days, hours, minutes for that matter. It may take but a second for a fleeting sensation to etch itself on your memory, to fall fully in love, or to root yourself so deeply into a landscape that you will always, always, even years later, hundreds of miles away, feel like you've left a part of yourself behind—some skin, a few bones, still out there, bleaching into the godforsaken plains.

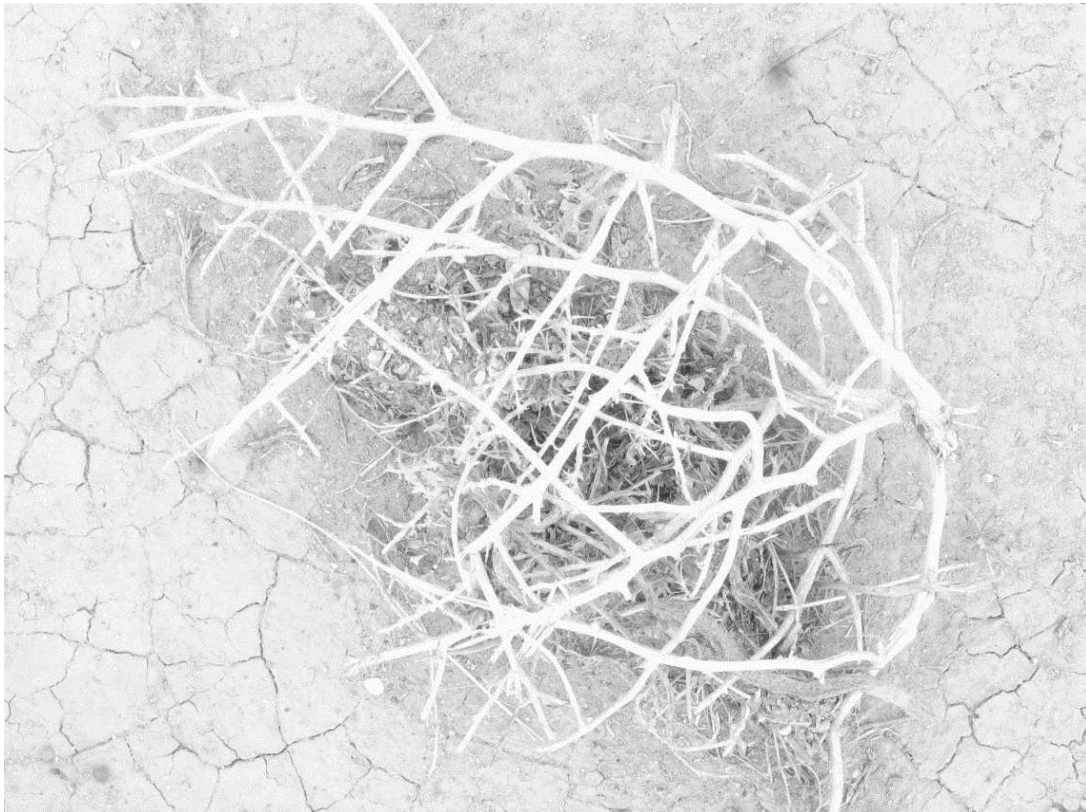


Figure 1-69 : Russian thistle, dead and dry.

It was only my fourth season at Petrified Forest National Park. Other rangers had been there for twenty seasons or forty years—*they* had rightly earned the reputation of “desert rats,” *they* had rightly earned the respect of peers, *they* had earned the right to call the Painted Desert *their* place, *their* park, *their* home. Maybe. (Probably not, Ed Abbey would say.)

In a transcript recently disseminated to all Park Service employees, a high-ranking official told the Director and an interviewer that his biggest pet peeve is when rangers call a site “my park” or “my monument.” The sites belong to all Americans, he insists, not just the select few that work or live there. But, dear former deputy director/current Yellowstone Superintendent, it really *is* my Painted Desert. I am happy to share it with fellow citizens, but it is mine. I cannot own it much less control it, but I can claim it as a part of me. I could stoop to the level of neuroscience and say that cells in my brain have been permanently configured in the shape of a dry wash, or I could insist only slightly more absurdly that dust from the prairie is glommed deep in my pores, that I sweat sage, or I could just explain: Pilot Rock, you see, Pilot Rock.



Figure 1-70 : Pilot Rock (charcoal).



Figure 1-71 : Pilot Rock, summer noon.



Figure 1-72 : Pilot Rock, summer storm.

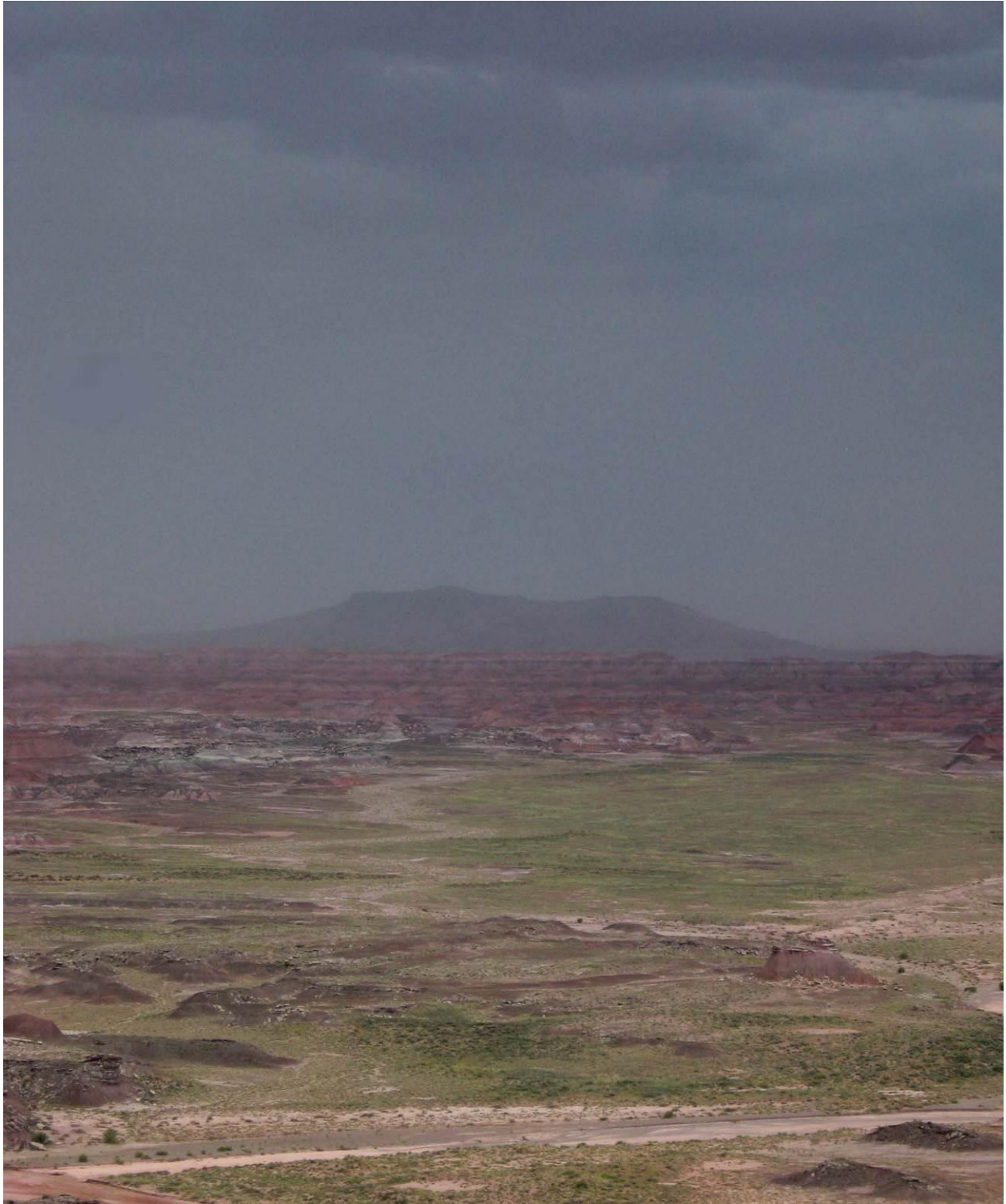


Figure 1-73 : Pilot Rock, spring storm.



Figure 1-74 : Pilot Rock, spring storm.

I should have known that something would be different—that I was clinging too desperately to delight or that infatuation was tipping toward obsession. There were hints during training week, starting when a supervisor told our gaggle of eager seasonal rangers that we must remain considerate of the visitor and leave our personal opinions unexpressed. She meant, I'm sure, something like “don't get embroiled in political debates,” or “listen to all religious views,” or “be polite, even when you feel tired and cranky”—basics of front-line interpretation—but I immediately froze. Why should I have to compromise my unabashed love for the place? How was I supposed to curtail my passion? If a visitor made a deprecatory remark about the “boring” landscape or “empty” plains, I tended to either issue ardent injunctions (*Look! Pilot Rock!*) or bristle and fall silent (*Fine then, get out of my park, go on your way, shoo.*)

And what was I supposed to do when my new roommate hated the place? “I knew it was a desert,” she spent the first week in a mild state of despair, “but I didn't think it would be like this! A *desert!* How can I live here for a whole summer? There are no *trees!*” (My initial attempt to comfort her—“Well, actually, it's not a desert. It's a semi-desert sagebrush steppe”—didn't seem to help.)

By the second week, though, she had begun to appreciate the nuances of the landscape. I'd like to take credit for that (here, use my bike; go watch the sun set; *granted, it may not look like the places you're used to*, I offered unsolicited counsel in aesthetic appreciation, *but it's even more beautiful once you get know it*), but it was actually a matter of her own willingness to stay and explore with open hands.

Meanwhile, I made every possible effort to get out of the Visitor Center, off the paved trails, and into the backcountry. I volunteered to go out with the paleontology crew to search for bone scatters and lug a large plaster cast out of Devils Playground. (I became an aficionado of teeth, unable to find the grander skull cases of giant crocodylian phytosaurs and instead attuned to the enameled surface of centimeter long serrated *Desmotosuchus dentae*). I joined the wildlife biologist on night drives along the park road (*Lampropeltis!* she would find, or *Theraphosida!*, while I only managed to identify a herd of cattle that had broken through the fence.) Most memorably, I helped the archaeologist relocate and assess hard-to-access sites. The fourth week of the season—June, pre-monsoon, hot—I offered to accompany him on a multi-day trek through the Wilderness Area, beginning in the far northeast corner, heading around, up, and along Chinde Mesa, following the northern fence line, and cutting diagonally back to the Painted Desert Inn after looping behind Pilot Rock.

Ah, Pilot Rock.

I'm a walker, a wanderer, not a peak-bagger. I don't care much for "conquering" high points and would be just as happy to circumambulate significant landmarks, round and round, with or without prayer beads. You see more that way—get a feel for the country, not just a view from the top.

Or so I tell people. In truth, I hate being goaded by peaks. They're domineering, relentless. If they're there, well, then, you have to climb them, right? Maybe that's why I like plains—knobs and knolls don't taunt, just expand gently into the sky.

Pilot Rock, though, that's different. It's the highest point in the park, and the farthest too, but that isn't it. As a volcanic neck, composed of 6-million-year old basalt, it's also one of the youngest features and certainly the darkest. I don't think that's it either. Perhaps it's the name—despite the superlatives, it's not Pilot Mountain, nor Distant Big Dark Rock; just Pilot Rock, Pilot Rock, evoking flight as well as the feel of solid stone, a navigational beacon as well as unassuming rock-ness. Pilot Rock. I can't really tell you what "it" is, or what "that," exactly, makes it different. It just is. Pilot Rock.



Figure 1-75 : Pilot Rock, storm (pastels).

I don't think I was quite as obsessed with Pilot Rock the first time I was at Petrified Forest. Of course, I had tried to hike out to it—one of many adventures in those breathless months of first acquaintance. One particularly benign winter day, I woke early, packed my water bottles and bags of granola, laced up my boots, stepped out into the Wilderness, aimed my internal compass at the peak, walked and walked until, 5 or 6 miles out, I ran into an insurmountable cliff—a wall in the badlands, a barrier, high and steep, too high and steep to scramble up, too crumbly to even get partway. I tried, then conceded defeat, inability, naïveté, and found other wonders to keep me entertained. ("Don't start / with a mountain / ... / Start with / one seed pod / or / one dry weed" advises Byrd Baylor in *The Other Way to Listen* [1978].)

When I returned to Petrified Forest for a second season, I was slightly more determined to reach the top of Pilot Rock. Or at least its base. I had spent so many months drawing its profile, dreaming its view, staring at its scrunch of lines on the topographic map that I just wanted to touch it. To know it was real. Solid. Rock.

I strapped a sleeping bag and pad to my pack and carried extra water and apples and cookies, planning to be out overnight. I also took a notebook, a sketchbook, and, of all things, a copy of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (“This is our life, these are our lighted seasons, and then we die,” [Dillard 1974, 129]). I regretted the extra weight as I trudged down the social trail, along the Lithodendron and its tributaries, past the lumpen sandstone hoodoos of Angels Garden, past the giant fossilized logs of the Black Forest, past the petroglyph panels and the lone juniper gnarling its way out of rock and clay, past everything, everything except that cliff. It was still there—even higher, steeper, crumblier than I remembered. I tried scrambling up, paced back and forth in search of any slight gap, any drainage, any series of footholds, handholds, other people had hiked out there, there *had* to be a way. A Way? Away. I couldn’t find it. Retreated in sweaty shame, nothing to show for the trip but bloody knees and elbows.

Rinse, repeat.

Three times—three times, I tried, I tried, I tried, Pilot Rock!

That only increased the allure. I had to earn its respect.

(It’s a rock. It doesn’t respect me. I respect it.)

Summer, the third time I was at Petrified Forest, I learned how to get to Pilot Rock. Early in the season, a couple of gung-ho young rangers asked if I wanted to join them on their excursion to the high point (they wanted to check it off their to-do lists before moving on to bigger, higher peaks). They’d asked a veteran employee for directions; he’d happily informed them of a gap in the badlands cliff and mapped a clear route to the summit. (Oh, Ted, ever willing to share. You trust everyone with the place and its secrets; why do I guard them so jealously?)

We dashed out and back in just two days. It was a test of endurance, no lingering to look for fossils or stopping to smell the yucca along the way. Instead, we practically slid off Chinde Point, ran across Lithodendron Wash, skipped Angels Garden and the Black Forest, paused only to consult the map before racing into the correct canyon that wound up through that formidable barrier in the badlands. We didn’t even bother to rest when we reached the upper expanse, just moved on along Digger Wash, flung our overnight packs down at a singular cottonwood oasis and, freed of the weight of sleeping bags and water bottles, flew up the pillar of Pilot Rock. No stopping. No stopping until we reached the wooden cairn and USGS marker at the summit, where we reveled breathlessly in our sense of accomplishment.

Pause.

Anticlimactic, almost profane.



Figures 1-76 : Ta da, Pilot Rock!, we gloated.

[S]ince wilderness is a place, and wildness is a quality, we can always ask, ‘How wild is our wilderness?’ and ‘How wild is our experience there?’ My answer? Not very, particularly in the wilderness most people are familiar with, the areas protected by the Wilderness Act of 1964.

—Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (1997, 83-84)

A few years ago, I was asked to write a short piece on a good weekend hike for an outdoor adventure magazine—perhaps the directions to Pilot Rock? I couldn’t bear the idea of people tackling the landmark with that peak-bagging, high-pointing mindset, oh no, not my Pilot Rock (Pilot Rock will never be mine). Yes, I will provide directions, I decided—instructions on how to explore Wilderness, seek wildness.

“Step to the edge of the Painted Desert,” I wrote carefully, almost painfully, “You’ll see a dark shape looming on the horizon, towering over the polychromatic expanse of dry washes and sagebrush flats. Pilot Rock.”

Am I demeaning the landmark? I wondered, *I hope not. Listen here, all you outdoor adventurers, let me tell you how this works.*

“Many people snap photos of the basaltic neck, located in the far northeastern corner of Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona, but few dare to traverse the miles of crumbling clay, scrubby prairie, and sandstone ledges that separate it from paved overlooks.

“Go. Dare.”

Will you really go? Will you really dare?

That first day—that first cold, grey, windy day when I stepped to the edge of the Painted Desert—I was awed, but afraid. Afraid of wandering out on my own, unprepared, no maps, no trails. Afraid of the big grey sky, the desolate red earth, that dark formation that separated the two, wonder-full, awe-full. Afraid, you; be afraid too.

“The experience of watching the sun set across that landscape, with only a touch of wind and cry of a nighthawk for company is well worth the effort.”

It is. Well worth it. But let me tell you just how much effort is involved.

“As the farthest landmark in a designated Wilderness Area, Pilot Rock doesn’t have any trails leading to its summit. Instead, you have to find your own way, negotiating eight to ten miles worth of labyrinthine washes and cliffs with a topographic map, an eye to the horizon, reliable directions, and lots of water.”

No trails. Do you hear me?—no trails. Find your own darn way, you can always see Pilot Rock, it’s the highest point on the horizon, figure out how to get there.

No, sigh, I understand.

“Maps, with contour intervals useless to the casual day-hiker but handy for longer treks, are available at the park’s visitor centers, as are free overnight permits.”

I hope you come to me to ask for a permit! I’ll size you up, warn you well.

“As for directions:” *Here we go, breathe,* “start at the west side of the Painted Desert Inn, where a Wilderness access trail switchbacks down into a gully, then flings you out into the unmarked desert. An unmaintained social trail will lead you one mile west before it’s cut off by the Lithodendron Wash. Follow the wash southwest (if it’s not too muddy, you can walk right in the channel) until you’ve skirted the hills of the Black Forest region (named for its unusually dark petrified wood). Turn into the easternmost tributary, heading northeast toward Chinde Mesa (a high feature that demarcates the northern boundary of the park) for about four miles. After winding your way up a gap in the steep badlands cliff and emerging in Digger Wash, follow the streambed west two miles until you reach a small grove of cottonwood trees. This oasis, situated another two miles from Pilot Rock, makes a nice place to camp. Drop your pack and pick a route to the summit, where you’ll find a wooden cairn, a USGS marker, and a wild sense of peace.”

All true, but good luck making any sense of it without knowing the desert, or having years to learn. It took me years. Years! That cliff is steep and covered in desert pavement—little pebbles of rock and clay that are like marbles. You can’t just scramble up. Believe me; I have the bloody knees and bloody elbows to prove it.

Then again, I get scraped up every time I’m out in the desert. Expect to. It’s part of the experience—trade a little skin for rock.

“A warning: water is an absolute necessity in this arid environment. It’s advisable, even in cooler temperatures of autumn or spring, to start out early in the morning, find a juniper (or tamarisk) to relax under at mid-day, then continue hiking as afternoon shadows lengthen. It’s even more advisable to bring lots of extra water—far more than you think you could ever need or even drink.”

Bring. Lots. Of. Water.

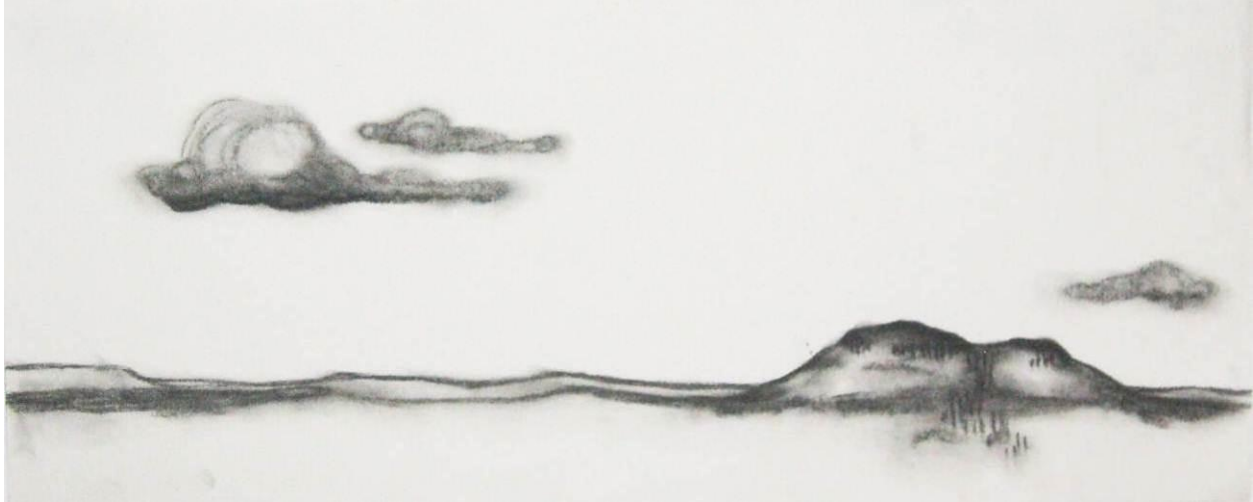


Figure 1-77 : Pilot Rock (charcoal).

“I know how to get there!” I told the park archaeologist, “I’m familiar with the Wilderness Area; I can get back from Pilot Rock! [And I want to go to Chinde Mesa.] I’ll go!”

Thus I was appointed temporary volunteer field technician/wilderness guide. The archaeologist would determine what sites to visit, plan the route, carry the relevant files as well as a radio and GPS device; I would be there as an extra set of eyes and, more so, as a safety precaution.

Because it was June—hot, premonsoon, as in 100-degree-plus temperatures and relentlessly clear skies—and we were planning on being out there for several days, he asked law enforcement personnel to make two water drops for us. Sure, no problem; they rode horseback out to place one set of bright plastic containers “in the shade of a tree at the foot of Chinde Mesa,” and drove out on private rangeland to leave another “by the gate in the fence at the far northwestern corner of the Wilderness Area.” That settled, the archaeologist and I set off late one Sunday afternoon, bumping an old Dodge truck as far down Route 66 as possible then continuing on foot along the Park’s western border. When dusk began to descend, we settled in to camp on the open plains.

It was a beautiful evening—slight breeze, soft sky, the epitome of serenity. No need for a tent, just stars (*so many stars!*) and birds (*so many birds!*), singing happy praises into the night. Later, in the wee dark hours, lonely howls floated into the air. “Together,” Kathleen Norris promises (1993, 217), “monks and coyotes will sing the world to sleep.”

(I should have known, should have known: there are some places that people are only meant to see, to dream—not actually visit. I was hiking through that big sweep of prairie that I’d spent several seasons contemplating, every morning, every evening, on my walks down old Route 66; the landscape ought to have been left to the horizon, never solidified into actual grasses and dirt.)



Figure 1-78 : Pilot Rock, dusk (pastels).

The next morning, then, we woke before dawn and aimed for the first site—a blown-out dune filled with pottery sherds and lithics. Right away—an intact arrowhead! Then another! Both were knapped out of the finest of chert, one smokey, the other rich reds and purples. (Why so unused, perfectly preserved, presented?) I could have spent all day there, crawling around on hands and knees, calling out “pottery!” “base!” “shells!” while the archaeologist tried to sketch everything into his records, but there were many miles to go, other sites to see, and the day was quickly beginning to bake under that blazing sun.

Not long after we’d begun hiking in earnest, hoping to reach the first water drop by early afternoon, we encountered a skull. Mule deer, judging from the antlers. Various other parts, too—vertebrae here, jawbone there, all bleached a pure, smooth white but not yet beginning to splinter with seasons of exposure. No time to stop and take a photo much less make a sketch—just imprint on the amygdala.



Figure 1-79 : Brush clinging to clay.

Aside from that discovery, mid-day hours and miles melted into a blur of sandy slopes and slight ridges, dusty washes and tangles of brush, a detour to a rather unimpressive couple of sherds then a long, open flat overgrown with dead plants—dead sage, dead yucca, dead cacti, brown and crumbling, broken and bent—that looked like they’d decided en masse that the desert’s no place to grow. By the time we reached the foot of Chinde Mesa, the archaeologist and I were taking slow steps, looking for hoofprints, anxious to find the shade of a tree. Shuffling, shuffling, up a wash, round blind curves, until...a cairn? Big white jugs? Water! Blessed water! We happily collapsed, stared up at the blue blue eternally blue sky through the boughs of a lonely piñon.

Thirst quenched, spirit refreshed, we refilled our bottles and continued up to the top of the Mesa. I was surprised to discover that the landform is broad and flat. Yes, I know “Mesa” means table and, as such, the term is applied to table-like features with steep sides and a broad, flat top, but I had spent so long looking at Chinde from afar, knowing it as the defining border of the northern horizon, that part of me expected it to drop off on the other side as if it were stage scenery or a movie set—a cardboard cutout, a wooden façade, two dimensions, not three. The horizon is supposed to be a distant border, the attractive edge of a landscape, which can quicken expectation and shape human curiosity (paraphrased from Lopez 1986, 110; Herzog and Barnes 1999; Appleton 1975, 90; Wright 1947), a “point of astonishment” (Emerson 1909, 19) where land meets sky, visible drops off into invisible, and known is clearly, sharply distinguished from invisible, unknowable. “The essential feature of the prairie is its horizon,” Paul Gruchow avers (1985, 2), adding the seemingly-obvious stipulation, “which you can neither walk to nor touch.” You are not supposed to be able to stand on the horizon.

Yet there I was.

While I was grappling with that idea, the archaeologist realized he'd left his camera at the water drop and went to retrieve it, leaving me to nestle into the base of a juniper. I ate a few cookies, made a few sketches, watched a cloud divide then recombine then divide again. In the cool shade of a hot summer day, I possessed and maintained "a strange and unreplicable mixture of happiness and despair and dreaminess and urgency" (Bass 2009, 173). I was seeing new places and learning new things about a place I thought I'd known, I thought I owned, *ah Painted Desert*, I exhaled, *how much you have to teach me!*



Figure 1-80 : Juniper (pastels).

But soon I began to feel a touch of unease. The earth was shimmering, the juniper clawing. Somewhere overhead then all around, a raven *craw-craawed*. I remembered, then, sprawled in the shade of a tenacious tree, that "Chinde" is the term for a ghost or spirit exhaled by Diné with their dying breath. According to toponymic legend, there had once been a hogan (Navajo dwelling) on this mesa, abandoned and shunned after its owner passed away inside. One day, so it goes, a geologist happened to be out making field maps, somehow got soaking wet (were there storms? Was it monsoon season? The story begs for embellishment, but it's not mine with which to tinker) and went to the hogan to dry off. Some Navajo shepherders happened to ride by, saw a pale figure lurking in this place of death, and raced off to warn others of the chinde that had taken up residence in the cursed place.

Simply a matter of mistaken identity mixed with superstition, no?

I had also heard a co-worker—a perfectly rational, logical, experienced hiker—tell me to never, ever go near Chinde Mesa.

Onward. The archaeologist came back. We checked off two more sites then opted for a short rather than smart route, dropping off the steep, unconsolidated side of the mesa. Having safely descended the slope and breathed sighs of relief, we tromped through a Georgia-O’Keeffe-esque scene—huge pink hills with red and cream and black striations; over them, a half moon floating in a turquoise sky. (This is the moment—the exact, identifiable moment—I fell in love with turquoise. Yes, Ellen Meloy [2003], “It is the stone of the desert. It is the color of yearning.”)

There was, according to the charts, an archaeological site located a few hundred meters south of the Wilderness Boundary, about dead center between Chinde Mesa and Pilot Rock. We tried to stick to the fenceline, figuring that it would be easier to follow it than the squiggly topography. *Ha!*, I soon thought, as we dipped into another ravine then dragged ourselves back up the other side, this had to be one of the craziest fences I’d ever encountered. It plunged down cliffs and perched on boulders, never wavering from its destination: Pilot Rock. (Pilot Rock Pilot Rock Pilot Rock.)



Figure 1-81 : Old fencepost in the badlands.

Just as I was going to propose that we take a flatter detour, the archaeologist told me to keep my eye out for the site. It’s somewhere nearby, he said, looking back and forth between the GPS and a paper form. The former told us where we were, the latter where wanted to be. Roughly. The original surveyor wasn’t exactly sure of the site’s coordinates, nor did the notes mention what, exactly, we were supposed to be looking for. Petroglyphs? Pottery sherds? GPS precision is pointless, I was coming to realize, when you’re following bad directions.

People have been scouring the Painted Desert in search of artifacts for more than a century. Most early 20th century visitors merely stopped to see “Indian Art” or collect an arrowhead en route to the petrified forests; one of the first people to conduct a more systematic survey of cultural resources was John Muir. Herbert Lore, an early homesteader and original proprietor of the “Stone Tree House” on the site of today’s Painted Desert Inn (still there, waaay on the horizon), took people on tours of the Painted Desert in the 1920s, likely leaving more material behind than he took (old tin cans, broken glass; there’s even a full, rusted-out Model T Ford at the base of Chinde Mesa, though no one’s quite sure how it got there). As the Park Service acquired land and developed resources in the early- to mid-twentieth century, Civilian Conservation Corps crews partially and semi-accurately reconstructed Puerco Pueblo and Agate House (an eight-room dwelling at the south end of the park, built entirely out of petrified wood), paved trails to petroglyphs at Newspaper Rock and the Picnic Gallery (the latter now inaccessible due to rockfalls), and, mostly, left the Wilderness Area alone. (Too much space; too desolate to bother.) Nonetheless, a few intrepid teams of archaeologists ventured out and found an astounding abundance of resources—not just petroglyphs and flakes, but evidence of long-term settlement in the form of manos and metates, building blocks, grand kivas and pueblos. Standard protocol entailed giving each find a number, writing out a detailed description, and marking the location with a stake—wooden, at first; later, metal.

That’s what we were looking for—the archaeologist and I—some sort of stake, with some sort of resource nearby. We had passed several lithic scatters and pottery sherds throughout the course of the day, none of which warranted paperwork; even I was becoming inured after my initial delight at the intact arrowheads (just that morning?). By late afternoon, we were hot, tired, had covered more than 20 kilometers, and couldn’t find the site, the darn mid-north site. We were surrounded by mud-cracked clay and cobbles, not even a bush nearby. What could be here; why couldn’t we see it? There’s a lot of land “about 500 m south of the boundary, centered between Chinde Mesa and Pilot Rock.” (Pilot Rock.)

We were about to concede defeat, give up and move on, when, almost simultaneously, we spotted a strange little vertical (vertical, vertical, not horizontal! Straight lines still odd in a land of undulation)—the stake! We rushed over, only to find... a rock. A volcanic bomb, a chunk of basalt, perhaps used to pound some sort of tool. Oh.

Onward, toward Pilot Rock.

Pilot Rock Pilot Rock Pilot Rock.



Figure 1-82 : Trekking along the northern boundary, mid-way between Chinde Mesa and Pilot Rock.

From this vantage, we could only see and thus aim for the false summit—a slightly lower knob to the east of the actual top. Though I'd always known it was there, or at least that Pilot Rock was more oblate than pyramidal, I had never really considered the east side in its own right. Why bother? From afar, it's but a little dip, a little lilt, a diminutive cousin of the sinistral summit. By this point, though, even second-best seemed high enough, rising as it did some several hundred feet from the plains below. Higher, higher, though somehow never closer. We were walking on pure bentonite—a cracked skin of red clay. The sky was assertively blue. It was difficult to gauge progress much less distance between the two flat planes, so I was relatively startled when the archaeologist broke into my mindless trudge, “Should we stop for water first?”

First? Water? Stop? Oh, we were at the base of Pilot Rock. And I was thirsty. We paused to get bottles out of our packs and plan a route up. After an hour's worth of across, a bit of up required recalibration. Should we aim right for the peak?—aside from a bit of a cliff toward the top, the series of brush-filled gullies looked challenging but do-able. No, the fence had made us leery of straight lines and “shortcuts;” we decided to climb up about halfway then traverse a contour around to the north, where the terrain smoothed out a little. There was no longer any sense of urgency—the afternoon was lingering into early evening; still plenty of light, so near the solstice, along with the promise of much cooler temperatures. We dawdled up, pausing frequently to catch our breath (a luxury I'd not been afforded on my first whirlwind of a trek.) As we were half hiking, half looking for artifacts somewhere partway up and around the northern slope, a rock caught my eye. Just a rock. A smooth, round, dull tannish chunk of sandstone about the size of my palm. I leaned over and picked it up—no small investment of

energy by this point. I just wanted to hold it in my hand—a rock, solid, sun-warmed, of certain weight but not too heavy. (By now, I know, you’re wondering why I’m telling you all of this; I’m wondering why I’m writing it. Why so much detail, why care about a rock, much less the dalliance of fencelines or the legend of Chinde Mesa? Lessons of the prairie: be patient; pay attention to detail; nothing is as it seems; nothing is nothing. Abbey [1968, 268]: “Yes...Touch stone. Good luck to all.”)

Then, who knows why, I shifted the rock to my other hand. I’d picked it up in my right and transferred it to my left—a simple move, but it transformed the rock from a rock into something else. A tool. A mano. A magic talisman. It fit perfectly in my hand, like it had been made not just for me but *by* me—that I had been holding it, using it for years and years, grinding my corn against my metate and thinking: this is my rock, this is my food, this is where I live; I am home. I wrapped my fingers—long, skinny fingers that never fit into premade gloves but that fit perfectly around this rock—around the rock. In so doing, I realized that my odd long hands are the same exact size and shape as those of someone who had held the tool centuries before. And, I knew, that person—whoever they were, wherever they were going, whatever they ate or felt or believed—that person was here; they were at Pilot Rock (what did they call it?) They were left-handed.



Figure 1-83 : Mano.

When we reached the underappreciated second summit of Pilot Rock, I gazed out across the expansive landscape with contentment, looking east to where we’d come from, west to where we were going, north to the Navajo Reservation, then south to the entirety of wilderness. The archaeologist, meanwhile, poked and puzzled about the place where we were standing. “Hmmpf,” he said eventually, hinting that he had something important to

say. “These rocks,” he contemplated a pile of black boulders, then “hmmpf”-ed again. He looked up, scanned the horizon, and, upon finding what he was searching for, a third “hmmpf,” a nod, and a smile, “I’ll bet it’s a shrine.”

A shrine?

He may not have used the actual word “shrine” and “hmmpf” is not an exact transcription, but I remember realizing that the place held something sacred—something between a cairn and a cross, meant to mark the sightline from Black Knoll (far to the south, visible from the Puerco River corridor) to Pilot Rock to its Bidahochi volcanic field contemporaries (far to the north, on what’s now Navajo land, part of newer lore.)

But why, I never asked him, would the shrine be on the false summit, the lower side? As I looked across to the actual high point—tall, dark, desolate—I thought I understood. I didn’t want to go there. There was something about it, too forbidding, foreboding, awe.

I didn’t understand at all.

Pilot Rock.

We dropped our packs in the little saddle then clambered up a basalt cliff to the 20th-century cairn and USGS marker. Yet again, we couldn’t locate the archaeological site we’d set out to survey—perhaps it was that pile of boulders back east?—but it didn’t matter by that point. We were done for the day, ready to return to our packs and collapse in blissful appreciation for the view and for twilight and for sleep. Deep sleep, blessed sleep. Light breeze, a billion stars, badger, we thought, watching from the rock nearby.



Figure 1-84 : Pilot Rock, nightfall (pastels).

After waking in the quiet, pale pre-dawn, we packed up, ate a quick breakfast, and finished most of our water. I even (oh, innocent indulgence) splashed some on my face: it felt good to get rid of a couple days’ grime; besides, there was no reason to carry the extra weight around. We began threading our way down the northern slope of Pilot Rock, planning to survey the last few sites, refill our bottles, and start the long trek back, entertaining the vague hope of making it to the edge of Black Forest before night.

My thoughts were already in the Black Forest, with the Old Dead Juniper (which had, by now, become capitalized in my mind). I'd never seen it at night, wouldn't it be wonderful to sleep right there? To see its silvery branches shadowed against the dark sky, to see its stolid roots shimmer and dance in the starlight? Before I knew it, it was 8 a.m., two of the sites were surveyed, my legs were tired, and it was hot. Baking. I was thirsty.

