

Writing Stories Voices of the Valley



A Collection

Volume III

Edited by Emily DuBord Hill and Erin Lord Kunz

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And of course — thank you, reader — for delving into sense of place in North Dakota, committing yourself to living well and living holistically.

Index

I. Prairie Heartache, Erin Lord Kunz	5
II. Leaving, M. L. Whitman.....	14
III. Occupation; Home, Matt Berosik.....	21
IV. The Edge, Emily Dubord Hill.....	26
V. THE STARLING WE FORGOT: The Western Meadowlark and the North Dakota Tradition of Change, Billy Beaton.....	33
VI. The Beauty of Decay, by Erika Gallaway	41
VII. The Oil Boom of North Dakota: An Alexander Memory, Amanda Claire Starbuck.....	44

<i>VIII. Farming Grass Upon the Prairie Sea, Dr. Joshua Hunter.....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>IX. New Moon, Stephanie Olson.....</i>	<i>58</i>

Introduction

When *Writing Stories: Voices of the Valley* first began in Fall of 2013, we were looking for a way to bring community members together that may not normally hear each other's stories. We attempted to bridge the gap between millennial and elderly populations, as well as native North Dakotans and immigrant/refugee cultures. In our third volume of *Voices of the Valley*, we are adding a third element to the storytelling: the North Dakotan landscape.

The most publicized conversation about North Dakota at the moment is the oil production in the Bakken. This subject deserves its own analysis, introspection, and set of stories. However, people have been living, working, and interacting with this land long before the Bakken put North Dakota in the environmental spotlight. Our collection will articulate some of these stories and help us further understand what it means to live in this place. Not only do we want to bring writers in contact with North Dakotan citizens who have stories to tell; we want to further understand our sense of place in connection with these stories concentrated on the land.

According to Annette Lucksinger, to understand sense of place, we need to “examine the complexity of the human relation to the physical world, the universal connections between people and landscapes, and our moral obligation to act rightly toward the places we inhabit.” While humanity creates standards and treatises on how we must treat each other, Aldo Leopold argues that this same care has not yet been extended to the environment, and we have no articulated land ethic. This volume of *Voices of the Valley* will explore this complexity between people and landscapes and inevitably raise questions about how to develop a land ethic.

By reading this volume, you are participating in the conversation about North Dakota's environment, and we are thankful for that engagement. Furthermore, all proceeds from this project go back into the community, to projects that contribute to the overall creativity and wellness of the city. This year, proceeds will be donated to Fargo River Keepers and UND's Children's Learning Center, toward their Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms project.

Stories illuminate the affinity that people have for the land. This collection is our commitment to the land-people relationship, and our belief that this relationship should be honored.

Yours,

Emily and Erin

I. Prairie Heartache

by Erin Lord Kunz

Don't make me sound like a whine ass.
--John T. Lord



There aren't many places where you can sincerely get lost, where you can go miles and miles on a four-wheeler and not see another soul. On Easter morning, John rediscovered a bit of the rural magic that seems to disappear with adulthood, when the expansive world you love starts to feel smaller. The plains of North Dakota never begin to shrink; they only stretch out more and more and will, as John says over and over, humble you.

*

The grey horizons
Only bore those who never
did follow its call

*

It was cold and windy in Western North Dakota that day, like many of the days in this part of the country. But down in the crick, where the cows were with their calves who needed tagging, the wind went quiet and sun shone through the trees. The calf was sleeping in his sunspot, paying no mind to John. He watched the calf's mom, sitting on

a fallen tree, talking to her baby in the cool spring dew, and it was perfectly quiet, with a momentary warmth.

“That is magic,” says John. “That’s the most beautiful thing. You don’t get that anywhere else. That’s what gets me up every morning.”

Instant gratification. Not a phrase you hear often when people describe the farming and ranching life, but they’re the moments that bridge one goal to the next, one season to the other. This is what drew him to ranching life--the solitude of the field. There can be days where he comes across no other person, no disturbances. He is rarely interrupted by the outside world; he doesn’t even have an e-mail address in which to be bothered, a lifestyle that is both deeply alluring and incomprehensible to me. The last time he was in town a building along his driving route was there; the next time, it was gone. Time marked by the appearances and disappearances of physical structures. There are days when John does not even turn on his radio and simply soaks up the peace of being quiet with his thoughts:

“It’s not like I am having these deep thoughts. I don’t even remember what I thought about. It’s just nothingness all day, just observing. This is better to me than sitting in a crowd. I’m not comfortable in a crowd.”

Crowds are not something one from North Dakota has to worry about. Maybe North Dakota nurtured this introverted sensibility in John; perhaps he is just lucky he was born in an area that feels natural to him. The topography of his childhood neighborhood mirrors this disposition – we lived in a valley situated within mild hills, physically cut off from the rest of town but in no severe way, aptly named “taravalley” - a little idiosyncratic neighborhood that earned its own name in the larger town of Mandan.

He and his friends thought this valley was their world, and to a child, it really is. Making forts, hiding precious artifacts in the hills, and climbing in the culvert that went from the top of the hill down to the road; this was how John played away summer days with his buddies. The middle child of us five, John knew he had siblings that scoured the neighborhood, too, but he felt like these places were his, a discovery known to no one else. All of us kids lived within this roughly half dozen-street neighborhood, but our discoveries were private:

“We all thought we were the first to find the culvert.”

As the youngest sibling, I can attest to this, too. I thought it was mine. Our oldest brother hid toys in the ditch on the West side of the neighborhood, thinking we never knew; we all knew. John and his friend Kyle also thought the grassy enclave the city eventually filled in was their spot. Of course, these were all of our spots, but they still

remained secret and personal to us, like a song everyone knows but interprets from an individual perspective.

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Laughing as we tromped
Through the tall grass hidden with
Our jokes and secrets

*

The legends of taravalley passed down among us, too, even though we never spoke of them with each other. Everything drained downhill to the north where there was a slew, or crick area, with gravel washed into it. The way the water washed into the gravel made it look like a footprint--a six foot tall footprint--and John was convinced it was Bigfoot's footprint. There was only one, but he and his friends were convinced. The curbs in taravalley weren't square; they were at a 45 degree angle, just a slant. One such curb in front of a neighbor's house contained a small hole in the cement, and John and his friends would pour water, and mud, and grass in this hole to make a mud slushy to bait Bigfoot. I am always amazed by the way nonsensical memories and stories from childhood stick—events that no adult could arrange to happen for their children. John and Kyle were certain Bigfoot lived in taravalley, and they wanted to prove he was there, hoping to catch him. The clues left by the gravel and the cement hole were enough to narrate a story, their boyhood friendship adventures:

"We would ride our bikes to the north end, see for more spottings."

The layout of taravalley made the neighborhood feel separate from the rest of town, even though it was right on the edge of it. There was a pasture out north, in which sat an old wrecked car next to a field with two horses. John claimed this territory also as the valley, his world:

"Everything where we could travel was taravalley."

This ability to see and know anything that was reachable by bicycle was what started his lifelong love affair with open spaces. John's best memories as a child were going to his cousin's farm--the very Polish Filkowskis. The farm sat along the edge of the Badlands, a uniquely elevated landform compared to the rest of Dakota. The country, farm lifestyle really intrigued John, and he remembers always wanting to go there and dreading when it was time to come home, as much as he enjoyed taravalley. The openness sparks a kid's imagination, with all of the territory to explore, the prairies stretching as far as the eye can see. In North Dakota, this is not just a nice saying to knit onto kitchen towels; the plains really do roll on, farther and flatter, than the human eye is able to interpret. Everything seemed so big to John when he was a kid on the farm:

"You could walk a mile and think you walked a million miles."

He could spend all day outside, doing nothing, but it would feel like the greatest day of all time.

If only the childhood picture of the world could last forever. The land changes, and we change, too. John remembers growing up with empty lots between houses and the particular day Dad put the fence in. Before that everyone shared everyone's backyard, and backyards were only distinguished by who mowed what, but it was still all one backyard. Today, there are no empty lots in taravalley. And in a tragic development that feels almost like the antagonistic plot line in a children's cartoon, there is now a Walmart on top of the hill where his fort used to be. There is a school and a medical clinic, too, west of the neighborhood, which fills in the space that used to be separate from the rest of Mandan.

"It doesn't seem like the neighborhood I grew up in that was so magical," says John.

Now it just seems like town. He can't imagine a kid having the experiences today that he did when he was little, when the emptiness made the possibilities seem endless, because the horizon was, indeed, endless. Even though the neighborhood was technically defined as city, all you had to do was walk a block and you would be in a hay field and the widest open country you could ever imagine. You were only a quarter of a mile away from the town, but because it was in the valley with the "big hill"--as we called it--it blocked the view of the rest of civilization. You couldn't see the town, and you were excluded, wonderfully, from it. John felt like that even though he lived in a city's zip code, he was as close as he possibly could be to being a country kid.

There is no questioning now that John has grown into a country man. Expanding the slice of world he could reach by bike, he is now self-employed and ranches and farms 30 miles south of Mandan. John raises Black Angus commercial cattle and backgrounds all the calves, meaning that he does not sell them immediately; he cares for them until they meet a certain weight, around 1000 pounds. He grows corn, sunflowers, and wheat. When I ask how many cattle he has and how many acres he farms (which seems like the right question at the time), he reminds me that these types of numbers are not ones respectable ranchers and farmers give out liberally. Though many of us who are distant from the country life lack the context to make these numbers meaningful, for ranchers and farmers, they are kin to asking what your yearly salary is.

I feel a constant irony when writing this story, fleshing out the interview transcription, and calling to get more information. Just now, as I feel irritated that my Moroccan Mint Green Tea has gone lukewarm in my mug, I call John to get more elaboration on the particulars of his ranch. He jokes with me for a bit and then--quite patiently, I might

add--tells me he will have to call me back because he's unloading a truck. I drum my fingers, frowning at my cold green tea.

My tea problem cannot compare to his description of North Dakotan winter farming, when it's cold, -40 degrees below, and everyone is hiding in the house, Facebooking about the temperatures. John has no time for that, as he heads out to feed the cows, coming back only when the job is done and the cattle are safe.

John adamantly states, "We're not working for them; they are working for us. I respect them. I learn their personalities. I know the cow that is bluffing and belling when I am tagging her calf, and the cow who won't bluff but will come to run me over when I'm with her calf."

Working the land is a fundamentally different occupation than what most people experience once they settle into a comfortable career after a four-year degree. With a "town job," being short \$2000 for a bill means picking up extra shifts, working overtime, or even adding a customer service job to your evenings, but ultimately you are still in control of your finances. With farming and ranching, John is at the mercy of what Mother Nature provides and where the markets are sitting. Ranchers and farmers get paid a couple times a year: the day they sell their calves, and the day they market their grain.

As committed as John is to his work, he is often unable to control his ultimate profit margin:

"[I] can do everything right--everything, *everything* right--but the grain markets were poor [last year] so we lost money. I've never worked so hard in my life as I did last year in sheer number of hours, but on paper, I lost money; I was a failure last year. Even in the old generation--our dads' dads--if you put the work in you would get something out. If you put in a few more hours of work you'd get that much farther in front of your neighbor. Now you [still] have all the work, but it's all marketing--it's strategies."

In order to be successful as a rancher and farmer, you have to be incredibly smart and educated, but it's not just local markets you have to understand now; it's world markets. John explains:

"As soon as you think you understand something, this thing has a way of humbling you and showing you that you don't know."

The way the markets work is different than a couple generations ago, because there are so many more factors and variables that can throw off what could or couldn't make your year, what could or couldn't make you money. Farmers sell contracts to the elevator to estimate how much grain they will have, for example, 5,000 pounds, or approximately five semi-loads. In August, if for some reason they can't produce the

grain, the farmers have to buy themselves out of the contracts, because the elevators have already sold the grain that doesn't actually exist yet. The most fundamentally grounded occupation--literally growing plants in the ground--now exists in a state of fugazi, dependent on how people think other people might place market values. The idyllic, cartoonish Oregon Trail idea of trading goods, or even just selling and getting paid, no longer exists.

*

Physicality

Of a seed, of a plant, can't

Fight economy

*

Previous generations didn't need operating loans and sold their product straight up. Farms were smaller, 50 acres, so they didn't necessarily need a loan to buy them. They had eggs or milk to sell every week--not the twice-a-year budget plan farmers and ranchers are at the mercy of today. The global economy didn't affect the interaction of buying and selling with neighbors.

