

Crossing the Prairie

I was introduced to the prairie in grade school, but I didn't see it for myself until I was 35 years old. Like millions of other 9-year old girls, I once spent an entire summer reading and re-reading *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The book made me dream of rolling across the prairie in a covered wagon like Laura, wearing a calico dress and eating beans under the stars. The next year, we learned a folk song in music class that began, "Oh, do you remember sweet Betsy from Pike, who crossed the wide prairie with her husband Ike." It seemed that the prairie was much like O'Hare Airport: a place that you had to go through on the way to someplace else. The operative word was always "cross." Apparently, the prairie wasn't a place where you actually wanted to stay. The first time I saw it for myself, I immediately understood why.

It was Memorial Day weekend, and I was driving through South Dakota's badlands with my husband, Patrick. We'd ended up there because of two unused plane tickets that were about to expire; South Dakota was the farthest we could get from Washington, DC for the ticket price. Like a lot of other people, we arrived on the prairie by accident.

The trip through the badlands had been otherworldly. The road snaked around towers and spines of rock, striped pink and brown and white. It was like driving through a set of gargantuan sandcastles. Much of the badlands border the Lakota Sioux reservation, and the only radio station our rental car would pick up was broadcast in both English and Sioux. The DJ, an elderly man who kept hinting that he needed a ride home when his shift was over, was alternating Bruce Springsteen songs with Sioux drumming and chanting. As we drove the twisting road through the looming rock formations, slow drum beats and lamenting wails filled the car. Pinnacles of rock towered over our heads. Finally, Patrick broke the silence. "Wow," he said. "This would be *really* weird if you were high."

We'd meant to turn around at the end of the road -- and then we came to the prairie. Glimpsing it for the first time was a lot like seeing the ocean for the first time, because the prairie resembles nothing more than an ocean of grass. Its entire surface seems to ripple with the breeze, millions upon millions of tiny, dazzling waves.

I had pictured the prairie as a sort of big, open meadow, like a baseball field gone to seed, the sort of place where it would be fun to play tag in a sunbonnet. But the tallgrass prairie is deep. When I stepped out of the car, the grass reached up to my waist. I had to wade through it the way you wade through deep water, holding your arms out from your shoulders, feeling your way on feet that you can't see any more. The grasses wave, and rustle, and sigh, and whisper to you. I'm not a biologist, but I could immediately see that I was looking not at one kind of grass plant, but at dozens and dozens of different species, an entire forest of grass. Blue and green, smooth and scratchy, they waved together like synchronized swimmers. I discovered their evocative names later: big bluestem, hairy gramma, stinkgrass, Junegrass, ricegrass, tumblegrass, a symphony of grasses that sounded as if they'd been named by people who were just passing through, the way you might name cloud formations on a day spent picnicking outdoors.

The prairie whispers, but its birds sing out loud. Whizzing above our heads, tunneling through the grass stems at our feet, birds seemed to be everywhere. Their songs overlapped each other and the soft susurrations of grass blade rubbing grass blade. At the edge of the path, a red-winged blackbird rode a bunch of needlegrass like it was a galloping horse, bobbing up and down on his slight support. Cliff swallows wheeled in the distance, and every so often we spotted a western meadowlark flashing overhead, its neon yellow chest almost psychedelically bright in the sea of blue and green. It's seductive, the prairie. We kept driving, even though dinnertime had come and gone. I couldn't resist looking around the next bend in the road, and then the next. "Do you want to turn around yet?" I asked Patrick.

"No, let's just go a little ways farther," he said.

As the sun was setting, we stopped to look at a prairie dog town. The sentinels popped out of their burrows, whistling at us like construction workers. They cast long, straight shadows in the lowering sun. The prairie dogs' outrage knew no end, and one or another shrilled at us every ten seconds.

Then they began to whistle at the buffalo. First one and then another appeared over the crest of the hill, and soon the whole town was surrounded by grazing giants. Above the buzz and whir of insects, we could hear their teeth tearing through the grass, the soft stamping of each hoof. It was a scene that Laura Ingalls Wilder probably experienced herself a hundred times.

In the half-light, the prairie looked even more like an ocean, its surface all heaves and swells in the dark. And that's when the coyotes started howling. Their voices were thin and silvery and tuneful. Their singing rose and fell, sliding up the scale and holding a note like a jazz saxophone, then free-falling in counterpoint. I wanted to listen to them and watch the buffalo and the prairie dogs forever, and I also wanted to go inside immediately.

The prairie was magical, and it was also far, far too much. Its sheer vastness, rolling and rippling in every direction, filling up the horizon from rim to rim, was overwhelming. Like the ocean or the night sky, the prairie is just too big to look at for long. I felt as isolated as any astronaut tethered to his spacecraft, walking outside in the immensity of space. I wanted to get back to someplace with four walls, someplace where my eyes weren't constantly drawn to the edge of the world.

I wonder if anyone who ever crossed the prairie for days and weeks and months on end could ever forget it. I think of the Western pioneers now as sailing through an ocean of prairie to come to a new place: the forests of Oregon, the rolling valleys of California, human-scaled landscapes where you could imagine starting a new life. And I wonder if it haunted their dreams sometimes, years later, the way it still haunts mine.

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Threshold

From the bar at the pier's end
they saw the moon's pale hands
play over the sea as if it were a piano,
phrasing waves into a night song.

He held his beer glass
steady on the high counter,
as a breeze blew, and her shawl tassels
fluttered against her mouth.

She'd got a raise, she told him.
He was glad, he said.
She watched the night fisherman
step into the shallows, cast his line.

City lights felt
the crescent of the bay,
completing the slow curve of ships
moored in the deepwater.

Along the beach
small ordinary fires
warmed the dark.

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