Water, soon, "by the gate in the fence at the far northwestern corner of the Wilderness Area," they had told us. Fence? Check. Northwestern corner? Check. Gate? Uh oh.

We walked back and forth, north-south, then east-west, where the fence turned a sharp ninety degrees, back and forth, forth and back, where was this gate? No gate, no water. Water. Why hadn't we insisted on GPS coordinates, or a good old-fashioned mark on a map? Why hadn't we brought more water?

The sun rose higher in the sky, 8:30, 9. Brighter, hotter, no longer a benevolent god. I began to feel slightly nauseous. We would need shade soon, would need to get away from the unforgivingly barren flats.

The radio didn't work; the thick shadow of Pilot Rock separated us from any signal. No radio, gate, no water. "Worst case scenario," the archaeologist finally said, voicing what I hadn't dared to think, "one of us tries to hike back to the Visitor Center, then sends the LEs [Law Enforcement] out to get the other. We can't both make it and we can't just sit here until they send out a search party."

Can't go. Can't wait. Between the two of us, we had half a liter of water. Summer, June, 100-degree-plus temperatures and we had half a liter of water. Half a liter of water, two apples, a topographic map, and eight to ten miles worth of labyrinthine clay hills and sandstone ledges separating us from civilization. Can't call. Can't wait. Can't go. Far northwestern corner of the Wilderness Area, beyond Pilot Rock.

Pilot Rock.

Worst case scenario.



Figure 1-85 : Boundary fence.

We reconvened at the fence, rigged up a tarp for shade, and sat in the dust. What to do? Draw straws. Just a formality—of course I would go. I was lighter, smaller, knew the terrain. I had been to Pilot Rock and back, I knew the cottonwoods, knew the gap. [This was my desert.]

He drew the short straw, but I protested, reasoned—lighter, smaller, know the terrain. *Can't just sit here and wait for someone else to retrieve me from my desert.* I shed my overnight gear—sleeping bag, pad, extra socks, even my sketchbook—strapped on a little daypack containing the apples and the GPS, and headed off, aiming for—what else?—Pilot Rock. It was the easiest way to go, up and over again, rather than around and into a series of deeply-cut gullies. Pilot Rock.

Pilot Rock. I don't know how I got there, but I remember pausing at the summit, looking back in the direction of the archaeologist then forward toward the Painted Desert Inn—both too small to be seen. North then south. West, east, I inhaled deeply—air thick with challenge, adventure, had I finally found it—wildness? Pure wildness, true adventure!

Then I exhaled. Oh.

Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert

—Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968, 267)

As I climbed gingerly down from the summit—a malevolent pillar of hot black basalt—I was already worrying about the cliff in the badlands. For that matter, I was acutely aware of every little ridge and ravine, rock and root—what if I turned an ankle? How would anyone find me, or even know where to look? 43,020 acres. Forty-three thousand twenty acres. That’s a lot of space.

Space.

If I can just make it to the Old Dead Juniper, I thought to myself as I approached the cottonwood oasis, I can crawl back, need be; I can drag myself through the Black Forest and Angels Garden, across the Litho, up the Access Trail. I paused in the shady sanctuary to eat an apple and swallow heavy thoughts. “The terror of the country you thought you knew bears gifts of humility,” Terry Tempest Williams promises (2002, 24), “[t]he landscape that makes you vulnerable makes you strong.”

Leaves rustled. I stepped out into Digger Wash, aiming for the drainage that cuts through the wall and closing my mind to the other possibility: a landscape that makes you vulnerable can also make you weak, weak, weak, weak, tired, a little crazy.

I have feared that if I go too far I will myself erode into nothing....And I have also feared that I will live, but will be left unable to speak, my mind handed over to this ineffable vastness. —Craig Childs, *Soul of Nowhere* (2002, 13)



Figure 1-86 : Pilot Rock and desert pavement, contemplated from Digger Wash.

Although prairies and plains are rarely thought to confront travelers with the same sort of challenges that, say, a mountain range or a raging river pose, they are, in fact, full of dangers, perhaps all that more perilous because of their hiddenness, their diffidence, their quietude.

To be sure, there are large, unmistakably dangerous phenomena—tornadoes and brushfires, blizzards, dust storms, swarms of grasshoppers. There are also smaller but much more animate threats—rattlesnakes, scorpions, everything from ticks to hanta virus. The howling of wolves filled many a homesteader's heart with fear.

But then there are the hazards that lurk unseen. You begin to cross what looks like a perfectly flat field only to realize that it's incised with a dozen steep-sided ravines. Or you eagerly approach a spring or watering hole only to learn that it's brackish. Drought—how can you anticipate or quantify that, but in desiccated plants and dead cattle? Distance—without a sense of scale, how can you tell how far away a storm is, or how fast it's moving? Lightning bolts strike out of the blue.

The most ineffable and thus terrifying peril of the plains, though, is the sheer exposure, the nakedness, the relentless emptiness: “[t]here is no place to hide” (Gruchow 1985, 25). No place. No thing. It's not a simple matter of lack—no trees, no water, no landmarks (no gate in the fence at the northwest corner). Nor is it a matter of elements from which one would hope to hide—sun, rain, snow, wind wind always wind. It's not even a combination of these factors. No—“it,” in this case, is the feeling of a voracious presence (Childs 2002, 12; Lopez 1986, 219), an emptiness so vast so as to have acquired gravitational force. Exposed to the weight of the prairie sky and the sprawl of the prairie earth, a person cannot help but feel naked, lost somewhere between two infinite entities, belonging to neither, excoriated by both.

Worst case scenario, I told myself, perhaps even said aloud once no one was there to hear or say it for me, no one, no one, *I'll slide down*.

I was skirting the top of the badlands cliff, back and forth, back and forth, searching for the right route, not finding it, not knowing whether to keep looking, just keep looking, looking, while the sun rose higher, hotter, hotter, hothothot, or to give up and try sliding down. *A controlled slide*, I mumbled to myself, unconvinced, *a calm, smooth slide*. No straws to pick, no coin to flip, I finally decided to go for it and tumbled gracelessly down, legs and arms grasping for clay cobbles.

When I came to rest at the bottom, I paused, exhaled, assessed. Intact, unscathed? No broken bones! No gushing wounds! I had made it down past the wall! I was practically home free!

But, you see, I was already free. I was already home.

This is what I don't understand, don't know how to explain:

Midday, out past Black Forest still, sun high hot blazing blinding overhead, I was trapped in the tortuous meanders of some anonymous little wash, following my feet along the dry channel rather than attempting to pick my own way through the prairie's sand and brush. I felt vaguely confident that I was on the right track—that this little wash might lead to a slightly larger one, and that, in turn, to a tributary of the *Lithodendron*—but I couldn't be certain. There were no dramatic features nearby, no beautiful flowers in bloom, nothing by which I could mark my

passage, nothing, nothing, that's what I don't understand, there were things all around me—dirt, brush, sky—but all were completely unknowable, unseeable, uncareable. My mind had long since dissociated from my muscles and bones. I could, for all I knew or cared, have been going around in circles or simply standing still.

So I stood still. I came to a curve in the bank that was deeply undercut. In the undercut bank was a pocket of shade. Shade. I paused, undecided; stood still; sat. This was it. I had decided to sit. To stop walking. To eat the other apple. To lean into the cool cool clay, curl into the prairyerth, let my sweat evaporate off my face and my flesh sink into the ground. Bones bleach out in the sun wind snow.

Exhale.

What do we know? What do we really know? He licks his dry cracked lips. We know this apodictic rock beneath our feet. That dogmatic sun above our heads. The world of dreams, the agony of love and the foreknowledge of death. That is all we know. And all we need to know? Challenge that statement. I challenge that statement. With what? I don't know.

—Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975, 366)

“Bring lots of water,” I wrote for my guide to a good weekend hike, but couldn't let that be the final word. “If you'd prefer not to have to worry about trails or travails,” I tacked on an extra paragraph,

“50,000+ acres of designated Wilderness (total between the Painted Desert and Southern sections) are open for exploration—spend as long as you like just scrambling around the prairie looking for fossils, listening for birds, smelling the sage. You don't have to stand on the summit of Pilot Rock to breathe a touch of wildness.” *Don't ever go to Pilot Rock.*

I got a note back from the magazine's editors saying they liked my submission, sounds like a great place, but we wouldn't want people getting lost in the wilderness, could I please provide better directions, where exactly is the trail?

I must have picked myself up and continued on. (“On,” not “back.” “Back” lost all meaning; “forward” too. To where do I long to return?) I don't remember or care to remember how. All I remember, all I know, is the smell of clay, its cool embrace, and, somewhere overhead, an empty blue sky.



Figure 1-87 : When you see the entire sky.

when you see the entire sky endlessly clear, enter such clarity

—Centering, from Vigyan Bhairava, Sochanda Tantra, and Malini Vijaya Tantra (transcribed by Repts 1957, 202)

If I had to name favorite places in the Painted Desert, Pintado Point would be there, of course, along with the old dead juniper. The petroglyph at Puerco Pueblo. The key embedded in the pavement a mile out old Route 66. And the porch of the Painted Desert Inn.



Figure 1-88 : Painted Desert Inn Museum with Pilot Rock in the background, seen from Tawa Point.

Now a museum and a registered National Historic Landmark, the Painted Desert Inn no longer operates as an Inn. In fact, it's not been available for public lodging for decades. Its rooms echo with years' of use and abandon, bustle and silence, and even, according to local lore, a ghost. (Every proper historic structure is haunted.)

The first building on the site was constructed by a private entrepreneur, Mr. Herbert Lore, in the early 1920s. Recognizing an opportunity to capitalize on the emerging tourist industry, Lore built a hotel out of petrified wood he'd lugged up from the Black Forest. Despite the spectacular scenery and the uniqueness of a "Stone Tree House," as he advertised it, it wasn't necessarily the best place to build a business: not only did Lore have to motor a long, bumpy 10 miles south to retrieve visitors (and water) from the railroad, but the constant shrinking and swelling of the clay foundation threatened to topple the unstable structure. When the Park Service expressed an interest in expanding Petrified Forest National Monument, Lore happily sold both the land and the crumbling building to the government in 1935 (Petrified Forest 2011; Harrison 1986).

Because it was easier, policy-wise, to "renovate" an existing structure than to erect an entirely new one, the Park Service asked Lyle Bennett—a little-known yet gifted artist who also designed elegant "Pueblo Revival"-style visitor centers and ranger cabins at White Sands and Bandelier national monuments—to redesign the building. Bennett poured his talent and appreciation for southwestern cultures into every facet of construction: the exterior of the building looks like an extension of the surrounding landscape, crouching low and pink, with thick walls and a jumble of rooflines that mimic the clay hills of the badlands, while the interior is filled with stylistic touches such as glass ceiling panels (hand-painted with designs found on Ancestral Puebloan pottery), Spanish-mission style tin

chandeliers, hand-carved corbels and hand-adzed vigas and savinos (pillars and roofbeams, made of ponderosa pine and aspen from the nearby White Mountains), and geometric designs in the cement floors, meant to mimic Navajo rugs. As supervisory architect Lorimer Skidmore attested in 1938 (cited in Harrison 1986), “[t]he building . . . blends harmoniously with the surroundings. It is entirely in character being located in the heart of Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni country.”

Not long after construction was completed in 1940 and the Painted Desert Inn (as it came to be known) opened for business, America became embroiled in the second World War and people stopped traveling to National Parks. The Inn closed, and Lyle Bennett somehow disappeared into dusty corners of the federal bureaucracy. Today many visitors assume that the building was designed by an equally talented and far more famous early 20th century architect—Mary Jane Colter, known for buildings such as La Posada in Winslow, Arizona, and the Watchtower, Hermits Rest, Hopi House, and Phantom Ranch at Grand Canyon National Park. Indeed, Colter had a hand in the interior decoration of the Inn: after the war ended, the Fred Harvey Company, which was expanding away from luxury railroad resorts to operate facilities in National Parks, hired her to update the building to make it a vibrant rest stop along America’s “Mother Road” Route 66. (Rather than open the six tiny guest rooms to overnight travelers or expand lodgings to an economically feasible scale, the company planned to open a curio shop, soda fountain, and dining room catering to the daily tourist.) Legend goes, when Colter came to see Bennett’s structure for the first time in 1947, she exclaimed that it was beautiful just the way it was.

She did make a few cosmetic changes, though—enlarging the windows in the curio room (affording me a much wider view of the wilderness when I worked there, decades later), choosing a paint scheme that brought the vibrant colors of the desert inside (summer-sky blues, creamy pinks, the palest of sage green trim), and hiring Hopi artist Fred Kabotie to paint murals on the walls, as he had done with great success in the Grand Canyon (Harrison 1986). Kabotie, in turn, chose themes to fit the location and the facility’s intended uses: in the room with the lunch counter—a spot for travelers to catch a quick bite—he painted images of the Tawa sun symbol and of four buffalo dancers in his usual, realistic style; in the sit-down dining room, however, he chose to tell a story, using the clean lines and characters of legend.



Figure 1-89 : Mural by Fred Kabotie, dining room, Painted Desert Inn Museum.

According to Kabotie, this mural depicts a traditional journey in which two youths leave their home and family at the Hopi mesas (center), pass several wild creatures (such as ants, prairie dogs, coyote, pronghorn, and bear), retrieve salt from the Salt Lake near the Zuni pueblo in New Mexico (overseen by a Goddess figure, top), and finally return home. “I had been thinking over what subject I should do,” Kabotie said at the mural’s unveiling (quoted in Harrison 1986), “when it occurred to me that the Hopi people...used to travel right through this country to go after their salt.” The mural depicts several rituals specific to the coming-of-age tale: the boys must run, brandishing sticks, as they approach the lake (upper right); they are expected to visit puebloan cousins at Zuni (upper left); and they know to light a fire upon their return so that their cousins and aunts can prepare to welcome them home (bottom right).

Departure, initiation, return. It’s an old story, the monomythic Quest. As described by Joseph Campbell (1949, 245-246): the hero bravely severs himself (always a “himself,” a “hero”; what of heroines?) from home and family, undergoes several tests or trials of character, culminating in “a supreme ordeal,” achieves some sort of triumph—intrinsically an “expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom),”—then integrates back into society with newfound wisdom. The heroes with a thousand faces: Tawa youth venture forth (answering the “call to adventure”), traverse a path lined with supernatural beings (a “road of trials,” filled with dangers as well as protectors or guides, such as the Goddess of the lake), successfully gather salt

(finding the “ultimate boon” or “magic elixir”), visit their Zuni brothers (proving their comfort and mastery of “Two Worlds”), then cross the final threshold back into Hopi life—the triumphant return! Home!

Home.

When I first worked at Petrified Forest, the Painted Desert Inn was falling apart. It had been abandoned in 1963 after a new Visitor Center / administrative offices / housing complex was built 2 miles away, courtesy of the Park Service’s “Mission ‘66” construction craze. (Architect Richard Neutra’s modernist brick walls are now full of bentonite-induced bulges and cracks as well.) After several years of unuse, the Inn was so filled with mice and cobwebs and water stains that it was scheduled for demolition. Local citizens rallied on its behalf, however, and had it declared a National Historic Landmark in 1987. As a still unfunded, still unused National Historic Landmark, it remained closed until just a few years before I arrived for my internship. At that time, park management decided to open it for visitors to see—creaks, cracks, hanta virus and all.

The building was dark and lonely. At some point someone had plastered the exterior a dull grey, painted the interior a dull tan, slathered the corbels and vigas with coats of dull, dark brown. It was cold, too—an old boiler system sometimes clanked and clattered to life, but I spent most of my time there huddled by a space heater or out on the porch, trying to catch the pale warmth of the winter sun. I don’t know that I saw ghosts (either the Harvey Company employee who had died in a fire there or the cigarette-smoking phantom who paces the roof at dusk—Herbert Lore, some say, but I like to think Lyle Bennett), but I certainly heard squeaks and felt shadows. (Once, years later, I witnessed a locked and bolted door fly open of its own accord.) I loved that building.

Finally, in 2006, the Inn was closed for extensive renovations. The park historian had tracked down old blueprints, photographs, and original furniture as well as the funds necessary to return the place to its Route 66-era glory. Workers stabilized the foundation, fixed the leaky roof, stripped ugly paint, replaced rotted beams, cleaned the skylights and chandeliers, restored the Kabotie murals, and, in the most startling and revitalizing step, replicated Mary Jane Colter’s paint scheme—blues! Pinks! Greens! Creams! I loved the building even more.



Figure 1-90 : On the porch of the Painted Desert Inn Museum.

Then, one day—one hot day in June, my fourth season—I found myself tucked into a cool corner of the porch, melting into the rough stuccoed walls and shadowy cement floor. I vaguely knew that someone was getting me water and someone else was arguing that I shouldn't drink water, that I needed electrolytes. (Magic elixir!) I vaguely knew that someone was on their way to get the archaeologist (getting permission from the neighboring landowner and driving a truck out to the boundary fence.) I vaguely knew I was at the Inn, but had no idea how I'd gotten there. I looked at the walls of the porch: pink—a deep, smooth, salmony pink—the same pink as the clay wash; I looked at the sky beyond: blue—a deep, rich, summer-on-the-steppe blue—the same blue as the wilderness sky. The air smelled of baking juniper.

That is all I knew. All I needed to know.



Figure 1-91 : Adobe, vigas, shadows, sky.

Yes, an old story, taking place not just in Hopi lore, but in deserts and forests, on mountains and seas around the world: go to the wilderness to find oneself; to touch holiness. From the Buddha to Jesus, John Muir to Jon Krakauer, saints and adventurers, heroes and sinners have ventured into the wild to strip themselves of shallow, social layers and find what sort of human being they truly are (paraphrased from Tuan 2001; see also Nash 1967). According to religious historian Mircea Eliade's theory of the "eternal return" (1967, 23), man "detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time" by performing rituals and enacting myths. From Carl Jung's psychoanalytical perspective (1964), the hero (or just the average person) must disorient and dislocate him- or herself from society in order to confront suppressed elements of the undesirable-unconscious *shadow* and integrate them with a conscious *ego* and desirable-unconscious *anima* in order to arrive at an integrated "self." Set forth; overcome trials; learn to be self-reliant, self-assured, in any situation, when facing any danger. The shadows, the tests, crossing of the very first threshold—those are typically considered the biggest obstacles to integrated "self- hood. The biggest danger on Kabotie's mural, for example, is the enigmatic mountain lion-like figure with a spirit line, spear tongue, and sharp whirling claws, encountered at the very outset of the journey. Compared to that that, even the bear looks goofily benign.

But of what, dear Mr. Kabotie, do the boys dream during their last night under the stars? As our heroes light their signal fire, are they thinking happily of their aunts and piki bread, or does something in them resent a return to the literal daily grind? Having tasted freedom and adventure, sipped water from clear, tadpole-packed pools, will they now be content to tend their corn, beans, and squash?

Yes, what, Mr. Campbell, Dr. Jung, Dr. Eliade, do you have to say about the integration, the return? How and why do heroes want to cross the final threshold, to go back to town? What happens if they choose to stay in the wilderness or fail to fully return to society? The shadows, out there over the plains: are those clouds? ravens? or chinde, ghosts.

Who's ready to leap free of the world's traces: / come sit with me among white clouds?

—Han Shan, 8th century Chinese "Zen tramp" (translated by J. P. Seaton 2004, p. 34)



Figure 1-92 : Pilot Rock, summer morning.

I spent the rest of the summer trying to regain a semblance of balance and wonder, if not a sense of curiosity and delight. (Light, light, how hard I tried not to be dark, dull, heavy.) I went out again with the archaeologist the very next week, ostensibly to locate the sites we'd missed but really to show Pilot Rock it had not won—I was neither lost nor alone, much less afraid. (It didn't seem to care.) I continued to walk walk walk sunrise and sunset, saw several new petroglyph panels and found more *Aetosaur* teeth. Bought a turquoise ring and a copy of Terry Tempest Williams' *Red*. Biked to Puerco Pueblo, sat out at Pintado Point, camped by the Lithodendron Wash, talked with my roommate, dined with other seasonals, welcomed the monsoons, danced in puddles, and then then then

Night. August. It was raining. An unusual rain—not a thunderous downpour, nor a teasing sprinkle; a soft, steady summer rain. The air reeked of life.

Normally, the sky is full of stars—stars and planets, planets and satellites, satellites and a sliver of moon, a moon so bright you have to squint—that's the prairie at night. But this night, it was dark. Dark with rain, drizzling dark. So dark that I couldn't sleep.

I drifted out of bed, out of my room, out of the apartment. It was dark. I was barefoot, clad in soft black pants and a black top. Dark. My feet found their way along the cold, wet sidewalk, then onto the black pavement. Dark. Past the sleeping cars, onto the road, closed for the night. Along the road, past old 66, all the way to Tiponi Point. I couldn't see a thing. It was dark.

I felt the wall, the low stone wall that separates the parking lot from the Wilderness, the overlook from the overlooked, and felt, mmm, the rock warm with residual daylight. That's one of my favorite things about the semi-desert steppe—the temperature of the air swings madly from extreme to extreme, but the ground is slower to react. I had often nestled into warm thrones of sandstone to watch the sun set or sprawled out on the sidewalk to keep my back warm while freezing droplets fell from the sky. On this evening, in this moment, the warmth of the stone wall offered more than physical comfort; it was a psychological tie. The rain, the darkness, the night—the wildness loomed all around me, the Wilderness near me, drawing me out into its empty heart. All I had to do was step up and over the wall; from there slide down the nearest ravine, slip through the brush, splash across the wash, and there I would be, mud soft and smooth between my toes, rain erasing any trace of my passage—oh, the possibility!

Up and over the wall I went. Then paused. I was shivering and the stone was so warm. So warm. It was so dark. What would happen when it was no longer dark, so empty, so abstract? What would I do the next morning, when the sun would rise and the darkness would dissipate and there, there would be rocks and dirt and plants and animals and maybe even some clouds skittering lightly through an open sky? Where did I belong in that world?

In rain during a black night, enter that blackness as the form of forms.

When a moonless raining night is not present, close eyes and find blackness before you.

Opening eyes, see blackness. So faults disappear forever.

—62nd and 63rd of Shivas's 112 Ways to Open the Invisible Door of Consciousness
(transcribed by Repts 1957, 202-203)

64th of Shivas's 112 Ways to Open the Invisible Door of Consciousness (Reps 1957, 203):

Just as you have the impulse to do something, stop.



Figure 1-93 : Pilot Rock (pastels).

Stop.

Eventually I fell asleep, clinging to a rock somewhere between the parking lot and the Painted Desert. Woke woozy, goosebumped, in the dark, drizzly pre-dawn and stumbled back to bed, dreamless. Yes, Kathleen Norris (1993, 153), it *is* “a dangerous place, this vast ocean of prairie. Something happens to us here.”



Figure 1-94 : Pilot Rock, autumn storm, dusk.

1.6-7 Interim: Dream of Place

Laramie, Wyoming; and the Painted Desert, Arizona

There are more things in the mind, in the imagination, than 'you' can keep track of— thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is where a bobcat is right now.

I do not mean personal bobcats in personal psyches, but the bobcat that roams from dream to dream”

— Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild* (1990, 176)

In making a case for the necessity of wild spaces, Stephen Trimble testifies (1996, 20): “People smile when they remember such particular places on the earth where the seasons and textures and colors belong to them, where they know, with assurance and precision, the place and their relationship to it.” Smile! You own seasons, you know your place! Right?

After the summer of Pilot Rock, I began to rethink and rescind my claims of ownership over textures and colors, much less seasons. It is the other way around, I came to realize—rather than knowing and owning the Painted Desert, I was possessed by it.

Early one morning, deep in December, I was trudging down the sidewalks of Laramie, Wyoming, boots gripping the icy cement, head bent to the howling wind. Trudge trudge trudge, trudge trudge trudge. But then I blinked or breathed and oh! Red dirt! Blue sky! Silver sage, sunshine? I stopped, gasped, gaped at the gritty sandstone ledge in front of me. The Litho? I was standing in a dry wash...in Arizona...on a dusty summer day? Before I could begin to believe what was happening, I blinked or breathed and was back on the wintery sidewalk in Wyoming. My nose was cold, but warm desert air swirled in my lungs.

That’s how they began, my dreams of the wilderness. Not just any old wilderness—the Painted Desert Wilderness, all 50,020 acres of open-skied, coyote-tracked, sagebrush-scented semi-desert shrub-steppe. And not just any dreams—dreams so real and unexpected that I’d call them hallucinations if not actual time-space wormholes. I’d be working in my stuffy white office, pouring over papers scattered across a big wooden desk, when I’d hear a rustle, look up to glimpse a jackrabbit hopping out from behind a shock of Indian Paintbrush. I’d be standing in my little white room, stirring a pot of hot chocolate, then sneeze to find myself stirring up clouds of dust, face open to the bright warm sun. One moment here, the next there; a whiff of sage, a raven’s garble, and I’d find myself in my beautiful desolate wild open park. Not thinking about it, merely indulging in nostalgia, but actually *there*, under the brilliant blue open sky, a bit disoriented, a bit dizzy, but happy, home.

My imagination has always been vivid. I see a photograph of the Red Desert's Killpecker Dunes and feel sand between my toes; someone says "grassland," I hear meadowlarks sing. I've walked the prairie with Laura Ingalls and Wallace Stegner; seen the plains through the eyes of George Catlin and Michael Forsberg. Like Paul Gruchow (1985, p 112-113), when reading O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*,

I could see a moonlit winter night. I could see the whole landscape covered with sparkling snow until it revealed not a single distinguishing feature. I could hear the emptiness and the wolves howling. I could see the tiny hut and Per and Beret sitting in the dim light of the fire...I could see them sitting empty-handed and silent, nothing to say, nothing to do, no place to turn around in, nowhere to rest their eyes, even. I could feel time dragging endlessly on.

But this wasn't a matter of imagination, much less daydreaming. I had no control over these moments, much less any warning. They came in flashes, bolts, hypersensual bursts. Some were memories of specific experiences—I'd touch the old dead juniper again, or trip over Onyx Bridge for the first time, repeatedly. Others were more general feelings—I'd find myself rolling my sleeping bag out onto the cool, gritty sandstone of Angels Garden or trudging a Seussical stretch of dead yucca at the foot of Chinde Mesa. Most unnervingly, some were fleeting impressions of places to which I'd never been, things that I had never experienced, but *knew*—knew, somehow, just knew, still know—exist, are out there, either in this world or some parallel universe?

Rather than delve into Hofstadter-esque paradoxes, I raided the psychology section of the library and came to the conclusion that it was some sort of neural misfiring. My brain meant to process a regular sensation—walking, say, down the sidewalk; cooking dinner; climbing—but electrons were sucked into a stronger, deeply-embedded, already-made path, like a flood continuously drawn back into an older, well-incised channel. I had "been marked by the desert;" it was "a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination [had] fuse[d]" (Tempest Williams 1991, 243 and 21, respectively).

Mind and imagination, okay. Rootedness, though, that's a different matter. If you allow yourself to become deeply rooted, to fuse with a landscape, well, then, when you leave, you feel loss. At a loss. Lost. You wither. Pulled out of place, a person, as a plant, wilts.

Like most parks, Petrified Forest has a decent reference library. Mixed in with the bureaucratic files, anthropological studies, plant and animal identification guides, and tomes on Triassic paleontology are a number of seminal works on conservation philosophy. *Quiet Crisis. Silent Spring. Desert Solitaire. A Sand County Almanac*, next to a biography of its author. In reading about Aldo Leopold's life, I learned, during my very first internship, that he felt that there are six things every person needs to live well: Adventure, Work, Love; Food, Air, Sunshine. (I always think of them in that order, with that rhythm: Adventure, Work, Love. [*Pause.*] Food, Air, Sunshine.) I found these precepts so compelling that I made them into signs to hang on my wall—purple letters and mountains for Adventure, blue and clouds for Air, *et cetera*. I carried them around with me for years, tacking them up everywhere I went. They brought me cheer, or at least a reminder of what's truly important. It was like Leopold was there, whispering: *remember, the important things: Adventure, Work, Love; Food, Air, Sunshine.*

At some point during that winter in Wyoming, the signs began falling off my wall. I would come home to find Sunshine or Love, always Food, on the floor, face down, as though they'd quit, were no longer a part of my life.

Deciding that it probably had something to do with tape drying out or drafts slipping through cracks, I tried hanging them back up—bought new tape, then tacks. It didn't work. Eventually, I stopped trying—let the walls reclaim their whiteness. "Adventure" remained hanging for the longest, clinging by a corner until it too was gone.

I had returned to Wyoming intending to continue researching perceptions of the Red Desert (from a safe distance, of course) and in so doing create a wall of objectivity between the plains and my own psyche. It is, however, unwise to immerse oneself in the theory of construction of meaningful place when one is still reeling from lonely exposure to desolate space. And it is, perhaps, even more unwise to run away from a land of whirling dust and wind-rent skies to a town where icicles grow sideways from the eaves. I was cold, tired, and, worst of all, lost—lost in a city, a cold rectilinear shell of civility. There were plenty of places to go, things to do, but no tumbleweeds swirling down the road at noon, no rabbits quivering by the courtyard at dusk, even the beautiful snow-capped peaks of the Medicine Bows just to the west couldn't rival the mesas and buttes of the semi-desert steppe. Where's the adventure in neatly gridded city streets? Where's the meaning in "hellohowareyouimfineseeyoulater"? Where's the hope in the small, blank walls of office and apartment? I missed wild tangles of washes and brush; I missed coyote howling for the pre-dawn sky. I missed the plants and animals and rocks and sky, oh that prairie sky. I was lonely.

So I dreamed myself back into place.

William Least Heat-Moon suggests that we must dream our way into landscapes, particularly prairies. About a fifth of the way into his epic *PrairieErth: a deep map* (1991, 105), he realizes:

I'd come to the prairie out of some dim urge to encounter the alien – it's easier to comprehend where someplace else is than where you are – and I had begun to encounter it as I moved among the quoins, ledgers, pickled brains, winds, creek meanders, gravestones, stone-age circles. I was coming to see that facts carry a traveler only so far: at last he must penetrate the land by a different means, for to know a place in any real and lasting way is sooner or later to dream it. That's how we come to belong to it in the deepest sense.

In time, he invites the reader to join him (1991, 326): "Now: you are dreaming, walking in your dream, here in the hills, alone. If you continue you will find what I have hidden for you, if you want it."

Barry Lopez, too, believes people forge deep, meaningful relationships with barren places through the dream world. In the introduction to *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, he explains the psychology of getting to know an alienating expanse (1986, xxi): "the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own estrangement." He realizes (1986, 368) that "the ethereal and timeless power of the land, that union of what is beautiful with what is terrifying, is insistent....The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it."

What *will* we do about it, this insistent, terrible beauty? What is hidden? How do we find it, alone?

As long, cold, empty nights dragged endlessly on, I found myself dreaming more and more, eating less and less, never quite sure where I was or where I ought to be. I vaguely began to wonder if I should worry about my dreams, my dizzy spells. In tackling the "open question" posed by geographer Pete Shortridge (1988, 206)—to what extent have "aridity, space, highly variable weather [and other physical realities]...modified the psyches of plains

people?”—I realized I had pursued only the exhilarating, uplifting elements. Wilderness! Space! Room to think, to breathe, to walk walk walk. All of my interviews, all of my readings, all of my research was biased to corroborate the fullness and worth of open places. I had thought “emptiness” and “desolation” pejoratives to counter and obstinately ignored warnings posed by David Pichaske (2006, 105) and Scott Russell Sanders (2009, in Gruchow, ix), namely: “[e]mpty space may be an opponent against which humans struggle for survival, identity, or sanity”; “the expanse and indifference of the grasslands could drive its inhabitants to ‘prairie madness.’”

Prairie creatures are hunted by loneliness, Sanders continues, making it sound as though loneliness is a beast that lurks in the grass unseen. Maybe it is. This belief—that there is “something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie: the loneliness of a forest seems nothing to it”—has been voiced by everyone from Washington Irving in 1832 (quoted in Price 2004, 14) to William A. Quayle in 1905 (“Loneliness, thy other name, thy one true synonym, is prairie,” quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 179) to Thomas Scanlan at the other end of the century (“The land is linked to suicides and madness, to defeat and conformity and spiritual deadness,” [1990, 201]) and, most recently, to Tom Rafferty, a third-generation resident of Havelock, North Dakota who was interviewed for an article published in *National Geographic Magazine* in 2008 (Bowden 2008): “‘There were a lot of suicides,’ he says [of the town in the first half of the 20th century]. ‘I think in many cases it was financial—they were down and out—and in other cases, it was the loneliness.’” (When Rafferty looked through his granddad’s diary from 1908, he reflected, “‘a lot of the entries are about wind.’”)

It’s important to distinguish loneliness (*sabishisa*, in Zen tradition [Hamill 2004, 6]) from aloneness (*sabi*) and, especially, solitude. “Solitude” connotes desirable space and time; a person seeks solitude so that they can think and breathe in peace. (Is it accident that the term contains the Latin word for sun?). “Alone-ness,” meanwhile, is simply a matter-of-fact state of being. A person may find they are a lone—no others around and no thought of whether that’s good or bad; it just is.

Aah, but loneliness. Loneliness is alone-ness with the ache of desire for un-alone-ness, for companionship, for society. It is the acute awareness of unbidden solitude, solitary confinement, or, in the case of the plains, solitary exposure. Loneliness is looking out at the world, asking for beauty, for wonder, for comfort, for anything, *please!* and seeing nothing nothing nothing nothing, how the wind does howl.

That ultimate world, he thinks, or rather dreams, the final world of meat, blood, fire, water, rock, wood, sun, wind, sky, night, cold, dawn, warmth, life. Those short, blunt, and irreducible words which stand for almost everything else he thinks he has lost. Or never really had.

And loneliness? Loneliness?

Is that all he has to fear?

—Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975, 389)

1.7 Beauty and Desire, Beauty and Despair

Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

People's desires and aspirations [a]re as much a part of the land as the wind, solitary animals, and the bright fields of stone....And, too...the land itself exist[s] quite apart from these.

— Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986, xviv)

By now, it's a familiar refrain: bid farewell to a place, make other plans; those plans fall through, you're back. Leave and return. Return and leave. Again and again. "The landscapes we know and return to become places of solace," writes Terry Tempest Williams (1991, 244), "We are drawn to them because of the stories they tell, because of the memories they hold, or simply because of the sheer beauty that calls us back again and again."

Beauty. Solace.

People layer preconceived notions—what is Beauty? What is Happiness? What is Comfort or Desolation or Sacredness?—on the world, then demand it conform. Similarly, individuals develop perceptions of self—I am independent; I am strong; I am a plains person—then struggle to live up to their ideal. When you turn to the world for answers, though, or at least for comfort, you find that there is no solace, no sense of self to be found out there: "what solace / can be struck from rock to make heart's waste / grow green again? Who'd walk in this bleak / place?" (Sylvia Plath 'Winter Landscape, With Rooks,' quoted in Bunkše 2007, 226.)

A song, published in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968, 130)(and also known as part of a Navajo Blessing Way prayer):

"Happily I go forth.
My interior feeling cool, may I walk.
No longer sore, may I walk.
Impervious to pain, may I walk.
With lively feelings, may I walk.
As it used to be long ago, may I walk.
Happily may I walk...Happily may I walk.
Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk.
May it be beautiful before me,
May it be beautiful behind me,
May it be beautiful below me,
May it be beautiful above me,
May it be beautiful all around me.
In beauty it is finished"

When I found myself back at Petrified Forest National Park yet again, after a full year of feeling uprooted, placeless, lost and tired, I carried a copy of Momaday’s blessing in my pocket, as if by so doing, by wishing deeply enough, I would find beauty in the wild, windswept plains. The landscape would, as Stephen Trimble promises (1996, 20), “nourish and teach and heal;” it would keep me sane, give me strength. It would afford “restoration, protection, release from dark anxieties and complexities, the chance for a fresh start” (Pichaske 2006, 105). It would teach me to “imagine beauty and conjure intimacy... [to] find solace where literal analysis finds only trees and rocks and grass” (Lopez 1986, 351).