Today, local and regional climate patterns are not the only weather concerns they must worry about; a drought in Brazil could affect soybean prices here. As environmentalist Aldo Leopold writes, "the formerly localized and self-contained circuits are pooled on a world-wide scale." The literal, tangible product a farmer produces doesn't mean much within the context of a global economy, because the product only becomes meaningful within the abstract world of market prices.

John laments, "I sold semi-load, after semi-load, after semi-load of grain, and lost \$90,000 because the grain prices were low."

Even the honesty of the seed is subject to today's globalization. John relies on Mother Nature to give him enough rain and enough warm days, and the markets to look at his work favorably, but he keeps the responsibility of success squarely on himself. He controls the spraying, and he makes sure there is enough fertilizer. If he screws up one step he could put his entire year in jeopardy of making money.

This burden does create some tension among "town people" who don't understand or don't want to understand. They may think the government are constantly bailing farmers out.

John laughs, "Of course because I get the subsidies, I don't think it's enough. People who are on other side and don't understand, who haven't lived it, will of course think farmers get too much help. But you don't understand the heartache until you've lived it."

This heartache is the burden of small decisions from day-to-day to the big decisions that affect the ranch years on out, but ultimately the fact that hard work is not realistically connected to how the markets monetarily define success.

Though my sisterly and socially-minded perspective makes me draw out this section, in order to extrapolate the unfairness in what used to be such a tangible, straight-forward profession, John does not concentrate his thoughts here. His business is more significant to him than its monetary gain. John explains:

“We’re doing this to make money--we’re going to use the land--but we’re not going to abuse it.”

Some ranchers abuse the land, but any short-term gains will only hurt the ranchers, and of course the land, in the long run. If ranchers take a piece of land and graze it to nothing, it can’t and won’t produce the next year. Careful and prudent farmers can contribute to the land by making it more efficient, so they can do with one acre what farmers 50 years ago did with ten acres. If they till everything black, the earth will dry out or blow away and cease to be productive for the farmer.

Ranchers use lagoons now to pump manure back onto the land and add more fertilizer and organic material, rather than simply dumping it into their neighbor’s crick and looking away. John believes there is momentum toward more sustainable farming and ranching methods, because people are watching the self-employed farmer/rancher (perhaps more so than corporate farms), and because misuse of the land is equally disastrous to the earth and the people working it. Respect for the environment is not beneficial only in the abstract concept of eco-friendliness; it’s practically advantageous – and necessary – to those who work the earth.

The sensibility of someone who wants to work the land, who wants to work cattle, who settles with having an unknown future, and who puts in work hours most of us could never fathom, is decidedly different than status quo. John says he likes the struggle and even when there is a spring blizzard, when the temperate hopes of Midwesterners are dashed as more snow falls. A sort of occupational sadism? Maybe. But there is no joy without pain, and there is nothing quite like seeing a cow and calf in the summer, when the glass is blowing in the breeze, when it’s green and beautiful and warm, and the ranchers think back to that March blizzard when they couldn’t see their hands in front of their faces. That warm day is the payoff for John, knowing that he brought the cow and calf to the point of warming themselves in the sun, at the bottom of a crick, on Easter morning.

“I got her to that point,” says John. “And I will get the calf to the point of wherever he ends up in his life. To know you can do it, then to actually do it.” That is the sensibility of John and his ilk.

John's reflections about what his North Dakotan life means is part of the prairie genre. It's wholesome, small town, and family-oriented. In his 18 years of living in "the Mandan house," he doesn't remember ever locking the doors or even seeing a key. What makes farming and ranching more particular than this Midwestern Bildungsroman is how individualism wears away in a fashion someone might not expect from the rugged, goal-oriented rancher. In North Dakota, farming families are all working toward the same goal, and they all understand the everyday struggle and heartache to accomplish that same goal. There is a feeling of satisfaction when that goal is accomplished, together, as a collective, no matter how big or how small the task.

A straight-laced, practical man with rose-colored glasses, it's no surprise that John sees the landscape of North Dakota--his land--as being alive and constantly changing. Though not everyone might understand the ranching and farming life, with its effort and work and heartbreak, John believes anyone could grow to love the vivid sounds, sights, and smells of the Western farm experience:

"I think everyone could appreciate what I see, the trees clanging above you...anyone could understand."

The sheer amount of work is harder to grasp. Whether it's the guy with four chickens and two cows who still milks the cow for himself, or the dairy farmer with 3000 cows that is running a corporate farm—the work is hard, and they are not guaranteed anything.

"I live in North Dakota because it's the only place I've lived, but that's the same reason I'm here...it's the only place I'll live," says John. "I am sure I would feel this way if I was born somewhere else. It's not fair to say since I've never been to many other places, but I love North Dakota. I love that we do the one-finger wave off the steering wheels to strangers as we drive down the highway. I like that we help people, help an elderly woman put her groceries in her car. You don't do it because you want a crowd, or because you want someone to put it on Facebook. You do it because you care. You want everyone to have the love of a family."

Aldo Leopold posits that "The land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process." Talking to my brother, in his boots and flannel and cap hair, about the business and the work but the love, too, this sentiment surges forward. As a farmer and rancher, John identifies his heartache with his stewardship:

"You respect the land. If you don't respect Mother Nature, Mother Nature will educate you very fast. You learn work ethic. You are responsible. You appreciate the land and you know the heartache. You don't take anything for granted."

The possibilities are sparse, yet endless, in the wide open prairie. The kid will bike toward it all, and he'll always find the magic.

*

Did he know as he
Chased Bigfoot that he'd never
Stop the prairie chase

*

This essay was written from the recorded transcription of a conversation between John Lord and Erin Lord Kunz, as well as follow-up conversations.

Erin Lord Kunz is Co-creator of Voices of the Valley, an Assistant Professor of English and Writing Program Administrator at Mayville State University, and a doctoral student in the Educational Foundations and Research Program at UND. She predictably likes reading and writing, as well as dogs, running, travel, and the outdoors. Her writing can be followed at erinreneelk.blogspot.com, culinary and gardening adventures on Instagram: "NDGardenGal." Let's keep the eco-conversations going.

II. Leaving

by M. L. Whitman



May 2010

I am twenty. I am barely into my first week conducting archaeological survey for a water pipeline. In the mornings, I leave the work truck and walk down into the ditch and back up into a field that does not yet reveal any signs of spring or summer. The legs of my jeans are damp with dew, denim sticking to my calves, but the early sun dries them quickly. I walk east and slowly the sun leaves my gaze. I trudge through that soft dirt, blissfully kicking up topsoil, freshly churned stratigraphic layers.

Several days into the project I feel a twinge in my right hip. I blame this on the powdery plowed dirt of the cultivated fields across which I traverse, my boots sinking in between rows of planted corn growing under the surface even though I can't see it yet. With each step I correct my balance and tell myself that once I reach the mile mark and switch to pasture, the discomfort I feel will vanish, left behind with the day's early coolness and moisture of the grassy ditch.

We break for lunch, but when we return to the line in the afternoon I know I have a problem. The sharp, tight clench in my hip registers alarmingly when I hoist myself over a sturdy wooden fence post. I carry on, letting my mind wander as I scour the earth in between rows of young pine trees and determine how best to cross Beaver Bay without encountering the traffic of Highway 1804.

By the end of the day, however, my stride evokes searing pain that shoots down my thigh. I tell my crew chief I can't go further. I have to pull myself into the cabin of the truck using the steering wheel. My job is walking. How can I work if I can't walk?

We spend the next morning scouting out smaller lines, poking around cellars and houses long forgotten, bridges crumbling under the weight of the earth they uphold. But the afternoon comes and I drop my crew chief off near an abandoned German-Russian homestead. I remember that stucco, the plaster sides of that house, and its lonely location at the front of a series of buttes, unforgiving in the wind. I remember that pang of loneliness, that sense of remembrance I can't really lay claim to because I was not there. But I feel it all the same, felt it again later in my grandmother's trembling voice that carried the loss inherited through generations.

I drive to our halfway point, pull into a ditch, and ease myself out of the truck, warily eyeing the hill in front of me and the bleached cow skull a rancher has attached to a fence post tapping the weathered wood in the wind. I walk south. After a mile I turn to the east and begin my trek upward. Moving forward hurts more than most pains I have known. I do not have tears for this. Instead I wail into the wind. I am alone for miles, but this wind carries my cries away from anyone who would listen.

My hardest miles max out at three. I stop by a small alcove, it and a cemetery a quarter of a mile into a section the only traces of St. Bernard's. I see a cloud of dust before I hear the engine of the truck. My crew chief drives up to me and tells me his route took him through a prehistoric site. We return to the cow skull and slowly enter the section it guards, following the faint tire tracks in the prairie grasses that meander up a long ridge. Atop, we disembark. I can see for miles.

My crew chief points out ring after ring after ring and finally we come to a rectangular depression. My eyes widen at the indication that someone had lived up here. The view is commanding but the locale is desolate in the way that these prairie scenes are simultaneously harsh and beautiful. In my mind's eye, I construct a small house over the depression in the ground. A woman walks from the door and looks to the north, where the horizon is empty, save for the landscape. Who could live here? Who could open the door everyday and face this wind? Who could go on like this? Who could survive and prosper in this wind?

“Someone lived here?” I ask my crew chief. I have to shout for him to hear me over the wind, even though he is next to me. I examine the ground, the extents of the ridge, its descent into open terrain.

I've read about prairie madness, and at that moment, I got it. I understood in my body, in my blood, in my skin, burned from the sun and the wind, how the women of the prairie could lose their minds. They lived in this. They lived in this without another human around them for miles. They left the house with the bracing winds and blizzards and gusts and they survived. At times, they thrived. My hip didn't hurt as much.

JUNE 2010

My grandfather is alive. He is on my left, sitting in his rocking chair. I am perched on a leather love seat. My grandmother is to my right, settled into an adjacent couch. I am telling them about the cellars.

Emmons County, the home of the proposed water pipeline, sits at a vertex of what historians call the “German Russian Triangle”. In the late 19th century, Germans from Russia, an ethnic group from present day Ukraine, migrated to the United States to escape persecution. While the challenge they found in the North Dakotan plains proved that their new home did not entirely mimic the steppe they left behind, they planted themselves as they sowed their crops. Encountering a German-Russian homestead on survey became the highlight of the project, as many contained within their plots a distinctive root cellar. From the outside, these cellars appear as doorways straight into the earth, concrete entryways apart from other structures. The first cellar we came across necessitated a trip down ruined steps into a large cold, damp room, complete with a pile of snow leftover from the winter.

The mark of the Germans from Russia is impossible to miss in Emmons County. Kuchen is a staple in grocery stores, and I ate fleischkeuchle for lunch throughout the project. Lawrence Welk grew up on a farm just north of Strasburg and his parents are interred within Strasburg city limits. I had never fostered much interest in my German-Russian ancestors prior to setting foot in Emmons County. My grandmother fed me kuchen and we danced the polka at family reunions, but I did not feel strongly about this history. I did not even know much about it beyond placing leaves on trees for elementary school projects. One of my few seeds of memory includes a corner of the Heritage Center in Bismarck featuring a one room house for visitors to

peer inside. Next to it was a replicated cemetery with an iron cross nestled into glittery snow, a gentle reminder that homesteading was not without difficulty.

I describe the cellars to my grandparents animatedly. They recognize my descriptions. My grandfather tells me about his family farm south of Glen Ullin, and my grandmother talks a little about Halliday. My grandfather tells me his great-great-grandmother got off the train in Hebron and walked with her luggage to the new land near Glen Ullin. I find this unfathomable.

My grandmother begins to tell me about a documentary she had seen. She keeps in touch with others in the area, her large family having trickled into central North Dakota from the west. Her summary becomes sobering as she launches into an anecdote from the film.

She tells me that in the early days of settlement a blizzard hit, snow and wind secluding a family to their home. Soon, the fire began to die. The father, realizing that this diminishment meant their own, prepared to venture into the storm to find supplies. In those days, even though towns sprang six miles apart from one another so that no one could be isolated beyond that distance, braving the cold could prove lethal. It can still prove lethal. The man's wife tried to reason with him: "You can't leave me." Text cannot convey to you, reader, this moment. Six years have passed and I hear it rattle in my brain as clearly and as viscerally as my grandmother said it that summer. "You can't leave me." Her voice chokes and I feel a prickle in my eyes. She goes on, wavering voice, pitch climbing. The man knew he had to go or they would all die. After some time, he returned with fuel for the fire, but along with supplies he had acquired illness. The cold, the ferocity of the land took him, consumed him anyway. "You can't leave me," my grandmother repeats. We are silent. My grandfather sits, motionless. I stare at the coffee table, my heels dug into the carpet. We are only interrupted by the hum of the air conditioning, pumping cool air into the house, such a stark contrast to the wood frame, collapsing houses I peeked into days before.

