Splendor in the Tallgrass

by
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Out here, I feel crushed by the sky. I feel exposed—little mouse on the prairie. It's too big and I'm too small, and I don't know how to relate.

I have Nature Conservancy scientist Brian Obermeyer to help me—born here forty-five years ago, never left, soft-spoken, trim-bearded, in denim baseball hat and hiking boots, an un-cowboy-looking person in this cowboy neighborhood. He flies down the dirt roads in his pickup, a solid faraway gaze in his eyes. He scans the horizon, to distant creeks revealed by dark, snaking lines of cottonwoods and oaks, and to grassy tracks that lead away across the hills to nowhere.

Then he does his magic trick—his far-gazing eyes pull up short and so does the truck, and the tires throw up a cloud of dust. "Did you see that?" he says, and we walk back to check it out—a collared lizard basking on a rock no bigger than a bottle cap. That's the trick, evidently, to see far away and up close at the same time, and not just with your eyes but with your mind.

I try it. I turn in a slow circle and see green prairie hills rolling out like ocean swells in every direction, under a vast blue sky. I catch wildflower scents chasing past on the wind. I feel the brush of the grasses against the knees of my jeans.

At my feet, a little world hums: a net of grass, some fanning out low with long arching blades and some high and stiff and waving feathery seedheads, and a bright upturned bouquet of snow-on-the-mountain pushing through, and grasshoppers popping like popcorn, and deep in there, the ground-hugging prairie rose's hips ripening to gold.

We're in the Flint Hills, a 60-mile-wide spine down eastern Kansas into Oklahoma, and the last great swath of tallgrass prairie left. I'm here because I've always wanted to see this thing, tallgrass prairie, though I'm not sure what I expected. In the Flint Hills, the prairie survived because the limestone and flint at the surface of the soil resisted the plow. At one time, the tallgrass stretched from Canada to Texas; what's left is perhaps 4% of what once was. And two-thirds of that is in the Flint Hills, some of it in great preserves, with hiking trails leading across thousands of acres of swaying wildflower-studded grass.

Brian says, "This is the only place I feel uncrowded, able to breathe." He's a biologist and a no-nonsense guy but his voice is wistful. He levels a firm appraising stare out at the landscape. "When I go to the city or somewhere…" His words trail off. At first I don't get it, I feel I'm looking at a whole lot of nothing, and I'm used to looking at *something*. But I realize in a way that's the point—it's a great stretching austere emptiness. "Viewsheds," they call the endless vistas here.

Brian tries to teach me how to see it. He stops the truck, says, "This is the south end of a pasture." I note the line of barbwire running out of sight. "You see the difference on this side of the fence?" I don't but keep looking. On this side, a number of plants, some wiry, some bunchy; on the other side, fewer of these, and thicker grass. It

seems the cattle follow the sun all day and pile up at the south end of places, resulting in this lopsided look. Who knew cows did this?

Brian knows all kinds of things. He claims, when he looks at overgrazed pastures, he can see through them to their future, to the regeneration in them that hasn't happened yet. His eyes get squinty; he's looking at the place where stem meets soil, but what he sees I do not know.

"What are the names of these plants, that grow where the cows pile up?" I ask.

"Ironweed, pigweed, broomweed, sumpweed."

"So they're weeds?"

"No."

"What are they?"

"The ranchers call them forbs."

"What does 'forbs' mean?"

"It's just a word. It's what the ranchers call them."

"What do *you* call them?"

"Broad-leaf plants."

Seems it's either a broad-leaf plant or a grass. Or a sedge, that's a third category. Or it's not here at all.

When I first went looking for prairie, I thought I was looking for grassland that hadn't been grazed, as if ungrazed prairie were like virgin forest. But I learned that analogy was not quite right. It's a landscape that's been shaped by humans for ten thousand years, through fire for example, which stimulates grass growth. This practice allowed Native Americans to influence the movements of bison, and it also kept trees

from taking over. Ranchers continue to use fire, though there are various approaches, and Brian's job as director of the Conservancy's Flint Hills Initiative involves researching best management practices. He also helps local ranchers preserve their land through conservation easements.