Please please please be beautiful; in beauty may I walk.



Figure 1-95 : Crumbly clay underfoot, like walking on the skin of dragons.

The Painted Desert was, of course, beautiful. It was late August: the harsh glare of summer was beginning to lengthen and tilt toward autumn. Monsoon storms continued to sweep through in bursts of power and light. Everything was still there—all of the colors, all of the shapes, the Litho! Chinde! Angels Garden, Black Forest! Oh, Pilot Rock.

I wasn't strong enough to make it all the way out to Pilot Rock. I had returned to the wilderness as bare bones as the semi-desert, all sinew and dreams. My first weekend back, I loaded up my pack and tried to head out to visit the old dead juniper. How easily, how eagerly, the possibilities rose in my mind: perhaps I'll swing by Onyx Bridge along the way, I thought, or look for that silly BLM benchmark. Old friends.

Down the Wilderness Access Trail, I went (quadriceps quaking slightly), then out to the very muddy Litho (legs like lead); mucked along meanders east, west, (trudge, trudge), east (breathe), west (pause), onto the sandy flats (gasp) then into one of those drainages (stop, think: the farthest left or the farthest right? It didn't really matter.) Exhausted. Barely even two miles out and I was exhausted. Beauty? Too tired to look. I didn't understand, didn't really care by that point whether I saw the Bridge; I just wanted to sit. Rest. *No longer sore, may I walk./ Impervious to pain, may I walk.*



Figure 1-96 : Onyx Bridge.

There was no way I could make it to the juniper. I'd be lucky if I could make it to my favorite camping spot—a little sandstone saddle in Angels Garden, high views of every horizon. There, I thought, I can sit and think. Really think. *Where am I? Who?* Had I, too, “walked too much, aged beyond my years?” (Dillard 1974, 241) Had I “been there, seen it, done it;” did I believe “the world is old, a hungry old man, fatigued and broken past mending” (Dillard 1974, 241)?

If, as Anne Whiston Spirn avers (1988), “dialogues with ourselves and with the landscape...help us know ourselves and our place in the world,” then plains are the perfect landscape for contemplation. Forests are full of

distractions and seashores lull you to sleep (*crash*, the waves break, *crash*, two three, *crash*, two three, *crash*); cities are disorienting, suburbs even more so; wood-lined fields too bucolic and mountains too forbidding. Yes, prairies and plains afford just the right balance of long, clean horizons and intricate details: good, solid earth and wide, open sky; movement and pause; expectation and surprise; space, space, space—ever more space than the mind can possibly fill or fathom. Deep thoughts rise, expand, iridesce, then turn to dust; the wind sweeps them away and you are light and free.

At least that's the promise.

Kathleen Norris (1993, 156): “Here, the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities inherent in emptiness.”

Mary Oliver (*Dream Work*, epigraph to Tempest Williams 1991): “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — / over and over announcing your place / in the family of things.”

Scott Russell Sanders (2009, ix), in the forward to Paul Gruchow's *Journal of a Prairie Year*: “never despair of nature;” life will keep “breaking through.”

Possibilities. Never despair. I made it to Angels Garden (barely.) After rolling out my sleeping bag, I settled in to wait. Wait for the sun to set, stars to appear, coyote to sing. Wait for the sun to rise, datura to bloom, raven to trace grand spirals on the upwelling wind, *craw! Craw!* Oh, wild geese, where are you?



Figure 1-97 : Angels Garden, dawn.

Establishing legislation for the National Wilderness Preservation System (Public Law 88-577) mandates that designated lands provide “opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” “for the permanent good of the whole people.” Wholeness. Goodness. Recreation. Re-creation. (*Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk. / May it be beautiful before me.*)

Again, that myth, that mantra: go to the wilderness to heal thyself, to confront thy true nature and return Whole (Jung 1964). Doubly so for plains places: “disorienting and dislocating us from familiar references and reliable features, [prairies] simultaneously offer us a prospect from which to confront our own true nature” (Kinsey 1995, 198); “[t]he High Plains often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them (Norris 1993, 1). It’s so easy to fall under the expansive prairie spell, to believe under that grand and open sky that one has found some greater meaning, deeper Truth. (“The SKY!,” remember Georgia O’Keefe? “the sky, the sky!” “[T]he landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in,” according to Willa Cather [1927, 232], “the sky, the sky!” Even Leo Tolstoy, speaking through the voice of Prince Andrei in *War and Peace*, “...All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that.”) Since the pioneer era, such openness has made people ponder life “on a grand and utopian scale,” according to Pete Shortridge (1988, 218), who goes on to explain: “Where land holdings and sky both are large, it seems logical for human aspirations to expand as well.”

Euphoria! Utopia! U-topia. No place. Placeless. “But even it does not exist,” does Tolstoy write of the sky or of the truth?

There I was, sitting out in Angels Garden, waiting. Just me and the stars. So many stars. Star light, star bright, with nothing to block the edges of the universe, I suddenly wished desperately to see a shooting star, *please*, to whom am I pleading?, with whom do I speak?, I *have* to see a shooting star; I *have* to believe.

Nothing. The sky was silent, the night still.

Pernicious!, the promise that Old Spider Woman will come, Tawa will rise, wild geese, wild geese, “[w]ith every dawn, every place on earth is a new place” (Gruchow 1985, 87). I lay awake, waiting, wanting a new place. The sky grew darker, the stone colder. Stars. Moon. Breeze and tiny little gnats. Fingers and toes tingled as my heart alternately skipped and raced. I didn’t belong there. Where do I belong?

When the sun finally rose—a pale blush into the sky, a quiet lightening across the land, good morning, sun, good bye—I packed my bag and slowly, softly, left the Painted Desert.

No place is emptier than the one where someone has been and will not return to.

— William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth* 1991, 547

Chapter 2 - Mixedgrass

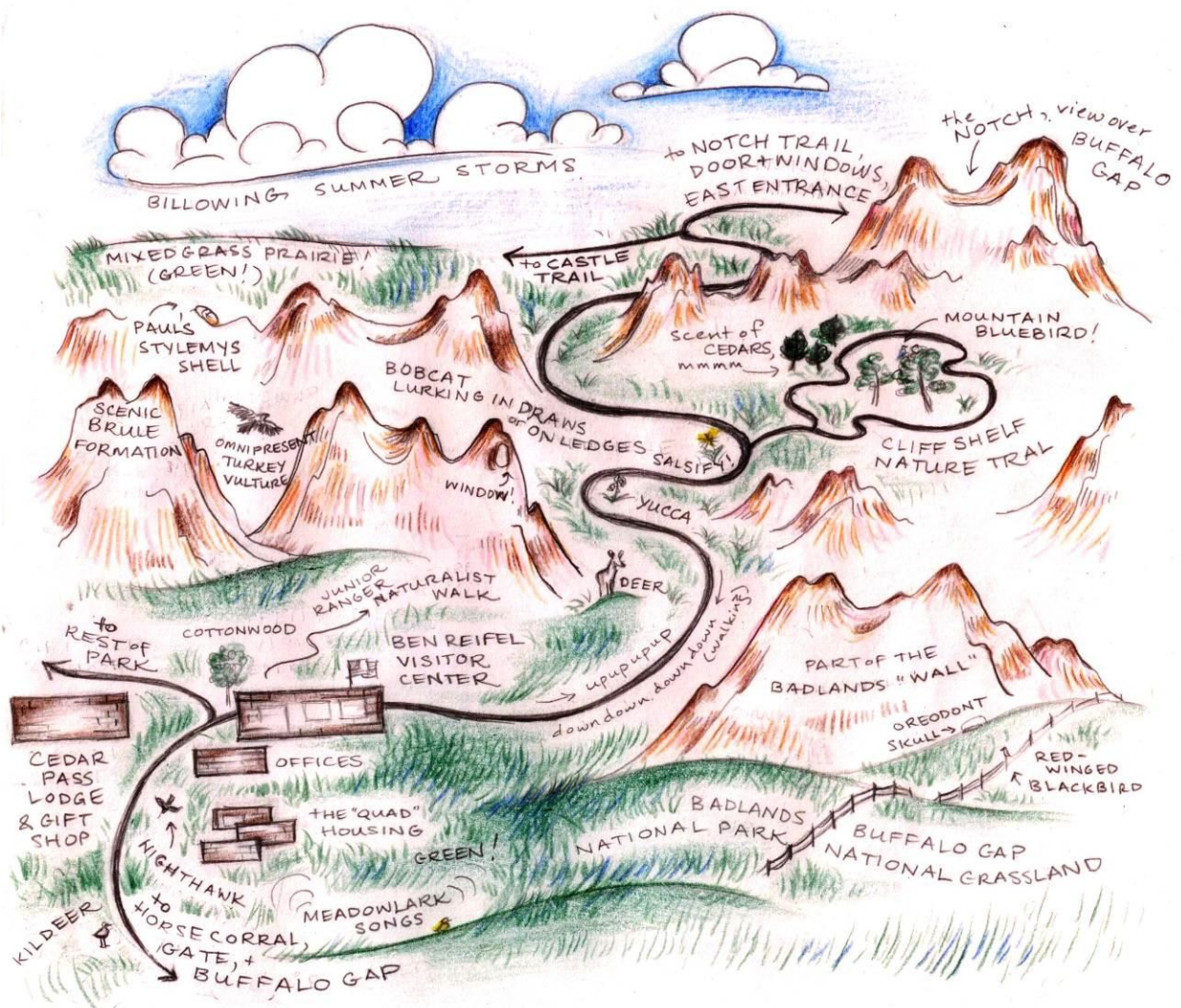


Figure 2-1 : Map, Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland.

2.1 Wonderlands

Badlands National Park, South Dakota

I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping...

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

Green! Greengreengreengreen green!

So *this* was the legendary sea of grass; *here* was the soft growth of *Poaceae*; *now* was Willa Cather’s “spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere: in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind—rising suddenly, sinking suddenly” (1918).

I thought I needed to try something more lush, more spectacular, less desolate and more inhabitable, so headed northeast, destination South Dakota. I arrived at Badlands National Park on a glorious day, mid-May—a sunny, blue-sky-with-puffy-white-clouds, air-throbbing-with-spring sort of day. I would describe the drive—how I was so eager to get to there from Denver that I woke pre-dawn and even, gasp, zipped all the way along the Interstate instead of lingering on scenic back roads; how I hadn’t even turned off I-80 at Wall, South Dakota and driven through the bulk of the park, but rather stayed on the highway until I reached the exit nearer the Visitor Center; how I had slowed slightly, windows rolled down to let the fresh morning air and the liquid songs of meadowlarks permeate my car; how I caught my first glimpse of the jagged, pink-cream-red-striped mountains of clay, passed the parking area for the Notch Trail and Castle Trail without pause, then rolled down the steep hill after Cliff Shelf and finally stopped at the Visitor Center; how I had introduced myself to a half-dozen new faces, then gotten directions to my new quarters; how I had begun to unpack my car, but, halfway through, finally looked up and around and realized, I’m *here!*—but all I remember is dashing out the back door, scrambling over a hill, flinging myself down into a soft sea of spring grass, and thinking, *Green! Greengreengreengreen green!*

“Bad” lands?

(That night, a front moved through. The rest of the week was cold, grey, and drizzly. Hills turned to muck; wildflowers exploded.)



Figure 2-2 : Yellow salsify, *Tragopogon dubius* (technically an exotic species).



Figure 2-3 : Foxtail barley, *Hordeum jubatum*.

The mixed grass prairie of western South Dakota receives an average of eighteen inches of precipitation a year, most of which comes in the form of late spring-early summer rainstorms. Compared to the shortgrass and semi-desert farther west, where a good year might bring nine or ten inches, this abundance of moisture nurtures riotous growth. The high plains are susceptible to climatic extremes, however—harsh blizzards and withering droughts, raging lightning-lit grassfires and periodic floods. The grasslands here teeter on the brink of barrenness.

The term “bad lands” doesn’t reference weather conditions, however—rather, the earth itself. Whereas some stretches of the unglaciated Northwestern Great Plains ecoregion are underlain by “soft, black shale soils” and “a thick mat of short grass prairie and dusky gray sagebrush” (Bryce *et al.* 1996), the Badlands are made up of siltstones and clays (the Chadron Formation) capped by layers of gravelly sandstones and siltstones (the Brule) and, ultimately, ash-laced fluvial and aeolian sediments (the Sharps) (NPS 2011). Like Arizona’s Painted Desert / Chinle Formation, Montana’s Hell Creek Formation, and the Little Missouri River badlands in North Dakota, the capital-B Badlands can’t support much vegetation: highly-absorbent clay swells when wet, then shrinks when dry, leaving large cracks and curls in the surface and making it difficult for plants to take root; moreover, steep and siliceous hills erode at a rate of up to an inch a year, sloughing seedlings. The slick surfaces and rugged topography also make travel difficult. Indeed, the Badlands were thus named not because they were inhospitable or uninhabitable, but because French trappers and fur traders found them *les mauvaises terres a traverser*—“the bad lands to cross.”



Figure 2-4 : Tipis at Badlands National Park.

For the most part, early 19th century explorers, travelers, and even Plains people tried to avoid the heart of the rugged region, particularly the sheer “wall” of clay that extends about 100 miles from what is now an eponymous town to the heart of Badlands National Park. (The feature gained renown in 1890 when Lakota leader Spotted Elk, also known as Big Foot, escaped the United States cavalry by leading his Lakota Sioux people down a seemingly impassable cliff, through the *mako sica* “land bad,” and, ultimately, to Wounded Knee.) In the 1840s, though, the geologic formations became a destination. After a few curious discoveries—bones of creatures unknown to contemporary naturalists—were brought to the attention of easterners, scientists working in the budding field of paleontology rushed to find their own fossils in of the southwestern section of the Dakota Territories.

In 1846, Dr. Hiram A. Prout of St. Louis published the first paper (under the heading “Miscellaneous Intelligence” in the *American Journal of Science*) describing a fossil from “the ‘Mauvais Terre’ on the White River.” He identified it as the maxillary bone of a “Gigantic *Palaeotherium*”—an Oligocene-age rhinoceros-like creature, later renamed *Titanotherium prouti*. The next year, Joseph Leidy of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia described “a remarkable genus of *Ruminantia*, very different from any that has been heretofore described” (cited in O’Harra and Slouber 1910, 10)—a sort of ancestral camel. By 1852, Leidy had filled the Academy’s proceedings volumes with descriptions of ancient “Ruminantoid Pachyderma” (1850), “Two New Genera of Mammalian Fossils” (1850 and 1852), and even “A New Rhinoceros” (1850). Rhinoceroses! Camels! And, soon enough, land turtles, pig- and sheep-like mammals, carnivorous creodonts, sabretooth cats, and even three-toed horses (Leidy 1869)—the race to find and name new fossils was on in the “Birthplace of American vertebrate paleontology” (NPS 2011a).

Even the land surveyor Ferdinand V. Hayden got into the paleontology craze, describing dozens of new species and genera in his 1857 reports of explorations in the Mauvais Terres. But apparently Hayden wasn’t as awe-struck by the abundance of fossils, the rugged badlands, and the lush, open swaths of prairie as he was by a wild land of fire and brimstone he was sent to survey fourteen years later—the great basin of the Yellowstone. According to popular lore, members of an earlier expedition to the Yellowstone region (the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition of 1870) had been so amazed by the “fairylane of unending wonders” they encountered there—geysers! Mud pools! Waterfalls and canyons, forests and wildlife—that

[a]s they sat around their campfire the night of September 19, 1870...., [they] quite naturally fell to discussing the commercial value of such wonders, and laying plans for dividing personal claims to the land among the personnel of the expedition. It was into this eager conversation that [Montana lawyer Cornelius] Hedges introduced his revolutionary idea. He suggested that rather than capitalize on their discoveries, the members of the expedition waive personal claims to the area and seek to have it set aside for all time as a reserve for the use and enjoyment of all the people”

—a National Park (Kieley 1940).

Although this “campfire myth” later proved romanticized if not outright untrue (NPS 2011d), the idea of creating a National Park or Preserve had begun to circulate by the end of 1870. When the Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Congress gave him the duty of “secur[ing] as much information as possible, both scientific and practical” about “the geological, mineralogical, zoological, botanical, and agricultural resources of the country” (Haines 1974), Hayden assembled a team of not just scientists but artists, including the well-known painter Thomas Moran and pioneering photographer William Henry Jackson. The group returned from their travels in October of 1871 armed with maps, descriptions of ecological attributes and curiosities, specimens, sketches, and Jackson’s folio of negatives, some of which still rank as some of the most spectacular and iconic landscape photographs ever taken. These materials—particularly the images—were then used to convince Eastern legislators and citizens that the Yellowstone was, indeed, a land full of wonders meriting protection. Nathaniel Langford (from the 1870 expedition) introduced a Yellowstone bill into the U.S. House of Representatives on 18 December 1871, quickly followed by Public Lands Committee Chairman Samuel C. Pomeroy’s version in the Senate (Kieley 1940 and Haines 1974). President Ulysses S. Grant signed it into law on 1 March 1872, establishing the world’s first National Park.

In designating “a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” (U.S.C., title 16, sec. 21), legislators set several precedents. The first, according to Jerry Sheppard (1995, 73), was that the scenery destined for preservation as a national park had to be spectacular and unique. “The second precedent was that the area under consideration for national park status had to be commercially worthless to logging, mining, grazing, and agricultural interests. The third precedent was that the land had to lie within the public domain.”



Figure 2-5 : Badlands, seen from Cliff Shelf.

Spectacular! The rugged Mauvais Terres of South Dakota certainly are breathtaking, awe-inspiring, especially at dawn or dusk, when the long, oblique rays of the sun deepen the hills’ warm hues and sharpen the relief with dark shadows. As artist Frederick Remington wrote in an article for *Harper’s Weekly* in 1891, “[n]o words of mine can describe these Bad Lands... One set of buttes, with cones and minarets, gives place in the next mile to natural freaks of a different variety, never dreamed of by mortal man... The painter’s whole palette is in one bluff” (cited in Mattison et al 1968).

Unique! Writing to ask the federal government to designate a small section of country near “the headwaters of the White River” a national park in 1909, the South Dakota Legislature justified their petition with the assertion that “nature has carved the surface of the earth into most unique and interesting forms, and has exposed to an extent perhaps not elsewhere found... this formation is so unique, picturesque, and valuable for the purpose of study that a portion of it should be retained in its native state” (cited in Mattison et al 1968).

But agriculturally worthless? Public domain? The badlands bluffs are but islands of wonder in a sea of mixed-grass prairie. As soon as the region was opened to homesteading, the grasslands began filling with intrepid

settlers; by late 1906, there was “a homestead shack on practically every quarter section of land” (second-generation resident Leonel Jensen, quoted in Mattison et al 1968). Because the siliceous soils and climactic extremes proved harsh for farming, the federal government decided to expand allotted acreage from 160 acres to 320 (via the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, implemented in South Dakota in 1915) and then to 640 (via the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916), quadrupling the rate at which lands could be claimed. “Between 1910 and 1920,” note Badlands historians Ray Mattison, Robert Gromm, and Joanne Stockert (1968), “increasing amounts of land in western South Dakota passed out of the public domain and into private ownership.” Thus when US Senator (and former South Dakota governor) Peter Norbeck began campaigning for a National Park in 1922, he was met with a great deal of opposition “on account of the land having gone into Private ownership. The Federal Government will not purchase land for park purposes” (Norbeck in a letter, 1927, cited in Mattison *et al.* 1968).

Moreover, several legislators and Park Service officials simply didn’t believe that the place was worthy of park status. Maybe a monument, they replied, exemplifying what Jerry Sheppard calls the fourth precedent—one on par with if not subsuming the first. National Parks, a la Yellowstone, are established not just for their geological, ecological, and/or archaeological importance, but for their potential to provide for the enjoyment of the American public. (Pleasuring grounds.) As of the early 20th century, the Mauvais Terres were still bad lands to cross. “[A]t that time,” continue Mattison *et al.* (1968), “the highways were relatively undeveloped. The automobile industry and tourism were both in their infancies...”

accessibility to the scenic sections of the Badlands Wall from the Washington Highway were already being closed in 1919 by the construction of fences, except for a few low passes in the wall where side roads had been constructed. The Washington Highway and the railroad are both located two to six miles from the most picturesque Badlands features.

Because travelers couldn’t access and thereby enjoy the wonders, there was little motivation for Congress to declare them recreation areas. Senator Norbeck introduced bill after bill, attempting to establish first the “Wonderland National Park in the State of South Dakota” in 1922 (Wonderland!), then reintroducing the renamed “Bill to establish Teton National Park in the State of South Dakota” in 1928 (the first Tetons! As Grand as, though, admittedly, very different from, the currently-so-named mountain range), but he received little support. It wasn’t until after the Great Depression and Dust Bowl blew away the prospects if not the dreams of local homesteaders (Mattison *et al.* 1968), and, simultaneously, led to the creation of the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps that the idea of a National Park unit seemed more feasible. By the mid-1930s, federally-funded crews finished building roads into the heart of the Badlands and the Emergency Relief Administration began considering purchasing land from failed homesteaders. The National Park Service issued a report proposing a Badlands Recreational Demonstration Project in 1935. Four years later—on 25 January 1939—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Badlands National Monument into existence. Nearly forty years later, it was redesignated a National Park—Badlands National Park

(“Badlands”? What happened to “Wonderlands”?)



Figure 2-6 : Sunrise over the Badlands, Notch Trail.

“Dear Granny,” I addressed a letter not long after I’d begun to settle in; rains had stopped and the prairie felt even greener, wilder than it had when I first arrived,

“I’m writing from atop a little knoll in a big sea of grasses. As the breeze picks up, rustles ripple by and even the crickets stop to listen. Earlier, the sky was blue—a deeper, more insistent, purely blue blue than what Crayola packages and sells as that of ‘sky’—but a big white and grey cloud just swept in, marking the transition to afternoon. Looking up and south, all I see is grass grass grass and a puny little fence struggling to define the boundary between Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Looking north, I see a rugged ridge of mudstone and sandstone, horizontally striped in layers of tan and beige, vertically striated by steep erosion channels. Other people have likened this landscape to European cathedrals and monstrous teeth, but I just think of it as a huge tangle of dirt / a graveyard for early grasslanders (Camelids!). It’s so full of fossils that it’s hard to walk anywhere without stepping on a 35-million-year old turtle shell or teeth of an ancestral horse. I could spend all summer exploring the area within a mile of my apartment and still not see what’s hidden in every nook and cranny (or rather ‘knoll and crag.’)

“I would try to draw you pictures / sketches, but I don’t know how? Infinite swaths of green, beige, blue? Thin stalks of grama, curling out of mud cracks? Better yet, the chorus of birdsongs! The smell of dirt! The warmth of the sun, oh, I know, those don’t fit in an envelope.)

“Instead of drawing, instead of writing, I feel like all I should do is spin round and round and round until I float up into the clouds. Or I could burrow into the dirt, around the mat of roots, crick like a cricket. Does this make sense? : imagine what it would be like to walk out to the middle of Lake Erie, or the ocean for that matter. On a calm day, you’d be amazed by the abundance of fish and seaweed and birds—that’s what it’s like to stand on the grasslands, teeming with life. But on a stormy day, you’d be engulfed by towering whitecaps, both beautiful and terrifying. That’s what it’s like to stand in the badlands. I’m drowning.

“It’s wonderful.”



Figure 2-7 : Sunset across the prairie, from the road leading to the horse corral, one route for a nightly walk.

2.2 National Grasslands

Buffalo Gap and Comanche National Grasslands, South Dakota and Colorado

What I remember most about [my trip to the National Grassland] was setting up the tent in fierce winds (successfully, I might add, with just a bit of patience and ingenuity), the glorious Aurora Borealis against the inky, star-studded sky, and the repeated singing of very close-by coyotes

— Thomas Henry, former webmaster of www.trailsandgrasslands.org (2009)

Two years after Badlands had been set aside as a National Monument (and nearly forty years before Congress redesignated the unit a National Park), a former chair of the Ecological Society of America's Committee for the Study of Plant and Animal Communities reflected on the fact that “Great Plains national parks and monuments were established to preserve features—‘badlands, outlying mountains, etc.’—other than grasslands and were ‘not typical of the great grassland community’ (Victor E. Shelford, 1941, cited in Sheppard 1995, 281). Even the Department of the Interior noted in their Policy Guidelines for the National Park Service, issued in 1969 (cited in Sheppard 1995, 285), that

[t]he National Park System should protect and exhibit the best examples of our great national landscapes... There are serious gaps and inadequacies which must be remedied while opportunities still exist if the System is to fulfill the people's need always to see and understand their heritage of history and the natural world.

Grasslands were (and still are) one of the most egregious gaps, not considered wonderlands, deserving of preservation. Until 1991, when Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve (“a new kind of national park,” the National Park Service applauds [2011g]) was carved out of former ranchland in the Flint Hills of Kansas, only accidents of geology (the Badlands, along with Wind Cave, Petrified Forest, and Fossil Butte) and/or history (Theodore Roosevelt, Lewis and Clark, and assorted former forts and battlefields) resulted in prairies’ inclusion in the National Park Service system. (And even then, proposed establishment of some units, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Tallgrass Prairie, met with vociferous protest. The former was considered too “stark” [Sheppard 1995, p, 184], and opponents voiced a “deep-seated philosophy...that the government should not own land” to protest the latter [Conard and Hess 1998; Least Heat-Moon 1991]).

Ah, but the Park Service “Crown Jewels” are not the only—nor necessarily the most important, much less the most beautiful—public lands in America. In addition to the 270 million acres of leftover “land nobody wanted” (Loomis 2002)—mostly shortgrass prairie and full-fledged desert—now overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, the US Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service (USFS) manages twenty units containing 3.8 million acres of rolling hills, woody draws, and an astounding variety of plants and animals (USFS 2011; Moul 2006): America’s National Grasslands.



Figure 2-8 : Buffalo Gap National Grassland.

Badlands National Park shares borders with Buffalo Gap National Grassland—nearly 600,000 acres of mixed-grass prairie and rugged clay hills, including more than 48,000 acres of proposed Wilderness. Aside from a few scraggly signs and a spindly fence upon which red-wing blackbirds like to perch, there's little to separate the two on the ground; they share the same geological, ecological, historical, and scenic characteristics. In fact, visitors to the National Park can't help but experience the Grasslands too: the sweeping view from Notch Trail? Mostly Buffalo Gap. Conata Basin Overlook, White River Valley Overlook? Buffalo Gap. The Pinnacles Entrance, the Northeast Entrance, the Interior Entrance, even the lesser-known gravel road leading from Scenic to Sage Creek? You can't get into or out of the North Unit of Badlands without crossing Buffalo Gap. (Once, when I recommended to a visitor that he return to Rapid City via Highway 44 and thus see the beautiful expanses of Buffalo Gap, he replied that he didn't want to see any old prairie; he'd come for the *Park*. I shut my mouth and refused to warn him that his landscape photos are contaminated with Grassland.)



Figure 2-9 : Scenic view from the road between Cliff Shelf Nature Trail and the Visitor Center. Almost everything beyond the rabbit is designated Grassland, not Park.

Although not as well-known as and far less appreciated than National Parks, the Grasslands, with their array of landscapes, lifeforms, and unique resources—colorful badlands and deep canyons, carpets of wildflowers and lonely cottonwoods, keystone prairie dogs and endangered black footed ferrets, dinosaur tracks and historic structures—are considered by many to be just as beautiful (see, for example, Chuck Milner, Rangeland Management Specialist for Black Kettle NG, quoted in Moul 2006, 104; see also Henry 2009). The Grasslands were not initially established out of public appreciation for ecological and aesthetic integrity, however. Quite oppositely, they are tattered remnants of a failed “Great American Garden”—products of boom, bust, dust, and (mis)management pervasive on the Plains (Shortridge 2005; Popper and Popper 1987).

After intrepid homesteaders persevered through decades’ worth of droughts and wildfires, tornadoes and blizzards, loneliness and labor, the combined one-two punch of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl forced nearly two and a half million people to abandon their seemingly worthless small farms throughout the Great Plains. Seeking to curtail socioeconomic and environmental catastrophe, federal legislators passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935 and Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, giving the government the power to provide loans to “encourage and facilitate farm ownership” and also to purchase land in order to directly “control

erosion, produce more forage, and ensure economic stability for remaining rural residents” (Olson 1997, 11; West 1990, 87). From 1938-1954, the Soil Conservation Service oversaw the Land Utilization Program (LUP), which broadened its objective from simple development of “specific projects to improve range, grazing, forests, recreation, wildlife, and watershed” to demonstrating wise-use practices to adjacent private land holders (West 1990, p 87 and 88). Tracing the Grasslands’ Origin and Development, historian Douglas Hurt notes (1985, 157):

The land-use projects were not the panacea capable of solving all the regional, economic, social, and erosion problems that many New Deal social scientists had hoped...[but did halt] wind erosion,... [restore] a sound agricultural base...[and ensure] best conservation and land-use...As a result, the National Grasslands [today] serve as wildlife refuges, sources of mineral wealth, and public recreation areas in addition to grazing lands.

The acquisition history and management paradigm may help explain why 5.5 million acres of livestock-supporting LUP grasslands were transferred not to the BLM (previously the U.S. Grazing Agency) but to the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service in 1954. With its principles of “wise-use,” the USFS was quick to “continue and expand upon ...improvement activities” through implementation of resource surveys and development of recreational sites (Olson 1997, 8). After quietly designating 3.8 million acres as National Grasslands on June 20, 1960, land management officials continued “to correct maladjustments in land use, and thus assist in controlling soil erosion, reforestation, preserving natural resources, mitigating floods,...and protect...the public lands, health, safety, and welfare,” as mandated by the Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, only amending the legislation to add “protecting fish and wildlife” and “not to build industrial parks or establish private industrial or commercial enterprises” in 1962, “protecting recreational facilities” in 1966, and “developing energy resources” in 1981 (Olson 1997; West 1990).

Foresters trained to measure timber harvests and suppress woodland wildfires were a bit unsure about what to do with arid, open plains, however; employees have struggled to define management objectives and negotiate unfamiliar and evolving usage of the grasslands ecosystem (West 1990). USFS officials admitted to researcher Francis Moul (2006, 52) that they sometimes “kind of look down on [grasslands]” as a “desert”; the absence of trees makes the units “a step-child” within the agency. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, a Management Review Team found that

direction, standards, and guidelines are lacking for many significant resources, values, and issues outside of commodity issues...Long-standing uses such as livestock grazing, mineral development, and hunting have to be managed within an environment of increasing demands for wildlife viewing, photography, rock hunting, and other diverse interests. (1996, p 14 and 3-4, included in West 1990, Appendix A; see also Moul 2006)

The Review Team’s solution called for “[c]reation of a commonly understood vision for the national grasslands” as well as a communication plan meant to “articulate and implement” that vision (1996, p 2-3). From a broader perspective, the Forest Service is transitioning away from their traditional mantra of “multiple-use, sustained yield” and attempting to integrate “human needs and requirements, the ecological potential of a landscape, and economic and technical considerations” into management protocol (Collins and Larry 2007, 5). Agency policies and outreach materials are beginning to articulate the importance of “ecosystem services”—an array of attributes that the United Nations’ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report defines as (2005, 5):

“the benefits people obtain from ecosystems...includ[ing] *provisional* services such as food, water, timber, and fiber; regulating services that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes, and water quality; *cultural services* that provide recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits; and *supporting services* such as soil formation, photosynthesis, and nutrient cycling.”

In order to articulate the shift toward more holistic management, the Forest Service hopes to embrace “a new language” (Collins and Larry 2007, 6)—one that resonates more deeply with residents of local communities as well as travelers. Traditionally, official documents had been filled with detailed technical information that informed specialists but hardly inspired citizens to understand or take pride in their public lands. (A Scenery Management Handbook uses flow charts and classifications of “landscape elements of landform, vegetation, rocks, cultural features, and water features” based on “their line, form, color, texture, and composition” [USDA 1995, 7], for example, and in so doing compares “which *sites* are beautiful, [but] not which *ways* each site may be beautiful or interesting” [Evernden 1983, 8]; vague references to “an open, scenic landscape” [Buffalo Gap National Grassland Management Plan Review, p 2-35, 2-45, 2-52, and 2-60], meanwhile, neglect the fact that “[t]he prairie is an experience, not an object – a sensation, not a view” [Evernden 1983, 8]). Newer documents take multiple approaches—from economic efforts to “capture the true value of nature’s capital” (USFS 2007) to ecological intent to “car[e] for our natural assets” (Collins and Larry 2007) and from “[c]ontrol [of] agricultural pests” to “[p]rovid[ing] research opportunities” (USFS 2011 and 2007). In so doing, they hope to connect with peoples’ myriad interests.



Figure 2-10 : (For the history buff) Tracks of a 19th-century stage road, still visible at Comanche National Grassland, Colorado.

Although it can be difficult to translate bureaucratese into clear, meaningful language, some officials, scholars, and local citizens have demonstrated an ability to provide lyric interpretations of ecosystem services. The Dakota Prairie Grasslands, for example, welcome visitors to a place “where pristine vistas inspire the imagination; where the rugged unspoiled beauty of the land invites exploration; and where the sights and sounds of the wide, rolling prairie stimulate the senses” (USFS 2011); Francis Moul’s *Guide to America’s Undiscovered Treasures* introduces readers to a “seemingly infinite expanse of grass and sky where the solitude and beauty take time to assimilate” (2006, 7); and Thomas Henry’s *Great Plains Adventure Guide* entices travelers to experience “the few wildernesses left where you can actually sleep under the stars...just you and the coyotes and the grasses and the wind and the sky – oh, that sky!” (2009).



Figure 2-11 : Sunset, Comanche.

Perhaps most importantly, “sense of place” is, according to some scholars, “finding a home in ecosystem management” (Williams and Stewart 1998) and becoming “an integrating concept in natural resource politics” (Cheng *et al.* 2003; see also Davenport and Anderson 2005; Stedman 2003; Williams *et al.* 1992; Shumaker and

Taylor 1983). Each of the National Grasslands has site-specific concerns to acknowledge and address—mining and drilling on some units; overcrowding on others; checkerboard ownership involving different local players at several (see Moul 2006 and USFS 2011). Each has a unique natural and cultural assets to celebrate as well. As officials seek to identify the meanings and uses assigned to specific Grasslands and articulate “appreciation for the land that goes beyond [commodity] value” (Cheng *et al.* 2003, 99; Eisenhower 2000), they reap “the ecological benefits...of cultivating a sense of place...[namely] that then there will be a *people* to be the People in the place” (Snyder 1980, 140)—a people to continue living in rural communities and a people to serve as stewards for the prairies. When local residents and land managers together recognize and cultivate the ecological, socioeconomic, and aesthetic value of the National Grasslands, they are actively “restor[ing] the biodiversity of the plains...restor[ing] the spirit and livelihoods of those who live and work here,...[and] recapture[ing] the imagination and interest of people throughout the world” (Forrest *et al.* 2004).



Figure 2-12 : Border between Comanche and private ranchland.

Imagination! Interest! Sense of place? Where, buried in this management history of Grasslands, Badlands, wonderlands, is the sense of place?

While in South Dakota, I visited the National Grasslands Visitor Center in Wall, taking the opportunity to learn about the natural and cultural history of American prairies, marvel at an exhibit of photographs from each of the units, and speak with a Forest Service employee who radiated enthusiasm for the plains. “Here!,” she gave me a stack of reading materials and a topographic map of Comanche, “You have to go to Comanche! You’ll love it! There are ridges and canyons and petroglyphs and dinosaur tracks, you have to go to Comanche!” (There are some people who speak in exclamation points, whose eyes shine when they think of places they love. She is one of them.)