You can't leave me.

DECEMBER 2010

My grandfather is dead. I am rage, seething as I storm out of the last stage of the funeral. With frigid fingers I turn my car's ignition and head for the interstate. I shake as I grip the steering

wheel. I drive west. As I approach the exit for Glen Ullin my nerves quiet. I coast through town and turn south, stopping at an abandoned farmstead. I do not know where my grandfather's farm is. Was. It does not matter. I stand in the snow and listen to the wind upon the snow. I admire the hazy sun and the myriad of grey in the field before me. I turn around and drive to the Catholic cemetery. I trade my mourning shoes for my hiking boots and trudge through the pristine snow until I reach my great grandparents' grave. I thank them for my grandfather, for surviving this place, for enduring. When I return to the interstate and drive east, I am peaceful.

JULY 2010

With my grandfather's directions in my glovebox, I pack my car. I am going to Montana to excavate along the Yellowstone, but I have a detour planned. When I reach the Glen Ullin exit I turn south. As I slowly roll through town, I see the cemetery I am looking for. I park and start my search. I find my great grandparents and even great-great grandparents, but this woman who made her way through the open plains eludes me. I grow agitated. I leave the cemetery. My grandfather told me about a smaller cemetery, St. Peter and Paul, where his ancestors remain. I have a general geography in mind but no lay of the land. I blast down gravel roads, gaze skittering through fields and pastures, but I see nothing of the sort. Soon I realize I am lost. Unnerved, I abandon my quest and conform to the first major gravel road I find south of Hebron. As I hit smooth pavement, loss of sense of place morphs into loss of heritage. I have lost my ancestors among this place, swallowed by vastness I can't navigate.

MAY 2014

I am home. I have lived outside of North Dakota for ten months, but now I am home. I use the state's GIS hub to peruse the Grant County topography for cemetery markers. I jot notes and memorize section lines, marking up county maps. I slip into my car and drive west to Glen Ullin, and this time I know where I am going. Some eight miles southwest of the town, I carefully guide my car down a muddy two track toward a derelict church. A cemetery encased in sagging barbed wire sits beside it. I roll under the bottom rung over dirt and flattened grass, taking notice of names and dates. My great-great-great grandmother is not here, but it does not matter. There are others, and I know where they are.

The cold did not take this woman, but rather the opposite. After her farm outside of Richardton failed, she moved south and managed her home into old age until an epileptic seizure caused

her to knock over a lantern. The cold did not claim her, but sometimes snow is indistinguishable from ash.

MAY 2013

My last project in Emmons County spread out into Logan and McIntosh Counties as well. For a time, we dutifully stopped by every cemetery near the pipeline route, our interest piqued. But I found there are only so many times I can quietly mutter “another kid” before I didn’t need to say it at all.

The German-Russian triangle is full of places like this, from larger, more formal cemeteries to family plots hardly discernable from a highway, but they are almost all full of children and families who did not, could not endure the land. Some have their existence memorialized with concrete markers, but others received an iron cross, a hallmark of the Germans from Russia. A few cemeteries in the triangle are entirely made up of these crosses, their metal curls in striking relief against endless snow drifts and skies.

I don’t know how to reconcile myself against the Germans from Russia that couldn’t escape blizzards or starvation or prairie madness. The summers I spent walking through valleys and hopping through streams and rolling my hips on the fresh dirt of cornfields do not bind me to them even as I know how the cold can live in my bones with an effect both fatal and invigorating. I know how the wind can tear and restore, how rippling wheat is a sign of the continuity of seasons even as it demonstrates our reliance on its productivity. I was wholly in the triangle, and I can’t leave the triangle, even if I’m not there.

I am a cultigen of the prairies and the buttes. This place is in my flesh. I can’t leave it, and this is both a relief and a burden. My subsequent trips to North Dakota yield the sweetness of sliding back into nostalgic memory and the aching grief of slowly augmenting unfamiliarity, soil compensating for absence, loss from uprooting, closing in around an excision.

You can’t leave me. I’m no longer sure of where that plea originates. For the early German-Russians, desperate spouses and kin. For me, the land becomes inseparable from my genealogy to the extent that I can’t interpret who or what makes that demand.

Madi Whitman is a doctoral student in cultural anthropology at Purdue University, where she longs for the open prairie but is vaguely fascinated by the presence of forests.

III. Occupation; Home

by Matt Berosik



“I just think that North Dakota has a lot to offer, but it’s not for everyone.”

I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Susan Ellis-Felege, Assistant Professor of Biology at the University of North Dakota. The goal of our talk was to understand how Susan, a recent immigrant to North Dakota, looks at the land and the role it plays in what makes North Dakota, North Dakota.

Susan grew up in western Pennsylvania, in an area that holds a lot of similarity to North Dakota: rural country, very agricultural, neighbors few and far between. Susan had a lot of the same experiences growing up that I, and other life-long North Dakota residents had: spending your days outside, getting dirty, exploring wherever you could. Her family had a deep connection to the land as well that instilled a love for the outdoors:

I grew up in a family of hunters and fishermen. My father is also a deputy wildlife conservation officer, having just retired after doing that for forty-some years as a side job... knowing wildlife was an option for a profession, as well as a recreation and an appreciation for doing the right thing relative to natural resources, you know... a guy with a badge (her father), you really learned the laws, the rules and all of that... so that was kind of my childhood, and it was... those experiences that made me realize I really enjoyed the outdoors.

Hunting trips as a youth brought her out to the prairie and through North Dakota and brought with her an interest in the land. In reference to those trips, she said, “we actually were hunting up in Saskatchewan, but we drove right past here (Grand Forks, North Dakota)... and it was when I really learned a lot about the value of the prairie for waterfowl, ducks, and geese.”

Combining with this innate interest in the prairies, she volunteered with the Pennsylvania Game Commission and realized that she could have a career in it and “I declared as a kid that

was what I was going to do when I grew up... and it has been the trajectory I have been heading on since."

To go from the relative hilly, wooded areas of Pennsylvania and the swampy lands of Georgia, where she completed her Ph.D. to the flat prairies of North Dakota required a little bit of acclimatizing. North Dakota is not without its terrain changes though, as Susan described the land:

It changes dramatically, in North Dakota, from the east to the west. This flat, one inch of elevation change every mile in the river valley, where flooding is the major concern... it's just flat, like you can see for miles, and then as you leave the river valley, you get to those rolling hills... and the pothole region that's important for ducks... it's rolling hills and little spots of water. Then, as you go west even farther, there's actually true hills... after you spend so much time in the east, you find yourself winded as you walk up them, embarrassingly so. I describe it as something that is like a growing topography from east to west.

The pothole region that she described is in reference to the "Prairie Pothole Region" as it is termed. This is a unique landscape that cuts a swath across the Midwest from Alberta, southeast to Iowa and contains an almost uncountable number of small lakes and sloughs that is responsible for producing almost sixty percent of the ducks in North America, among other animals. Susan refers to it as the "duck factory!" This region brings wildlife biologists from all over the world to study the habitats of these animals and was one of the primary reasons for Susan to come to North Dakota. With her research looking at ground- nesting birds, the Prairie Pothole Region was the ideal laboratory. "I got my passion from ducks, but I've always wanted to live in North or South Dakota or Montana since I was a teenager, because of what it represents for North American waterfowl species."

When I asked her about stories she had heard related to the land, Susan began to channel her inner Aldo Leopold:

I think about what this region was, and I wonder what it really looked like 100 years ago. You hear the things like the Lewis and Clark journals.... of this vast landscape of grasses, some very tall here in the region.. the massive herds of bison... and I wonder what it would have been like to live here, back then where things were on fire because lightning would strike and then these herds of bison would follow these big burned areas, you know, a spot where the plow hadn't broken the land up and some people look at that and think, that land looks really clean because it is all meticulous, because the farmer leaves it clean.

I look at the landscape as *broken*... because it's not that vast grassland that I had envisioned as well as a lot of the potholes are lost (due to development), so I see it as a damaged landscape, and my stories come from that, that it is a damaged landscape. It was a beautiful, historic thing that many accounts of the people moving west talked and wrote about, and it's not exactly that anymore. It's partly why I came here as well. It is because this is a place that has a lot of problems, agriculture has had an impact on geography and about how aggressively we do change and how much that's altered even how water flows across the landscape.

Putting all these big, windmills up, which seem like a great, green, thing but the power isn't needed here, it's needed somewhere else and there's other energy challenges of what that means to get that power somewhere else and the prairie wasn't designed to have big things on the landscape that soared above the grasses, it's not how that ecosystem was, and then you go west and you look at the gas and oil and you know, dust storms from all of the traffic, to me it's unfortunate that my story about it is that of a broken landscape; it's one where we have used it and used it and used it and perhaps, not stopped to ask some question about should we continue using it the same way we have, or can we use it differently and I think many of the stories I hear, from folks all over North Dakota, the words are "Oh my how it's changed"... and that's not necessarily a positive. I have nothing against progress, working lands, or living off the land, but we must consider our impact on the land and that it has limitations.

As a person who was born and raised outside of North Dakota and only arrived in the state five or so years ago, when discussing the people and how they interact with the land, Susan said:

A strong, outdoor heritage exists here, and that hasn't changed in my viewpoint, I thought that when I came, I still think that, the people of North Dakota, you know, one of the major recreational things here is hunting and fishing. There's an outdoor heritage for sure that exists, but there's also something that maybe has emerged, there's two different sides to that outdoor heritage, the one that pays the bills and generates all this economic stuff and then the other side, where there is truly the appreciation of the land and the use of the land for hunting, fishing, more recreational things... and those two things are a odds right now, and I don't think I saw that dichotomy as strongly when I first got here, I knew it existed, but I didn't realize it was as strong as it is. This is a state where the land is mostly privately owned, maybe 90% is privately owned, which, when you start to think, for most western states it is kind of the opposite with large expanses owned by the public.

As a lifelong resident I, along with others, sometimes take the outdoors for granted, hearing the jokes about our flat prairies (you can watch your dog run away for three days before he disappears), but tourism is still a large part of what makes North Dakota. Hunting and fishing are primary examples and I found Susan had a better idea of the role the land played in tourism more than I did and what brings people to North Dakota:

Most people don't recognize that before the gas and oil boom, the second biggest industry in this state behind agriculture was tourism. It is the number three industry right now, behind these big energy and food industries. So I think people do come here, and they come here for natural resources, they come here to bird, they come here to hunt, they come here to fish... pheasants, deer, and walleye pay the bills... that is the big three, which interestingly enough is not ducks, which I've always kind of wondered about, but ducks would also be right up there close behind. So, we are a state to visit, we are not necessarily the most diverse state, culturally, you visit, we're the state you go to, in my mind, to escape the hustle and bustle, a state where you can come to still find quiet places, and even though there's a big gas and oil boom, even though there is all this stuff

going on in the state, there's a quietness on the prairie that doesn't exist anywhere else.

I've always teased at -10 °F, there's a stillness in the air, although everyone says that's because it's -10 °F! I think the people who live here are a special kind of people, they come from people who really look out for one another, you can't live in this environment without taking care of one another, people say that there's southern hospitality in the southeast (United States), I lived there and experienced it. It's not the same thing as here in how people interact with one another. I do genuinely believe that people in North Dakota care about each other in a way you don't find in many places and when you get to the smaller, remote communities, they are excited to interact with you. Sometimes they don't understand you as an outsider, but you also sometimes don't, as outsiders, give them the chance for you to be something more than an outsider. You know, we come and go as visitors, instead of stepping back and listening to what they have to offer, their stories of this prairie that I think the people here, the landowners, the farmers, the small communities, have to share.

It's still a small community place and that doesn't exist almost anywhere else, some of the west still has a little wild west to it, but North Dakota really has that small community feel to it. You can go to true bed and breakfasts and you can actually go out and find places where your rush hour isn't anyone else on the road, and that is pretty cool, that is unique. My contributions... originally I got into the profession of wildlife biology because I wanted to contribute to the protection of land and wildlife for future generations, I quickly realized that doing that as an agency person was not going to happen, or it wasn't going to happen in the meaningful way I had hoped. As a result, I did the thing that I said I would never do and that was to become an academic and it's not my research that's going to make a difference, it's hopefully providing students, even if they don't go out and actually become wildlife biologists, or fisheries biologists, or natural resource managers, it's being informed citizens, that make good decisions about the land and appreciate the land and then the ones that do go out and make it a profession, they're going to be, as a group, making a big difference more than I could have done just working in an agency. I believe my research questions answer applied problems on the landscape, but I don't know how much people will actually use that science to make the decisions that actually need to be made to protect it, so my best option is to train the next generation of people who care and will fight for the land in the way that, that it should be fought for.