The ranchers are an interesting species. This is the New West, where cowboys wear a wedge of dung under their boot and a cellphone on their belt, and spend half their time at computers tracking the protein content of grasses. One of these is Bill Haw. A former banker with a degree in literature, he began buying land here over twenty years ago, claims he bought only "ice cream ranches"—sweet ones. He is wiry, wears crisp khaki shirts and jeans, goes without a hat. With guidance from The Nature Conservancy, he and his wife Maggie recently donated a 10,000-acre easement that now, as a result, will never have a road or building on it, protected from subdivision by people he calls "cappucino cowboys."

Haw and other ranching men and women like him are spiritual heirs to the ones who came in the 1800s and founded towns with fancy courthouses and wide, western-movie-set streets. They quarried the local stone to build mills on the tree-shaded rivers, and huge barns for their bluestem hay, and they dug deep for the prettiest, creamy-white limestone for their extravagant Second-Empire-style mansions.

I find my way to one of these grand houses, on a ranch turned bed-and-breakfast where I am the only occupant, with 5000 acres to myself and a bedroom above the very parlor where Jesse James is said to have spent the night. In Kansas, 'Jesse James slept here' is like 'George Washington slept here'—those guys really slept around.

It's spooky to prowl downstairs at night, through the antique-filled rooms. There's a coffee table with big griffin feet; there's a Victorian fainting couch with lumpy horsehair stuffing. I strike a couple of notes on the 150-year-old piano in Jesse's room. Badly out of tune, the notes rise weirdly in the silent house.

It feels good to get away by myself—biologists and ranchers are fun but I sense that the true essence of the prairie is found in solitude. After the moon sets I sit out back of the house, near the pasture gate—I think about going through that gate, into the wilds, but there are cows out there I don't want to meet in the dark.

I look up at the stars. They are dense, glorious; the Milky Way sweeps drunkenly across the sky. I think of all the people who've been here and seen those stars: the folks who built the high-ceilinged rooms of the house where I sleep; the Indians who lived here before them for thousands of years, in villages they moved from time to time, following the bison across the open plains.

I stare hard at the stars and wait for the click that will transport me in time, into connection with the past. I listen: I hear the wind, I hear a distant freight train. But then I hear a tractor trailer rumbling out on the highway. And my neck is starting to hurt, and I'm sleepy. It's not happening—can't force it—go to bed.

But sometime very late, before the sky begins to lighten, as I slumber in my bed in that great empty house, the calling of an owl drifts through my open window, from somewhere out on the prairie. I stir, and lie there half dreaming, and the owl's haunting call draws me into a timelessness so deep there is no bottom to it.

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I think about when I want to return. Spring is the height of wildflower bloom, and

its finest moment may be May into June, when the butterfly milkweed paints bright orange all across the shocking green.

August into September is a ripening time, when the unceasing wind becomes a welcome thing and the grasses are tall and swelling with seed, "heading out" as people here call it. In October, when mountains in New England are turning colors, the same tones here catch fire—bronze and rust and gold, moving on the wind through the sea of grass. In a good year, the Indian grass and big bluestem grow tall enough to tickle your ear.

Out on the prairie with Brian—he has stopped the truck for a pair of mating grasshoppers—I wander off to study grasses. I scare up a jackrabbit with gigantic ears, who bounds up the dirt road ahead, then stops and looks back at me. Plump meadowlarks wing up, then coast low. Creaky grasshopper noises fill the air, and notes of birdsong like splashes of watery sound.

I squat down to look at some switch grass. It is fine-stemmed, with delicate purple seeds held out in a wide spray. Who knew a single stem of grass could be such a lovely thing? I hunch down low and I can look up through it—an airy constellation of tiny purple points—to sky that is empty blue.

I never told Brian how when I first got here, I felt his sky press down on me. Now I'm glad I didn't, because now I know that prairie and sky are joined, if you only get down low enough to look.