I saw her again, along with dozens of other people who have dedicated their lives to caring for public lands, at the annual meeting of National Grasslands managers a year later. Instead of focusing on traditional themes of ecology, economics, and/or policies, that year, attendees strove to “enVision the Visitor’s Experience.” Officials brainstormed ways to “tell the grasslands story” and better communicate the principles of conservation and multiple use to local community members as well as visitors. (USFS personnel insisted on calling visitors “visitors,” shuddering at the idea of hordes of National Park-type tourists). Managers expressed an appreciation for the natural beauty of wide-open landscapes as well as the human history of the grasslands, a duty for responsible stewardship, and, mostly, a fierce pride in the land and people. Nametags and water bottles were emblazoned with the quotation: *Anyone can love the forest. It takes soul to love the prairie.*

Soul. What do I know of soul? What sense do I have for these places? I’ve barely dipped my toes into a handful of Grassland units, much less spent weeks, seasons, years, prowling them in search of their secrets. If you want to know of soul, look at Don Kirby’s images of the grasslands, which evoke the feel of all of the units in all different seasons, at all different scales. (His technique: “Photograph something for what it is. And what else it is.”) If you want soul, read Dan O’Brien’s *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*, which describes how a neighbor of Buffalo Gap formed a lasting, symbiotic relationship with the land. (His inspiration, quoted in Price [2004, 48]: “I feel deeply about cows and grass and falcons, so I gotta stick with that...It’s not a matter of choice.”) If you want soul, go to the National Grasslands Visitor Center in Wall, South Dakota and listen to the people who live near and with the grasslands on a daily basis; listen to the people who say “I have been here before. These lands are in me...This land is in me, and I am in it. We are one” (anonymous Forest Service employee).

If you want soul, go to Comanche National Grassland, perhaps late one afternoon, mid-August, when you’re the only person around for miles and you have just enough time to wander off and become deliciously lost, disoriented even, in the knee-high grasses that carpet the draws and flats around Vogel Canyon before the sun gently sets and the sky fades away and you must follow the historic stagecoach trail back through the chorus of crickets toward the spot where the bright, fat full moon rises and a small herd of pronghorn leaps lightly on by.

There you may feel the stirrings of soul.



Figure 2-13 : The Moon Cannot Be Stolen (transcribed by Reys and Senzaki 1957, 27): “Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of the mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing to steal. / Ryokan returned and caught him. ‘You may have come a long way to visit me,’ he told the prowler, ‘and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.’ / The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. / Ryokan sat naked, watching the moon. ‘Poor fellow,’ he mused, ‘I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.’”

2.3 Animal Encounters

Badlands National Park, South Dakota

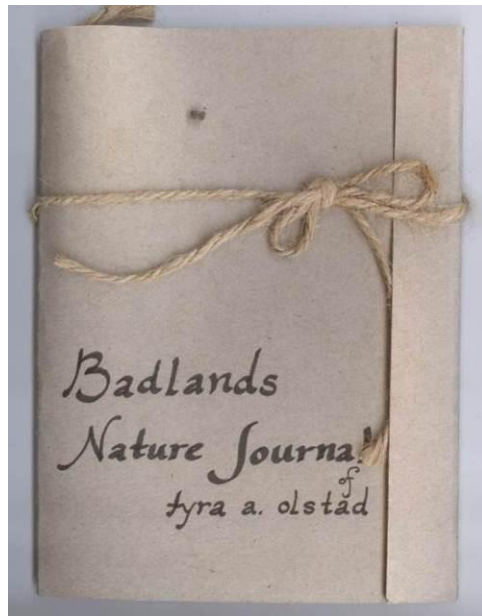
Part I : The Theory of Birds

*I was lucky / on Coyote Day, / because / out of all time / it had to be / one moment / only /
that / a certain coyote / and I / could meet — / and we did*

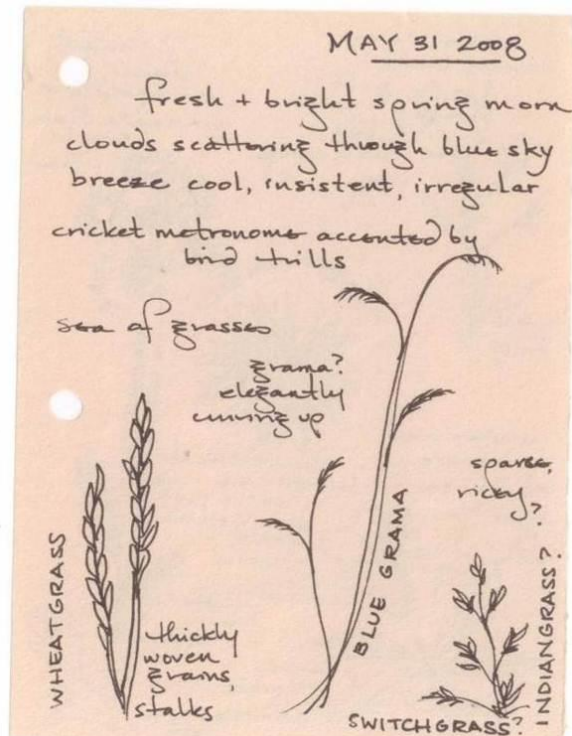
—Byrd Baylor, *I'm in Charge of Celebrations* (1986)

Within a week or two of arriving at Badlands, I had made friends with the local deer, as usual, as well as the rabbits, to whom I'd nod politely and greet "Good Morning" each dawn. I began to notice subtler changes in the vegetation—phlox spreading out one moment, primrose popping up the next. There was so much I wanted to remember, so much I was afraid to forget, that I began keeping a record of daily weather patterns, wildflowers, and animal sightings—a feeble attempt at a naturalist's diary, since I couldn't identify half of what I encountered. "Salsify!" I might learn and label excitedly, or "Switchgrass!" If I identify just one plant and one animal per day, I thought to myself, I'll know nearly a hundred of each within three months!

Badlands National Park boasts more than four hundred sixty plant species (including sixty grasses alone), at least thirty-seven mammals, fifteen reptiles and amphibians, sixty-nine butterflies, and two hundred six different birds (NPS 2011a). Oh.



Figures 2-14 a-b : Badlands Nature Journal.



I am not a birder. People assume that I am because I lead a birder lifestyle: I enjoy getting up before dawn, learning species' names, and, above all, sitting and watching the sky expand around me. The problem is that I don't have a crucial fourth characteristic: I don't like birds.

While growing up, instead of waking before dawn and traipsing off to the woods eager to record sweet songs (as did Craig Childs, 1997, introduction), I wanted to throw pillows at ducks paddling quackily past my window. Unlike true naturalists such as Aldo Leopold, who could appreciate great honky vees of geese as "a wild poem dropped from the murky skies upon the muds of March" (1949, 23), or Terry Tempest Williams, who finds symbols and solace in everything from burrowing owls to avocets and stilts (1991), I couldn't get past the fact that pigeons are mean and seagulls belligerent. While watching cardinals and bluebirds squabble over birdseed in the backyard, I always, secretly, rooted for the squirrels to get to the feeder first. Birds just couldn't hold my imagination—I could never look into their beady little eyes and see a fierce green fire, feel a connection with something greater, wilder.

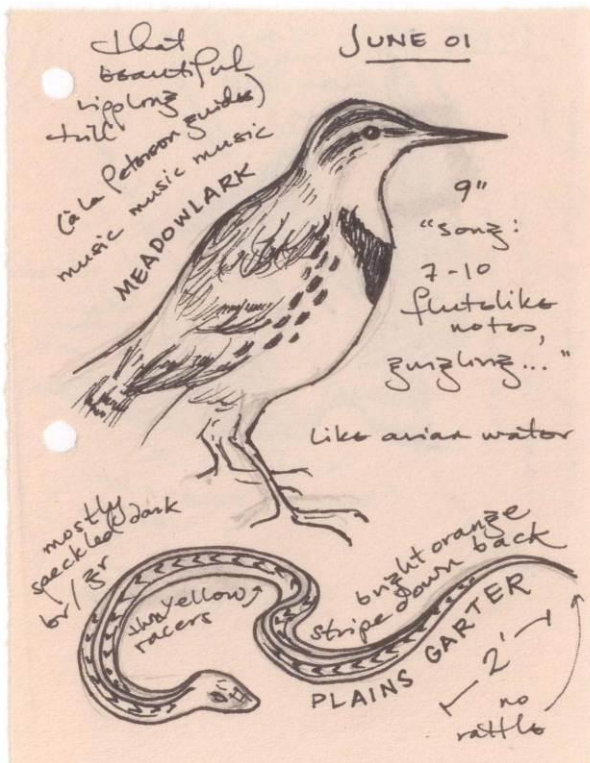
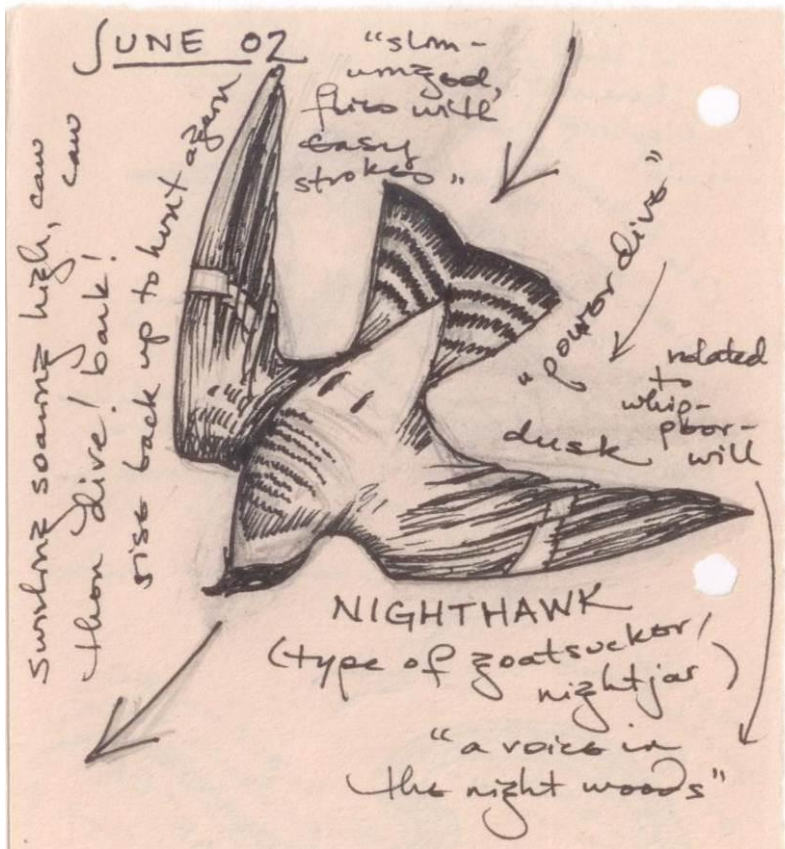
At Petrified Forest, I became acutely aware of hawks sweeping wide circles over the steppe, roadrunners peeking into doorways, hundreds of little brown sparrowy somethings singing from the brush; ravens, ravens everywhere. But visitors kept asking me to identify distant specks, forcing me to shake my head and admit I couldn't identify flight patterns, silhouettes, songs; couldn't recite families, genres, species; didn't much care to learn. Too much to learn. How was I supposed to hold the binoculars steady enough to see the darn things before they flew away? How was I supposed to remember male vs. female, juvenile vs. adult, summer vs. winter? Above all, how was I supposed to distinguish all of those cheeps and chirps, trills tweets warbles? That, in turn, made me feel like I was a bad ranger, a poor excuse for a naturalist, how could I not know my birds? Finally, one day, after listening to obnoxious squawks emanating from a tree just outside the Painted Desert Visitor Center for what seemed like an entire morning, I went outside armed with loads of books, determined to identify the medium-sized black creature whose only distinguishing feature was its yellow head. On my first serious attempt at birding, it took me a full half-hour to determine that it was, indeed, a yellow-headed blackbird.

I tried, but simply didn't have a passion for birding. I tried going to see cranes in Kearney, but couldn't concentrate on anything but the cold air, the scratchiness of the bind's hay bales, and the distractingly beautiful sunrise, marked by long wisps of cirrus sweeping across a pale pink-blue sky. I tried going to see swans in the Laramie basin, but tuned out the lessons on migratory patterns and instead filled a sketchbook with prairie dogs and mountain-scapes, not a single bird. Eventually, I decided, there was no point in trying anymore; I am just a flower-gatherer, a rock-collector, a hopeless mammalia-phile. I watch clouds, not birds.

Then on one of my first evenings at Badlands, I was sitting on my front step, watching a storm tie the sky in knots, waiting for grumbles of thunder if not the cool patter of rain, when I heard a strange snort fall from the air. Maybe it was more like a huff? A humph? An angry bison standing on my roof? I called for my roommate to come listen. A grunt? Was there a badger around? What does a badger sound like? We had no idea.

“A nighthawk!” laughed one of the rangers when we told him the next day. He was an expert on astronomy with a passion for birds, happy to share everything he knew. His infectious enthusiasm acted as a catalyst; I couldn’t help but take a bit more interest in those nighthawks. When I heard them dive and whoosh again, I smiled and thought to myself, “aha! Nighthawk!”

A few days later, I timidly asked Ranger L about the aggressive birds who didn’t like me walking one particular patch of road—top-heavy things with long skinny legs and squat greyish-brown speckled bodies? “Sandpipers!,” he told me. The pairs that populate the visitor center parking lot, showing off their long, iridescent-



black tails and flashes of white wing stripes? “Black-billed magpies!” The flocks that flit into and out of nests in the badlands wall? “Cliff swallows!” And, of course, the first species I learned to identify by song, as cheery yellow as its breast: Meadowlarks!

I still didn’t like birds, but after beginning to learn their names, I grew a little curious about their habits. I asked my mother to send me her father’s 1966 edition of the Golden Field Guide to Birds, dusted off the bookshelves at home. After reading about the common species and spending a considerable amount of time trying to decipher the sonograms, I decided to purchase my very own bird book—not a Sibley’s, nor an Audubon, but the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *Bird Songs* (Beletsky and Dunn 2006), complete with audio recordings of 250 species.

Figure 2-15 : Badlands Nature Journal, cont.

Bird Songs! I played the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*, number 002) incessantly, until my roommate threatened to remove the batteries. Then I moved on to the mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*, number 186), Say's phoebe (*Sayornis saya*, number 194), and, of course, the western meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*, number 244). Despite the book's awkward size, I began lugging it along on my daily walks, letting my feet figure out where to go while I concentrated on training my ears to recognize rhythms and melodies. One evening, one regular old evening, as hot and (relatively) humid as any that had come before, would come later, with the sky its usual pastel blue fading into a dusky pink, nothing remarkable, nothing memorable, my bird book and I went up to Cliff Shelf Nature Trail. It was the perfect time to be there: campers were settling in for dinner, travelers were on their way to Wall or Murdo, so it was just me and the path and, of course, the birds twittering happily from the treetops. After listening for a while, I began pressing buttons. I didn't know what I was playing (hadn't yet learned to identify more than a few)—six, seven, twenty different calls, chosen at random—before, pause, something sang back from the real world. The same melody I'd just heard in the book.

I hit "play" again. The same half-dozen notes echoed from the air. Again? Again! What was it, number 214? Two-fourteen, two-fourteen...Mountain bluebird! I was hearing a mountain bluebird! Not just hearing it; it was hearing me, and singing back! Just like that, "I [caught] the animal excitement...I rejoice[d] in the stimulus of spontaneous life" (Rolston 1987, p 187-188).



Figure 2-16 : Oh dear, I still can't tell what species it is (is it my mountain bluebird?), but it looks so free, flying.

Wildlife-watching adds an important dimension to people’s perceptions of natural landscapes, according to researchers whose quantitative surveys and qualitative analyses confirm that encounters with wild animals can “produce strong and vivid memories” and help visitors develop emotional connections that “[lead] them to care about the animal’s well-being” (paraphrased and quoted from Ballantyne *et al.* 2011). Writing of the Aesthetic Experience of Wildlife (1987, 1990), environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston III muses:

The mountains and rivers are *objects*, even the pines and oaks live without sentience; but the squirrels and antelope are *subjects*. When perceiving an item in the geomorphology or the flora I see an ‘it.’ But with the fauna, especially the vertebrate, brained fauna, I meet a ‘thou’...I see them; they also see me...The aesthetic experience differs because of reciprocity.

Reciprocity. I was singing with a mountain bluebird, *Sialia currucoides*.



Figure 2-17 : Mountain bluebird, *Sialia currucoides* at Cliff Shelf.

Visitors to Badlands often ask where they can see animals, especially the bison, the bighorn sheep, the cute squat little prairie dogs. (Although the latter may be rodents, they're a captivating keystone species; the park road clogs with slow-traveling wildlife-gawkers alongside colonies.) "Sage Creek," we would tell people who wanted to see bison, which roam freely through a designated wilderness area in the park's North Unit, as well as prairie dogs, who pop anxiously up from and back into their burrows in Robert's Prairie Dog Town, yapping away all the while. Pinnacles Overlook for sheep, especially when researchers are tracking radio-collared individuals in the area. Birds? Cliff Shelf, as well as Prairie Wind Overlook for meadowlarks, the Visitor Center for magpies, and anywhere along the wall for turkey vultures, which like to lurk on thermals that rise up the cliffs. We kept wildlife updates on a large map of the park in the Visitor Center (magnets that we could shuffle around whenever sightings were reported), but could not, of course, guarantee that the animals would stay there, posing for people's photographs. As Rolston continues (1987, 188):

a principal difference between scenery and wildlife is that the observer knows that the mountain or the cascades will be there, but what about the redtail hawk perched in the cottonwood...? The latter involve probability, improbability, contingency, which add adventurous openness to the scene...[T]ime brings to the animal freedom in space, and aesthetic experience of that freedom must delight in the spontaneity.



Figure 2-18 : Wild life of the grasslands (Konza Prairie Preserve, Kansas).

Wild + life = Freedom! Delight! Surprise! You never know what will pop out of the brush or swoop down from a cloud, never know what will happen when you step out of your door. The prairie is *alive*. You have to be there to experience it.

Part II : Rewilding

Today, the mixed-grass prairie of Badlands teems with wildlife, with wonders, but when the original Monument was established, it lacked several of its most charismatic—and ecologically important—species. By 1939, industrious homesteaders and hunters and their fences, plows, and guns had put a severe dent in the pronghorn and mule deer populations and caused the demise of great herds of bison, elk, and bands of sheep. “Problem animals” such as coyotes, swift fox, and wolves had fallen victim to the US Biological Survey’s “predatory animal extermination program” (Mattison *et al.* 1968; see also Freilich *et al.* 2003) and prairie dogs were considered “so deleterious to agriculture and stock raising that their presence in some localities c[ould] not be tolerated,” according to the official policy of the U.S. Biological Survey (Redington 1929, 278).

Even while the animals were disappearing from the plains, people began to notice that “[k]eystone mammal species—grazers such as prairie dogs and bison... — played a crucial, and frequently unappreciated, role in maintaining many grassland systems” (Askins *et al.* 2007, 1). Along with drought and fire, grazing is one of a trifecta of large disturbances that maintain balance in prairie ecosystems. The mixed-grass of western South Dakota needs large herds of bison (and, to a lesser degree, elk and pronghorn) to graze, wallow, and stampede their way through the taller grasses, creating a “shifting mosaic” that periodically allows the shorter buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) and blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) room to grow (Fuhlendorf and Engle 2001; Askins *et al.* 2007, 17); black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), meanwhile, not only impact the vegetation with their nibbling and burrowing, but create habitat and/or act as a food source for species such as the burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), the prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*), the coyote (*Canis latrans*), and the black footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*).

More than four hundred sixty plant species! Thirty-seven mammals! Fifteen reptiles and amphibians, sixty-nine butterflies, two hundred six different birds! Remove a few mammals, let a few plants grow wild, change the habitat for the birds and the butterflies and the toads, and what happens to the mixed-grass sea of green?



Figure 2-19 : Cycle of life on the plains (Notch Trail, Badlands).

In 1987, Deborah and Frank Popper expressed their scholarly interpretation of the Great Plains as “the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history,” predicting that “over the next generation the Plains will... become almost totally depopulated,” leaving the federal government free to “take the newly emptied Plains and tear down the fences, replant the shortgrass, and restock the animals, including the buffalo” (12). This idea was not without historical precedent, but the East Coast academics’ “musings... set off a torrent of discussion about the region’s future” as “plains people came to view the study as an attack on their way of life” by geographic and philosophical outsiders (Popper and Popper 1993, 24; Shortridge 2005, 214). Locals accused the Poppers of painting an exceedingly negative picture of the Plains and journalists of milking “a good story” (De Bres *et al.* 1993; Wallach 1993, 22); meanwhile, the Poppers and colleagues accused locals of “exploit[ing]... nature for profit” and assuming “that the value of land lies in the intensity of its use—that it is more valuable when it is plowed, sold, or developed” (Roebuck 1993, 19; Popper and Popper 1993, 25). Several years later, reinterpretations of the so-called Buffalo Commons as “a literary device, a metaphor that would resolve the narrative conflicts – past, present, and, most important, future – of the Great Plains” (1999) asserted not controversy but success: “There have been several initiatives to increase bison and to preserve grasslands across the Great Plains,” the Poppers noted in 1993 (24), explaining, “[t]he groups most involved are ranchers, Native American tribes, land preservation organizations, and public land managers.”

Indeed, ranchers such as Dan O’Brien, owner of Wild Idea Buffalo Company (“a vision of environmental health, animal health and human health,” located on a “certain little patch of prairie” just west of Badlands [2001, 5; Wild Idea Buffalo 2011]) have realized both the ecologic and the economic benefits of raising bison, while non-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy have brought back thousands of animals in an effort to “restor[e] the ecological and cultural values” of regions from Canada to Mexico (2011). Meanwhile, Custer State Park (carved out of the Black Hills region in 1912 by the same Peter Norbeck, then Governor of South Dakota, as later campaigned for Wonderland National Park) started with 36 bison in 1914, was overgrazed by nearly 2500 head in the 1940s, and now balances around 1300 (Smith 2011, 12) and neighboring Wind Cave National Park protects one of only a handful of genetically-pure, free-ranging *Bison bison bison* (Plains subspecies) herds (NPS 2011i). (Yellowstone, of course, boasts another.) From Ted Turner’s 15 ranches totaling 50,000 head of bison (Turner Enterprises 2011) to Kevin Costner’s giant bronze statue (and interpretive center and gift shop and snack bar) of Tatanka outside Deadwood, SD (Tatanka 2011), Buffalo-Commons-esque examples abound.

And yet, as a team of scientists, government officials, NGOs, and tribal members from places throughout the international Great Plains write in the essay “The Ecological Future of the North American Bison: Conceiving Long-Term, Large-Scale Conservation of Wildlife” (Sanderson *et al.* 2008), those who are interested in reintroducing bison must ask themselves: “What is our vision for bison restoration? Is it the animal itself... or is it also the interactions between bison and their environment that need to be conserved?... What aspects of the human relationship to bison—economic, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual—should be restored?” (253).

The team of scholars and interested parties refines their vision (2008, 252):

Over the next century, the ecological recovery of the North American bison will occur when multiple large herds move freely across extensive landscapes within all major habitats of their

historic range, interacting in ecologically significant ways with the fullest possible set of other native species, and inspiring, sustaining and connecting human cultures.

Large herds + Extensive landscapes + Prairie ecology = Human inspiration?

After witnessing the abundance of wild life roaming freely about in the Dakotas in 1832, the artist George Catlin wrote (quoted in Sheppard 1995, p 59-60) : “Nature has no where presented more beautiful and lovely scenes than those of the vast prairies of the West...

It is a melancholy contemplation for one who has travelled as I have, through these realms...to contemplate [the buffalo] so rapidly wasting from the world...

And what a splendid contemplation too, when on (who has travelled in these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they *might* in the future be seen...preserved in their pristine beauty and wilderness, in a *magnificent park*...What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve...! A *nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!

It would be one hundred thirty one years before bison would return to the mixed-grass wilderness of Badlands National Monument.

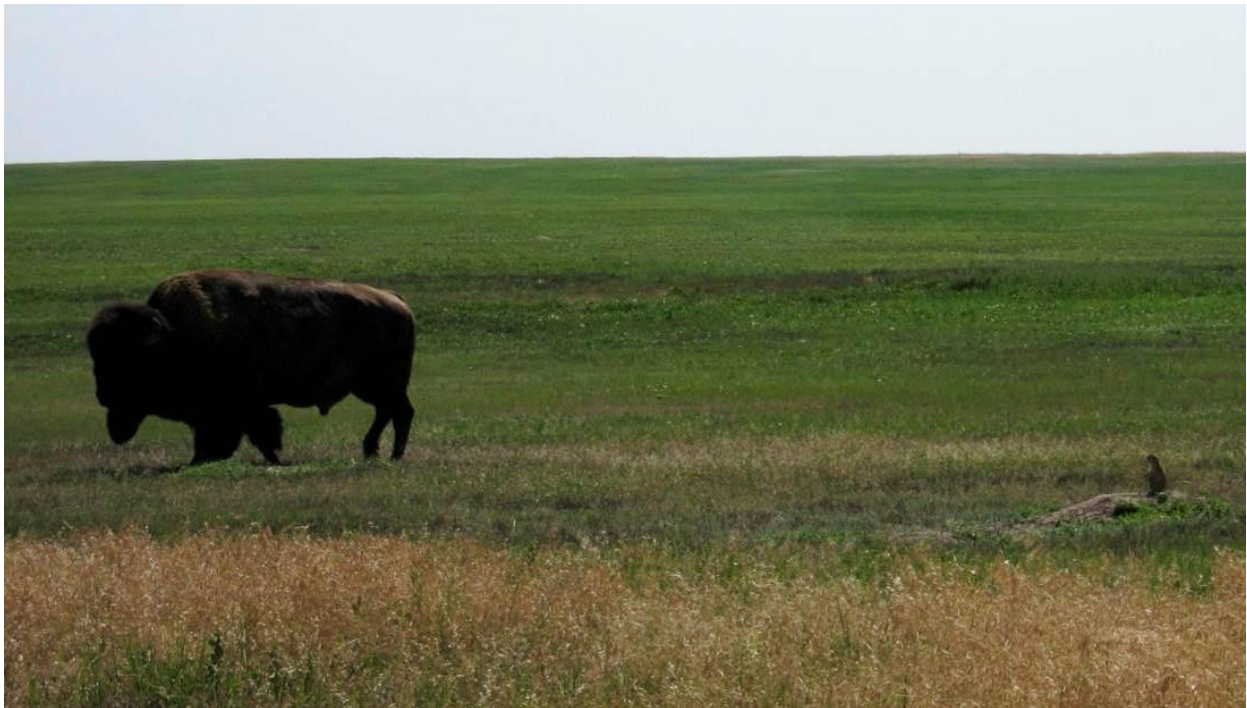


Figure 2-20 : Keystone species (Badlands north unit wilderness area).

From its inception in 1916, the National Park Service has been tasked with what some scholars refer to as a dual mandate: “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (16 U.S.C. 12 3, and 4). In an effort to restore the tattered remnants of mixed-grass prairie to its natural glory, managers of Badlands (“supported by science,” NPS 2011a, “Restoration of Native Animals”) have researched the feasibility of reintroducing native species. After evaluating “the ability of [a] species to prosper under the park’s current conditions; [t]he public opinion of the local community and the nation; [e]conomic impacts to the park and its neighbors; and [e]nvironmental impacts to the local ecosystem” (NPS 2011a)—note that only two of the criteria are ecologically-based; the others are sociocultural—they have condoned the return of bison, bighorn sheep, ferret, and, most recently, swift fox.

Bison were the first to be brought back, in 1963. They proved so successful in their home range that wildlife biologists have had to execute annual round-ups to cull the herd back to 600-800 members (and gather important data on the population’s genetic makeup and overall health), transferring extra animals to the Oglala Sioux Tribe and other Native American Tribes through the Intertribal Bison Cooperative (a group based out of Rapid City that includes 51 member tribes and more than 10,000 animals [Intertribal Bison Cooperative 2005]). Bighorn sheep came a year later, and now more than 100 clamber happily around the clay hills (NPS 2011a). Ferrets fill more of a surprising and precarious position: the prairie-dog dependent predators were so greatly impacted by the widespread extermination of their prey that by 1987, they teetered on the brink of extinction, with only 18 individuals known to science. A successful captive breeding program allowed scientists to reintroduce ferrets to wild prairies such as Badlands and Buffalo Gap; since 1994, they’ve expanded to reach a population size of nearly 300 (though wildlife biologists currently fear that bubonic plague may sweep through prairie dog communities in the area, again decimating the ferrets.) Finally, swift fox! The cat-sized, grey-tan canid with big ears and a bushy black-tipped tail has been back at Badlands for less than a decade, sleeping in its dens during the day and prowling the prairie in search of rabbits, grasshoppers, and berries at night.



Figure 2-21 : Bighorn sheep (Pinnacles area).

I joined a team of wildlife biologists as they set off to monitor the swift fox population early one morning, while a sliver of moon still hovered languidly in the pre-dawn sky. We found three or four individuals—all healthy, happy to be free to wander off to their daily routines—waiting patiently in cage-traps set the night before. But when I joined the same biologists in their quest for black-footed ferrets late one night, all of our tricks—radio telemetry gear, a great big spotlight, several pairs of human eyes straining to see the tell-tale green glow of Mustelid eye-shine from afield—we encountered only cattle, mooing dully from the darkness. After hours of driving and sitting, watching and waiting and listening, we finally had to call it a night, relocate a dirt road, and head back to headquarters. I'd barely figured out where we were—around the corner from the Fossil Exhibit Trail, where the main road slips between ghostly grey-pink hills—when something small and grey slipped into the sweep of the truck's headlights. Swift fox? My heart leaped. Ha! Coyote pup, glancing back over its tail with a trickster's grin. Not a scientific success story, but a wild creature thriving, laughing even, on its own terms. Wild life enough for me.



Figure 2-22 : Night comes to the Badlands (across from the Visitor Center).

There's no wilderness left here...so don't fool yourself...[but] There's still something wild and powerful in the land here, more than some other places, and that's what sustains me.

— Dan O' Brien (quoted in Price 2004, 53)

2.3-4 Interim: Medora to Marmarth (with some dinosaur statues in between)

South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming

On the highways that dissect North Dakota, horizon always beckons.

—Eugene Richards. Photograph caption for Bowden 2008 “The Emptied Prairie”

“Oh, it’ll be fun!” I tried to convince my parents that they should get up at 5:30 a.m. and hike a mile and a half to watch the sun rise over the open grasslands, “it’s a great view.” They had just arrived at Badlands after a long day of traveling and likely wanted nothing more than to sleep in the next morning, but I was eager to show off the place; the prairie was at its freshest and most beautiful at dawn, I felt, and knew the notch high in the badlands wall afforded the most expansive, awe-inspiring scene.

Sigh. They agreed, trusting my insight or enthusiasm or simply because I was their daughter and this would be neither the first nor last time I would drag them off on some adventure or another. (I may already have asked if they’d be interested in driving up to North Dakota and Theodore Roosevelt National Park, perhaps swinging through the tiny town of Faith, South Dakota—home of Sue the T-Rex!—along the way?) I didn’t plan this hike well, though, forgetting (a.) it’s generally dark before dawn; (b.) cold too; (c.) Mom’s not a big fan of heights; and (d.) as soon as I promise we’re perfectly safe, of course that’s when we’ll encounter a rattlesnake. Welcome to Badlands!

Granted, it was a baby rattlesnake, trying to drag off a dead, fly-ridden mouse. (Just what everyone wants to see before breakfast.) And, granted, Dad and I were willing to slow down and navigate the trail carefully, especially the sections that skirt a shallow but steep wash (not much we could do about the part where you have to climb up the ladder; sorry). Most importantly, though, the sun cooperated and put on a good show, first painting the sky with a soft blush, then quietly popping up over the horizon, spilling light across the grassland and onto the hills. “Beautiful!” Mom exclaimed, while Dad happily recorded the whole thing on his new video camera. (Complete with narration: “now, that’s the sun coming up...”)

Thus we began our great northern plains vacation.



Figure 2-23 : Dad (and his camera) on Notch Trail for sunrise.

The Plains are not everyone's first choice for a vacation destination. Though there are a number of attractions—everything from parks and grasslands to petting zoos and pow-wows; Scenic Byways! Heritage festivals! The geographic center of the United States (including Alaska)!—few people plan specifically to see sites in places like the Dakotas. Rather, they have to be enticed off the highway by oddities or curiosities—albino prairie dogs or ubiquitous signs for Wall Drug. They may spend a few hours looking around, then continue on their way to the Black Hills or Yellowstone or home to Chicago, whizzing past mile after mile of flat, windswept prairie.



Figure 2-24 : Town of Cottonwood, SD, located about 7 miles north of I-80.

Even those who do take the time to wander the backroads witness thousands of acres of ranchland laced with tired fences, dotted with haybales, and punctuated only by lonely siloes or the occasional weatherbeaten building. There's a poignant sense "of things ebbing," wrote Charles Bowden for an article published in *National Geographic Magazine* in 2008, "of churches being abandoned, schools shutting down, towns becoming ruins." His words, accompanied by Eugene Richard's haunting photographs, painted a stark picture of rural North Dakota as not just "The Emptied Prairie," but "a giant skeleton of abandoned human desire." (A "giant skeleton of abandoned human desire"! How do you counter that?) While the portrait of a dying heartland surprised and touched readers worldwide, local residents and scholars were already well aware that "out on the land, the population has relentlessly bled away" (Bowden 2008). Sociologists and rural geographers have been discussing the implications of persistent population decline in North Dakota and throughout the Great Plains for decades, noting that waning birth rates, an advancing age structure, and out-migration of youth are symptoms as well as catalysts for further socioeconomic and even cultural decline (Wood 2008; Woods 2005; Cromartie 1998; Fuguitt and Beale 1996; Johnson 1993). As rural communities "struggl[e]...to develop an economic base outside of agriculture" (Johnson and Cromartie 2006, 38)—courting everything from businesses and baby boomers to garbage dumps and prisons—some scholars and residents question "whether any program—local or national, private or public—can save the small plains town" from an

“irreversible decline” and “near-total desertion” (Shortridge 2004; Bowden 2008; and Popper and Popper 1987, respectively; see also Readers’ Comments, National Geographic Magazine Online Forum, Bowden 2008). As with desolate flats farther west, “[d]riving through this landscape alone [can bring] forth an interminable sense of longing and loneliness, and a constant wish to escape from it as quickly as possible (Bunkše 2007b, 226); it equates to Edmunds Bunkše’s “landscape of broken dreams” (2007b, 226).



Figure 2-25 : Abandoned church (somewhere between Montana and South Dakota).

Unique “purple cow” attractions can spell the difference between life and all-out death (Wood 2008). When my parents and I detoured to see Sue and other paleontological specimens temporarily on exhibit in Faith, South Dakota, for example, we ate at a local restaurant, peeked in a local jewelry shop, and, of course, purchased a dinosaur t-shirt that changes color when exposed to sunlight in order to support the local economy. Not every town has a remarkably complete and famous *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton on hand, however, nor would many people go see one. Instead, other communities try to capitalize on their cultural history (former ranch of a famous president, for example), their geographic location (if not at the center of the nation, outside Belle Fourche, at least along the interstate corridor), their natural beauty (found in public and private parks and preserves), and/or the quirky humor of local artists (including everything from Carhenge outside Alliance, Nebraska to the biggest ball of twine in Darwin, Minnesota to a plethora of giant dinosaur statues. The region has to be the world capital of random-dinosaur-statues-in-the-middle-of-a-field.)