At the end of our talk, Susan finished her thought with these words, "I just think that North Dakota has a lot to offer, but it's not for everyone. I think that you have to be willing to think outside the box and really learn to love the land and also learn to appreciate the places where it hasn't been broken and how to move forward with it." With that, our talk was over and I found myself, as a person who has lived in North Dakota for almost 33 years, being more proud of my state than before. It's not perfect, it can be seen as flat, desolate place, but the land and people have a lot to offer.

Matt Berosik works and learns at the University of North Dakota. He is a staff Biologist in the Biology department and a doctoral student in the Educational Foundations and Research department. He enjoys reading, writing, being outdoors, and spending time with his family.

IV. The Edge

by Emily DuBord Hill



There are not many times in my life when I take pause and realize I'm experiencing an authentic North Dakotan moment. However, this summer I attended my first true farm wedding celebration. My friends, Emily and Evan Montgomery, married each other on July 11, 2015 at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The bride wore flowers in her hair and the groom wore his cowboy boots. Both originally growing up in rural North Dakota, it was fitting their wedding reception took place on the Burkland farm which has been farmed by Emily's family since her paternal great-grandparents lived there. The guests and wedding party enjoyed their dinner outside in a tent that swayed in the prairie winds. There wasn't much need for typical wedding decoration since there is nothing more stunning than the hues flickering through prairie grasses. Later in the evening, the barn doors were opened and we danced the night away to old country tunes that seemed natural in that space. Evan, being both a farmer and a classical vocalist, surprised the guests by crooning some of these country songs to his new wife. The evening ended with a fireworks display that lit up the prairie sky and the multigenerational farmstead.

Everything about the evening emulated what North Dakota is all about—community, hospitality, and natural beauty.

For this reason, I knew my friend Emily Montgomery would be a perfect person to interview when considering what it means to have ties to the North Dakota land. When I was thinking about people in my life who are prime examples of having a sense of place in the Red River Valley as well as having unique experiences in the area, Emily was one of the first people to come to mind.

As we discussed her memories over coffee, she began to unravel what it was like to grow up on a farmstead in the Red River Valley. Her family's land is located southwest of Grand Forks and just outside of Thompson. As a child, she has memories of the farm being a prime place for make believe games to come alive. When I asked her to describe some of her early memories with the land, she vividly spoke of "the woods." She started to laugh when she said this because she said since it is North Dakota, "the woods" was really only a disorganized shelterbelt. But through the eyes of a child, it truly was a mysterious woods.

Emily remembers standing in the middle of the shelterbelt and not being able to see out of it. She was encased in trees and the space felt large to her. A person could get lost in the woods, so in a sense, it was the perfect place for your imagination to run wild.

Most adults remember making blanket forts in their living rooms as children, however Emily remembers building a network of forts inside the shelterbelt. The space was large enough to have specific regions for various forts. She remembers her father making use of scrap items from the farm to build his children these forts. He made teepees out of tarps (she laughs in embarrassment about how not politically correct this was) and even converted an old nonfunctioning outhouse into a playhouse for them. To Emily and her sister, the outhouse was just a playhouse. They didn't realize it was an old outhouse until much later.

From an early age, there was cultivation of imagination and creativity for Emily on her family's land. There was theater that happened in those woods without her probably knowing that what she and her sister were doing was art.

For many, our childhood memories of make believe and fort making occurred in very expansive places. But as we grow older, when we visit these childhood spaces, they feel much smaller and more insignificant than our memories tell us. Emily has a similar feeling when she goes back to her woods in that old shelterbelt. The regions are a lot closer together than from what she can remember drawing as a young girl with her sister Caroline. The playhouse that seemed like a mansion her dad built for them looks more like a small, ancient outhouse in her adult eyes.

The acres of farmland that were endless growing up have shrunk in many ways. It has become more of a luxury to live in the country. People who once bought land to cultivate its richness have now turned into people who seek a country lifestyle without all the difficult work. These new country dwellers are people who make a living by working jobs in Grand Forks and commuting back to their quiet homes underneath the prairie sky in the evening. They live there for the peace and quiet; not to know the earth.

Although these new country folk desire tranquility, Emily has notice how the increased interest in living outside of town has made the farming area more of a neighborhood. When her parents were growing up in the Thompson country area, they went to one-room schoolhouses through the eighth grade because the population could not fill a whole school. Now with the increase of families choosing a country living, the roads are busier, the quaint one-room schoolhouses are closed, and even some small churches have closed their doors.

Like any good North Dakotan-Norwegian family, Emily's family went to small country church while she was growing up. This church had been their religious home throughout the generations – even her grandparents attended there. But as time went on, Emily's family noticed the attendance dwindling, which caused quite the decline in the feeling of community. As the population increased in the area, families started attending church in Thompson and Grand Forks in order to find this community again. These schoolhouses and prairie churches were once centers for people to gather. Ironically, as more families move into the country, this once strong sense of community has been disconnected by the influx of people.

There also has been a growing disconnect between what traditional farming was in the past and what it is now in the present. Over a hundred years ago, agriculture was the primary way to make a living in North Dakota. Emily reflected, "It used to be that the communities were smaller and people were closer – closer connected to the people who were farming. They were only 1-2 degrees separated from a farmer. Like your cousin farmed, or your dad, or your brother, or your neighbor. And now, not many people know farmers just because the farmers are getting bigger and there are less farmers." She becomes frustrated when she hears the stereotype of the modern rich farmer, because in her experience she knows a farmer's fate is tied within the environment's jurisdiction each passing year.

As the sense of community and sacredness of the role of farm started to diminish around her, Emily's feelings of disconnection with the land began to grow. During her teenage years, she was adamant about getting out of this place. As if North Dakota was

difficult to escape. There were so many more opportunities and exciting things going on outside the North Dakota borders – concerts, theater, art, and people.

It wasn't until Emily started competing in pageants in college, that she began to reignite her appreciation of her state. When she became Miss Grand Forks and a top ten finisher in the Miss North Dakota pageant, part of her duties was to travel around the state and meet people. While traveling, she reflected on what makes North Dakota unique compared to other states. She began to realize it wasn't just the fact that most of the state's land is flat. In terms of topography, North Dakota stands out from the other states because our soil is very high in nutrients because half of it is in a river valley. It is also fascinating to think about our state being engulfed by a glacier in a time far away. When I asked Emily to create a metaphor that described the land, she very aptly told me it was like rocky road ice cream. All laughing aside, it is the perfect metaphor for the land here – it is very rich and has lots of fertility (like how rocky road has ripples of fudge, marshmallows and nuts in it). She went on to say that although plains surround the area she lives in, the western side, The Badlands, is sheltered by some of the most scenic vistas of warm red, brown, gold, and orange.

Beyond the variety of topography in North Dakota, the state also has its own distinct culture. She smiled as she said, "Every state has something different to offer, but I just feel North Dakota still has some of that old-fashioned culture." She admitted sometimes this old-fashioned culture does influence our ability to move with modern trends and politics, however there is something comforting and welcoming about the kind nature of the people who live in our state. There is something charming about a culture where it is common place to go out of the way to help your neighbor sandbag around their home during flood season, shovel an extra sidewalk, or having a pedestrian wave and nod to the driver who stopped so they could cross the street.

But it is not only the people who inhabit the state who she finds comforting. As she has traveled beyond the state borders and experienced other landscapes, she finds something reassuring about the flat prairie lands. She remembers traveling to Norway with her family to experience her ancestors' heritage. Norway possesses some of the most beautiful and untouched natural environments in the world. While floating through fjords by boat was absolutely breathtaking, Emily remembers feeling claustrophobic. She laughed as she said, "I felt like we were enclosed and there was no way to get out. And I wonder if this had something to do with me growing up in really flat, open land." Sometimes it is when we leave North Dakota for a while, that we truly realize the beauty of being able to see so far into the distance. The land no longer is merely flat – it is steady.

As we continued to talk and sip on our coffee, I asked if she felt any specific events in her life have strengthened her ties to this area. She replied laughing, “Umm...so I married a farmer.”

She went on to explain in many ways she always knew she would marry a farmer even though she resisted this notion earlier in life. During her first year of marriage to Evan, she said it has been strange to grapple with the fact that they are never going to move anywhere else. But with this permanence, there is also pride with carrying on the legacy of working the farmland their ancestors once tilled themselves.

After getting married, Emily and Evan moved out to his paternal grandparents’ farmhouse in Manvel, North Dakota. Even though Emily has a lot of experience with farm life in her own past, moving out to the Montgomery farm has been a very different experience – the biggest difference being the cows. She explained that a person who doesn’t have farming experience might think this is not a large transition, however the dynamic of the yard has really changed. The typical day is much more regimented. You have to feed the cows at a certain time and it is not something you can skip. You also have to feed the horses. “If they get out, you have to go get them. You can’t just stop dealing with them,” she said with a laugh.

I asked Emily about her recent social media post about the cow who escaped the Montgomery farm. It’s definitely a process when you are gathering a large animal since you cannot pick them up and place them back into the yard. I envisioned Emily, home from a long day at the Empire Theater wearing professional attire, trying to herd a startled cow back inside the gate.

Emily and Evan are a unique North Dakotan farming couple in the sense that both of them are artists in their own regard. Emily gives artistic vision to the historical Empire Arts Theater. She is a classically trained pianist, vocalist, as well as participated in the North Dakota Ballet Company for many years. Evan has a vocal performance degree, sings in the Grand Forks Master Chorale, and can be heard singing to his cows daily. I was curious to know if Emily thought there were any interesting similarities and differences to the arts and farming lifestyle.

She expressed the major difference is how tangible farming is and how intangible working for the arts can be. Often after a day at the theater, she can get overwhelmed by how intangible the outcomes can be than perhaps the outcomes in an average 9-to-5 job. But when she goes home to their home, there is some comfort in the tangibility of the outcomes for a farm. As a farmer, you put something in the ground, you take care of it, you take it out of the ground, and then you sell it. “It becomes food, so it’s very

concrete,” she said. “Everything you do has a very definite end that you truly can see and experience.”

Growing up, Emily never really understood why people always said farmers have good work ethic. But when she landed her position as Executive Director, she began to see her strong farm girl tendencies shining through into her work in the arts. She feels like she has a better work ethic because of growing up on a farm. Nothing on a farm is negotiable: “You have to do it. There’s no way around it or out of it. You can’t put it on someone else. You have to put the crop in there and you have to get it out...It feels like there is less of a middle man in what you are accomplishing. You are doing it all yourself.” And for a theater, you are often put on this regimented time frame in order to pull off a show or a concert. For life in the theater is like the farm in the sense that “You just have to get it done and work until it is done. Whether that is at 5 PM or 5 AM.”

Emily also has found that with both farming and the arts, there is a great level of conservationism. She said that her father introduced her to what it means to conserve the land at a young age. He was always involved in the Soil Conservation Society, which worked a lot with bringing awareness of over-farming the land. She said, “He was always really cognizant of caring for the land and trying to make sure it would produce well for years to come. I feel like I’ve kind of inherited that.”

Emily brings these conservationist ideas to her work at the theater. Because North Dakota is so sparse when it comes to population and cosmopolitan areas, the area is accurately described as an arts desert. There are fewer resources for the arts in this area and Emily has become in a sense, an arts conservationist. She recognizes that we are on “the edge” geographically when it comes to arts opportunities. Because of the digital age, people now have access to social media and YouTube to see, hear, read, and essentially witness the art being created outside the boundaries of our state. This technology opens up a lot of windows for people who live in an artistic desert such as North Dakota, however we are still limited in resources when it comes to live performances. Emily accurately describes our arts culture like this: “It’s like a terrarium, you know where the water evaporates and continues to water the plants. It’s recycling the same ideas and resources.”

As an artistic conservationist, Emily actively finds ways to exchange and generate new ideas with the artists within the area but also tries to invite artist from other parts of our country and the world to share their talents within her theater. Exposing area artists and art appreciators to art from the outside is imperative for her because she never wants the Red River Valley audiences to become used to a certain level of artistry.