While some towns have struggled to remain socioeconomically and demographically relevant, others have “succeeded,” only at the expense of their local identity. Each summer, more than 250,000 tourists and 300 seasonal workers visit Medora, North Dakota, for example—a community that has cycled through booms and busts tied to coal mining as well as cattle ranching and now measures a mere 100 permanent residents, a household income \$10,000 below the national average, and a residential vacancy rate of more than 50%. The tourism bureau claims that visitors come to “one of the premier family entertainment destinations in the country” seeking “a modern ‘Old West’ experience that [they] will never forget” (Medora 2009; U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Indeed, I didn’t forget it. When my parents and I got to Medora—gateway to Theodore Roosevelt National Park—I was eager to see the land that had inspired our 26th president to become a pioneering conservationist. The park itself, with its rolling grasslands and thundering herds of bison, did not disappoint. The town, however, had been planned and polished with such deliberate “Old West” kitsch—strategically-spaced restaurants, shops, lodging, and attractions including an Ice Cream Parlor, Fudge and Ice Cream Depot, Corner Corral Gift Shop, Sacajawea Trading Post, Chuckwagon dinner, and, above all, the “Medora Musical” that nightly sings and dances its way through a romanticized history of the region—that I felt more like a character on a flimsy movie set than a visitor to an authentically thriving community. (Confession: we did enjoy delicious dinners and I bought a cowboy hat. What does that mean?)

More so than Medora, more than Sue, more so than any of the other places we saw as my parents and I circled north then west (Mom insisted on seeing Montana, then slept through County Road 7 while Dad refused to stop to let me take pictures of fence posts), then south (to Devil’s Tower National Monument, where we again woke bleary-eyed before dawn and were rewarded with a badger-sighting and the hollow echoes of elk bugling), and finally east through Rapid City back to Badlands, the place that inspired me most—that kindled my imagination, that glows in my memory—was Marmarth, North Dakota. I have no idea why.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the booming railroad town of Marmarth had two banks, two hotels, a large elementary and high school, and even a theatre and Opera House to serve a population of 1000 people (Garstka 2011). I didn’t know that when we drove past the isolated, weatherbeaten railroad station, much less the newly-restored Mystic Theatre. Every summer, while teams of paleontologists and interested volunteers prowl the famous Hell Creek Formation in search of more late Cretaceous specimens like “Dakota,” a hadrosaur complete with skin impressions, the town celebrates Dino Daze “to promote tourism” (Garstka 2011; Nelson 2009). I didn’t know that when we drove past—what else?—the random dinosaur statue standing on a hill next to Highway 12. I didn’t know that “[t]his small town of 140 people invites you to come and enjoy its beautiful scenery, wildlife, history, dinosaur and fossil digs, and relaxing lifestyle”; I didn’t know that it urges travelers to “stop and see us; you’ll be a stranger only once” (Garstka 2011); I only knew that the afternoon sunlight was shining through the leaves of the cottonwoods, a couple of dogs were lolling happily along one of the dusty side streets, and as we rolled past the modest grocery mart and toward the open badlands, I thought, oh, this town has everything I could ever want, I would like living here, Marmarth!



Figure 2-26 : Mystic Theatre, Marmarth, ND.

Residents of rural communities on the Great Plains cherish and champion their desirable “quality of life” – a healthy natural environment, quiet pace, friendly neighbors, and good schools (Wood 2008; Lu and Paull 2007; Stauber 2001). When the Poppers suggested an inevitable population drain, they quickly learned that “[m]any people felt a possessiveness about their Plains-positively, exuding pride and love, and negatively, resenting outsiders” (Popper and Popper 1993, 24). Twenty years later, North Dakota governor John Hoeven bridled at the idea of an “Emptied Prairie,” firing off a letter to the editor of *National Geographic Magazine* that touted the state’s growing economy (including the nation’s 3rd largest pasta manufacturer) even as it insisted that “small town, rural enterprises reflect [North Dakota’s] spirit and ingenuity” (Hoeven 2008). Readers celebrated other attributes— “a view of a cornfield, a community where everyone nods hello when I pass, air that doesn’t make me wince and water I can drink out of the tap... All the stars I could ever care to look at” (Larsen, Sept 30 2008, posted on blog). “Let it be what it is!,” one exclaimed, as much to his governor as to the author, “a big flat nothing with the most beautiful skies....”

“Debate about the Great Plains has now spilled beyond economic issues,” geographer Pete Shortridge observes (2005, 214):

People have noticed, for example, the uncomplimentary nature of the widely used words ‘treeless’ and ‘semiarid.’ Why define this landscape in terms so negative and so obviously formed by outsiders? Why not stress instead the glories of low humidity, clear-blue skies, and lush grasslands...? The aesthetic of the Great Plains environment is also being rethought. Many long-term residents truly love the region’s open spaces, but have lacked words to counter the outsider’s frequent judgment of them as empty and lonely. New articulations now appear regularly to an enthusiastic audience.

Editors of the *Lincoln Journal Star*, for example, assert that Nebraska has “something increasingly rare and valuable in today’s crowded world — open spaces where a person can look across miles and miles of land without buildings, roads, power lines or fences” (2008). “How about a little love for prairies?” they ask (2007). Bloggers in Kansas, meanwhile, insist that “small towns have a beautiful story” (Kansas Sampler Foundation 19 April 2009) and that there’s “no place like home” (see, for example, Lowry 2011; Toll 2008); painters and photographers strive to “capture the elemental, intolerable beauty [of the high plains] in [their] work” (Lillegraven 2010; see also Forsberg 2009; Patterson 2009). There’s even a website dedicated to documenting and preserving the poignant beauty of North Dakota’s abandoned places: <http://ghostsofnorthdakota.com>.

It includes Marmarth.

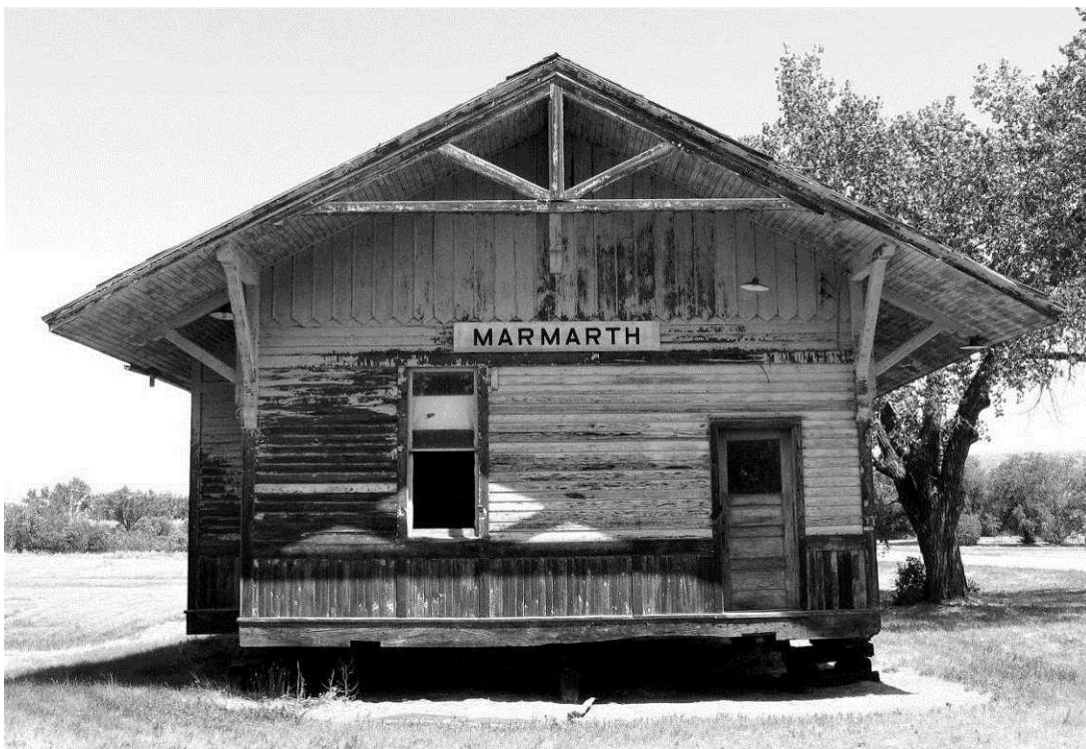


Figure 2-27 : Old train depot, Marmarth.

Nothing blurs the dazzling white, shimmering light of the prairie...nothing disturbs the solitary silence. All noises seem to bound back from that silent, soft sea of grass over which rests an unexplainable, passive sadness.

—Alexandra Grippenberg. 1954. *A Half Year in the New World* (Retzinger 1998, 223)

When Senators Chuck Hagel (R-Nebraska) and Byron Dorgan (D-North Dakota) sponsored the “New Homestead Economic Opportunity Act”—a “bill to reward the hard work and risk of individuals who choose to live in and help preserve America’s small, rural towns” through a mix of tax credits, loan forgiveness, and investment opportunities (S. 1860)—in 2002, “the word ‘homestead’ somehow caught the imagination of the [Great Plains] region” (Shortridge 2004), but did not inspire a flood of eager 21st century settlers. It’s still nice to think, as did original homesteaders, that “the unique environment of the Central Plains...[is] fertile and potentially rewarding, but also harsh enough to test people’s character. Weak-willed settlers would leave the region. Those who stayed would be chastened and gain a clear-eyed, pragmatic approach to life” (Shortridge 2005, 207), but in practice, Bowden observes (2008), “[w]hat happens is that some people cash in on their property and move someplace warmer and easier. The rest grow old and die.” It’s nice to rhapsodize, as does Kathleen Norris (1993, 128), that “[t]he severe climate of the Dakotas forces us to see that no one can control this land. The largeness of land and sky is humbling, putting mankind in proper perspective;” but, in truth, daily humbling can exhaust people, erode away at the psyche. Although high plains people may live right in the unforgivingly extreme center of a continent, not “the dusty edge of the world,” they, like the Anasazi people to whom Craig Childs refers (2006, 221), are “honorable people no doubt, but bound to a desperate landscape.”

A desperate landscape.

It’s beautiful. It’s not for everyone.

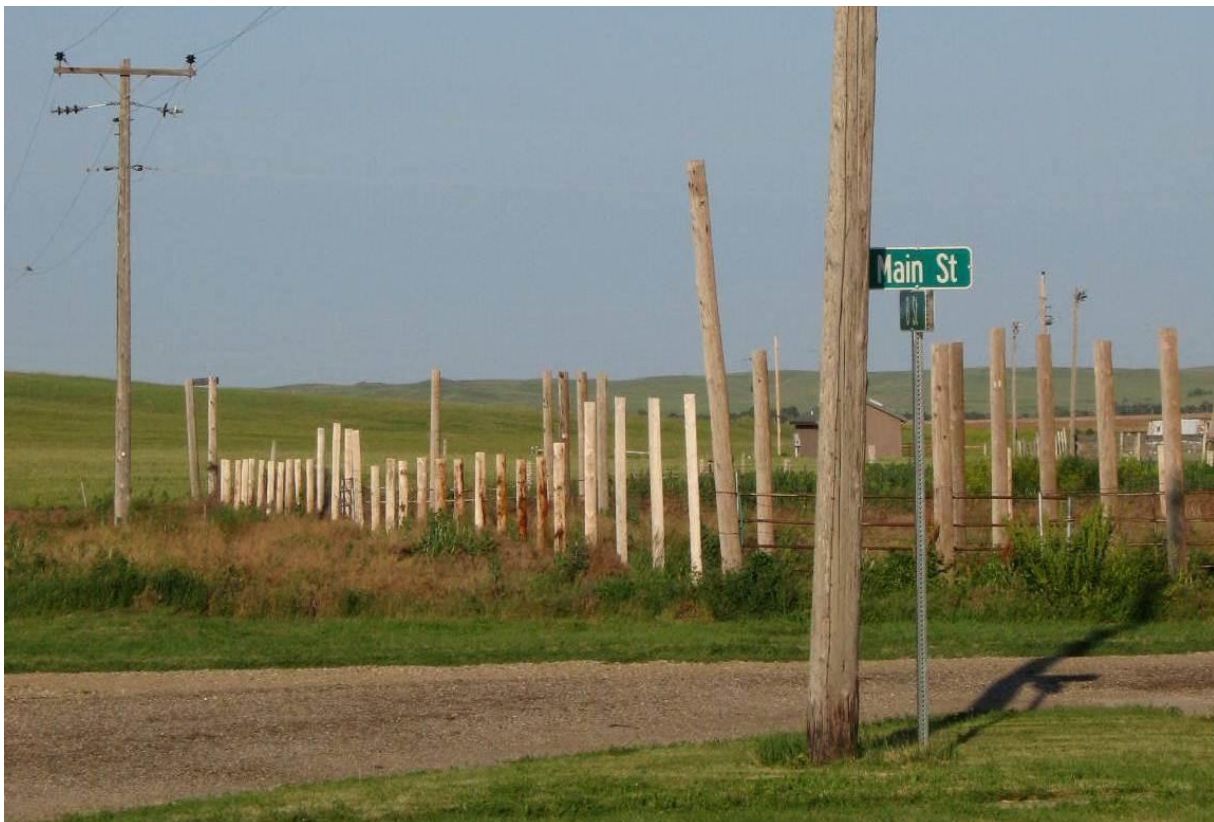


Figure 2-28 : “Main St.,” Cottonwood. Population: 6. Median age: 66.

As communities seek to stimulate socioeconomic growth—to lure tourists off the highway and into local shops and restaurants, they have to beware that travel can open people up to new places, new perspectives, or it may reinforce stereotypes. After the tourism bureau for the state of Kansas unfurled its new slogan, “Kansas, As Big As You Think” in 2005, reactions ranged from “People will think, ‘It’s probably as flat and brown as I think, too,’ or ‘It’s as boring as I think,’ or... ‘It’s probably as backward as I think’” (Online forum, *Lawrence Journal-World*, 2005) to “I like the new slogan. It’s a hip kind of relativity. Each person gets to decide how big Kansas is to him or her” (Benedict 2011). When the company Kansas, Inc. conducted post-slogan surveys in the attempt to determine contributions of the “Kansas Image” to the statewide economic development, they found that people had mostly negative reactions (2007). Their conclusion? : “While traditional stereotypes and clichés may never change, we must find a way to embrace who and what we are, and use that to our advantage. We must realize that we can change certain parts of our image, and certain parts we cannot – we are what we are” (Kansas, Inc. 2007, 34) (A reporter for the travel magazine *Holiday*, quoted in Shortridge 2005, 211, declared Kansas as “82,158 square miles of flat and cheerless prairie, producing little except wheat and tedium.”)

We are what we are. Wu-wei. Wheat.

North Dakota is Legendary, Oklahoma just OK. Wyoming is Forever West, Montana claims Big Sky Country, South Dakota has *Great Faces. Great Places*, and in Nebraska, the Possibilities...Endless. Great Plains states are full of unexplored possibilities, agrees geophilosopher Edmunds Bunkše (2007, 9), but they’re not tourist destinations; rather, prairies and plains “favour *travellers*” (emphasis added). Sacajawea Trading Posts (and dinosaur statues, for that matter) may attract a certain kind of person, but can they really change people’s perceptions of a region? No, according to Bunkše (2007, 9):

A change in the perception of rural landscapes...de-emphasizing purely visual aspects of landscapes in favour of perceiving them through all the senses and with the mind. In short, emphasizing multisensory qualities. That is exactly what rural landscapes offer...What feeling of space is experienced in the trilling of skylarks over tilled fields in May? How does a path of cold clay feel to bare feet at sunrise?

The vicious cycle, this: try to convince people to experience prairies and plains so that they can see and hear and feel them firsthand, but hope that when they do so, they experience more than wheat and tedium. Hope they see more than highways and singing cowboys. Hope they don’t feel hot and tired and bored. Hope that they’re there with an open mind, that they’re willing to do whatever their daughter or their guidebook suggests. Hope they take the time to “feel the flat, gentle terrain swell into hills and valleys,” as a brochure for the Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway urges (Federal Highway Administration, Nebraska Department of Roads, and Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism); hope they “Turn down the radio. Notice the shapes in the clouds. Suddenly...notice the spectacular corona of light as the sun tucks itself under the horizon...[hope they] relax. Luxuriate in the scenic wonders of the Sandhills. Tune in to the birds, the wind, the rivers: the symphony of the plains.

Above all, hope they “Take the Journey, a 272-mile stretch of beauty,” as the brochure concludes, and want to “Return every year.”

Mom liked the haybales; Dad liked the bison staring us down from the middle of the road at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, its breath steaming in the cool morning air. (Also the calves at Custer State Park, Mom insists, and the hike around the base of Devil's Tower, and a phenomenal steak dinner for \$7.95 in a small town near Jewel Cave...) We all enjoyed the thunderstorms and the ice cream. But would they have visited South Dakota if I hadn't been at Badlands? Would I have driven to North Dakota if they hadn't come? What convinces a person to travel?

"Sometimes...geographers go on 'unstructured' field trips, just to see what's out there, with no prior questions in mind," writes Yi-Fu Tuan in the article *Life as a Field Trip* (2004, 42). "An undertaking of this sort is believed to stimulate the imagination, leading one to ideas inspired by objects in the field rather than by words in a book," he explains, before asking, "Does it? Each geographer will no doubt want to give his or her own answer. Mine is no. I cannot say that casual outings have made me wiser, or even much more knowledgeable."

But, dear Dr. Tuan, how would I have known of Medora, of Marmarth, if I hadn't gone? How would Mom have seen Montana (sort of) and Dad seen Sue if they hadn't been willing to travel, at random, without any idea what they'd find in the next field? Go on a field trip!, I want to write in a guidebook, "to real fields! To prairies, to parks, to grasslands! Go without prior questions, especially without preconceptions. Simply wake at dawn, preferably while grumbles of thunder linger overhead or animals are stirring; walk—walk! Move! Breathe!, don't just drive—down the road or up to the overlook or the fencepost or the abandoned railroad depot or off into the middle of a big empty field; and open yourself to whatever surprises the world has to offer.

(Watch out for rattlesnakes.)

2.4 Interpretation and Inspiration

Badlands National Park, South Dakota

As long as people – local residents and visitors, scientists and artists, Park Rangers and you as a Junior Ranger – enjoy Badlands, they will help protect this special place. Then it will be here for you and all of your family and friends to come back to and enjoy again.

—“Being a Junior Ranger,” *Badlands Junior Ranger Guidebook* (Badlands NP 2008, 12)

My official title at Badlands was “Junior Ranger Ambassador.” Instead of interacting with visitors firsthand, answering questions and giving talks, I worked behind the scenes to prepare an activity booklet for children. Most National Park Service units have Junior Ranger programs, in which younger visitors complete tasks—usually an assortment of drawing, writing, crossword puzzles, word searches, even treasure hunts—designed to help them learn more about the park. “Explore. Learn. Protect,” reads the logo, assuming that people’s experience naturally progresses from curiosity to increased knowledge and, ultimately, to compassion. The Junior Ranger program is a way to spark interest and instill values of conservation, if not simply convince families to linger longer, to give each park a bit more time to work its magic.

That is the standard mantra of “Interpretation,” defined by the National Park Service as “the process of providing each visitor an opportunity to personally connect with a place....The goal of all interpretive service is to increase each visitor’s enjoyment and understanding of the parks, and to allow visitors to care about the parks on their own terms” (NPS website, 2011). The Park Service Interpretive Development Program (motto: “Aiming for the High Ground”)—now a sophisticated system of training and development complete with curricula, national standards, certifications, and, most belovedly, an “interpretive equation” ($KA + KR + AT = IO$)—“encourages the stewardship of park resources by facilitating meaningful, memorable visitor experiences...based on the philosophy that people will *care for* what they first *care about*” (NPS IDP 2011).

How do you make a person care about a place? Freeman Tilden, the author of *Interpreting Our Heritage* and considered by many to be the father of interpretation, suggests that interpretation specialists use “original objects” (i.e., rocks, flowers, homesteads, hawks), “firsthand experience” (i.e., talks, walks, wind, and that great blue sky), and “illustrative media” (newsletters, brochures, websites, and, yes, activity booklets) to “reveal...to such visitors as desire the service, something of the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive” (1957, 33 and 25). Similarly, scholars highlight the power of images to “bring about deep emotional feeling...and to activate moral sentiments of care” (Benediktsson 2007, 213; see also Sheppard 1995, 365: “photographs maximize the visual beauty of the [Plains]...thereby demonstrating that the Plains is a place whose Nature is worth saving”) and call for vivid, evocative descriptions that stir the heart, nourish the mind, and facilitate both understanding and appreciation (paraphrased from Lewis 1985). Proponents of

the “aesthetic experience,” meanwhile, insist that heightened awareness of both “intellectual and affective capacities engage an individual to understand, appreciate, and ultimately act upon the environment in a purposeful way” (Gobster 1999, 61; see also Budd 1998, Carlson 2010). Even conservationists call for writers and other artists to help scientists “think deeply about how we can live wisely and gratefully on the land” (Swanson *et al.*, 500).

Experience! Knowledge! Connection! Caring?

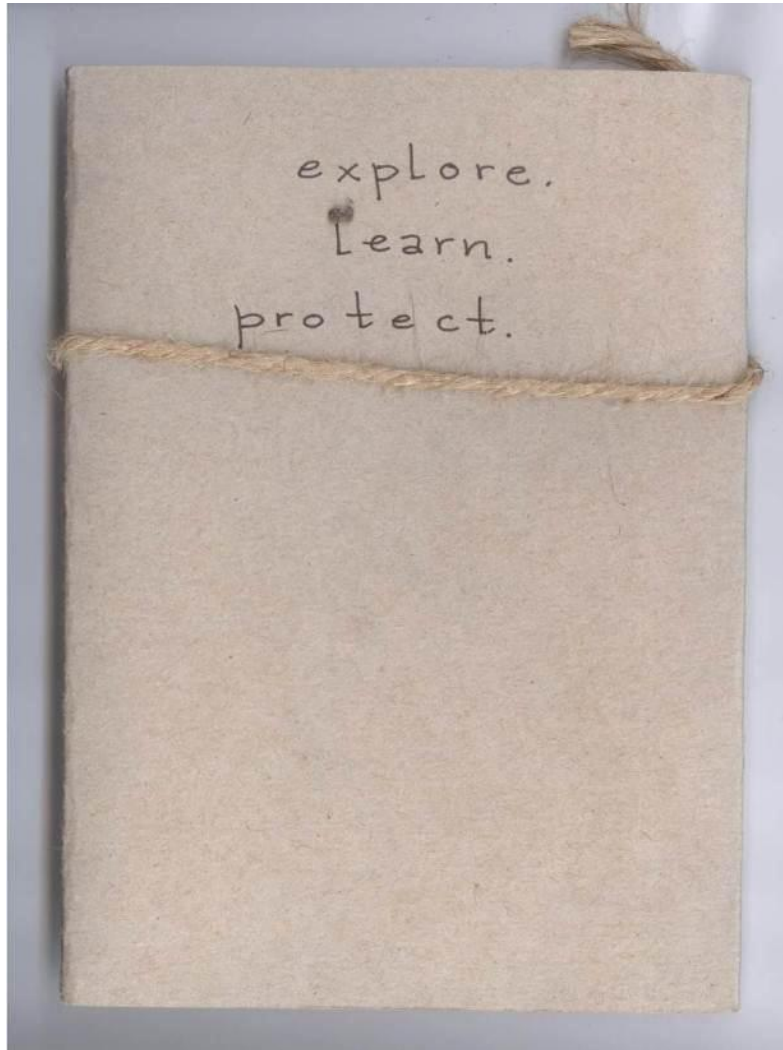


Figure 2-29 : Badlands Nature Journal, back cover.

Two important things to keep in mind. First, referring back to Tilden (1957, 25), the process of interpretation can only inspire “such visitors as desire the service.” On the occasions when I led a gaggle of aspiring Junior Rangers on a naturalist-style expedition out into the prairie, complete with blank journals, writing/coloring utensils, and plenty of rocks, cacti, grass, butterflies, birds, and ungulate tracks to learn and care about, some of the participants were over-enthusiastic while others were dragged kicking and screaming by their road-weary parents. The disgruntled ones probably didn’t learn much, and might forever think of Badlands as a hot, dusty, horrid place.

Moreover, for all of the families that agreed to go on the walk, or just stop by the Visitor Center to watch the movie and play with the exhibits, many more missed out on the “illustrative media” and ranger-enhanced “firsthand experience,” preferring to slip through with just the official map and maybe a glance at the newsletter.

This leads to the second point. As Godlovitch admits (1998, 118), “[t]he fact is we perceive differences amongst things of a kind and have preferences whether we like it or not.” Some Junior Rangers wanted to stay out and wander empty creek beds all morning; others wanted to go back immediately. Some kids thought the prairie was full of fun things to draw; others saw it as boring, barren, empty of any beauty or delights. Some parents perceived beauty in the rugged hills and oceans of grass while others wanted to hurry on to the monumental scenery of Mount Rushmore and Yellowstone.

Not only do people see different details in a landscape, geographer D. W. Meinig notes (1979, p 33-34), but people find different meaning, different value. While perceptions and preferences “are informed by and change with experience” (Godlovitch 1998, 115)—the role of the interpreter is, after all, to enhance the immediate experience with “association, memory, and knowledge” (Tuan 1989, 234)—people may not, in the end, find more meaning much less value in a place after reading a book, seeing a picture, stopping at an overlook, or going on a hike.

And that’s okay. “[T]he tourist,” Bunkše reminds us (1987, 7), “does not expect to be challenged with transformation of the self nor to induce transformation of the culture back home.” Philosophers who make judgments and issue moral imperatives—flinging out shoulds, oughts, and musts in the attempt to “bring our aesthetic appreciation of environments, both natural and human, in line with our environmental and moral responsibilities to maintain ecological health” (Carlson 2010; see, for example, Carlson 1979, Gobster 1999, Benediktsson 2007, and Saito 1984)—can easily alienate audiences and/or propagate negative stereotypes. (See R. Fudge, for example, who accuses people of “mistreating the unscenic” and being simply unable to see scientific beauty (2001, 279), then goes on to abuse the prairie as “boring” (2001, 276) and equate it with rotting elk carcasses and insects (282); and Yuriko Saito (1998), who cites descriptions of the plains as “tedious” and “scenically challenged,” even while he suggests that people who are not open to the aesthetics of unscenic nature are selfish and close-minded.) “Does it make sense,” Marcia Eaton asks (1998, 149), “to say to someone, “This is the way you ought to experience nature?”

The key word in Interpretation, then, is “opportunity”—providing visitors the *opportunity* to develop emotional and intellectual connections. Instead of insisting that people ought to or will experience nature in a certain way, it’s a suggestion that people *can* see places in a new light. Doing so need not take months, or miles. “For a relationship with landscape to be lasting,” writes Barry Lopez (1986, 362),

it must be reciprocal. At the level at which the land supplies our food, this is not difficult to comprehend...At the level at which landscape seems beautiful or frightening to us and leaves us affected, or at the level at which it furnishes us with the metaphors and symbols with which we pry into mystery, the nature of reciprocity is harder to define. In approaching the land with an attitude of obligation, willing to observe courtesies difficult to articulate – perhaps only a gesture of the hands – one establishes a regard from which dignity can emerge.

True to the letter I'd written my grandmother in the very first week, I didn't stray widely that summer. I never do. I am perfectly happy to spend hours each day drifting back and forth down the road and on weekends roam more widely, more deeply, but I've never liked the idea of getting in my car and driving to a trailhead or making plans to go fossil-hunting or animal-watching with someone. Maybe it's that I hate driving, or making plans in general—so much fuss!—but really it's that doing so is a form of separation as well as confinement, a trammeling of curiosity and wonder. I need to feel free to dash out the moment I feel like it, and return whenever it's dark or my legs or tired or it's just time to return. I need to feel free to go as far as I like, wherever I like, not out and back on a designated route at a designated time. I need to feel like I am learning my backyard, not on an expedition to some special foreign place. For me, walking is not recreation, re-creation, mere release from the pressures of daily life, renewal of spirit, but rather creation, life itself. For me, the Badlands—the grasslands—were only alive when I was wandering around, rarely more than a mile from home.

I quickly found that I could step out my front door, stroll along a back road past the maintenance yard and horse barn, and, within a matter of minutes, be standing somewhere between the open expanse of grassland and the even bigger expanse of the prairie sky. That was my route if I was in the mood for contemplation (i.e. something fairly flat, fairly quiet); if I felt like cool shade or the scent of pines (and didn't mind traffic and a bit of a hill), I could huff halfway up the badlands wall, following the main park road up to where the Cliff Shelf Trail winds through a grove of junipers nestled in a geologic slum Sunrise sunset, morning or evening, walking walking out or up, up or out, breathe. Beautiful.



Figure 2-30 : Good evening, park horses.

I can count on my hands the number of times I went hiking anywhere else, though, much less with other people. Early in the season, a resource technician and I explored Castle Trail; we had a grand time trying to clamber up to and around grassland “islands”—clods of prairie held together by plants’ strong, deep roots, isolated by deep erosion of the clay soil—until we noticed that a thunderstorm was approaching much more quickly than anticipated. (Lesson: it’s hard to judge motion against an infinite horizon.) Toward the end of the summer, I poked around the Old Northeast Road area with a volunteer who wanted to show me a curious geologic formation he’d found years earlier; we ended up crawling through the clay on hands and knees, looking for scraps of bone. (Lesson: wonders everywhere, once you figure out what you want to look for.) Somewhere in the middle, I headed out to nearby Buffalo Gap National Grassland with my supervisor; we wanted to rockhound in an area known for its agates, but the wind was howling, filling our teeth and ears and eyelashes with grit and making it hard to stand up much less look for rocks. (Lesson: sun, dirt, wind. That is all that matters.)

I never backpacked through the Sage Creek Wilderness; I don’t know what it’s like to camp out with bison snorting and stamping nearby. I have a feeling that would have been an expansive experience. I never spent time in the Stronghold Unit of the park; I don’t know much about it, except that it’s managed by the Oglala Sioux in a unique agreement with the NPS. I have a feeling I neglected an important cultural dimension. I never looked through a telescope at the special Night Sky Program. I never spent an autumn at Badlands, nor winter, nor spring, never saw the hills draped with snow or ravines laced with ice, never rejoiced for the return of the birds. I, I, I. Every morning or evening I hiked up that hill hoping to see the bobcat that lurked in the brush. I never did.

Why didn’t I explore more widely, deeply, richly, how? So many places, so much space, too little time, what have I lost?

I wish I had spent more than a season at Badlands. I wish I could have stayed for winter, wish I could have stayed until I saw the bobcat. I wish I had explored more widely, deeply, wish I had learned the names of more birds. I can't write as passionately, as knowledgably about the mixedgrass prairie of South Dakota; I fear I did not truly live there, was it in my heart? "You must not be in the prairie, but the prairie must be in you," William A. Quayle warns (via Least Heat-Moon 1991, 93), "That alone will do as qualification for biographer of the prairie...He who tells the prairie mystery must wear the prairie in his heart."



Figure 2-31 : A waxing moon rises at a pow-wow on the Pine Ridge Reservation; keep dancing into the darkness.

“Dear Granny,” I wrote at the end of the season, Junior Ranger Guidebook finished, time to move on to a new place,

“I’ve accumulated a stack of half-written letters that I haven’t quite been able to finish and send. I’ll start to describe weather and wildflowers and windstorms and deer-sightings, with the occasional fossil hunt, rodeo, Powwow, swift-fox survey, etc but then drift off into dissatisfaction at my inability to remember and convey the full experience. It doesn’t matter, because all I really want to write about, to think about, to live, is dawn, dawn, dawn, the nuances of each fresh quiet wild new day (today: breezy, slightly humid with the scent of pending rain, clouds skittering by, lone mule deer with whom to share the scene...) That is all that matters. I am happy here.”

Love,

t



Figure 2-32 : Farewell, Badlands.

Chapter 3 - Tallgrass

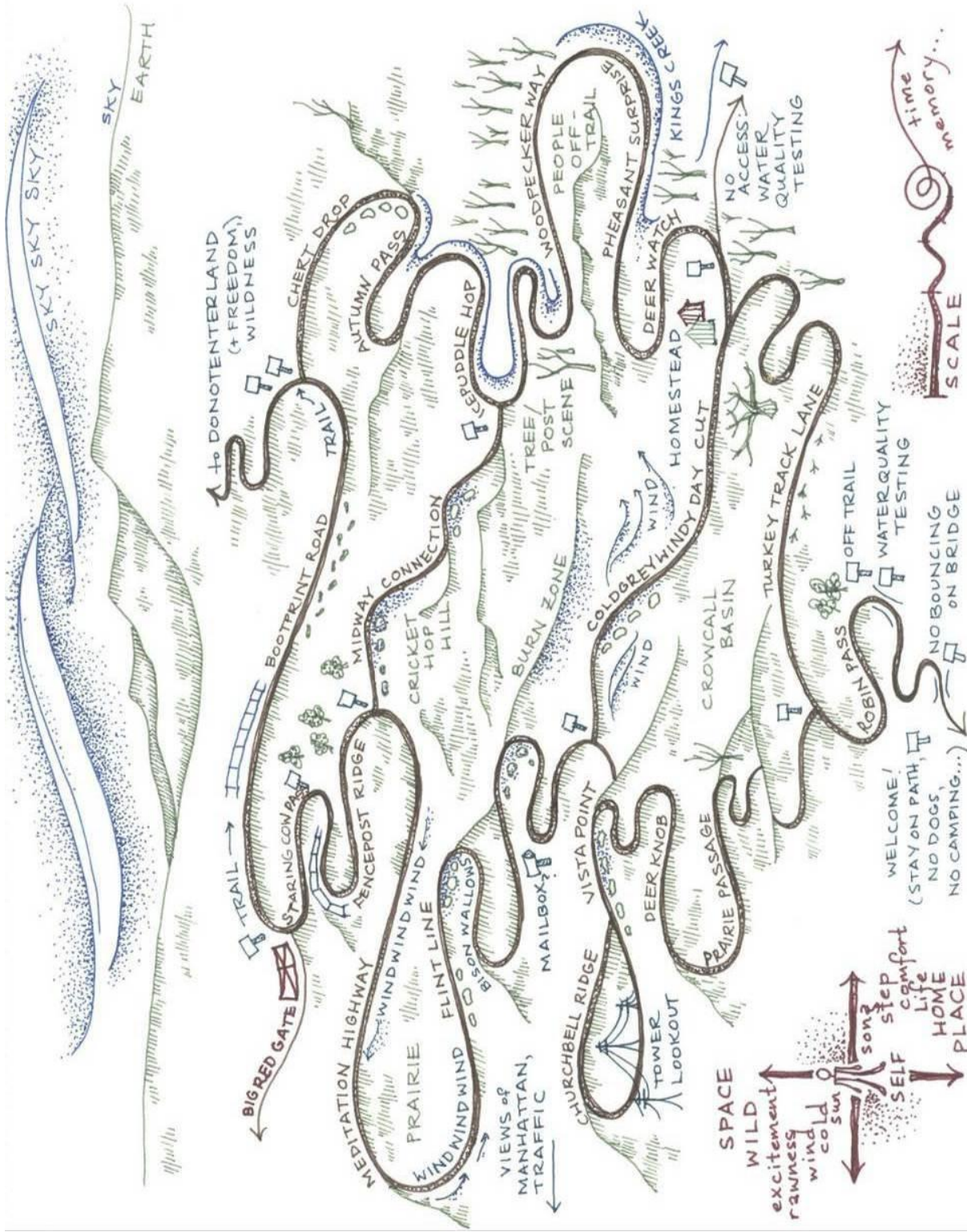


Figure 3-1 : Map, Konza Prairie Preserve, Kansas.

3.1 Experiment and Experience, Or, How I Tried to Like a Prairie

Konza Prairie Preserve, Kansas

[T]he air had quite lost that lightness, that dry aromatic odour. The moisture of plowed land, the heaviness of labour and growth and grain-bearing, utterly destroyed it; one could breathe only on the bright edges of the world, on the great grass plains or the sage-brush desert.

—Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927, 273)

You cannot make yourself love a place. You can go again and again with different expectations, for different reasons, in different seasons, but you can't make yourself love a place. You can learn the names of the plants, the colors of the sky, make friends with the deer and the wind, but you can't make yourself love a place. You can rationalize and rhapsodize, open your mind and narrow your field of vision, sit and watch, walk and think, think and try through rain snow sunrise sunset, but no. Know you cannot make yourself love a place.

When I moved to Manhattan, Kansas late one summer, I was not dreading the rumored “all-pervading flatness, moral, cultural, social, topographical, political” (Stephen Darst 1974, quoted in Shortridge 2005, 211). Rather, I was eager for *Kansas!* The Heartland! Wide-Open America! As Big As I Thought! I thought it would be big. And beautiful. *Ad astra, per prairie!*

I was wrong. (*Aspera.*) Any self-respecting geographer should always remain conscious of scale, conscientious about place, and have the flat-out common sense to realize that the abstract political and cultural concept of something called “Kansas” is very different than the all-too-real accumulation of sidewalks and streetlamps, apartment complexes and housing developments, bar district, Best Buy, and, of course, Super Wal-Mart that make up the micropolis of the specific, real world Manhattan, Kansas. (I am not a city person.)

Right away, I felt lost, trapped, suffocated—how was I supposed to *think*, with all of the noise; how was I supposed to *sleep*, with all of the light; how was I supposed to *breathe*, so many people, so many cars, (so much humidity), where was the sky?

I must have looked like a deer caught in a trap, for other people picked up on my anxiety and suggested I should go visit Konza Prairie Preserve, just down the road. Prairie? Preserve? I thought. And the thought made me happy. So one beautiful day, mid-November, sky an Indian-summer blue, grass a rich autumn gold, I made the short drive out to Konza, eagerly anticipating a wide open horizon, space (*space!*) to stretch the legs, the mind, to breathe.

Instead, I found a lined, captured, used, abused, tired little square of prairie lost under a big blue sky.



Figure 3-2 : Fencepost, barbed wire, and a blue blue sky (Konza Prairie Preserve).

Konza is an 8600-acre remnant of tallgrass prairie nestled in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Having proved unfit for agricultural development (even plows made of steel can't cultivate ridges of stone), it now serves as a Biological Research Station jointly managed by Kansas State University and The Nature Conservancy. Though intended to promote understanding and appreciation of grasslands, the Preserve is quite clearly and unabashedly not a park or pleasuring ground. School groups and visitors may attend programs at the educational center and/or hike the facility's three recreational trails, but the site is at heart an object of science—an outdoor laboratory in which botanists and biologists, climatologists and geomorphologists can conduct carefully-controlled experiments on the flora, the fauna, the rain and fire and grazing that make up a tallgrass ecosystem.

To facilitate this research, managers have systematically parceled the prairie into tracts and monitor usage by means of gates, permits, and strict regulations that say what grasses may grow, where bison may graze, and how people may interact with the place. Even the recreational trails are neatly mapped and marked to tell visitors where to go and what to look at: *Go here*, says the path. *Do not go here*, says the fence. "*No bouncing on bridge*," says the sign.



Figure 3-3 : Konza Prairie Trails.



Figures 3-4 a-c : Signs at Konza.

I'm not an avid bridge-bouncer; nor am I a fence-hopper. I have ambivalent opinions of paths, but dutifully obey them when they're there. I'm sometimes a scientist, sometimes an artist, always a walker. A prairie-walker, a plains person.

But I didn't want to walk at Konza.

Sunday morning, months after I'd first visited the Preserve, I was sitting in my little room in town, contemplating what to do with a whole beautiful day yawning ahead of me, empty empty, and suddenly remembered Konza. Oh, Konza. Perhaps I ought to give the place another chance?

The drive was longer and browner than I'd remembered; the light brighter, colder, sharper. *Frost*, I noted as I stepped onto the trail, trying to focus on simple pleasures, *Frost. Frost; grass; sun*. Then I came up over the hill and realized, *Sky*.



Figure 3-5 : Rocks, grass, clouds, and of course, sky.

Sky. Could it be? Openness, freedom, beautiful blue infinity? The air was singing with birdcalls and churchbells; the earth was laughing with ripples of wind; the sun – oh that sun! — was beaming brilliantly down, down on woodpeckers and trees and grasses and me, beaming brilliantly back. Konza!

Though the next Sunday dawned cold—really, really cold; windy, too, and grey—I still packed up my boots, my camera, my hopes and drove out to the trailhead. My enthusiasm paled slightly when I realized I had forgotten the law of the Wild (“Carry Kleenex,” according to Annie Dillard [1999, 60]), but I wasn’t about to let a runny nose sabotage Mission: Love Konza. I wrapped a scarf around my face and trudged off, glasses fogging with my breath.

Not long after I crossed the access bridge—before I even made it away from the wood-lined creek and up to the actual prairie, really—my fingers had numbed and mind had frozen. Frozen solid, ceased to function, formed a cold hard lump in my skull. Crows stared at me from the fields, silent. I stared back, silent. *Forget it!* I decided, *Retreat!* Go home, curl up and cradle a warm mug of hot cocoa, curse the Kansas wind, curse Konza.

Before I could reverse my angry trudge, though, I happened to glance up. There they were—deer—four of them, five?—standing halfway up the big hill, so calm and solid under the big watercolor sky. Time paused. Then more deer—four of them, three?—popped out of the tall grass next to me and everything came back to life. Deer! Deer everywhere! All around me, living, breathing, not complaining about the cold, just happy to be out there, out anywhere, Konza.

Well, I thought, why not go a little farther, at least to the top of the hill?

Nod to the deer, the crows; feel cold, silent, free.



Figure 3-6 : Come!, the deer beckon, At least to the top of the hill. Rick Bass (2009, 77-78): “[The deer] teach us new things about the landscape. They lead us into corners and crevices where we would never otherwise go, and teach us to notice, with senses inflamed, things we might never otherwise pay attention to – the direction of a stirring of breeze, the phase of the moon, a bent blade of grass, a faint odor, a funny feeling of being observed – and because of deer, we notice these things with an intensity that is both feral and comfortable.”

Perhaps, I began to wonder, I *can* learn to love Konza, can *learn* to love Konza?

In order to “cultivate geophilic values”—to “heighten awareness, bring fresh insight,” and “emotionally connect with a landscape”—according to Paul Faulstich (1998, 87-88), I need simply explore, symbolize, and take pleasure in the land. As Yi-Fu Tuan has famously postulated (1977, 6), “[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we get to know it better and endow it with value.” It’s possible to “extend the aesthetic experience,” he continues in another essay (1989, 234), “through association, memory, and knowledge.”

Explore, symbolize, take pleasure. Form associations, cherish memories, cultivate knowledge. Experience + Knowledge = Value. Eventually, according to experts, if I kept going to Konza, kept trying, I would no longer think of the place as just a Preserve, but rather an amalgamation of scents, colors, feels—no longer a Biological Research Station, but an accumulation of memories, moments, lovely little experiences.

Konza! I shall walk the paths each Sunday morning, I decided, wind or rain, skirting pastures and finding vantage points. I shall commune with the flint and *Andropogon* and meadowlarks. I shall learn about it, shall photograph it, map it, will derive great pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction from this parcel of prairie.

It worked at first.

Memory: the last week in January, a rustle in the grass inspired me to take a step, maybe two, off the path, and I scared a *quail* up! Then *another*! Then a *dozen*! My heart fluttered along with their wings as they flapped and squawked their way into the sky. (“[T]he bird in flight...constrain[s] the observer’s appreciation to the moment—catch as catch can...” [Rolston 1987, 188]).

Association: the first week in February, a slight warmth to the air, mist in the fields, horsetails in the sky, footsteps soft on the rich, dark earth. Forget the telephone poles, ugh, and the radio tower; let the raucous caws of the crows drown out the airplane; give up the desire to take photographs—to frame images and steal memories—and instead settle into a sense of peace. Warm, sunny, fresh-air peace; fresh-air, big sky peace.



Figure 3-7 : Sense a theme yet? Sky sky sky.

Oh. But knowledge. Reality. Mid-February, I went looking for inspiration, beauty, happiness, and found a pale, pale sky, weak, weary, barely a breeze stirring the emptiness. Turkey tracks. Deer. No magic. Even the frost seemed heavy, dull, lacked its crystalline sparkle.

Hey, prairie? I asked, Hey sky, hey grass—amaze me! Give me space to stretch my legs, my mind, to breathe! Breathe.

The prairie was silent.



Figure 3-8 : Grey winter day.

Crunch crunch crunch crunch, crunch crunch crunch crunch, I walked. Walked the same three paths, over and over and over again, repeatedly dulling any intimation of fresh adventure. Rather than adding to my appreciation of the place, each lap detracted from the excitement; each mile dulled the novelty. There was no way to engage in the place; I just followed the path, going where it told me to go, seeing what it told me to see. There was no choice. Konza. A tired, old landscape; a tired, bored mindscape. Cold and grey.

Memory: mid-February, out on the farthest extent of the longest loop, limping in pain, “ouch” with every step. I was wearing new socks, which had scootched down and left my skin exposed to the hard back of my boots. Didn’t stop to fix the socks, to stop my heels from bleeding; it was all I had that felt real, that felt raw, that felt at all.

I didn’t dare leave much out. I wanted to bear witness to the facts...

There’s no cleverness to be found here, only rawness

— Rick Bass, *Book of Yaak* (1996, 188)

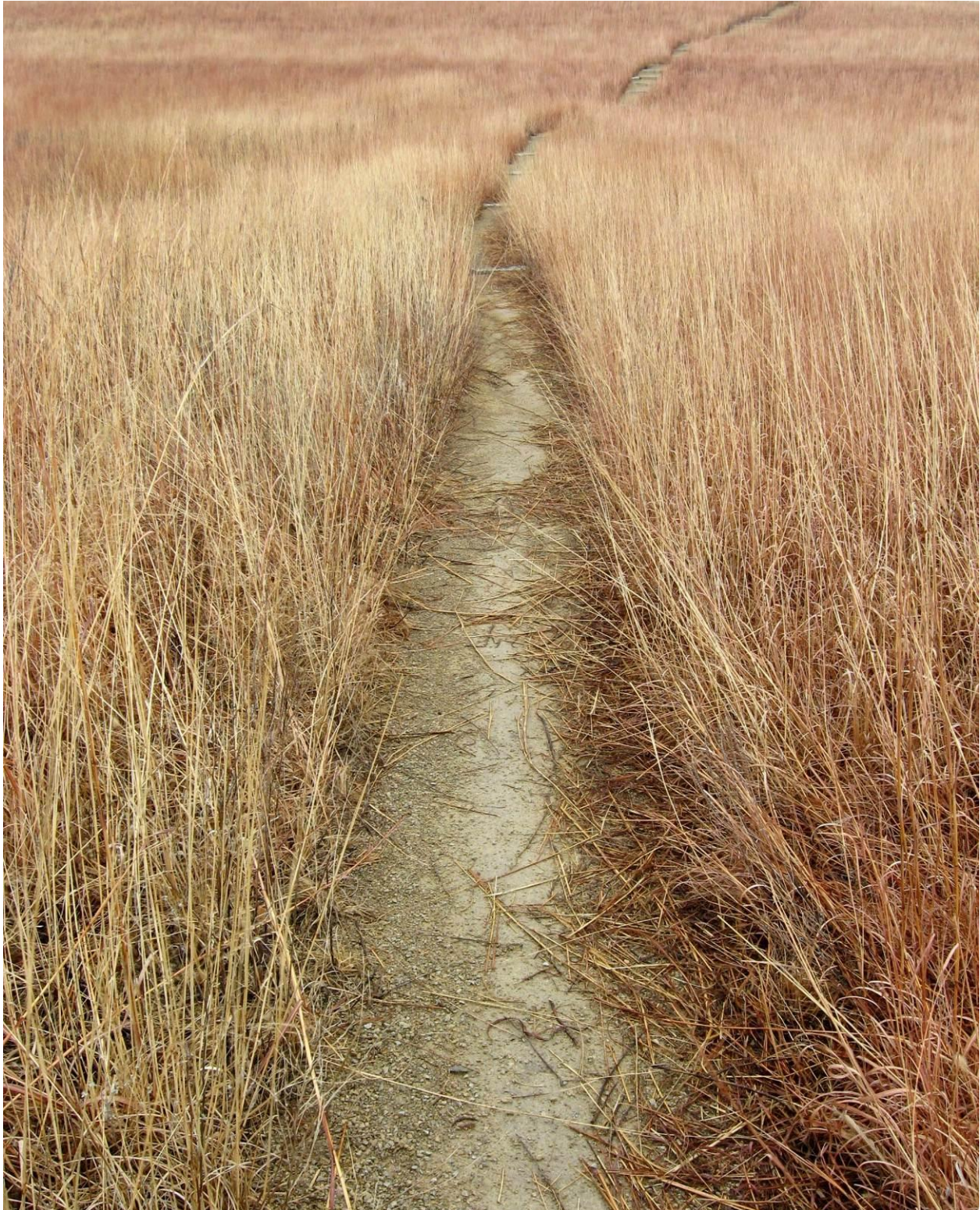


Figure 3-9 : Trail through the tallgrass.

Scholars and rangers, theorists and activists want to believe that people will fall in love with a place if they simply see it, understand it: the more you learn, the more you'll appreciate the complex relationships between climate, soil, creeks, grass, insects, birds, grazers, fire, drought, fewer trees and more people; the longer you spend, the better you'll attune to the dramatic moments, the subtle rhythms. "Come to the Flint Hills!" brochures exclaim with confidence (Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve), "experience the vast prairie landscape"! "The region's sweeping horizons enchant visitors!" "Careful scrutiny reveals the special beauty, wonder, and complexity of the prairie"! "Take all the time you need" (Sandhills Journey Scenic Byway 2010).

Journalist Rex Funk agrees (1996), urging people to "take time and get closer" to discover the character and quality of open spaces. He even provides tips to help people develop the skills, perspectives, and attitudes necessary for appreciation: focus on the scale, he suggests; remain mindful of your tempo; meditate on the place's processes and cycles, themes of continuity and change; and, yes, note the formal design qualities in the landscape—color, texture, pattern, line, form, movement, contrast, light.

Sounds lovely, no? But it doesn't work like that.

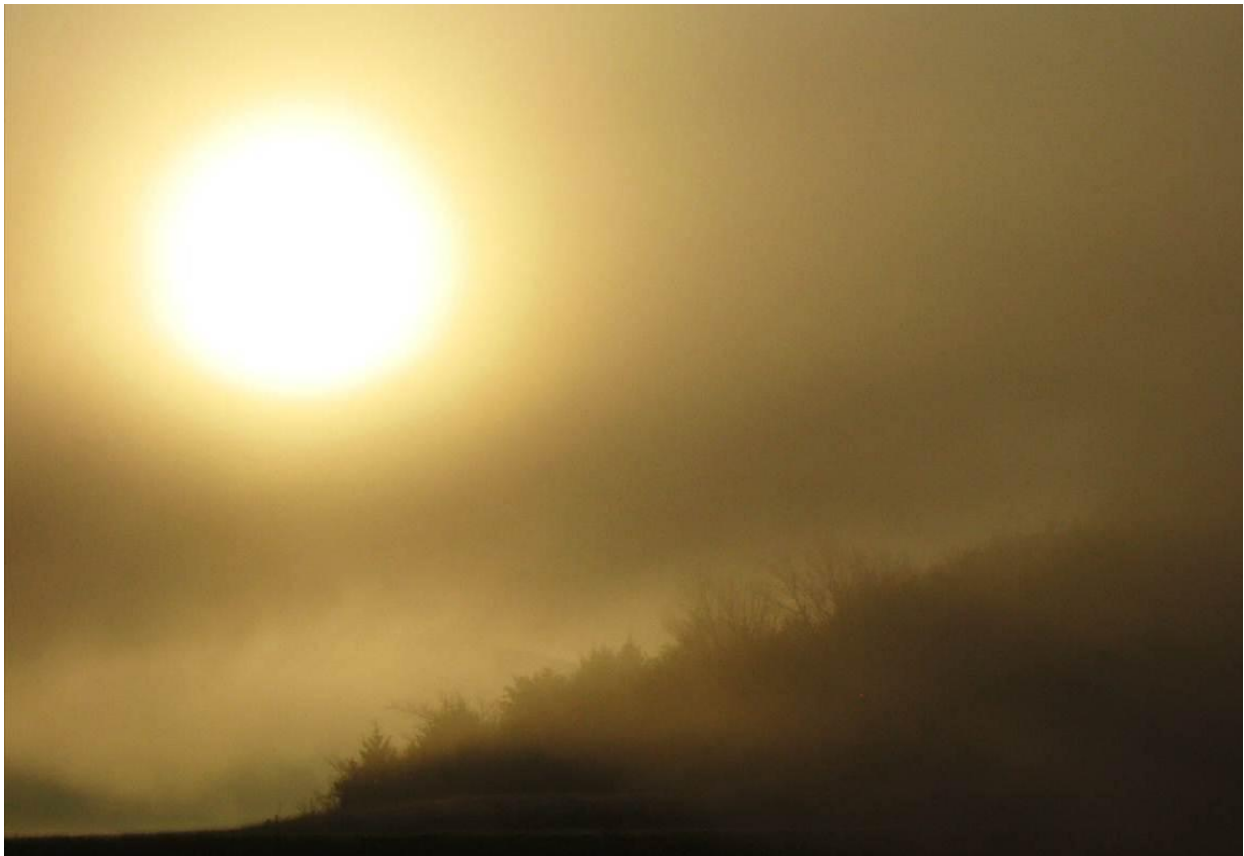


Figure 3-10 : Morning mist over the prairie.

Back at Konza on a cold, wet, windy morning, early March: I drove in past a flock of turkeys who had been breakfasting on stubble next to the road before my car sent them scurrying into the air, flapping with hungry displeasure. I parked at the trailhead, stepped out, and inhaled the rich scent of spring. Rain from the night before had left the sky clouded over and saturated the earth in vibrant color. I wanted to capture some sense of the scenes—grasses a rich bronze, trees a deep purple, and the horizon, the horizons, grey in the east and a curious blue, a layered blue, a distant blue to the west—but it was no use. The prairie was too subtle, too big, too real for representations. I put away my camera and just walked. Added my bootprints to the muddy tracks of those who had traversed the same path. Sang with the birds, twee-oo, twee-oo; ta-taptaptap, tap, ta-tap tap.



Figure 3-11 : Walking with the turkeys.

A month later—a warm-air, cool-earth April morning—I was back again. I drove in through clouds—waves of clouds, thickets of mist. The air was lifting at Konza, the grass greening, the peepers peeping, the little creek trickling and burbling and laughing as creeks should. I happily skipped along the path, over the bridge and out of the woods, through the field and up the hill, along the ridge and out to a sudden discovery—a distinct line between last autumn’s dry brown brush and flat, dark expanses of earth charred black, black, black...Burn! They had done the spring burn! The managers had set the dead grass on fire—torch mimicking lightning, scientists playing storm—and in so doing had exposed all sorts of secrets: outcrops of rocks ringing all the hills; little scraggly bushes, trees still sticking up; *yucca*? There was *yucca* at Konza?



Figure 3-12 : Burn line.



Figure 3-13 : Secrets of the burn.

And a *mailbox*? What was a mailbox doing out at the top of a charred knob of prairie?



Figure 3-14 : More secrets of the burn.

Oh. Right. Konza Biological Research Station. Konza Prairie Preserve. Education program; environmental interpretation; brochures. The mailbox housed brochures. Brochures to tell me what I would learn as I walked the trail. Trail to tell me where to walk. Walk a thin pale line across the big black earth, under the big blue sky.

Envisioning “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene,” geographer D. W. Meinig suggests (1979, p 33-34):

take a small but varied company to any convenient viewing place...and have each, in turn, describe the ‘landscape’...to detail what it is composed of and say something about the ‘meaning’ of what can be seen. It will soon become apparent that even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not – we cannot – see the same landscape.

Physical scientists may look at Konza and see *Andropogon gerardii*, *Quercus macrocarpa*, *Odocoileus virginianus*, *Bos bison bison*, stream flows and climate cycles—a landscape of Nature, System, and maybe Problem waiting to be solved through experimentation and control (Samson and Knopf 1994; Samson *et al.* 2003; Samson *et al.* 2004; Askins *et al.* 2007). Social scientists may see a former Habitat—an Artifact, with a History that demonstrates different conceptions of Wealth (de Bres *et al.* 1994; Frielich *et al.* 2004). Artists may see the Aesthetic—the “color, texture, mass, line, position, symmetry, balance, tension” (Meinig 1979) of wide open vistas,

the grace of sun of wind of rain. No one of these perceptions is inaccurate, though all are wholly incorrect; Konza exists not just as biophysical phenomena or sociocultural values but as a Place and manifestation of Ideology that blends and even transcends compartmentalized conceptions.

How are we to understand this complexity? Many intellectuals have issued calls for synthesis among academic perspectives—a so-called “consilience” of ideas and approaches to learning that can birth more holistic understanding of places (Gober 2000; Kinzig 2001; Taylor 2009, for example). As defined by biologist and philosopher E. O. Wilson, consilience is “a jumping together of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork for explanation” (1998, 8). In his manifesto for *Consilience*, subtitled *A Unity of Knowledge*, Wilson asserts that “[o]nly fluency across the boundaries [of the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities] will provide a clear view of the world as it really is” (1998, p 269 and 13, respectively); an “unusual richness” of new knowledge, new understanding, and new opportunities lurks not at the cores but at the intersections of disciplines, agrees Strober (forthcoming, 1; see also Swanson *et al.* 2008, 500). Beyond simple intellectual consilience, Allen Carlson advocates rounding out “cognitive” knowledge about the origins, types, and properties of the environment with “noncognitive” emotional states and responses with into a holistic understanding of a place (2010). “When conjoined,” he maintains, “they advocate bringing together feeling and knowing, which is the core of serious aesthetic experience.”

But are feelings acquired as easily as information? Can scientists think like artists, knowers like feelers? Yi-Fu Tuan (1979): “scientific knowledge can increase one’s appreciation of landscape...but...scientific analysis leads to abstractions and removes us from any personal involvement.” Thomas Heyd elucidates (2001, quoted in Benediktsson 2007, 211): “In many cases scientific knowledge may be neutral, or even harmful, to our aesthetic appreciation of nature, because it directs our attention to the theoretical level and the general case, diverting us from the personal level and particular case that we actually need to engage.” From Rick Bass (1996, 38): “You can measure the diameter-breast-height of a tree, but you cannot measure the magic of a forest, or the effect a healthy, growing wild place has on your spirit.” Finally, another extended quote from sociologist Douglas Massey, who implored a room full of scholars to admit an “*interplay* between rationality and emotionality” (2002, 2 and 17):

evolution has bequeathed us two dynamic, interactive brains—one emotional brain located in the various subsystems of the limbic system, and one rational brain centered in the prefrontal cerebral cortex. The two brains are connected to one another, but operate in parallel to yield two different systems of perception and memory. While neural pathways between the emotional and the rational brain carry information in both directions, *the number of neural connections running from the limbic system to the cortex is far greater than the number connecting the cortex to the limbic system...*As a result, not only do unconscious emotional feelings exist independently of rational appraisals of them, but given the asymmetry in neural connections between the limbic system and the neocortex, it is much more likely that emotional impulses will overwhelm rational cognition than vice versa...

Research in neuroscience shows that stimuli from the external world are perceived, evaluated, and acted upon by the emotional brain *before* the rational brain has received the pertinent information...By the time the rational brain receives incoming sensory stimuli about an event or object in the real world, the emotional brain has already swung into action and showered the neocortex with emotional messages that condition its perception.

In other words, you can't *think* your way into happiness, much less beauty; you can't will yourself to create neural pathways into the still unlovely human mind (adapted from Leopold 1949).

Experience + Knowledge \neq Value.

I tried to consciously analyze my emotional response to Konza and systematically construct an attachment to the place. But no matter how thoroughly I tried to conduct research or objectively I tried to examine the details, I can't help but look at Konza and see rules reading "Trails open sunrise to sunset" (*No camping. No sleeping out under the stars, marveling at the universe above and the ground underneath*). I see signs saying "No public access beyond this point." (*Important work is going on here – serious Science, real inquiry; we are busy learning, measuring, mapping, capturing Knowledge. Please contain your excitement. Go away.*) I see fences, paths, a parking lot, a trammled facsimile of prairie.



Figure 3-15 : Charred earth, charred wire.

The spring burn revealed a delicious puddle of sky-blue water. It looked so still, so refreshing that I wanted to dash off into it, to splash, to laugh, to feel the mud ooze between my toes. I wanted to wallow like a buffalo, to think like a buffalo, to know for certain, like the Venerable Tashmoo (quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 612), that “the buffalo were right here on their backs, rolling,” then “lay back, [roll] like a bison, [pause] as they do, looking upward,” to say, “I don’t see anything except sky. I feel the earth, but I don’t see it.”

That’s what it was. I wanted to *feel* the earth, to smell it, taste it, dark and rich and charred.

But I could not. Please stay on the trail.



Figure 3-16 : Unwallowable wallow, so blue, so blue.

Konza might be an outstanding example of a functioning tallgrass ecosystem and an iconic Flint Hills landscape, but it doesn't *feel* like a prairie. "Whatever else prairie is," William Least Heat-Moon writes of grass, sky, wind (1991, 82), "it is most of all a paradigm of infinity, a clearing full of many things except boundaries, and its power comes from its apparent limitlessness." As a biological research station, Konza is laced with boundaries, limits, controls. ("The scientific process has two motives: one is to understand the natural world, the other is to control it," noted C. Snow 1963, 64; Kansas State University motto: "Rule by obeying nature's law.") The ecosystem is preserved, not its spirit.

Maybe I'm just overly sensitive, or overly demanding. I know many people—scientists, artists, and outdoor enthusiasts alike—love the place. You don't need designated Wilderness Areas to discover a sense of wildness, to appreciate and love a natural environment, as environmental historian William Cronon chides (1998, 88), "Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet." Indeed, poet Gary Snyder reminds us (cited in Cronon 1998, 89), "[a] person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be."

I must not have had a clear heart and open mind, for I couldn't find the wildness, I couldn't appreciate the experience. I'm sorry, but when I drove the same drive, walked the same trails, the damn loops, each Sunday, past the fences, past the cattle, loop loop loop, I did not free, open, infinite. I did not feel prairie.



Figure 3-17 : Just the prairie trail again? (Look closely—that speck on the distant ridge is another prairie walker. Why does it ruin the experience for me to have to share the place?)

Except.

Memory: Sunday morning, early May. There were tornado watches on the radio but I went to Konza anyway. Saw a dark, curious glow in the sky; a dark, spring green on the earth. Felt the wind wind wind whistling hollows around my ears, whipping tears from my eyes, whirling through my nose my mouth my lungs. Stumbled along, crouching low to the ground, practically crawling to hold on against the gale. Kept getting blown off the path, off into the grassless prairie. Knew I should turn around, go back to my car, back to my apartment, spend the rest of the day rest of the spring rest of the year in Manhattan, but wanted to get to the top of the hill, just to the top of the hill, so I could cling to the stone—cold flint outcrops smoothed by exposure to the cold gritty wind—and look out across the black-grey-green, half-burnt, half-budding landscape, just to see.

And there it was—in that storm, from that hill, in that moment before the wind tore my breath away, pause—

Konza.



Figure 3-18 : Spring storm, alive.

3.1-2 Interim : In Which I Discover an Island and Fall in Love with a Forest

Prince of Wales, Alaska

Therefore, take yourself and observe yourself.

Take the world and observe the world.

— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (translated by Muller 2005, Chapter 54)

This was not supposed to happen. I am a plains person. I like sunshine and bright open skies, not cold, soggy mist that condenses into rain. I like simplicity, openness, emptiness, not scraggles of moss-draped cedar lining the banks of limestone fjords. I have spent years complaining about trees.

I don't know why I applied for a job of "Cave Guide" in Southeast Alaska—temperate rainforest; cold, dark, tight, perpetually drippy cave—I have no idea. I just needed to get out of Manhattan, Kansas, even if it meant being chilled and wet and surely miserable for three months. (Did I mention that I'm claustrophobic?)

The day I arrived in Ketchikan, it was, as expected, cold and rainy. Though people talk of whales and islands in the Inside Passage, I didn't see much of anything on the ferry ride to Prince of Wales Island; everything was grey. Grey grey grey. Not just a leaden blanket like the winter skies over the plains, but an all-around, suspended-in-a- cloud-of-resigned-cheerlessness grey. As the ferry docked in Hollis, the shore loomed greenly through the grey. It was an odd green—not the bright, multihued green of grasses in the prairie, but a dense, dark mass of green—forest. The first and only color I saw all day was a splash of yellow—skunk cabbage, my supervisor told me as we drove past a giant, primeval-looking plant en route to Craig, one of the first things to bloom in spring.

Rain rain rain pattered on the roof the whole night. When I woke the next morning, though, it was to the splooshing of fish and squeaking of eagles and air bright with the scent of pine. Everything was fresh and alive; I felt fresh and alive. (And I felt the sneaking suspicion that I might like it there.)

My supervisor took me to Thorne Bay—my "base" for the season, though I'd be spending weekdays living in a trailer by the cave, a 2-½-hour-drive-down-muddy-logging-roads away. That evening, I joined others for a bonfire at Sandy Beach, sipping cider with a view of snow-capped peaks rising over a salty passage. Mergansers paddled happily along the shore. Two days later, walking down the gravel road outside town, I saw my first black bear. The next morning, hiking up to Water Lake, I saw my first otter. And, oh!, heard a loon.

Loon loon loon.

This was not supposed to happen.



Figure 3-19 : View of western Prince of Wales from hills above Thorne Bay, AK.

Therefore the sage produces without possessing, / Act without expectations

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (translated by Muller 2005, Chapter 2)



Figure 3-20 : View across El Capitan Passage, from Forest Service dock.

Every morning, I woke in my damp but cozy trailer in the middle of nowhere (the beautiful wild peaceful cold wet Alaskan nowhere), slipped on my boots and raincoat, stepped out into the misty air, and crunched my way up the gravel track that winds through the forest and along the shore. Some days I felt like walking all the way to the bridge by the main logging road, moving quickly to get the blood flowing to my toes and fingers. Other days, I found myself poking along the water's edge, looking for shells and listening to oysters spit, spit spit. Sometimes I just sat, watching the fog lift and the world emerge.



Figure 3-22 : Typical morning at El Cap.

After making a pot of coffee, heading to the dock to greet the local heron and the otter, and recording the previous day's events in the Forest Service logbook ("Heron," I would write, "otter. One tour, 2 people from Craig. Rain."), I spent most of each day lurking around the equipment shed, ready to hand any visitors a helmet and a headlamp and lead them up a stairway and into El Capitan Cave. When the weather was slightly less drizzly, I strolled up and down the road, perhaps out to a peninsula about a half-mile away, or around and around to the dock to watch for orcas (I only saw two, all season.) When it was pouring, I sat huddled in the shed, trying to turn the limp pages of Rick Bass's *Book of Yaak* (1996, xiv: "This is not really a book. This is instead an artifact of the woods, like a chunk of rhyolite, a shed deer antler, a bear skull, a heron feather"), Jim Harrison's *In Search of Small Gods* (2009, 33: "get to where you're going, then walk like a heron or sandhill crane") or the collected notebooks of Robert Frost ("In youth I looked for flowers / Where now I look for trees") with stiff, mittened fingers.

At 4 or 5, I locked up the shed, tried to radio in to Thorne Bay to let them know all was well, wolfed down a quick dinner, then headed out for an evening walk. I strayed much farther at the end of the day—5 miles, 8, 10, sometimes not returning until well after the mottled grey of evening had begun transitioning to night's opaque blackness. I hiked up up up old logging roads to fields of ghostly white stumps, out out out to mossy muskegs laced

with small standing pools and ribbons of water, or wound round round round the rocky, weedy shore. Everywhere I went, there were signs of people—bottles, cans, tires, wire, if not the stumps and the roads themselves—but somehow that didn't matter. There weren't people there then. All memory of use and abuse had begun to weather and the green of the forest had begun to reassert itself, rain rain rain.

I was happy.



Figure 3-23 : View from the dock back toward the peninsula and my little island.

Several times a day, I walked out to greet my little island—a few rocks, a few trees that rose out of the water no more than ten yards away from the peninsula just down the road. I bowed “good morning” to the island as the sky filled with a light grey-pink, waved “hello!” during the noon downpour, sang “good afternoon” as I headed out after dinner, and whispered “good night” into the darkness upon my return. My island. I saw it in the rain, in the sun, between clouds that caught on the crags and swirled along the shore. I saw it from the peninsula, from the mainland, from a little delta a mile or so east. I saw it populated with seagulls, with an eagle, alone. And, on the rare occasions when the moon's rhythm and my routine coincided, I actually walked out to the island, across a slender isthmus that snakes between the main peninsula and the nameless knob during low tide. All I had to do was be there at the right time, tromp through green flats of glasswort, squish and squeak across slippery beds of kelp, and there I was—a few rocks, a few trees, and me, floating together in the wild, misty world. I haunted an enchanted isle.



Figure 3-24 : My island.



Figure 3-25 : The isthmus.



Figure 3-26 : Island again.

I never did figure out how to watch the tides, though. More than once, I became so engrossed in exploring my little island—crawling around on my hands and knees looking at moss, circling round and round the circumference, or just sitting on the outcrops, staring across the water, listening to loons—that I lost track of time and forgot to watch as the tide flowed back in. I then had to wade across the cold, salty stretch of water, ankle- or knee-deep in reality. (The mythic return.)

What does it matter? What does this have to do with the plains?

I can't praise the plains without admitting that I fell in love with a forest. I can't celebrate the steppe without dreaming of the seashore. The tides. The shells. A little island barely separated from a much bigger island along the rain-soaked, fjord-ridden, cedar-scented, grey-green coast of Southeast Alaska.

There were thimbleberries! And fireweed! And fog! How could I *not* love it?



Figure 3-27 : Soft moss, precious sunshine.

(Remember, remember, *remember*. Anyone can love the forest. It takes soul to love the prairie.)

(What does that mean?)

There was a wildlife biologist in Thorne Bay—an outdoorsman who taught me the names of the ferns and the routes to the peaks. On weekends, when I drove back into town and tried to remember how to carry on a conversation, we often became entangled in disagreements about the value of different landscapes. Put simply: he likes mountains; I like plains. He couldn't understand why I'm drawn to "flat, boring" (empty, desolate, *etc etc*) space, and I can't understand how he could discriminate against any wild place. "I like mountains, too," I would insist, weakly, "and woods and lakes and all of the stereotypically beautiful landscapes." It did no good to cite Roderick Nash for him, or William Cronon, Snyder, Leopold, Thoreau, any tomes tracing the evolution of Euro-American landscape perception. It did no good to remind him that I'd loved growing up in Western New York (lakes) and going to school in New England (woods) and climbing in Wyoming (mountains), or that I'd absolutely fallen in love with the forest, the ocean, my little island up there. ("Love"—a useless word, like saying the ocean was wet or the forest alive.) It did no good to show him photos, tell him stories, insist over and over and over again that there's *something* out there, in every wild open space—even prairies! Especially plains!—if he'd just give them a chance?

"Maybe that's what it is," I struggled to articulate the feel of grasslands, "you can't just hike through them or drive over them. There are no peaks to 'conquer,' no panoramas to 'take.' You just have to be there. Wander. Pause and look—really look, look hard, look long, get on your hands and knees and crawl, sit, wait, walk walk walk—or you won't get it. The smell of the sage, the feel of the wind, the sound of the meadowlark—you have to experience more than just the view. You have to like to walk, sit, breathe, *live* surrounded by space, not just look at calendar scenery or dash out on a hike and drive back into town."

(Unspoken: "It takes *soul*.")

"Mmmph," the unconvinced response. What did I know, I was coming from Kansas.

Even while trying to champion the prairie aesthetic (and figure out what, exactly, that means), I struggled to understand why I didn't like Konza. Why I hated Konza. Prairie! Tallgrass Prairie! Preserved! I *should* love it, I *had to* love it, I had *tried* to love it.