Making our artistic borders more permeable will encourage our audiences and artists to push for even more variety and quality of artistic experiences.

Although seemingly different worlds, agriculture and the arts, Emily believes both speak to each other in similar ways. As North Dakotans, we live on the edge when it comes to our remoteness compared to the rest of the country. But we also live on the edge in terms of innovation. In North Dakota, both arts and agriculture require a strong sense of resourcefulness, whether that may be coming up with creative ways to get the most out of the land while being environmentally conscious or how to get new audiences to groundbreaking performances that go against the norm of what is typically attended in Grand Forks. They both require creativity, cultivation, and community. To be a farmer is to be an artist and to be an artist is to be a farmer.

Emily DuBord Hill is Co-creator of Voices of the Valley, an Instructor and Student Life Coordinator for the UND Honors Program, and a doctoral student in the Educational Foundations and Research Program at UND. In her spare time, she sings alto in the Grand Forks Master Chorale, drinks tea like it's going out of style, practices yoga, and has intellectual conversations with her dog, Mr. Gatsby.

V. THE STARLING WE FORGOT: The Western Meadowlark and the North Dakota Tradition of Change

by Billy Beaton



Feathers of Unequal Length

“There’s one!” A sudden flash of yellow streaked the space beyond our dashboard window. “That was close,” said Mike, instantly identifying the bird we’d set out to find. “I wouldn’t want you to see your first meadowlark smashed beneath the grill of my car. Want to grab a picture?”

I’d already rolled down the window as Mike followed the bird along the gravel road toward home. We’d been driving all afternoon on the edge of the tallgrass prairie, skirting a boundary that’s never stopped changing since our ancestors first proclaimed they drew it.

It’s been 211 years since Lewis and Clark laid Western eyes upon the natural resources of North Dakota’s Missouri River Valley. But it’s what Meriwether heard one summer morning that warranted a note in his journal.

“There is a kind of larke here that much resembles the bird called the Oldfield Lark, with a yellow breast and a black spot on the croop,” he wrote. “Tho’ this differs from ours in the form of the tail, which is pointed, being formed of feathers of unequal length.”

Two centuries ago, scientists named the Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* — the starling we forgot — and today it’s the state bird of North Dakota, Montana, Oregon, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Ten thousand years ago, a massive glacier scraped the continent clean of living beings. It melted, and the glacial Lake Agassiz formed, then receded. That’s when fields of prairie began to grow in its place.

New long-rooted plants built a unified ecology that sustained diverse lifeforms. They interacted with climate, animals, and indigenous peoples while Dakota's Turtle Mountains took 10,000 trips around the sun. Nothing happened, except change — and only out of that came our heritage and what my dad respectfully calls “the best damn soil on the planet.”

Somewhere near Bismarck on the floodplain of the Missouri River, I forgot I was in North Dakota.

Mike spun us around the last bend in the trail and killed the engine. But as quick as the bird had come, it was gone. We listened to the breeze whisper secrets to the trees. Combines sat silently to the side. We waited for what felt like a very long time.

Then one small heartbeat disappeared into the bean field, with nothing but home on its mind.

I'd never known about the Western Meadowlark until Mike Olson told me they were leaving. He and Hope raised their family far enough away from the noise of Bismarck to sustain communication with the land. Out here, they've reflected on the gratitude they feel for that which came before them, reshaping their traditions to what they are today.

I spent a weekend in their daughter's old bedroom as they prepared to move after retirement. We woke up at 4am to drive to a muddy slough in the boonies from which to watch the sun rise. It's something their family has done for generations, and it reminds us how we ought to live for the good of the next.

“That's the whole Aldo Leopold philosophy,” Mike said. “We'll never be true conservationists until we consider ourselves integrated with the natural environment.”

I wondered how he could leave such a beautiful home in a land so lucky to be this wild. But they're headed to a lake cabin in Minnesota where wild lives come as close as they like. (Mike claims he “forgot” to tell Hope about the set of bear tracks he found by the mailbox till after they'd signed the deed.) They both feel they need wild spaces.

“The big question we ask ourselves is,” Mike explained, “Are we gonna be able to make the tough decisions to conserve some of these resources before they're all gone?”

We sat on the deck, grilling ducks we harvested from a prairie pothole that morning. Friends came to share our meal and celebration. Lewis, the dog, chased wild bird calls in the garden. I've never enjoyed finer dining in all my life.

“It's a rejuvenation,” said Mike's friend Roger in his cowboy hat. “Life is rejuvenation.”

In spring when the wriggling things begin to sing again, “change” is a happy word.

“And the first sign of spring is audio,” Roger says over the windy, shifting plains. “That comes before the actual signs of growth.”

I hear the sounds of the prairie include meadowlarks. But they echo also our engines, sirens, and hockey stadiums.

“As things deteriorate, they don’t just fall off the end of the earth,” said Al Sapa as the sun spun behind the horizon. One by one, prairie stars started sharing their art with the falling night. “It’s a little bit at a time, so we get used to dealing with less.”

Sometimes living with less is the best way to appreciate privilege.

Bill Bicknell’s garden offers fewer kinds of vegetables than the local department store. But watch him negotiate the lifeforms in his backyard; you may wonder if you’re looking at a breathing self-portrait of Mother Earth.

“Harvesting corn is pretty much paradise,” says Bill’s wife Sue. She remembers how her first view of the Missouri River Valley from their backyard sold them on the house. “We feel like we’re the only people here.”

Like many North Dakotans, she enjoys hearing meadowlarks mark the start of spring. But Bill pays close attention in October — long after meadowlarks usually sing — when the occasional immature male may be heard practicing his developing hymns.

“Every Fall, I’m out in the prairie,” Bill told me. “I always mark on my calendar the last meadowlark of the season.” His yearly observations reflect the wealth of peer-reviewed science and landowner experience: the Western Meadowlark is moving away from its North Dakota home. Hearing its song when he least expects it is his link to our shared greater nature.

But other grassland birds are full of as much mystery. Bobolinks, Lark Buntings, Baird’s Sparrows, Sedge Wrens — all visit Bill in the backyard to communicate their curiosity.

“Working in the garden is a fulfilling, satisfying activity to begin with,” Bill said. “But then to have the symphony of spring join in — it hardly gets any better than that.”

Down the road in another wide lawn set deep away from town, Mike McEnroe wondered what may need to change to get more North Dakotans interested in conserving wild lives.

“We have meadowlarks out here in the spring. In fact, we had a meadowlark nest in the yard this year,” McEnroe told me. “But things like that are the canary in the coalmine. The meadowlark — that’s our prairie canary. And the prairie canary is disappearing from the landscape. That ought to tell us something.”

The Legendary Wildlifer

I once imagined the life of a wildlife biologist would be spent paddling canoes down nameless tributaries, collecting insects, and scribbling notes in muddy diaries. Maybe you’d bring a guide dog along. But the joy of the job would surely be the escape from society.

The first lesson I learned studying wildlife biology at the University of North Dakota is the most foundational truth of a sincerely deceiving line of work: wildlife management is people management. Those most enamored with the fate of wild lives find themselves most effective at protecting them when they spend their time inside, online, and far, far away from their own wild minds.

Mike walked me through the North Dakota Game & Fish Department offices, where I saw two meadowlarks — one stuffed in a glass display, the other on the cover of *North Dakota Outdoors* magazine. It was a special issue, Sandy Johnson explained. The agency just updated the state's "species of conservation priority."

And the Western Meadowlark made the list.

"It's a bird that just about everybody has seen somewhere at some point in North Dakota," Sandy said. "Twenty years from now, that might not be the case. A lot of people haven't seen our state bird, because it's just not there anymore."

Like a true wildlifer, Sandy puts her passion to good use at work — and spends more time on the phone than outside.

"Landowners call me all the time, wondering what has happened to their meadowlarks," she said. "Then they tell me they tore their pasture out and took all the fence posts away."

For grassland species, the conversion of native prairie to cropland is like the mass destruction of city homes in a flash flood. If we till up all our meadows, where can we expect the meadowlark to sing?

Rick Nelson at Bismarck's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office noticed the Western Meadowlark the day he moved to North Dakota in 1979. He formed a tradition of listening for them when he realized he heard them less and less.

"To see that change in the prairie is disheartening, but it's not too late," he said. "The message we seem to lose in modern society is that we're a part of that changing system."

As much as 99 percent of North Dakota's tallgrass prairie has been converted to cropland, and habitat protected by the Conservation Reserve Program has fallen 60 percent in a few years — and shows no sign of slowing. Meadowlarks are by no means the only grassland species struggling to find home on the disappearing prairie. But "the power of the meadowlark," Rick says, is that North Dakotans recognize it. "That's why it's the state bird, right? Everybody knows its song."

Could the disappearance of our prairie ambassador be a good thing? What else could better bring North Dakotans' attention to our rapidly disintegrating natural resources?

I left Bismarck with a mission from Mike: stop in Jamestown and visit the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. Pulling over the hill off Interstate 29, I realized the biologists working there come about as close as it gets to living like my legendary wildlifer.

For 50 years, their facility has nestled itself nicely into a 200-acre plot of real growing grass. Past the parking lot, wild lives still thrive — though meadowlarks, abundant in the area just a few years ago, are rarely heard anymore.

“Scientists have been watching grasslands disappear for decades, and have been unable to staunch that loss,” Jill Schaffer told me. She works closely with the energy industry to study how human activity impacts grassland species.

Wind turbines, she’s found, have little effect on the Western Meadowlark. But too many roads, croplands, and human settlements are guaranteed to drive many animals away. Without grass, there will be no grassland birds. “There needs to be a personal connection — a visceral gut reaction — when an ecosystem that’s been in existence for millions of years gets plowed up in half an hour,” Schaffer said. “We aren’t getting to people’s hearts and asking, ‘Doesn’t this feel wrong to you?’”

Upstairs, Larry Igl laments our changing traditions. Five decades of Breeding Bird Surveys show a clear decline — as native land turns to extensive agriculture, meadowlarks turn to leave. “Traditions do change through time,” Igl said. “So change isn’t necessarily a bad thing in itself. But it’s important for people to hear these birds.”

Back on the road, all I heard was the purr of motors. I passed a billboard illuminated in the night. “North Dakota: Legendary!”

Suddenly, I remembered my freshman year Latin course. *Legere* has three meanings — to gather, to select, and to read.

To gather is to be receptive, of each other and of our land. To select is to make decisions based on reason. North Dakotans fit these definitions well. Maybe it’s because we’re not big talkers, but we are good listeners with level heads.

But to read is two things. To read with others is to communicate, to teach. To read alone is to listen, to learn. They seem opposite. They are the same.

Are North Dakotans being the legends we need? What do we say when we don’t hear the meadowlark sing?

Returning Home

The view out the car window along I-29 doesn’t seem to have changed much. It looks the same to me tonight as it did 22 years ago when we drove to Fargo to see my grandparents for my first Christmas dinner.

The sky is as expansive as it’s always been. Standing water reflects the same starlight from the same ditch along the road. Rows of corn mesmerize me as they did when I was three years old.

“I see a’somethin’!” my sister screams from the back seat. A red and white water tower crawls over the horizon. We’d look for it every time we drove to Amma’s house. It was our constant — our vision of what’s to come. And we needed it now more than ever.

The Flood of 1997 destroyed our hometown. More than 50,000 people evacuated Grand Forks when rising water breached the sandbag walls. For no reason, our home was spared, but my mother drove us kids to Fargo while Dad housed our neighbors in the basement.

Single massive clouds stretch for miles above the car. They don't appear to move, but I'm told they do. At least after I fall asleep and wake up in Amma's driveway, they certainly do not still seem the same.

When I returned home from my Dakota voyage, I found myself back in my old routines — tapping my feet over cold concrete, driving my car to work, avoiding the outdoors without even realizing it. In the heart of the Red River Valley, it's still normal to feel as far from the prairie as anybody.

Then I heard about Bill Bicknell.

When we first pulled up in front of Bill's house last fall, Mike told me it might be the only time Bill and I would meet. A battle with cancer kept him inside most days, but the morning we met was meant to be spent in rejuvenation. The first and only time we spoke, I caught a whiff of his infectious hope.

Back home, Bill was on my mind. I'd imagine he was sharing a laugh with friends or cherishing the many paths he'd tread. I'd spent weeks editing video footage I'd gathered on my trip and saw Bill every day, smiling with me in the tireless autumn sun, harvesting his corn in pure paradise.

I was almost finished with the video. He'd see it in a few weeks at the state Wildlife Society conference. But almost the whole time I'd been editing, Bill had already departed. A constant I thought I needed in my mind to remain, changed. But the tradition he'd seeded stayed.

"Some of these changes are perfectly understandable," he said with a thoughtful smile. "Chalk it up to progress, and one man's progress can be quite different than another's. As we move forward, a valued tradition for many North Dakotans — that while still there — is harder and harder to come by."

The next night, I changed my ways to maintain my tradition.

Erin pulled up on her bicycle and shoved fruit and mittens into my backpack. We rode through the cold to where wild lives still know to go — along the banks of the Red River on the Grand Forks Greenway.

We settled into the twilight grass as our minds grew quiet to listen. What did we expect to hear? Who knows. But to be absent meant to miss it. Every song the meadowlark sings brings change. You just have to be looking at it to look at it differently.

Like a flash of yellow outside a car window, sounds pierced the darkening sky. Two birds on opposite sides of the river called to each other — one then the other, in persistent transmission. They were not meadowlarks, but my inability to identify them

only heightened my wonder. Why were these sounds of the prairie playing? What could our cold cousins above be saying?

Then, as invisible as these avian voices, another noise grew out of the distant clouds. The slow droning of an unseen airplane engine took hold of the river's soft symphony. The birds kept calling, but the gnawing metal gained control. Voices singing, ground down by thoughtless sound.

As my senses drowned out, I heard more Dakota voices ringing in the quiet corners of my soul, where feelings have time to guide thoughts safely home.

"We don't have good discussion," Sapa said. "But the more listening we do, the better off we'll be."

I no longer heard the waters of the mighty Red River.

"People need to realize this loss is related to the changes we've made on the landscape," Igl said. "It's already becoming noticeable."

I no longer felt the wind that once made me shiver.

"Our challenge is to make this story relatable to people," Nelson said. "That takes everybody — not just us egghead biologists."

I no longer saw change nor tradition as barriers.

"Change can be good. Change can be bad. Change can be incremental. Change can be fast," McEnroe said. "We have to keep trying to stem the tide and reverse it or fix it. Nobody else will."

The moment passed, cross-legged in the tall grass. The self I used to call my own, at last, felt at home.

We are not the Oldfield Lark, lazing in the riches of leftover plenty.

We are not the starling time forgot, content to express no legacy.

We are the Western Meadowlark, the legend of spring and destiny.

We are formed of feathers of unequal length, in unified strength.

We sing to bring balance to the sounds of all things.

We change to maintain the traditions we've made.

When the airplane was gone, the river reappeared — persistent, immobile, emotional, sincere.

I sure see a'somthin'. But what do I hear?

Billy Beaton founded Sandbagger News with friends this year to help empower others to maintain their cultures' traditions of change. Like sandbaggers in unison against floodwaters threatening their homes, we find ourselves communicating tales that ought be told. "Meadowlark Whiplash: Why the State Bird of

North Dakota is Leaving Home" is Sandbagger News' video of the experiences mused upon in this story.
We thank and love you all.

VI. The Beauty of Decay

by Erika Gallaway

--A story based on the artwork of local Grand Forks artist Kathryn Fink, put into narrative by Erika Gallaway



There is something inherently fascinating about the Great Plains — the way the wind flows through the prairie grasses and creates moving waves across the landscape. Grasslands are unique in the way that they are everlasting and seemingly infinite, creating the illusion of a break in time where nothing and everything is changing all at once. The sky reaches from one end of the horizon to the other, an endless expanse of shifting clouds. No two sunsets are the same, each painting the grass with a unique hue. The hills and valleys shift as the light falls away and night takes the sky in a shroud of starlight.

With each season the landscape changes. In the fall, acres of flaxen stems sway in the breeze. The air becomes brisk as it pulls brittle leaves from the trees. Stalks of corn reach up from the soil and meet the sky. The days become shorter, bringing with them an underlying sense of change. The prairie seems to die away slowly, receding into nothingness.

A short drive away from any given town lands one seemingly in the middle of nowhere, lost in a void interrupted only by the crisscrossing of thin gravel roads. Each plot of land is skirted by shelter belts, the charcoal limbs of each tree intertwined with that of its neighbors. The space underneath the canopy is shadowed and protected from the wind. In these linear forests, the ground crunches underfoot and branches crackle when brushed up against. Pheasants take cover in the underbrush, their feathers ruffled by the wind as they forage for seeds. Whitetail deer pick their way carefully through the trees, mindful of each step, their trails narrow and winding.

Beyond the shelterbelts lie square fields, laid out like the patches of a quilt. Settlements are few and far between, consisting often of no more than a scattering of buildings and farm equipment dotting the landscape. Every so often, a town can be spotted in the space between fields. The single-lane roads see little traffic but the same rusted pickup trucks and aged sedans of the locals. Street lights are seldom needed and are most often found near the lone gas station on Main Street, its windows decorated with old cigarette advertisements. Across the street, the small grocery store boasts a ten space parking lot— its concrete cracked and sprouting grass and weeds. Exterior paint chips off of the houses after decades of exposure to the elements. Rusted basketball hoops hang above garage doors, their nets long gone.

The towns, like the prairie itself, seem lost in time. Their residents sit in cafes with worn down hands clutching cups of Folger's coffee. Out of habit, they open the menu despite already knowing what they'll order. Layers of flannel shield their bodies from the wind and the soles of their boots are caked with dried mud and gravel. Their eyes squint into the sunlight, drawing creases over their skin. They are seemingly born from the very soil to which they devote their lives and return to in the end. Just outside of the towns are small gated cemeteries with faded white headstones and rusted black iron gates. The birth and death of each generation leaves an imprint on the town much like the rings of a tree with each passing year. Once-loved wagons now lay still in back yards, filled with flowers, their paint cracking and falling off. Aged wooden china hutches stand on top of worn carpet and couch cushions sag under the weight of the years. Old framed photos and prints hang from the walls and patched screen doors collect dust.

These aging towns reflect a dying Americana. They look back upon a "simpler time" filled with gripping nostalgia and a rejection of change. This is a characteristic unique to the plains. It seems as if the people occupying the prairie adopted its timeless nature and became lost in time themselves. Far beyond the reaches of urban development, buildings wither with age and disuse and nature slowly claims back the space once occupied by people. The wooden skeletons of abandoned farmhouses lay still and untouched. Inside there is only the faint memory of the previous occupants' lives. Rusted metal bedframes sit in otherwise empty rooms. What little glass is left in the window frames is clouded with dust. The floorboards creak underfoot and the staircases lead to musty concrete cellars. Occasionally, a cracked teacup or a bent fork lie amongst the rubble and a hollowed out, door-less refrigerator leans against the kitchen walls.

Outside of the houses stand broken windmills that still catch the wind despite missing blades. Collapsed farm buildings sag toward the ground and the steel skeletons of old cars oxidize in the elements. Their rubber wheels are cracked and deflated. The upholstered seats are worn down and torn. Sunlight glints off the chrome fenders and dances across chipped paint.

Abandoned schoolhouses rise up from cracked concrete foundations. Their brick walls are interrupted by small square windows that once granted students a view over the landscape. The wooden floors bear scrape marks from the desks and chairs that once filled the space and there are still nail holes in the walls where dusty chalkboards hung.

It is in this decay that a sort of morbid interest is piqued. Many find themselves fascinated with the leftovers of a past era and cannot help but study how its remnants slip into the void. It is the inspiration of art and photography, film and literature. It calls into question our very own mortality. On the plains, beginnings and ends seem slowed down almost to the point of stopping entirely. The Midwestern culture clings to its roots in history, with museums and heritage centers devoted to preserving the remnants of a different time. Slow to progress, this unique way of life stands upright and proud nonetheless. It paints a picture of people living at odds with nature, driving always to process it into something more useful, but relying on it so much that they become a part of it anyway. They build houses and barns and lay gravel roads but with each passing year the prairie itself pushes back. It can be seen in the skeletal husks of the abandoned farmsteads and the rusted hulls of machinery, in the automobile graveyards and the discarded scrap metal. It can be seen in the overgrowing shelter belts and the untended stock ponds. The organic decay of manmade creation mirrors that of nature itself.

It is through this process that we can truly understand the vast timelessness of the Great Plains— perhaps the best place to bring out our own mortality. It is in these grasslands that we can escape from the confines of society and find ourselves lost in the grandeur of it all, for the prairie is ever-changing and yet unchanged.

Erika Gallaway is a third year undergraduate student at UND. She is currently studying Criminal Justice and Psychology. Erika had written pieces for all three volumes of *Voices of the Valley*, and has published poetry and prose in high school literary magazines.

VII. The Oil Boom of North Dakota: An Alexander Memory

by Amanda Claire Starbuck



When my grandparents built their home on the hill in Alexander, North Dakota, Grandma insisted it be “flipped” so the back of the house faced the road, and the front – with its living room and large picture window – overlooked the prairie. This led to general confusion to us “big city” grandchildren when she referred to the front of her house; we had it ingrained that the front faces the road. Even so, my grandma firmly and proudly insisted her home looked out over the prairie. In her late middle age, crippled by muscular dystrophy and rheumatoid arthritis, this provided a comforting view of the only landscape she ever called home.

What would she see out that window today, had she lived to witness the current oil boom – the one that took root seemingly overnight and overwhelmed small towns like Alexander?

My grandparents lived most of their lives in a small corner of Western North Dakota. Theirs was a familiar legacy: they were the grandchildren of Norwegian immigrants who left their families and country behind to pursue the dream of owning land. Trading

mountain vistas and fjords for endless prairie and sky. Farming land that is at once beautiful and brutal.

Both my grandparents were born during the Great Depression. They married young and earned enough money to buy their own land. By the time Grandma was 30 – the age I am as I write this – she was raising five children, working a fulltime job, and helping my grandpa farm. I can't even begin to relate. Grandpa also had a lot on his plate, tending his fields and running a mechanic shop in town. Even so, he wouldn't hesitate to leave his field unfinished to help another farmer whose tractor had broken down.

My grandparents were fiercely proud of their Norwegian roots and of North Dakota. It's what led them to build a life in Alexander, a small farming town near Watford City. They weathered several oil boom and bust cycles and continued to invest in the community, joining coffee groups and bible studies and actively participating in the annual Old Settlers Day celebration. In later years, my Grandma would showcase her greatest pride – her grandchildren – dressing us up and displaying us on floats in the annual Old Settlers Day parade.

For my cousins and me, Alexander was paradise. When we visited, we had the run of the town, and our parents weren't too concerned of our whereabouts as long as we returned in time for dinner – free-range parenting at its finest. We'd hunt for frogs in the creek and drink from the two natural springs that flowed year round. We'd haul ancient sets of golf clubs to the public golf course where, unlike Bismarck's courses, no one complained if you took fifteen strokes to finish a hole or decided that drawing pictures in the sand greens was a better use of your time. And we always begged our parents for cash to buy candy at Alexander's only grocery store or a plate of chicken strips at the town café. Seriously, Norman Rockwell would have found plenty of inspiration if he'd followed us around for a day.

My grandparent's home sat on top of a hill towards the edge of town, surrounded by open fields of prairie. The house befits their Scandinavian roots: practical design and modest furniture that remained pretty much unchanged through my entire childhood. No one seemed too concerned about us grandchildren breaking anything. If we got too rambunctious, Grandma would order us to the basement where we could be as loud and destructive as we wanted.

Alexander was like so many small towns in Western North Dakota: quiet, sparsely populated. Struggling. Homes and trailers in need of a coat of paint. The grocery store eventually closing its doors because it can't compete with Williston's Walmart. But for

me, Alexander – and the house on the hill – will forever embody childhood pleasures and my grandparents' unbounded love.

The last time I visited Alexander was in 2010, for my grandpa's funeral. Grandma had passed away almost nine years earlier. By that time, Grandpa had sold his home to Halliburton to pay his medical bills. None of my relatives could find hotel rooms within a two hour drive of Alexander, due to the sudden influx of oil workers, so we crowded into my aunt and uncle's home in Williston, making beds on couches and the floor.

After the burial, we drove past my grandparent's house on the hill. The lawn was filled with the pickup trucks of the oil workers housed within. Otherwise it looked pretty much the same, and I wondered what I would find if I went inside. I had a vision of middle-aged roughnecks snuggled under the strawberry comforters in the room I often shared with my brother.

It was my first visit to Alexander since Grandpa sold his house. That reality – coupled with my grief and the sight of trailers popping up in the once empty fields – drove home the fact that Alexander had forever changed for me.