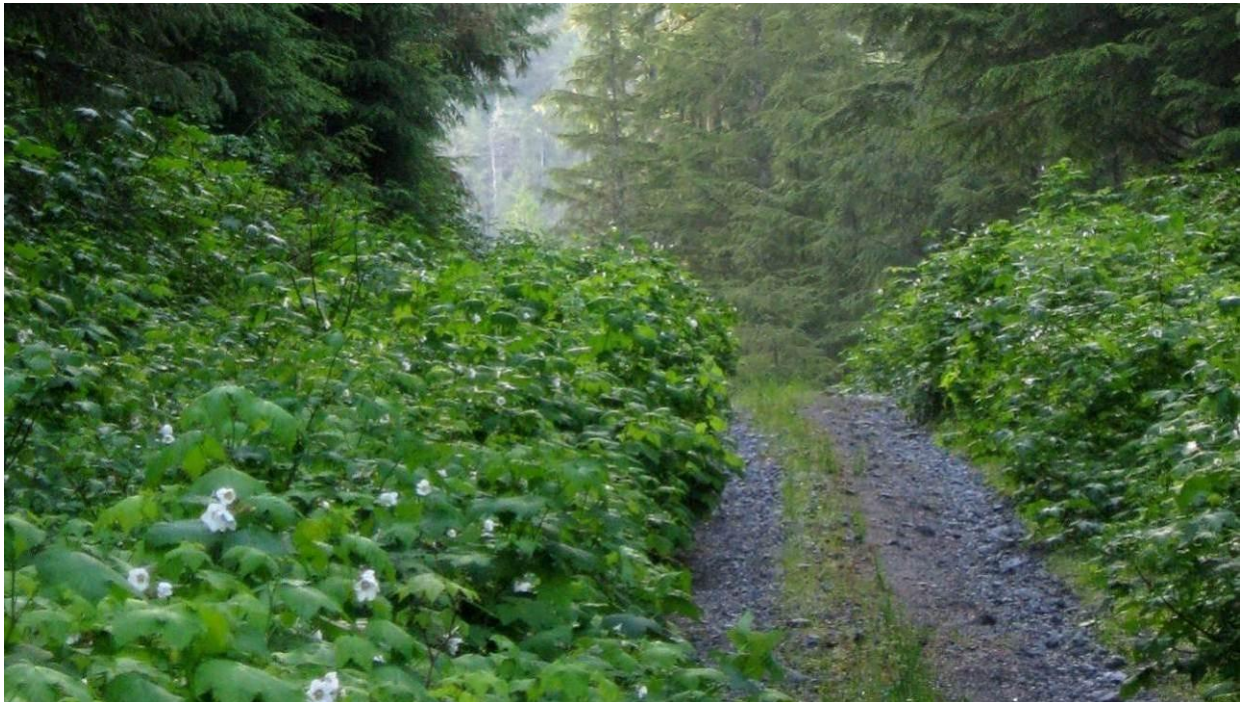
Oh good god, and I had to go back.

It was a great year for berries up in Alaska. In between stretches of rain, the sun managed to peek through the clouds often enough to encourage riotous growth. Within a few weeks of moving up to the cave, I encountered my first salmonberries—large, seedy, still a little tart, but delicious. Blueberries and huckleberries started ripening not long after that; the deer and I soon came to tolerate one another's presence in the best patches. The biggest surprise came when the thick brush alongside the road began sprouting soft, red thimbleberries. I'd never had a thimbleberry before, but as soon as I tasted one, I left the *Vaccinium* alone and proceeded to graze my way through riots of *Rubus*—thimbleberries with breakfast, lunch, dinner, dessert. I picked cupfuls and let them mush into a sort of jam; I added them to pancakes, oatmeal, ice cream; I ate them straight off the bushes, warm with sunshine or dripping with rain. "I'm stocking up," I excused myself for overindulging on their rich, velvety tang, fingers and palms stained red, "I have to eat all I can this summer, here, now."



Figures 3-28 a-c: Berries, berries everywhere!

I gorged on the spoils of summer while an awareness of the upcoming autumn and winter throbbed dully in the back of my mind. I will be hungry then, I knew—hungry for the taste of thimbleberries, hungry for the freedom to walk, hungry for the cries of loons and gruffs of bears, the rain rain rain rain pattering on my hood and seeping through the shoulders of my coat. I had to stock up on enough wildness to sustain me when I returned to the buildings, sidewalks, and streetlamps back in Manhattan; even if I could find a pint of blueberries to pick up at the grocery store there, I knew it would leave me hungry.



I began to accumulate shells, rocks, pieces of driftwood, curlings of bark—more permanent mementos. (Mementos: memories, moments, memes, me.) They found their way into my palms or my pockets; they quietly followed me home.

I'd always been a rock-collector, a gatherer of memories made tangible. River rock—water-smoothed cobbles that roll neatly around between my fingers—had always been most attractive, but any rock would do if it caught my fancy, called out “pick *me!* Take *me!* *I'll* help you remember this place, this moment.” The same thing for driftwood, for bones, leaves, pinecones, deer antlers—some items simply seemed pretty, others important; all added weight to my experiences in wild places. (But not *wildernesses*—no collecting in parks, preserves, biological research stations, just rangeland, grassland, forests. I may not like it, but I adhere fanatically to that rule.) Something about these things, though—these molluscs, these twigs, these white grey greenish bluish brownish stones—was different. I wasn't gathering them for the innocent thrill of the discovery, the “aha!” I felt when I found small beauties (Annie Dillard, 1974, 17: “I cherish mental images I have of three perfectly happy people. One collects stones. Another...watches clouds. The third lives on a coast and collects drops of seawater”), but began to feel as though I *needed* them. I couldn't take clouds, I couldn't take drops of seawater; I could take photos, but pixels have no weight, no depth, no reality. I had to take rocks. They had to remind me that this place was *real*, that I had been there. Happy.



Figure 3-29 : Seashore treasures.

Which is more painful, gain or loss?

Therefore we always pay a great price for excessive love. / And suffer deep loss for great accumulation

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Muller 2005, Chapter 44

Wildness, I decided. It's a matter of wildness, freedom. Once I had learned to wander, there was no going back. I could dash off anywhere I pleased up in Alaska, almost anytime. When I was up in my trailer, there were no people there to judge me, no one to think me crazy for slipping out of bed in the middle of the night and returning sopping wet. No one to ask why I greeted islands and lamented with loons. It was so *easy*—*too* easy—to love that place, that place of peacefulness, of serenity, of mist with a little magic stirred in; that place of heron, of otter, of sweet wild strawberries and salmon jumping sploosh from the water. It was too easy to love that place, where I could just sit and let the beauty roll over me, soft and grey and cool. My feet were perpetually wet, my pockets full of wonders, and every day, I wanted to drift off into the water, nestle into a crook of cedar, wind my toes into the rock, my fingers up into the clouds, the low low grey cold clouds.

But Konza? There, I was as fenced in as the bison, as regulated as the burn. (And yet, I realized, still searching for soul, there was still the wind. Wind and the weather. Fences, trails, signs can't trammel the sky.)

Aha! So that's what it was! Plains are *exposed*! It's all about the *sky*! I *like* to feel exposed, to see the sky! I like to know I'm *alive*. Rocks, shells, trees—these things remind me the world is real. Clouds, wind, birds—these things remind me I am real. Cold, wet; sunburned, surprised...*alive*. “That's why I'm always out walking,” I tried to explain to the wildlife biologist once, “because I don't want to miss anything.” Mist!, I meant, Rain! Sunlight dripping off boughs, salmon spawning up creeks. Eagles! Bears! The moon!

“And that's why I like living on the plains,” I continued, “It makes me feel alive *all the time*. I don't have to plan a mountaineering expedition or apply for a backpacking permit; I can step out my back door and be in the middle of it all.” Air!, I meant, Light! Dust whirling down dry washes and grass rippling before dawn. Ravens. Coyotes. The moon.

(Unsaid: Don't you see, don't you see? I fall in love with wild places, with their rocks and their plants and their animals and their skies, with their cycles and their moods. Some people develop a sense of place or attach to a type of landscape, others fall into and out of relationships with friends, family, lovers, but I am one for wild places. They become part of me. I carry them with me. They *are* me.)

Before Alaska, I believed that I “belong[ed] to a particular landscape...[that it] inform[ed] who [I am], carri[e]d my history, [my] dreams, h[eld me] to a moral line of behavior that transcends thought” (Tempest Williams 2002, 17). I would have said the Painted Desert was my ideal place, my one true home (paraphrased from Abbey 1968, 1); I would have said, “If I could draw you a picture of my soul,” it would be Pilot Rock (James Galvin, quoted in Tredinnick 2005, 208). I would have said that the semi-desert sagebrush steppe was what I breathe, what I dream. The Painted Desert, I could have borrowed a phrase from Yi-Fu Tuan (2001), “is my geographical double—the objective correlative of the sort of human being I am when the shallow, social layers are stripped away.”

Place-identity. In trying to tell the biologist about where I had been, what places I loved, I wanted to explain *who* I was. I was not Konza. I was not Badlands. I was sandstone in the Angels Garden, bootprints down the Lithodendron Wash. I was the smell of sage, the moment of sunrise, an old dead juniper winding up toward the stars. So, too, I had now become mist swirling through the forest and along the shore. I was an island off the coast of a larger island—a few rocks, a few trees, a few birds sometimes there, sometimes gone.

“We cannot choose the past or the places that create us any more than we can choose our biological grandparents, our genetic heritage,” John Price reminds us in *Not Just Any Land* (2004, 157). We cannot choose what to love, who to be, all we can do is open ourselves to the world, sit, watch and learn. Breathe.

Emptied of desire, we see the mystery ... Mystery itself is the gateway to perception.

Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching* translated by Hamill 2004, 21



Figure 3-30 : Evening-glow, balance, peace.

This is how it goes: you leave home. You learn that you like oysters and salmon and thimbleberries. You learn that you like trees and love rain. You learn that there is a little island off the coast of a larger island in the temperate rainforest of Southeast Alaska and that it is beautiful.

When the time comes, you gather up all of your rocks and shells and sweeps of driftwood, put them in a box, and mail them to your next address. You set off on your last walk, bid the birds and the bears farewell, and, finally, sit out at your favorite spot, letting the sadness, the desire, the sense of rootedness, of belonging, of longing wash over you, then pass. As the mist swirls around you, you inhale deeply, deeply, let the cool rich air permeate the space in all of your cells, pause.

Then you exhale. You leave.

In time, you will fall in love with another place.

Meanwhile, in Alaska, the salmon will stop spawning and the bear will stop eating. The nights will get longer, the wind colder. Snow will fall. The rocks, the trees, the islands, the paths, will be buried in white.

In spring, the rain will fall and the snow will melt. Rivulets will run into rivers will run into the channel will run into the sea. Skunk cabbage will bloom again. The little island will be there, even when you and the heron are gone.

I look upon...the rise and fall of beliefs as but traces left by the four seasons.

-- 13th-century Zen teacher Muju Shaseki-shu, *Collection of Stone and Sand* (Reps and Senzaki, trans.1957, 27)



Figure 3-31 : Farewell, little island. I have gone.

3.2 Conversations with Konza

Konza Prairie Preserve, Kansas

'Ask me why a person should walk cross-country.' *'Tell me.'*

'It frees you from wanting to own it. It liberates you.'

—the Venerable Tashmoo, quoted in *PrairyErth* (Least Heat-Moon 1991, 614)

The first Sunday in October featured a leaden sky rent by bitter wind; rumors of snow swirled in the air. Perfect.

I zipped on a jacket, laced up my boots, and drove out of Manhattan, Kansas, curious (and, admittedly, somewhat anxious) to see how I would react to Konza Prairie Preserve. *I will not compare, I will not complain, I told myself, trying to internalize lessons the rainforest had taught me, I will not demand wilderness. Instead I will celebrate wildness, whatever little happinesses I can find. (That's all I can do.)* As soon as I stepped out of my car, I breathed in the fresh air, delighted just to have a place to walk. Having spent the previous month and a half cooped up inside, “I’d forgotten how walking unbuttons you,” as the Venerable Tashmoo (quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 611) attests. “You can’t walk unconsciously for long,” he continues, “things thrust themselves right into your ears, up your nose. When you’re on foot, life vibrates.” Walking, walking, walking, who cares, I thought, if I have to follow a path? I’m moving at my own pace, saying hello to the crows the grass the wind tearing sprinkles from the sky. Who cares if I’m not allowed to slip away, head cross-country, dip into the woody ravines, climb along the flinty ridges, lay down in the middle of a field and watch the clouds dance? Walking! At least there is a place to walk, this little patch of tallgrass prairie nestled in the otherwise privatized hills.

I was happy to see familiar places, old friends. The path led me back to the spot where I saw the deer, the birds, the burn, each loop full of memories. Oh! I realized with delight, grass in the burned area had grown back just as tall. Oh! The mailbox, how could I ever have missed that? Oh! That old tree, this old ridge, oh! Wind and rain and walking walking walking, crunch crunch crunch crunch...

Crunch crunch crunch

Crunch.



Figures 3-32 a-b : Familiar features.



Figure 3-33 : Oh, Konza, I'm back.

Somewhere along the way, my enthusiasm melted, then throbbed. Into sadness, hatred, almost; ambivalence. I loved the pure sensation of walking out under the big grey prairie sky, but had trouble swallowing the urge to wallow in puddles or pick up rocks. I had trouble looking past the fences and signs. I had trouble, once again, of appreciating the Biological Research Station as a place, no matter the aesthetic experience it afforded. By the time I got back to the bridge (no bouncing), I felt so alienated, so lonely that I swore I would never return. Konza. Was that really all I had? Was that really all I could do? (*No expectations, remember; no demands. Soul.*)



Figure 3-34 : The fencepost again.

Take Two. Halloween. The sun was shining, the wind whooshing, crickets chirping and turkeys glarbeling, what was I to do? Konza. I went and sat. Drove all the way out there, hiked out on the trail, one mile, two, then plunked down in the middle of the dry, rocky four-point-four trail and stared at the ground. Konza.

I'd given up the old routine of challenging the prairie (*Hey, Konza, show me something new! Amaze me! Tell me why I should care*) and had sunk into a disinterested, disengaged reverie. Thoughtless. Empty, blank, hopeless, demandless. I suppose if you sit anywhere long enough, though, something is bound to happen. That day, it came in the form a grasshopper.

Insects had been chirping about all morning, but I hadn't really cared to think of them as anything more than ambient effect until a little green something leaped into sight. It balanced on a blade of dry, rustly grass and stared at me. I stared at it. It stared at me. I stared at it. An hour later, I was still crawling around on my hands and knees in an attempt to photograph grasshoppers. Big blue skies overhead, sun rippling through the bluestem, somewhere turkeys, somewhere coyote, somewhere traffic, talk, a bright beautiful world, and I was happy living through the "macro" setting on my camera.

Konza?



Figure 3-35 : You are wise, grasshopper.

Konza. No more pretending to make sense of experience, no more attempts to fit sensations and perceptions into knowledge, theory. I am none the wiser. Yes, John Fraser Hart (1984, 24), I am one of those geographers who “thoroughly enjoy the thrill of exploration and discovery.” I too

derive great pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction from wandering down narrow roads and lanes, stumbling across the countryside, bashing through underbrush, tearing [my] clothes on barbed wire fences, skirting pastures where bulls are grazing, talking to farmers, finding vantage points that command superb views across the land, having the wind and the rain in [my] hair, and communing with nature. (Hart 1984, 24)

All I want, Konza, is great pleasure, aesthetic satisfaction. I won't slip under fences or skirt pastures, but at least at least I can have the wind and rain in my hair? Konza?



Figure 3-36 : Still walking, still questioning.

Mid-November. After a stretch of soft, sunny Indian summer, autumn decided to return—cold, windy, sprinkles of rain on the roof, rumors of snow on the radio. Of course I had zip up my fleece, add an extra pair of socks, pull on my mitten-capped-gloves and head to out to Konza. It was still early when I got there (and cold and wet), so I was surprised to see another car in the parking lot; I felt an instant camaraderie with whatever other intrepid and/or desperate fool had come to traipse the trail.

For whatever reason, I decided to loop counter-clockwise, took the right-hand fork in the path with a delicious sense of spontaneity (little things). What did I see? Well, turkey, deer, trees, path path path, same old same old, no? No, completely different views.



Figure 3-37 : Approached clockwise, the upper limbs of this tree point right at the walker, invisible. You have to look back or walk counter-clockwise to know their elegance.

I was so excited to see a particular tree— really see it—that I completely forgot to turn onto the first loop. I didn't realize it until a mile later, when my fingers were stiff and purpley-blue and I was beginning to wonder why the route seemed longer from this direction. (You'd think I'd have been able to manage not to get lost by then. Three trails, for goodness sake.) (Then again, I wouldn't have felt lost at all if I had been wandering freely, fully engaged in the landscape.)

Meanwhile, I crossed paths with the other hiker. It turned out that he was not a hiker at all, but some spandex-clad, ear-bud-equipped jogger. I think he saw me first, as I was flapping my mitten-tops in a ridiculous attempt to get blood circulating through my fingers. I blushed as he passed, embarrassed to think I must have resembled a turkey. Oh. (That's why I prefer to have places to myself: I can flap my arms or clap my hands, sing and dance and crawl around and hunt for crickets without worrying about looking like an idiot. The birds, the wind, the prairie either understand or don't care.)

Later, after I'd found the turn for the second loop, climbed the big hill up to the grassy ridge / fenceline, and been refreshed by a little burst of rain, I encountered another person—a red-cheeked, grey-haired, flannel-wearing and hiking-stick-bearing man who was clearly delighted to be out in the inclement weather too. We smiled at one another and murmured something to the effect of "beautiful day, eh?" before continuing onward.

Onward. It *was* beautiful. Konza.

Late November, on another sunny day (prairie weather in autumn is as fickle as my moods), I went "backwards" again, winding alongside the wooded creek to begin with, saving the prairie for the end. That way, I realized, rather than start off eager, inspired, cold wild happy only to lose interest and have to plod through the last few miles, I would get to warm up my legs, my mind a little before walking out onto (into?) the bright windy landscape. Of course, that meant that I would begin bored, if not slightly disgruntled, but, as usual, I was so desperate to walk somewhere—anywhere—that I didn't mind too much that I had to drive all the way out to the trail, park my car with a half-dozen others, and share the place with joggers and children wandering off trail.



Figure 3-38 : The tree again, holding up the clouds

Maybe it was just that I was excited to finally get out of the woods this day, or maybe it was that I'd just run into a friendly couple that was obviously enjoying their the place, but when I hiked up the hill and emerged at the top of the ridge, views of grass grass grass sky sun, mmmm, I was happy. I started seeing sights, thinking thoughts, clouds and grasshoppers and a bright red gate!



Figure 3-39 : The big red gate at the farthest corner of the longest trail. 13th-Century Chinese master Mu-Mon's introduction to the classic Zen text *The Gateless Gate* (cited in Reps and Senzaki 1957, 114): "The great path has no gates, / ...When one passes through this gateless gate / He walks freely between heaven and earth."



Figure 3-40 : First encounter with the angry mooless cattle.

The cattle were there again. Our first encounter, a few weeks earlier, had been a bit surreal. They'd been mooing merrily away until I approached, then must have heard or seen or sensed me approaching because they stopped. Stopped mooing, stopped eating, just stood there. Cows in a field. Silent. Staring.

This week, though, they ignored me and continued to happily munch away at the forbs by the fence. Did they recognize me as an old friend?

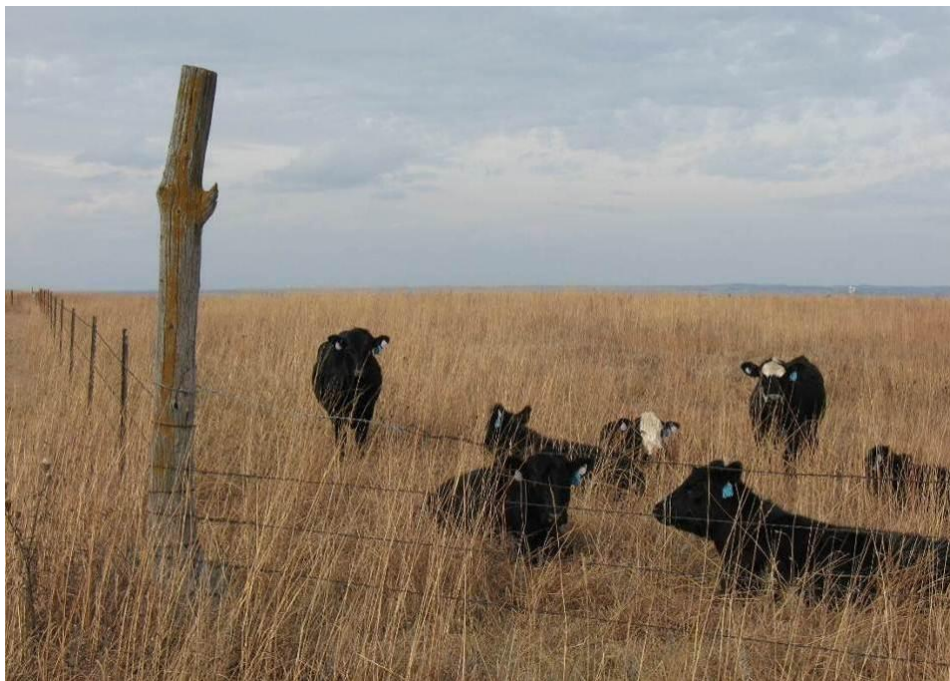


Figure 3-41 : Same cattle, more relaxed.

After I'd nodded hello to the livestock and begun to continue on my way, I heard a nonchalant "mooooo" off to my left, from among the bushes/grasses alongside the trail. Umm? There it was! A rogue cow! (I don't know why "rogue" sprang to mind, but it was free, defying the fence, feasting on the ungrazed vegetation. Hooray for the audacity of the rogue cow!) I couldn't help but attribute some sort of symbolism to the scene—a tamed beast yearning to be free! The streak of wildness that lurks in all living creatures!



Figure 3-42 : The rogue cow!

When I got back to the bridge by the beginning/end of the trail, however, my pleasant walk was interrupted by a family standing down by the creek bed, throwing rocks into the water. Dad, kids, mom watching from above—how that annoyed me!—they weren't rogues; they were rule-breakers, sign-ignorers. I wanted to point out: "Stream monitoring project. Please stay on trail." I wanted to ask them to please return to the trail. (Oh how I wanted to sploosh in the water too.)

Is it the same instinct as that of the rogue cow?, I wondered, a primeval turn toward wildness, delight? Do layers of culture inhibit deeper, rawer appreciation of natural places?

No conclusions. Just Konza. Trails. Signs. Rules. Experiments. Experience. People.

Knowledge nearly ruined the aesthetic, but it was, admittedly, undeniably still beautiful out there—grass rustling with warmth; horsetails sweeping the sky.

Two weeks later, it was cold. Cold cold cold and grey. I didn't really want to get in my car and drive anywhere, but had been sitting in town for too long and needed some fresh air. Besides, there'd been a blizzard mid-week and I was curious to see Konza in winter. (Real winter—none of that sunshine-and-blue sky nonsense that Kansas gets in January. *Winter*. Cold and grey.)

The prairie in winter, then—cold and grey. Icy. Very icy. Most of the path was icy, so much so that I had to pay attention to where and how I stepped, and/or boot-shuffle across slippery patches. Someone had been out skiing, someone else snowshoeing, though both activities are against the rules. *I should be somewhere skiing right now*, I thought, as I slid cautiously across the ice, *Somewhere else, where I could swoosh swoosh swoosh through the tall grass, across that big horizon*. I *should* have been out skiing, skiing away from a comfortable little apartment, from an inane little micropolis, from a computer, a tired, tamed lifestyle; should have been skiing, somewhere between white earth and white sky, breathe.

But no skiing at Konza.



Figure 3-43 : Ah! The trail in snow.

Konza did have something to offer, though—that day, the cold grey wintry prairie was a study in noises. Not so much landscapes—the snow had decided to sublime, a thick mist hovered in every hollow, mystery, mystery, beauty—but soundscapes:



Figures 3-44 a-b : Frozen footsteps, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.



Sounds! Twinklings of grass. The breeze was relatively calm, but if I paused, listened carefully, I swear I could hear frost-coated blades tinging together—acres and acres of tiny windchimes.

Sounds! Tweeterings of robins. I think every red-breasted little bird in the state had decided to come to Konza to sing of the snow; the air vibrated with notes and wingflaps, joy.

Sounds! Crunch crunch crunch, huff huff puff, that's all I really heard (unless I stood still)—just my footsteps, my bootcrunches. *Real* crunches, loud crunches, not gravely or sidewalk-style crunches, but cold crystal-breaking crunches. I huffed and puffed and crunched around to the first loop, then skipped and hopped and twirled and stomped—Cr-crunch! Crunchcrunchcrunch! Crrrrrrrrrunch! CRUNCH!—out across the path. Must have looked silly, sounded silly, but who can resist fresh snow, leaving dizzy tracks all the way down the trail? Besides, there was no one else there. No one else wanted to go to a cold, grey, icy, misty, crunchy prairie. I wasn't disturbing anyone's peacefulness.

Peacefulness. Pause.



Figure 3-45 : The tree in winter.



Figure 3-46 : Snow beginning to melt away.

So it went: Hate, then love; desire, then despair. Autumn, winter, into spring. Sun, then snow; snow, then rain. Grass, cattle, burn. Wind. Always wind. Prairie.

Each time I returned, I had to revise my perceptions—not totally erase and rewrite, but adjust to add layers, depth, dimension. I alternated between exhilaration and abhorrence, frenetic, trying trying trying to understand why I couldn't just enjoy the place. Was it because the Biological Research Station is subject to so many rules, experiments, scientific regimes? Was it because I had to stay on the path, couldn't explore freely? Or was it because I had to drive out to the site, turn each Sunday into an expedition, rather than simply step out my back door whenever I felt the need to wander?

Then I stopped asking questions, left them unanswered, unanswerable.



Figure 3-47 : Cold, wet spring morning.



Figure 3-48 : Clouds lifting over the hills.



Figure 3-49 : Burn!



Figure 3-50 : Burn! Again, the stark contrast, the sharp lines of the spring burn.



Figure 3-51 : The poor fencepost, still tangled in wire and charred again.



Figure 3-52 : First flowers of spring.



Figure 3-53 : Slight breeze up on the ridge.

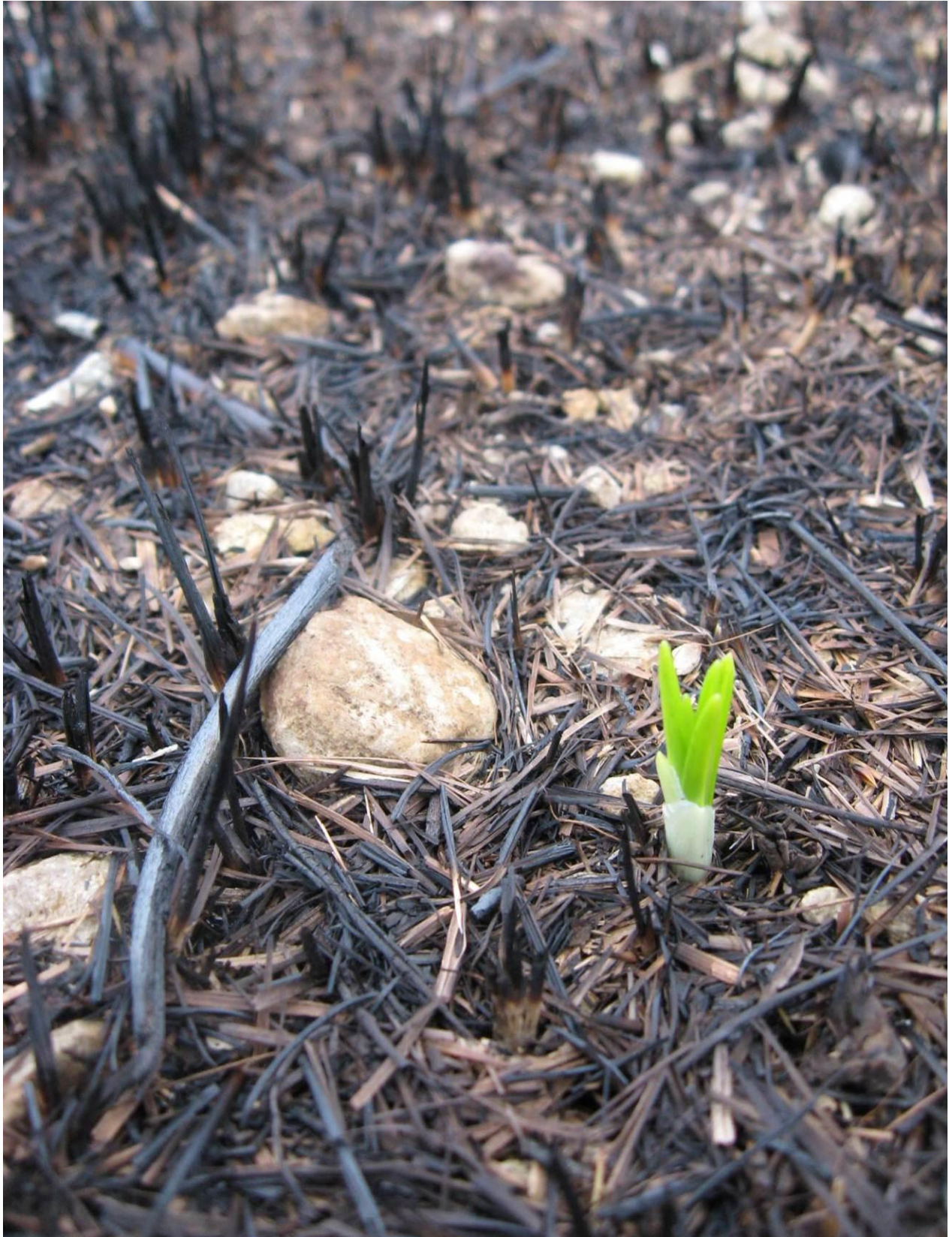


Figure 3-54 : Life returns after the burn.



Figure 3-55 : Greening.



Figure 3-56 : Fluttering.



Figure 3-57 : Green.



Figure 3-58 : Grass growing back over the stones.



Figure 3-59 : A significant component of the tallgrass ecosystem : lush riparian corridors like Kings Creek.



Figure 3-60 : *Penstemon*.



Figure 3-61 : The ensnarled fencepost, looking slightly less forlorn.



Figure 3-62 : Study in dew, number 1.



Figure 3-63 : Study in dew, number 2.



Figure 3-64 : Study in dew, number 3.



Figure 3-65 : Study in mist.



Figure 3-66 : Color.

No matter how delightful and stimulating they can be, subtle, rhythmic, secretive, beautiful plains landscapes cannot simply be seen or visited. I want to live the prairie, to step outside and forever be in the middle of a bright beautiful world. But Konza. Konza, to me, Konza became and always will be remembered as a string of separate experiences, historic events. Even though memories and places pooled together, overlapped, intertwined, each walk was separated by a week, a drive. Each involved a beginning, an end, and a set route (or three) in between. Each involved me waking up Sunday morning, checking the weather, zipping up my coat and lacing on my boots, turning on my car, driving out to the parking lot / trailhead, traipsing through the sun or the wind or the rain, happy, until I got to the end of the trail, had to get back in my car, return to town, unlace my boots. I was a visitor, who did not remain; a questor with a proscribed journey; a novice reciting someone else's surpriseless koan.

Finally, one May, one beautiful May day, I left. For good, I hoped. Forever leaving, leaving, leaving.

Unlike when I left the Painted Desert, however, and unlike when I left Alaska, when I left Konza, I left nothing of me in that landscape. And took nothing from it. Photographs, memories, maybe, but no soul.

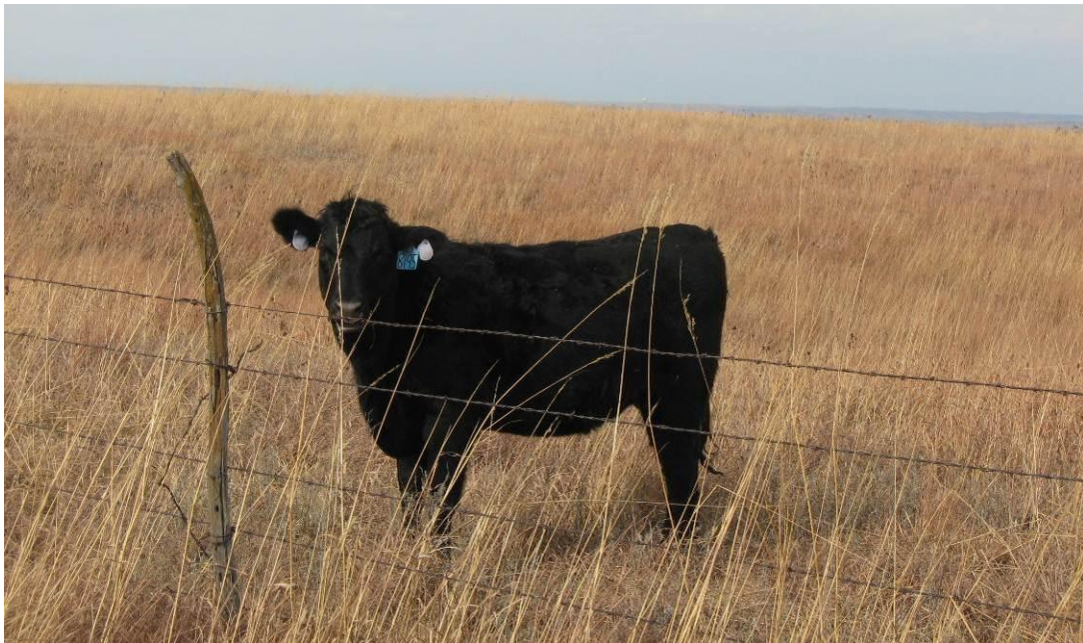


Figure 3-67 : Everything that is Konza, staring from a field.

Chapter 4 - Shortgrass / Semi-Desert Shrub-Steppe

4.1 The Return to the Plains

Fossil Butte National Monument, Wyoming

But the real heart and core of the country are not to be come at in a month's vacation.

One must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions.

— Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903, vii)

I could tell you about how I'd seen the place a year earlier, when traveling through on the way to somewhere else from somewhere else, and thought, *hmmm, I would like to live here*. I could tell you about how circumstances obliged and I found myself moving to southwestern Wyoming late one spring. I could tell you about the months I spent perched halfway up the side of a ridge, lifting layers of limestone in search of 52-million-year-old fossil fish or I could review the process of getting to know a place. (Exploration, exhilaration, familiarity; flowers, marmots, cattle; sunrise, sunset, storms.) I could describe an interim spent traveling through desolate southwestern landscapes, then the delicious return to a land of elk and aspen. Look, I could tell you, how beautiful the plains are!



Figure 4-1 : County road leading from quarters to Fossil Butte National Monument, early one rain-soaked June morning, train rumbling by.



Figure 4-2 : How to get to Kemmerer (about 11 miles east).



Figure 4-3 : Cattle grazing on BLM land, just outside of the monument.



Figure 4-4 : Making friends with the local wildlife.



Figure 4-5 : Sun-bleached bone.



Figure 4-6 : The edge of the butte and the plains, late summer glow.

By now you know how that goes—the rhythms, the routines, the exclamation points. But wait—there’s a different dimension this time. I learned something new, or rather unlearned, understood, finally let go of expectations and desires. Winter, you see, winter on the plains.

He who pursues learning will increase every day; / He who pursues Tao will decrease every day.

—Lao Tzu (cited in Capra 1984, 26)

First, though, autumn—the season of remembering and yearning that rises between summer and winter, exuberance and austerity.