One year later, I left North Dakota for Washington, DC to attend graduate school. I never intended on living on the East Coast nor did I feel any particular pull towards DC's busy lifestyle. But having attended college in Grand Forks, I felt it was time to study out of state and view a new part of the country.

DC is a city of transplants; even so, being from North Dakota makes me somewhat of an anomaly. Most conversations between new acquaintances start with "So, where do you come from?" I could be conversing with classmates from California or Oregon, yet when I revealed that I'm from North Dakota, folks often responded, "Wow, you came a long way." I quickly learned that, for many people outside of the Great Plains, the concept of North Dakota is remote. Some have little to nothing to associate with the state, aside from farming or vague references to the movie *Fargo*.

But this is changing. One aspect of North Dakota has pushed the state into the national spotlight. Early into my studies, I began to see national headlines talking about North Dakota's fracking boom. I saw references to Watford City and even Alexander, towns from my childhood geography that were scarcely even on the state's radar just a few years earlier. Now they are becoming household names.

This has given DC folks something to latch onto when they learn where I grew up. It lets me share what the oil boom means to me personally: How my mother's hometown

ballooned from 200 to 1,500 inhabitants in a few short years. How some towns are nearly unrecognizable with the new development and heavy truck traffic. Why the remaining family I had in that corner of the state have left, frustrated with growing crime and hour-long waits in Walmart checkout lines.

It's also an opportunity to have a deeper conversation about how we are stewarding our land and its resources – and what this means for the future of North Dakota.

This isn't our first rodeo; North Dakota has weathered several oil booms and busts over the past century. Each time, we tell ourselves that this one is different; this one is going to last. We scramble to build apartments, roads, and hotels to accommodate the influx of workers. Then the boom goes bust and this new infrastructure sits empty, a monument to our hubris.

But this one *is* different. We've exhausted many of our conventional oil wells. Now we're pumping millions of gallons of water and chemicals underground, cracking the bedrock to release the oil trapped within. This isn't your grandfather's oil boom; this one relies on new, expensive technology whose risks are still being discovered.

This boom is also unique in how it made millionaires overnight and drove employment to the lowest levels in the country; saved dying towns while displacing low-income residents unable to afford \$2,000 a month rent; brought unprecedented population growth (and rekindled our old prejudices and distrust of outsiders).

But like the booms before us, this one will go bust. And that might be upon us more quickly than we planned. In early 2016, oil dropped to under \$30 a barrel, far below recovery cost. Companies continue to lay off workers. Man camps that were once full to capacity are now nearly vacant, and brand new apartment buildings and hotels cannot find tenants. If prices don't bounce back soon, it may mean the end of the oil boom. And once again, the local communities will be left to pick up the pieces.

Why haven't we learned from past failures? For all of our love for North Dakota and the connection we feel towards its landscape – the prairie, the badlands, the rivers and lakes – we still see ourselves as its biblical masters. We fish from its rivers and plough prairie into wheat fields. We mine coal and burn it for energy. Like the European immigrants before us, the land exists to grant us our slice of the American dream.

And so we march ahead without acknowledging fracking's risks to our health and land. We ignore the warning signs, from workers tragically dying in the field when overcome by toxic fumes to saltwater spills that destroy farmland for generations. We do all of

this in the name of economic growth, for we love North Dakota, but we also want to subdue it.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not anti-progress. But I worry that the oil boom has not been good for North Dakota. Yes, it has created jobs, but the work is brutal and takes workers away from their families for weeks at a time. It is also inherently dangerous and has led to North Dakota having the highest workplace fatality rates in the nation. This is shameful.

Additionally, the money the oil boom brings in is hardly benefiting the local communities caught in the middle of unbridled development. Towns have had to beef up law enforcement and emergency services, repair roads that crumble under the weight of oil trucks, and invest additional money into social services to aid residents who have been displaced or lost their jobs. Studies confirm that these costs often outweigh the added revenue that comes from oil development. This results in a negative economic impact on communities that will only be exacerbated when the industry slows down and revenue sources dry up.

When it's all said and done – unless you're one of the fortunate individuals to own mineral rights – the oil boom has not been good to North Dakotans.

These are the thoughts that flood me as I sit at my office in Washington, DC and write about the latest in oil and gas policy. I told myself I was on the “two-year plan” – finish graduate school and then move back home – but like many DC transplants, life happened. I found a job, I fell in love, and before I knew it I became a local. I hope to move back to North Dakota someday, but until then, my career in environmental policy lets me engage with issues happening at home.

Unlike many of my colleagues, however, my interest in fracking is personal. And I have the unique opportunity to integrate my own experiences: to talk about what it means to call North Dakota home and to see communities forever transformed by oil and gas development. Suddenly, being from North Dakota is seen as an asset. People are eager to listen to my stories.

I often wonder what my grandparents would say if they were alive today. On one hand, they might have finally achieved economic security from the mineral rights they once owned. No longer would they be drowning under the weight of medical bills. But their love for Alexander ran deep, and I imagine they would have a hard time recognizing

the town for what it once was. Would they still have their coffee hour and bible studies? Would they still participate in Old Settlers Day?

My grandmother, gazing out the window at the prairie – now dotted with temporary housing and trailers – what would she see?

Amanda Claire Starbuck is a Bismarck native and accidental transplant to the Washington, DC area. She works as a Food Researcher for the non-profit organization Food & Water Watch. Amanda enjoys exploring DC's many bike trails and excellent sushi options, but will forever call North Dakota home.

VIII. Farming Grass Upon the Prairie Sea

by Dr. Joshua Hunter



"I'm a gardener. I tell some people I'm a farmer, I'm a grass farmer."

And the garden he tends is 2000 some odd acres of tall grass prairie, oak savannas, and wetlands in eastern North Dakota. It is a remnant, a mere scrap, of those native tall grass lands that once dominated in the northern plains. The etymology of the word prairie originates from the French word for meadow, whose root is the Latin *partum*, meaning the same thing.

In evoking the prairies, Teddy Roosevelt once wrote, "we have taken into our language the word prairie, because when our backwoodsmen first reached the land and saw the great natural meadows of long grass – sights unknown to the gloomy forests wherein they had always dwelt – they knew not what to call them, and borrowed the term already in use among the French inhabitants." The genesis of the prairies of North Dakota has a lot to do with the birth of mountains, as it turns out. With the upwelling of the Rockies, climate took a drier detour and a rain shadow covered the middle west of the continent so that trees died away and what was left was inescapably drier and grassier lands. Maybe it's fitting then that a fella from the Rockies should end up in this relic of what was once among the great grasslands on the planet, even if his heart remains in the high country.

In describing one of his favorite places in the grasslands where he lives and works, Eric talks about a place "not too far from the house, it's probably a quarter mile. I think it's the highest point on Brown Ranch. But, I love the walk up there, and just sit there, watch the sunset, watch the neighbor drive by, whatever is going on. That probably extends from living in Colorado and climbing the mountains for fun. You know I like to just get up there and sit. To survey my

kingdom. Yeah, you can see four miles instead of one." Musing about his affinity for these swings in topography, Eric stressed, "that's the Colorado boy that comes out in me 'Oh man, yeah.'" You can take the boy out of the mountains but not the mountains out of the boy it would seem.

Eric came to work in these grassy, open places as a land steward for the Nature Conservancy, tending to a mix of habitats and ecosystems in this neck of the woods, working at restoring and maintaining native ecosystems. For his part, he is something of a landscape archaeologist, attempting to interpret the various pieces of plants, animals and natural forces to reconstruct something that approximates the past. The land here is dominated by undulating grasslands, river bottoms, including spring fed fens, and burr oak savannas. The sandhills afford some of the higher elevation in this inexorably pancake flat land.

Tending this garden requires casting an eye both back into the distant past and forward towards an uncertain future of what may be possible through human endeavor. In what Eric implies in his thoughts above, there is an inherent tension in this kind of land conservation and restoration.

In describing the prairie in her book, *My Antonia*, Willa Cather remembers that, "as I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of winestains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running."

So, here we have two different metaphors at work to evoke the prairies; one of a garden, one of the sea; both the effluent of a long ago dried up glacier. Indeed, like all gardens, the prairies are indebted to water and, at the least, altered by its scarcity.

The metaphor of a sea is not only poetically evocative, but, as it turns out, geologically sound. 13,000 years ago, an immense proglacial lake, known today as Lake Agassiz, stretched across a vast geography, waves lapping across an estimated 170,000 square miles. The lake formed with the melting of the ice sheets from the Wisconsin Glaciation and the damming of its meltwaters by a low glacial moraine. At its greatest girth the lake was the size of the Great Lakes all poured into one basin. At that time, there would have been a huge braided emptying of the Sheyenne as it flowed north into the lake. With the retreat of the glaciers toward the pole, Agassiz followed suit and drained away leaving low hills of sandy delta sediment. Eric describes it in this way:

It's basically the Sheyenne Delta, and it's where the Sheyenne River used to dump into the glacial Lake Agassiz 10,000 years ago, give or take. So basically, I live in a giant pile of sand is what it amounts to. It might be 150 feet of sand, the water table's right at the top, there's wet ground, there's high dry dunes. Move closer to the river and it is a little flatter just because the river used to meander a lot more than it does now. So there's sort of a flat plain, but there are still nice ravines and topography there which is my favorite thing about Pigeon Point. It probably changes two-three hundred feet from the highest point to the lowest point, but I like it. Pigeon Point is mostly restored prairie. It was all farmed at one time or heavily grazed. So we did a lot of restoration work back in the early 2000s, so it mostly looks like native prairie now, it used to be a farm site. But it still has a lot of the native trees in the river bottom. Mostly intact ecosystem in there. I don't know if the understory is quite right, but I don't know what a guy would do to fix it either. I'm lucky enough that I live on Brown Ranch.

This land of tall grass prairie is known to this day as the Sheyenne Delta, though visitors would have to go way back to imagine it as a rich lacustrine plain. Perhaps then, in reverence to the massive river delta it lived in a previous life, the grasslands here are still referred to in ways that evoke water.

Grasslands born of the muddy floor of an ancient lake allows us an interesting vantage point from which to view the *longue durée* of a place. Indeed, viewing landscapes over the long haul presupposes slow change, but change nonetheless. These are, however, the slow workings of transformation witnessed by glacial advance and retreat, seasonal migrations, and wayfaring prairie fires. And it requires a different sensibility of what constitutes progress. Eric reflects on this when he laments,

you know, we are such an instantaneous society. We want everything to happen now. Restoration doesn't happen that way. You know you get a lot of small victories here and there, which feel good. You know, it's fun when you can take your machine and go grind something up and it's gone. Alright, that was good. But doing a full restoration project takes time, it takes a lot of time. I mean it might take ten years before it's even close to what it should be.

So, there's always that small, incremental change that feels good. Something like removing invasive plant species, or controlled burns. Yet, to realize substantive landscape level transformation is altogether a different beast and requires a different threshold of expectations.

Working within a landscape, coming to know its subtle moods, its blurred boundaries, further requires knowledge that vacillates between the whole and the part, recognizing that each is dependent upon the other, reflecting on the dialectical nature of its existence. This is not lost on Eric as he reflects on the constant comparative work he does with land that is native and altered land in the process of restoration. He says,

seeing it take that big step in and be, 'alright we got all the pieces.' Now you just have to let it mature, that's a pretty darn good feeling when you can look next door and say this is native, this has been here, it hasn't been screwed up, this piece is coming, pat yourself on the back, good job. You know, I don't know if I know how to describe it.

This is landscape level thinking, recognizing that the entire system is caught up in an interdependent web. Thus, the land as a whole is dependent upon a multitude of small happenings, diminutive stories, and primal forces, each one a piece of the fabric of this prairie. Working within this landscape is to become aware of the intricate dance between primordial rhythms of weather, fire, hoofed migrations, human impacts, and plant communities. Eric's days in the grasslands are spent negotiating with these elements, striving to be cognizant of how they collectively create a prairie ecosystem, like a mammoth quilting bee.

Native prairie evolved with fire and grazing. So we try to mimic that regime. So, we'll do prescribed fire every couple years. You know and just rotate it through the ranch. We kind of do the grazing the same way. We graze to meet objectives on the ground. So, lately I've been trying to target certain pastures, to burn it and then graze it, say a month later, to really reduce these non-native cool seasons we don't want, roam and Kentucky Blue Grass, in particular. It's amazing how well the landscape responds to that. You would think 'Oh my gosh, you're going to wreck it by burning it and then grazing it.' Actually it will do a world of good.