The transition began when I shut down the paleontological quarry for the year and retreated inside to work on interpretive publications. Then came a pronounced emptying: visitation slowed, seasonal employees and interns returned to life elsewhere, and birds flew south, pausing to rest in puddles or stock ponds along the way. Next, a change in routine: by early October, instead of cutting cross-country to get from living quarters to the office—out my back door, up over a ridge, down into a slight drainage, up a much higher ridge, and down to the spot where the Visitor Center nestles above Chicken Creek in full view of the butte—I began walking about a mile east down the county road, then another mile northwest up the park road. Though that meant I had to walk farther, with the sun rising later and later it was easier to trust the pavement than to trip over sagebrush in the pre-dawn light. (Oh, how well I would come to know every rise and turn of that pavement—by mid-winter, I could even *feel* my way through the cold, crystalline darkness based on nothing but memory and the crunch of snow, ice, or asphalt beneath my boots.) On the weekends, too, I couldn't just go traipsing about wherever I pleased, slipping under the fences that separate the monument from adjoining BLM land. Instead, I had to pay attention to border lines and wear bright orange: hunting season had begun.

Hunting season! I am not a hunter, but have to thank those who are: as soon as game animals felt threatened on public land outside the monument, they flocked inside the borders. (No exaggeration. Wildlife biologists have been using radio collars to track the migratory patterns of elk for years; data shows a pronounced movement of herds into Fossil Butte—Park Service policy: preservation of wild life—around the start of hunting season.) Within a matter of days, my morning walks were filled with a new magic, a new poignancy, a sound to rival that of the wailing loon: elk bugling.

If you have never heard an elk bugle, I'm sorry. There is no way to describe the sound. Something hollow, something haunting, something desperate but powerful and primeval. It sounds like autumn. If you have heard an elk bugle, you know. You remember. John Price describes the experience best (2004, 55): “[It is] not about factual knowledge, not about appreciation or empathy...

It [is], instead, a moment of crystalline clarity, of cohesion, and yet also a dispersion of self, a negation of consciousness. I was consumed [by my encounter with elk at Wind Cave National Park]...[W]hen I try to describe it to others, I not only want to verbalize I want to embody: the shivering fury of the bulls, their urgency, their heat. My voice rises in the telling, I exaggerate, I gesture wildly. I make a fool of myself. And when the conversation moves on to other subjects I want to interrupt and say: ‘Wait! I’ve seen the elk – *remember?*

Remember? Remember the elk? Remember the cranes? The color of cottonwoods, gold in the sun? Autumn is a poignant season, each moment tinged with urgency as well as nostalgia—you know the leaves will fall, the darkness descend, and all you will have left to wield against the emptiness, the desolation, the depression of winter are the tracings of memories. Happy moments—sunsets, like salmonberries. You struggle to accumulate as many as possible.

But then what do you do with them?



Figure 4-7 : Moonrise over the butte, seen during my walk home, late afternoon.



Figure 4-8 : First snowfall! First snowfall! Barely dusting the top of the butte, but snowfall nonetheless.



Figure 4-9 : Wind-whipped cottonwood and grass, clinging to the side of Cundick Ridge.



Figure 4-10 : Morning clouds swirling over the sage, catching on the ridges.

4.1-2 Interim : The Writer's (and Illustrator's) Discipline

Fossil Butte National Monument, Wyoming

The writer's discipline lies in steeping oneself in landscape and subject, and then in making oneself present enough for the story to rise, for the words, like things one might find in a landscape, to present themselves.

— Mark Tredinnick, *The Land's Wild Music* (2005, 64-65)

By the time the elk began bugling, I had begun the process of writing, or rather trying to wrangle a subjective cacophony of sensations and perceptions into some sort of meaningful narrative. As I struggled to bring structure and coherence to irregular fits and gaps of memory, I found myself grasping for themes and threads: I didn't know what was important, what was forgettable, what was remembered, what was forgotten. Every time I thought I came up with a manageable outline, I found my mind stifled, my observations bland. What to do with a series of expectations and surprises, a string of thoughts and dreams?

Finally, I decided, rather than continue to try to stuff years into awkward segments or shuffle places into staid categories, I will let my story tell itself. "By arranging essays in chronological order," I was still a touch too conscious of and conscientious about the arrangement and its desired effect, "I will share experiences and ideas just as they had come to me—in the order of first encounters, departures, returns; sunrises, sunsets, seasons; gaps, twists, epiphanies. Themes and motifs—those of place-attachment, place-identity, hopes, dreams, demands, wide-open horizons—will rise, pass, and return as naturally and openly as the prairie itself." Like Rick Bass (1996, 188), I told myself, "I [won't] dare leave much out. I want...to bear witness to the facts. I want...to lay out my heart, forgoing art's great schemes. There's no cleverness to be found here, only rawness."

Honesty! Daring! Deep reflection! That's how, I believed, I would finally come to understand my relationship with plains places. Once I had measured my life by the length of a mile and the tick-tock of time, I could, in turn, concentrate on explaining and expressing what I'd learned. The ultimate goal, of course, was (and is) to share my story, my passion for these places with other people—to help everyone experience and cherish the rich, unique beauty of seemingly worthless, meaningless, boring or desolate country.

Ha!, says the sage. Edward Abbey (1968 [1990], xiv): "You cannot get [a place] into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his net." Terry Tempest Williams (2002, 115): "I write knowing I will always fail. I write knowing words always fall short...I write out of ignorance. I write by accident...I keep writing and suddenly, I am overcome by the sheer indulgence, the madness, the meaninglessness." No number of drawings, photographs, or essays can force a person to love a landscape. Designs may intrigue, scenes inspire, stories entertain, but appreciation has to rise up, seep in through a person's pores and soles and soul.

Worse yet, the process of writing—the reflection, the wordplay it entails—can detach you from the very places and things you so desperately want to share. "[While]...a certain amount of interior verbalization is helpful to enforce the memory of whatever it is that is taking place," Annie Dillard acknowledges (1974, 82), "[s]elf-consciousness...hinder[s] the experience of the present." Not only the present, but the past, Paul Gruchow warns

(1985, 28): “The more I write about [a place], the less I [can] remember of it. To write about something is to take leave of it.”

His solution, when he has written his way away from a place? “So I went down to the waters of one of the springs that feeds it,” he explains an attempt to recover his sense of a lake (1985, 28), “expecting to find some sign of fresh life to color over my own grayness...”

A walk!



Figure 4-11 : The county road, walking east, with Fossil Butte to the left. Low heavy sky, autumn rolling past.

Late one afternoon—one of those restless, can’t-concentrate-can’t-function-can’t-for-the-life-of-me-sit-still afternoons in which mid-October specializes—I went looking for inspiration, for understanding, for some sort of sign. It had been, for the most part, an unremarkable day. That morning, I’d stepped out while a bright, crisp hunter’s moon cast the landscape in sharp shades of black and white, à la Ansel Adams. A few clouds danced around Orion and a few more lurked on the eastern horizon, ready to absorb the sun as it rose. By noon, vapor had stretched gauzily across the upper atmosphere, leaving the sky a flimsy, filtered blue. A cold front began lumbering through mid-afternoon, bringing with it a low, lumpy blanket of clouds and a heavy, palpable sadness. The earth was turning over, tucking in, ready for winter.

I walked out toward the butte, away from the table and computer and mug half-full of cold coffee. Wrapped entirely in my own thoughts (or entirely empty of thoughts), I walked without noticing the color of the sky (grey), the temperature of the air (grey), the skitterings of little animals (grey, grey, all grey). Finally, I decided I’d gone far enough, wasn’t going anywhere, wasn’t fully engaged anyway, so turned for home. When I did so, I caught a whiff of something on the wind. I hadn’t smelled it on the way out, when the gale was at my back, broken by my tight coat and flapping hood, but the taste of the air was in nose and mouth. What *was* that smell? Not rain, not snow, nor sage, aspen, sunlight, frost, dirt, rock, nothing that I knew—more sharp than dull, bitter then sweet. As I struggled to identify it (November, I decided, ultimately; it smelled like November, two weeks early), something by the side of the road caught my eye. Something small, round, grey with splotches of russet...

A rock! I picked it up, heavy and cold and smooth. It fit perfectly in my palm, that rock. My rock. My autumn rock, my shrub-steppe rock.; my writing rock.

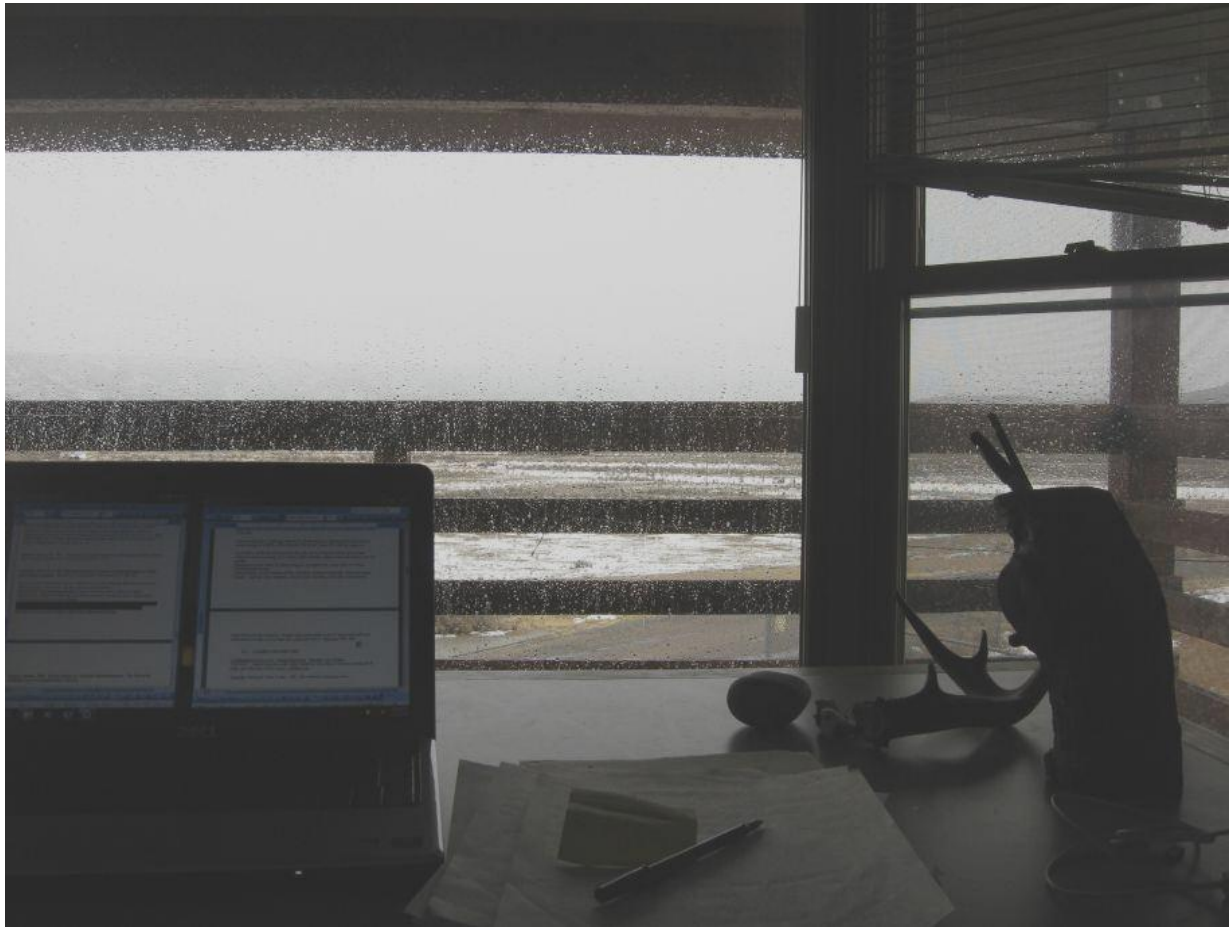


Figure 4-12 : Still life with dissertation and rock.

This is not really a book. This is instead an artifact of the woods, like a chunk of rhyolite, a shed deer antler, a bear skull, a heron feather.

—Rick Bass (1996, xiv)

Compiling a non-fiction narrative is the intellectual equivalent of exploring wild open space. You venture forth filled with excitement and trepidation, and very quickly find yourself lost. Even the best of maps and detailed directions can't tell you exactly where to go. (If they did—if you're just following along—then it wouldn't be your journey anyway.) There are few landmarks by which you can gauge your progress or plan your return. (Though geographers spend a fair amount of time celebrating the merits of phenomenological and humanistic research, there are few examples of original works of creative writing, photography, and/or cartography that are accepted as sufficiently "scholarly" or "scientific." Stigmas persist.) Each time you think you know where you are or what you're doing, something happens to make the place seem foreign. You'll constantly second-guess your navigational

abilities. You'll likely find yourself wishing you'd brought different or better gear. (More references! A newer camera! Another set of boots already?)

After the first few tentative trips, you start to feel a bit more comfortable with the terrain and a bit more confident in your navigational ability. You go farther. You get even more lost. Then you start to realize that getting lost is what it's all about. You are constantly delighted, surprised, by the twist of a path, the turn of a phrase; you start to see things you never would have expected, sitting there, hidden in plain view. You live in a world of pure sensation—wind, sun, snow, earth; line, color, adjective, verb.

Ah, but then you realize that it is starting to get late, if not cold and dark; you do, eventually, have to stop, to return, to find your way back, to figure out what you've learned along the way.

The story was supposed to end back at Petrified Forest National Park—the Painted Desert Wilderness Area, the shrub-steppe I had first learned to love. Before autumn in Wyoming, I returned to Arizona not as a ranger or researcher, but as an “Artist-In-Residence.” During my short tenure there, I revisited old favorites (Pintado Point! The Old Dead Juniper! Yes, even Pilot Rock. I got completely lost on the way home), made new discoveries (an unexpected arch; a petroglyph-filled ravine), took dozens of photographs, and, ultimately, nestled into a little cabin across from my beloved Painted Desert Inn—with a beautiful sweeping view of Pilot Rock—and began making maps. That was my “art,” I'd written in the application for the residency—I don't have a fancy camera; I'm not a proven author; I merely dabble in pastels; but I know how to make a map.



Figure 4-13 : Writing, drawing, mapping in the shadow of Pilot Rock.

“To make this sort of map,” I explained to park personnel and curious visitors who saw me sprawled out on the porch of the Painted Desert Inn with a giant pad of paper, pencil, eraser, and sweeping view of the Wilderness Area, “you don’t have to be able to draw or write well. You don’t have to know the newest version of ArcGIS. You don’t have to think things through beforehand, you don’t have to know every detail, you don’t need to measure, you just need experience, memory, a giant pad of paper, a pencil, and an eraser. Places will sort themselves out in time.”

As with writing a memoir, the hardest part in making a map is starting. I normally begin with some idea of “home” or “home base”—the starting and ending point for whatever experiences I want to include. In the case of the Painted Desert, for example, as well as Konza, my adventures begin and end at the trailheads; for the larger Petrified Forest and Badlands National Park, I leave from and return to the Visitor Center complexes (or, more accurately, housing). Next, I sketch in the horizon—Pilot Rock and Chinde Mesa, the Badlands Wall, the Flint Hills—as seen or imagined from the start. Then it’s just a matter of filling in all of the empty space in between.

Space.

Especially in such seemingly empty, capacious places as plains, space is an experience—a “way of being,” as Neil Evernden writes (1983, 8). Thus my maps and essays are full of events more than things—the routes I take and the animals I encounter, the weather, the seasons. You can’t see most of my landmarks from a scenic vista, or find my toponyms in the U.S. Board on Geographic Names’ Geographic Names Information System. You can’t care about the details—the Stylemys shells, the staring cows, the significance of Pilot Rock—unless you listen to my descriptions, look at my photographs, or, better yet, you go; go, crawl on your hands and knees through the brush, sleep under the stars, walk walk walk sunrise sunset. (By now, perhaps, you understand?)

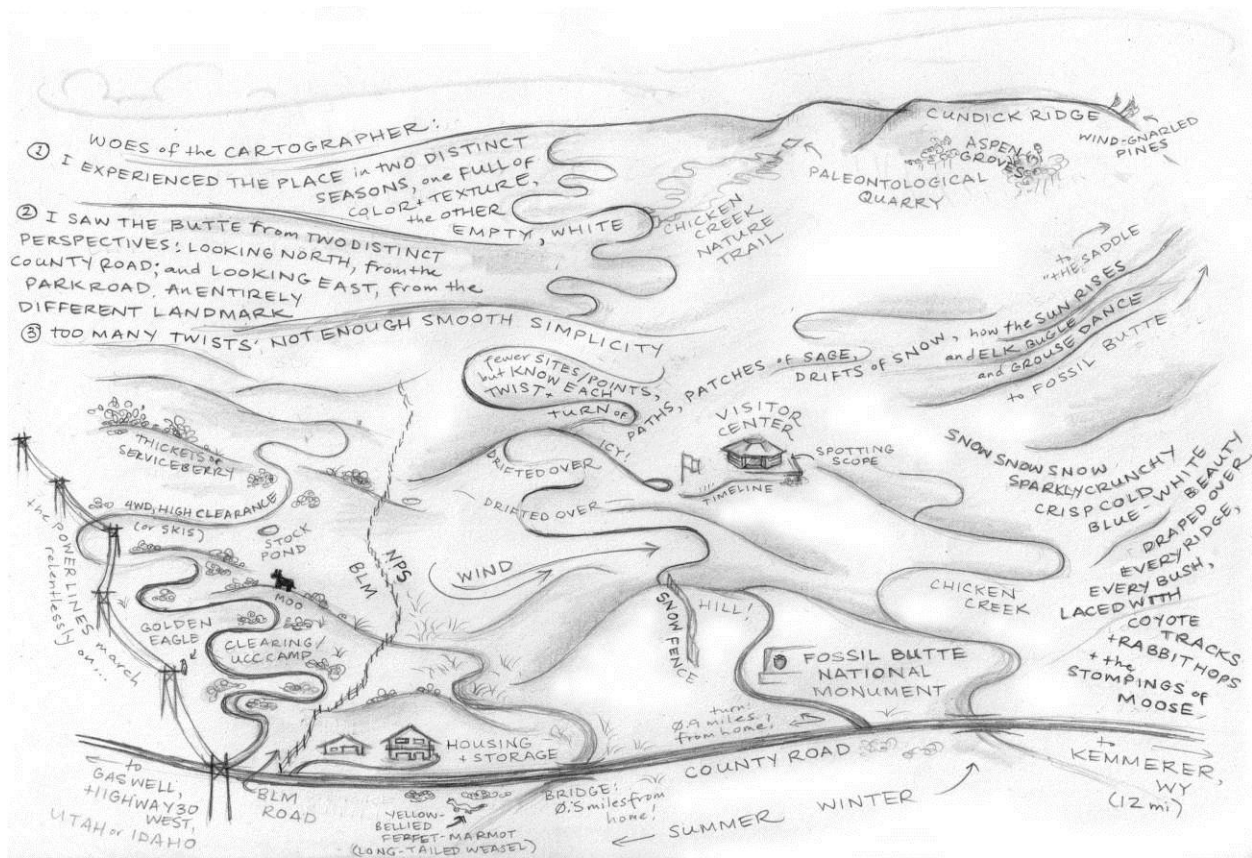


Figure 4-14 : Map, Fossil Butte National Monument, First Draft.

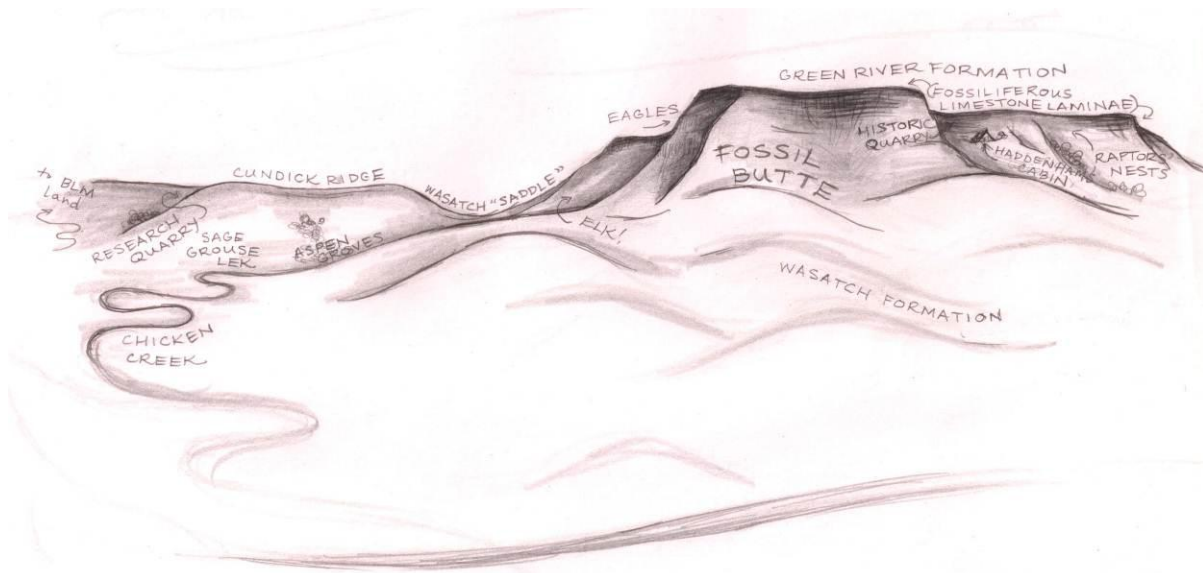


Figure 4-15 : Map, Fossil Butte National Monument, Second Draft.

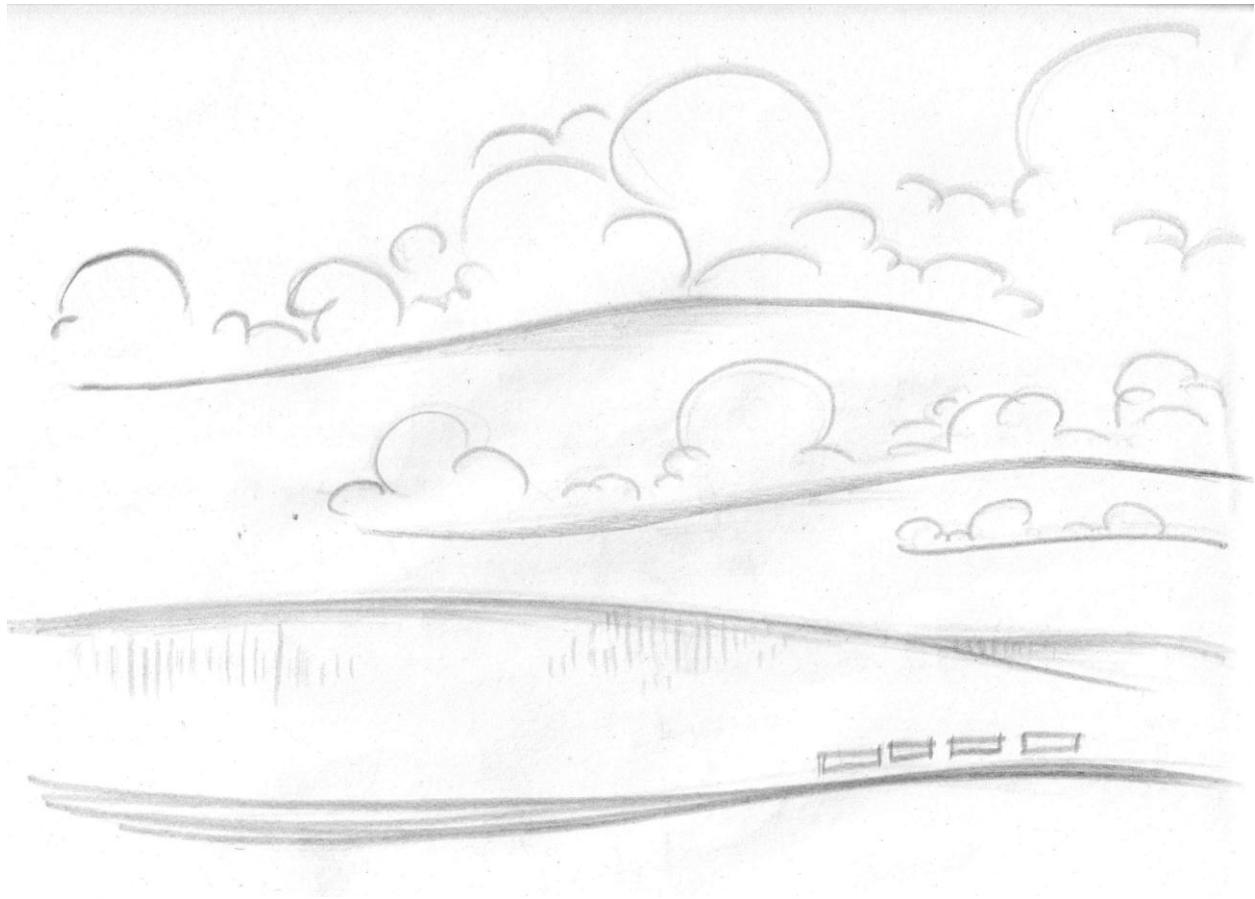


Figure 4-16 : Map, Fossil Butte National Monument: Train, Ridge, Sky, Snow.

Here's the riddle, then, the catch, the koan—after experiencing a place, after steeping yourself in its wonders, you want to share what you've seen and learned. When you begin to write or take pictures or make maps, the process of expression distorts your original perceptions—your memory becomes more and more selective, more inventive than your senses; words and images bedim real-world phenomena. So you strive forth again, in search of color, coherence, meaning. What happens then? “As I was standing there,” Gruchow learns (1985, 28), “the bank of snow gave way, and I was plunged in...

“It was not the thing I had imagined I might find.”

Back in Wyoming, while I sat and thought, thought and wrote, wrote and walked, walked and wrote, wrote and mapped, mapped and thought, thought and walked, walked and sat, tried to do anything and everything I could to encourage words and images to select and arrange themselves on a page, to let details settle out and clump together, the earth kept whirling around its orbit, tilting me away from the sun. The rain outside turned to snow; icy banks accumulated and I was plunged in. It was not the thing I had imagined I might find, winter.



Figure 4-17 : The first blizzard blows in, with 30 mph winds, dangerously bitter temperatures...



Figure 4-18 : ...and breathtakingly beautiful skies.

4.2 : Winter

Fossil Butte National Monument, Wyoming

I listen to the coyotes howling in the nights and to the crows cawing in the mornings and to the wind washing in the leaves of the cottonwoods in the evenings, and I know that I have not really heard anything of it except the mystery in it. But the mystery has captivated me, and under the spell of it, I have meandered, like the drifts of snow, across the wide prairies.

— Paul Gruchow, *Journal of a Prairie Year* (1985, 7)

In Zen practice, Buddhists strive for Enlightenment—an end to desire, freedom from want, clarity, lightness, and bliss. True Bodhisattvas achieve *satori*—a state of deep understanding and compassion, marked by full engagement in the present moment and harmony between the external and internal worlds. On the path to Enlightenment, novices may momentarily experience what is referred to as *kensho*—a glimpse of Beauty or Truth. (Western aesthetes might use the term “epiphany,” or refer to the same phenomenon simply as an “oh!-” or “aha!-” moment—that euphoria-filled, adrenaline-laced flash of surprise and delight in which an individual feels connected with the universe; remember sunrise, sunset?) To achieve such a state, especially to extend the short-term experience into a natural state of being, “you can only make yourself present,” to use Paul Gruchow’s words (1997, 167; see also Bunške 2007; Casey 2001; Lane 1988; Reps and Senzaki 1957), “watch earnestly, listen attentively...”

“[I]n due time, perhaps, you will absorb something of the land.

“What you absorb will eventually change you.

“This change is the only real measure of a place.”

Rather than pretend I understand Enlightenment or insist that *kensho* is more readily experienced in open, empty, seemingly infinite places, this, ultimately, is the story of what I absorbed from parks and prairies, how such places and seasons can change a person. I did not, you see, ultimately spiral back to the Painted Desert, Pilot Rock; instead, I finally come to winter. Winter on the plains.



Figure 4-19 : The same little hill, the same brush, New Years morning. Hoarfrost and fog. *Kensho*.



Figure 4-20 : Just me and a rabbit, out early one January morning, not a breath of air. *Kensho*.

You can feel the snow before it falls, as if the sky is aching to expand, divide, and drift to earth. If the wind's howling (which it likely is), you know when the first flakes go tearing by that millions more will be quick to follow; you'll soon be swept up a maelstrom of crystals—snow in your eyes, your ears, your nose, on your tongue, sharp, stinging, real. If, somehow, a rare peace has arisen, then you watch sparkles float down; listen as they come to rest on the rocks, on the sage, on the coats of the jackrabbits, now silvery-white.

Aha! Know, “[i]t's going to snow, whether you want it to or not. And it's going to be beautiful, whether you want it to snow hard or not” (Bass 2009, 22).



Figure 4-21 : The promise of snow, floating over the butte.



Figure 4-22 : Dawn at negative 20. Light freezes and falls from the air.



Figure 4-23 : Rise, sun, rise!



Figure 4-24 : A not-quite-balmy 6 degrees. The sun still manages to melt the frost.

You can feel the sun before it rises. It gets cold, colder, coldest, until it hurts to breathe and it seems as though even the stars will shatter and fall from the sky. (Sometimes they do, leaving a sharp, bright streak). Then you sense a pinkishness to the east—a pale rose, all the color you’ll get that day—and suddenly realize you can *see* your breath, you can see, you must be breathing, it must be day. The coyote howl.

Aha! Marvel, “[i]s this where we live, I thought, in this place at this moment, with the air so light and wild?” (Dillard 1974, 218).

You can feel the blizzard before it hits. A peculiar silence descends—the atmosphere inhaling—and everything stands still, watching; the rabbits’ ears twitch and the ravens caw nervously, fluffing their feathers and huddling together for warmth. Then, *wham!* A wall of wind—a three-day long wall of wind and ice and snow and your power goes out and you clutch your empty mug and feel vulnerable, alone, truly afraid, then, there, in the darkness, that wolves may come to carry you away.

Then, too, you can feel when the storm is ready to end, when it has grown sad, weary, ready to move on. Its howl takes on a different tone, a different timbre and you wake from your nightmare aware of the imminent calm. You know that when you step outside—the first fresh air in days!—the world will be shimmering, draped in blue-white drifts.

Aha! Believe, “[t]here [is] something of bliss in this stillness, and something ominous in it too. It [is] the kind of stillness that beckons us to turn inward, toward the beginnings of our existence” (Gruchow 1985, 32).



Figure 4-25 : Post-storm windscape.



Figure 4-26 : Air swirling ‘round sky and brush.



Figure 4-27 : From whence does the wind blow? Why, the west, sing the icicles.

You can feel the trains before they rumble by, rectangles of red so bright that you're startled to remember the world has color. Ah, "[t]he browns and blacks and whites [are] so rich [you can] feel them. The beauty here is a beauty you feel in your flesh. You feel it physically, and that is why it is sometimes terrifying to approach. Other beauty takes only the heart, or the mind" (Lopez 1986, 361).



Figure 4-28 : Train in January.



Figure 4-29 : Train in February.



Figure 4-30 : Train in March.

You can feel the moose bedding down beneath the aspen, and plan to curl into the depressions they've left in the snow. ("[W]e become tempered to the very shape of the land itself, and by its rhythms and processes, as surely as if we were buried by that snow...our bellies spooned against each curve and hummock of soil, each swell of stone, and the snow above pressing down, kneading and pressing and sculpting us physically," Bass 2009, 61.)

You can feel the crest of the hill as you huff huff huff up, and anticipate the whoosh of the skis as you glide back down.

You can feel the hollowness of the drift and fear you will fall into the creek.

You know that whenever you step out your door, your fingers will turn purple and your eyelashes and snot will freeze; you will see the hoofprints of pronghorn, the hoppings of rabbits, the twitterings of birds. You will add your happy, crooked bootprints, then return home, wrap your fingers around a warm mug of hot chocolate, and dream of the world out there.



Figure 4-31 : Oh, coyote, where were you coming from, where are you going?



Figure 4-32 : So crisp today, but by tomorrow my tracks will be gone.



Figure 4-33 : Loop-de-loop.



Figure 4-34 : Destination : bush.



Figure 4-35 : Before: tracks; behold: trackmaker.



Figure 4-36 : Train rumbling by; deer popping up to say, *who?*



Figure 4-37 : Another train, more deer, maybe the same deer. Thus each morning comes to life.



Figure 4-38 : After an entire night spent wondering what mythical creatures were snorting and snuffing and stomping through your dreams, you wake to find a herd of pronghorn foraging through the backyard.



Figure 4-39 : Coyote east, me west; the snow knows we crossed paths.

When you feel the bitter winter wind blowing across the prairie, according to Willa Cather (1918), you can hear it singing out, “[t]his is reality, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth.” Paul Gruchow, too, insists “[t]he earth in winter stares blankly back at the cold and featureless sky, does nothing to enhance or mimic it” (1985, 7) and Aldo Leopold suggests the season has simplicity if not purity, referring to the rest of the year as “a geometric progression in the abundance of distractions” (1949, 3). There’s honesty in the season—unabashed plainness, rawness, truth. Such crystalline clarity focuses attention and heightens concentrated awareness (Yasutani Roshi, cited in Capra 1984, 26), keeping a person in a perpetual state of aesthetic appreciation, attuned to awe (Chenowith and Gobster 1990; Keltner and Haidt 2003, 308). The howling wind, the sub-zero temperatures, that flat grey grey grey grey-white sky—when the environmental conditions are so decidedly *not* “favourable to biological survival” (Appleton 1975, vii), you must admit your own vulnerability. Vulnerability, in turn, begets intimacy (Lopez 2007, 145). You feel “insignificant, but never nonexistent: my point is that [you feel] *more* existent” (the Venerable Tashmoo, quoted in Least Heat-Moon 1991, 614); you shed frivolities, intentions, expectations. Empty of desire, you find only truth. When you open yourself up to the world, proceed nakedly, palms open, eyes wide, you feel the loneliness, the longing, the fear, the cold, everything that people hate about prairies and winter. It hurts to inhale.

Then, exhale, winter will scour your soul, sweep it clean, leave it as sparkling white as a snow-covered field. You realize that, through your years of wandering and wanting, *this* is what you sought.



Figure 4-40 : Winter.



Figure 4-41 : Waning moon hovering in the pre-dawn, -10 degree sky. Somewhere out there, elk are stirring. Coyote yawning. Brush shivering. A mountain lion sleeps, its thick tawny tail curled round its warm nose.

One morning, while trudging up to the Visitor Center through moon-lit drifts of snow and across invisible patches of ice, I had a sudden realization, a brief glimpse of emptiness, enlightenment—*kensho*, aha! Looking out over that landscape, I kept thinking, what am I supposed to *do* with all of this beauty? This smooth, pure, cold, white, here now beauty? Yesterday’s sky-blue, snow-sparkled, there then beauty? This pale, windy, blank pure, true true beauty? It’s too much for me, I can feel it, it hurts, I ache, may I *always* walk in such beauty. In beauty may I walk.

Oh, then, I gasped, sending a little puff of breath out to freeze and fall from the air, in beauty may I walk. It is not a hope or a demand; there is no need to always have a beautiful place in which to walk. “In beauty may I walk” is “may I walk in beauty,” with beauty, in a beautiful manner. May I learn from the landscape and honor it in my walking, my being. May I walk with the wisdom of winter on the plains.



Figure 4-42 : In which [a jackrabbit and] I walk in beauty.

Conclusion : An Even Briefer Meditation on Expectations and Emptiness

I discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something that has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear.

—Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, speaking of his Zen training (quoted in Holmes 2005, 431)



Late afternoon, winter solstice, out somewhere between the butte and home, with just the swishing of skis and swirling of light for company. *Satori*.

Let the snow fall. Let it cleanse all color, leaving the world sparkling in shades of white. Let it erase all texture, burying the bluestem, burying the sagebrush, burying the rocks the ridges, leaving all swept smooth. Let it negate forms, inverting the play of light and dark, the sense of near and far, any idea of self and shadow. Finally, let it remove lines. No more fences, no more roads, even that horizon—gone, meaningless. No difference between the land and the sky.

Then there is space. Space there in the wide white world. Not emptiness, or a lack of things, much less a memory of what was once there and desire for what could be. No, in that space, there's a rich possibility, an anything, an everything.

With that space, pause.

Breathe.

Step outside.



Zen of the Plains.

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