The life history of the prairie is tied to much older natural histories of glaciers, plant communities, fire, and grazing of ungulates on the move. Fire, itself, began from lightning and as a technology employed by indigenous people sustained and shaped the life history of the

grasslands. It would seem that Eric's role in the tallgrass region is an extension of a long history of human plant and animal management by use of fire. Either intentioned alterations or an outgrowth of natural processes, the land is constantly in the process of becoming, never static, constantly being reborn. Looking at ecological processes at the landscape level teaches the lessons of succession; that mountains sometimes emerge from flatlands, towering continents of ice will melt, and that lakes do not always stay lakes, but sometimes are reborn as rolling, sandy hills and seas of grass.

Inhabiting a landscape, coming to know your neighbors like burr oak, cottonwood, greater prairie chickens, Dakota skippers, bluestem and little bluestem, porcupine grass, among many others necessitates many types of awareness, but one, the act of exploring, is a first principle. As Eric describes it, he consistently "was trying to get the dog out and go for a hike, just to explore." Amidst all the newness of the job, dealing with grazing leases, meeting those neighbors and settling in, Eric says he needed to

try to get a sense for the landscape. Part of that was throwing on the waiters, get the dog out for a swim, seeing how far I can go. 'Oh, that hole is too deep to walk through.' You know, let's try to get to that high sand dune. I spent a lot of time walking around and trying to see where I could go. I knew nothing about that landscape.

If you know nothing about the land, the only way to change that is to get out and walk, crawl if you have to until your own trails become knitted to the other paths through the bending grass and swale. Edward Abbey suggests that only "when traces of blood begin to mark your trail, you'll see something, maybe." It takes this type of intimacy to get to know a place, at least in part. Getting a sense of the land becomes vitally important when tasked with the job of landscape restoration. Becoming aware of this sense of a place takes time and directly engaging with what's out there.

So, just one of the most important things I can do it just take time and just walk through the land I manage and just kind of try to take it in and think 'Alright, this worked out, or that didn't work out. Next year we are going to do this, hopefully we will see that.' I don't do that as much as I probably should, it's always rewarding when you say 'Alright, forget the office, forget the email, all that crap. I am going outside, you take your knapsack and your dog and just go for a walk.

When embedded in this process of getting to know the land, there are moments when something arrests the attention of a person. This might arrive out a past experiences or a comparative way of thinking about historic native landscapes and what's changed. It is often the synthesis of perceptions of difference and similarity coalescing in the individual subjectivity. For Eric, a transplanted restorative farmer, he reckons it along these lines.

There is very little of anything that is old growth, whether it's prairie, forest, I mean there's Reds Wood, California. There is only a smidgen of that left. Remnants of prairie, you can actually find a bunch of grasses that are yay big around [gesturing with hands about the diameter of a basketball] and they stand about that far above the rest of the soil level [not quite a foot] because that has been there for a century.

Standing astride something like that is an impressive experience for Eric, arrested his attention in ways that in his words, "gives me goose bumps just thinking about it." Eric continued to describe his first interaction with these thickly knotted bunches of grass. He is reminded of working in Louisiana and coming across Cyprus trees, which grow in wet, swampy places producing growths called knees. The bigger the knees the older the trees. Knees as tall as head height could belong to a tree several hundred years old.

Same thing out here on the prairie. The first time I came across all this knobby bunch grasses and everything that was eroded around it I thought 'well this is annoying, I can't walk through this very well.' Then I stopped and I thought about it. You can actually, it's almost like having growth rings in the grass. You kind of see that too and somebody pointed that out to me, I don't remember who, that's when I learned, 'Oh grass can be old like trees.' I had no clue."

This is a serious recognition, that grass can trace the contours of history, marking the cycle of seasons over the long haul. Walking the land now has a different resonance, something deeper, more nuanced. There exists a new sense of meaning between a human and a place. "Now when I walk across some place, it's all bunch grasses and it stands out above most of the soil level, this is a native piece of ground, this had been here a hundred years, five hundred years, thousand years, I don't know." There is always an act of discovery when walking the land in this way, natural discovery to be sure, but also personal discovery. Lessons abound in experiencing the land in this way, and as Eric was quick to point out, this is a humbling experience.

I learned a lot of patience, I know that. I think, maybe I better respect native land and how resilient it is too. You have any idea how hard it is to take bare dirt and turn it back into native whatever it used to be. It's a challenge, I mean it's almost impossible really. I've tried here and failed miserably.

To be a grass farmer here on the northern plains at the fringes of what was once called the sea of grass follows a circuitous route like the winding trace of the Sheyenne River. To be a farmer here, turning farm fields into grasslands or bent on keeping a prairie a prairie and not a feedlot or oil field requires a broad skillset and a patience akin to the slow rolling swells of the land.

Eric's ruminations on working in the prairie encapsulate a steadfast awareness of the persistence of natural systems, of artifacts from older days. The bunch grass, migrations of birds, the use of fire and grazing to mimic historic conditions, sandy dunes of an ancient lake all speak to the constant unfolding of history as cyclical and dynamic. These relics are reminders of longevity yet also impermanence and change and our own passing through, our itinerant life on the land.

So the oak savanna on Brown Ranch, I just like to walk through it and there's a couple hills in there, too that, you know if you have a long boring phone call at the end of the day, I'll hike that mile up there and just sit on that hill and under a big Burr Oak. 'Man, you've been sitting here for two, three hundred years already.'

Willa Cather, in *O Pioneers*, observed that, "we come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while." Eric thought about this idea of ownership as well, in similar ways to Cather.

So, when I was in Colorado in college, running around the mountains I didn't have any real ownership over that land, you know it was public land I'm playing on, but yet I still respected it, we always practiced no trace camping and hiking, you know tried to take care of it the way that we were using it. Whereas Brown Ranch and Pigeon Point, even though I don't own it, I have ownership, so I treat it like it's mine, right, wrong, or otherwise. This might help illustrate, I help spray for Leafy Spurge a couple years ago in the fall and I was walking around the next spring and it was just bare patches of dirt every place I sprayed which

isn't normal, that's not supposed to happen, you know 'Oh my gosh, what did I do, this is awful.' It hurt, you know I thought 'Man, I really screwed up, this isn't good.' It was kind of a black mark on my ledger. I just thought 'Aw.' As the summer went on I went back to those places to see what is filling in and to see how bad I did screw up. Turns out warm season grasses is the thing I wanted, it was coming back in. 'Okay, you know it wasn't that bad.' It's still not perfect but it's still that ownership. That's probably the biggest difference I can think of between at least Colorado and here. I had similar ownership in Louisiana. Partly because my boss said 'Okay, this preserve is yours, you deal with it. Okay, I don't have a clue what I'm doing, but, okay.

Restoring prairie ecosystems is fraught with the vagaries of weather, ecosystem dynamics, and human endeavor, and yet it is dependent upon these same forces. The landscape Eric surveys from his “castle on the prairie” is now hemmed in by roads, farms, and oilrigs. While they are indeed grasslands, they are no longer wild, but a fleeting memory of what has been. In this way the metaphor of a garden takes on a new timbre as these lands are domesticated through management, pieced back to a facsimile through strategic planting and cutting, prescribed burns, and grazing. Yet, they exist at all only because someone had the awareness that these ecosystems were significant. That they mattered. They only exist if someone is willing to put down roots as tangled as the bunch grass, matted deep below the sandy floor of that ancient lake. Willing to farm grass upon the prairie sea.

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IX. New Moon

by Stephanie Olson



Moon. This is one of my son's first words. *Moon.* Like my daughter before him, he climbs the couch to search the sky out the window. *Are you? Are you?* He will ask the night. And then, seeing its light held in the naked winter branches of an old oak tree, he will yell, *moon! Moon! Moon!*

It anchors us, like it anchors so many people. But ours is not an uptown moon or a southern moon, not a coastal moon nor a pine moon. Ours is a prairie moon, and it centers us here among all the sky and all the low land and all the prairie people.

Sometimes an anchor is what I need. At night, we might as well be at sea, the handful of yard lights scattered on the horizon like ships moored for the evening. Everything so black and full of wind and echo, so black except the sky-strewn stars and rivet of the moon. Without its hold, sometimes I fear I might drift away, lost on the current, landless.

My backstory. I come from the Twin Cities. I drove northwest to Fargo/Moorhead and then up I-29 to Grand Forks where I was then going to school. It was spring. The fields on either side of the highway were flooded as far as I could see. Signs demarcating different exits seemed to be wading up to their bellies. It was as if everything I had known, everything that was familiar to me, was washing away. The city I left did not flood. But now there went the guardrail of the highway, there goes the shoulder, there the southbound lanes have disappeared under water and I am waiting single-file to continue on as their traffic is routed onto a northbound lane. A large group of blackbirds, hundreds of blackbirds, lifted up from a tree and took shape in the sky overhead, shrinking and expanding like some strange balloon before dipping down to

the open palm of one of the flooded fields. I did not yet know the names of the birds. I did not yet know that spring flooding is not usually so severe.

I came to live about an hour east of Grand Forks, on my husband's farm, in the family farmhouse, on the nook of land his family has called home for four generations. He has had ancestors die in this very house, under these very stairs, in that very kitchen, here. He had ancestors die in the field that stretches out from our woods. And his grandfather was raised here, and his father was raised here, and he was raised here, and now we are raising our children here. This place is *rooted*. My family, on the other hand, is scattered on the wind. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska. I attended seven different schools in the Twin Cities area before graduating from high school. Rooted is new to me. But my children are of this place, this place will be theirs.

But back to the farm. At first, the silence hurt. I missed the planes arriving and departing MSP, not just the sound of them but also their linear constellation of lights as they cued up around the airport. The only other time I had known the sky to be so quiet was 9/11, and even then there was the occasional helicopter. Here, on the farm, at first I could hear nothing. I was listening for cars to drive by, for a neighbor to start up a lawn mower, for a siren to cry and fade. But our closest neighbors are a mile away, and there aren't even tornado sirens out here.

Then, then I started hearing things.

I heard the first sound early in the morning, around dawn, while lying in bed. I heard it through the bedroom window. It sounded far off. It was almost indescribable. The call of something. Something I had never heard before. Later, I asked my husband, describing it as like a loon's call, only much lower. And that's when I learned of the sandhill crane. If you know their call, you know what I mean when I say it is remarkably unlike anything else. It is both haunting and uplifting. When I saw my first crane, I thought it was a man standing in the field. They seem to be shadows of things until you get close enough to see them for what they are. Once, I saw one in broken-wing dance on the driveway, trying to draw me or some other threat away from its hidden nest or youngling. There are fewer and fewer every year.

I started hearing many things. And slowly, I learned what they were. The thrum of the partridge, which you feel in your chest more than you hear. The wild chorus of frog song. Robins chattering on the lawn. Coyotes howling from beyond the woods. Deer snorting from within the woods. Some things I smell before I see, like bear. Some things I am surprised to find here, like seagulls following the cultivator or that one lone salamander. I am learning the difference between birdsfoot trefoil and wild mustard, the difference between barn swallow and sparrow, the difference between a field of wheat and a field of barley because I can no longer be among the traffic, the lights, the close neighbors, that familiar pulse of the city. In the city, so much is public. Here, everything is private. I walk the rooms of this house, the woods' edge, the gravel drive,

and I wonder, *is this for me?* Not in an am I suited for it way, but in a way that needs to know, can this be mine? Can I share in this? Am I really part of all this, or am I still a stranger here?

Moon. In research, I read that the earth once held two moons within its orbit. Still does, in a way. The smaller moon crashed into the far side of what we call the moon today. That is why the terrain there is so very different, so separate. And yet, the two moons have become one. Our moon.

And so, despite all my searching, despite all my wandering this place looking for a sense of myself in it, I felt apart until my son hit his hands against the window glass and shouted *MOON! MOON!*

It was *my* moon he was seeing. The moon that had always been there. Yes, it looks different way up here in the north, like a face changing moods. Sometimes it is smaller, palm-sized, like the moon I remember from the city. Sometimes it dominates the sky, a huge plate of a moon. Other times it is made red from harvest dust, often it is obscured. But I finally recognized it as *my* moon. I don't have to be just one thing, I don't have to belong to just one place.

As my daughter has said from the backseat of the car, *the moon is following us.* And it is. No more getting tossed in the prairie wind. No more wondering which part is mine. I have the moon. I have a compass rose. It is our moon. And it has me.

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