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Tallgrass Prairie: A Work in Process

The sublime of this place that we call the prairie is one of patience and looking …. The coming to grips with the prairie, for the artist at least, has to do with a long and expansive relationship, one that seems, at first, without parameters.

--Keith Jacobshagen, painter
And Water Meets Sky

Title of miniature weaving (9.5”x4.5”): cotton, silk, reversible, all selvages finished, by Sheila Hicks, b. 1934, Hastings, Nebraska

Held in vertical filaments of celestial blue silk, Sheila Hicks’ key thoughts extend the reversible subject of her weaving: a blurring convergence of sea, sky, her artist’s eye. Drawn up and down, these warp threads suggest sky, land. Anyone can see she uses a small loom, miniature world view (no less true) to move past, and in toward her mind. Beyond this, she takes up the horizon, a back and forth entanglement thickening space into pattern, or if she pleases, opening into slits, slots, the swervings of weft. Here again sea-sky blue, but now pearl gray, green cotton too, and what moves me is the pale yellow, almost hay … hint of Hicks’ Nebraska roots, those prairies: bluestem, blazing star, inland salt, cord grass oceans’ wavering, and all captured in this small woven field.
Bluffline, Loess Hills, Iowa

By nature vulnerable, crooked, unstable. How would you like to be a bluffline for flour-sift silt? And what would you be trying to say, at once holding but ever ephemeral over oxidized piles of it, hills of it, hundreds of feet deep of it, this mostly rockless, seeming reckless loess: wind-placed quartzite dust, so fine a yellow, or sometimes sable, the pulverized remains left by long, scouring departures, returns, departures, re-turns, departuresreturnsdeparturesreturns of ice shelves, hurried hardly by wind, which nonetheless eventually blew these fragile giants into place. Dry, lonely, they can hold themselves in near-vertical walls: looming cliffs, a blown buff lining for river valleys, here at the Missouri, and not here nearer the Snake, Rhine, Yellow—

gone as quickly they can crumple in a heavy rain, a slow rivuleting, then rivering, collapse, a slumping, runoff, some reports say like dissolving sugar.

Standing on a loess bluffline, meandering spine, you can see miles of rumple and slide, and from maps know this old geological narrative narrows and bulges erratically, from the eastern banks of the Big Sioux River in southeastern South Dakota, to northwestern Missouri, just south of Mound City. Meaningless, these loess compass points, really, for they are always in flux:

once of the inland sea, then under ages of ice, then scoured and rescoured by it, now gullied, or tractored,
paved, plowed,

grazed to the nub,

or grubbed, dug. Still,

some line of drift-top till will always be returning, rearranged: a barely held ridgecrest, skyline,

ever-shifting script.
Bound less

… Came Suddenly into an open and bound less Prairie, I Say bound less because I could not See the extent of the plain in any Direction …

From William Clark’s Corps of Discovery Expedition journal, July 19, 1804, and one of the earliest writings about the tallgrass prairie near the Missouri River, somewhere south of Council Bluffs, Iowa, in what would come to be known as the Loess Hills.

I’d come there too, looking to find what’s now left, over 200 years later, of that tallgrass prairie, past vast country of grass, millions of bound less acres,

generous lining of our continental interior, from Manitoba to Texas, Montana to Indiana, tough sod heart: rhythm-weave, soil-maze, fossil bed,

hub. And I’d read about how Iowa had it all once, a border-to-border weave, sedge-dense diversities: a balance of seed, stem, leaf, so

many flowers—aster, larkspur, gentian, wild bergamot, foxglove, ironweed, rush-pink, even Queen of the Prairie, whose scientific name, it must be said, *Filipendula rubra*, is a song—alongside the newt, prairie racerunner, and earthworm; there were masked shrews, herds and herds of bison; mink, regal fritillary butterflies, toads, the ornate box turtle, bat. I’d picked here to look for all that, but more for its loess, *l-o-e-s-s*, a name I found while looking for rhyme, an end word to pair with *lessons*, last sound from a poem of mine’s previous line, *les*: linked, slip-like, to that final syllable, *sons*, slipping again, deep, a slip-stream of air lengthening over and past the tongue, throat, all the way to a deep hush, hum. How
to pronounce it though? A two-beat low-us?
Or a melding into one sound, with o and e as œ,
as in the French, feu? Or more like the long

oh, in bone, or know, or woe? In the original
German, it’s löss, which looks a lot like loss
on the page, only with an umlaut, those tiny eyes
dotted, doting over the o, don’t they keep it from
sounding like emotion, surprise? Don’t they instead
make it uh-ss, something it really isn’t, a kind of enforce-
ment? How linguistics with its diacritics
insist on assimilation: the originally occurring
now usually lost. Here, in Iowa,

just south of Council Bluffs, not far from
the tamed Missouri River, its unruly sand bars
and wandering ways channelized, I

see in any direction all that’s left now is
remnant—traces, a prairie ragwort here,
buffalo clover scattered near stands of Indian

glass there—how to the extent there is
anything, it’s holding and held by the steepest
loess bluffs (where cows and plows and saws
haven’t been able to reach)—and I
pronounce loess, emphasis on us, knowing
it carries in it loss, less.
Close Reading: An Epigraphist’s Apologia

afte[r] breakfast which was on a rosted Ribs of a Deer and a little Coffee I walked on Shore intending only to Keep up with the Boat, Soon after I got on Shore, Saw Some fresh elk Sign, which I was induced to prosue those animals by their track to the hills after assending and passing thro a narrow Strip of wood Land, Came Suddenly into an open and bound less Prairie, I Say bound less because I could not See the extent of the plain in any Derection, the timber appeared to be confined to the River Creeks & Small branches, this Prairie was Covered with grass about 18 Inches or 2 feat high and contained little of any thing else, except as before mentioned on the River Creeks &c, This prospect was So Sudden & entertaining that I forgot the object of my prosute and turned my attention to the Variety which presented themselves to my view ...

--From William Clark’s Corps of Discovery Expedition journal, July 19, 1804

Epigraphication, I’ll call it: that selective re-making of a point, a slice from somewhere else, a pointing to an image, or theme, that sounding of dialect, style, or pitch, that crafting of aura, or mood, a tonal casting of doubt in a reader’s mind, or a not-so-subtle pitch for credibility, (who’d have guessed she’d read that?), a spilling of cadence, the ringing of memory’s bell, a message from a sage, the stillness of pith. I’ve always loved the epigraph, how powerful a carving of opinion made in the mirror image of an original, or finessed to matter otherwise—it’s all in the hands of the cutter, chipper, chief ellipsist who plays ragtag with edges of meaning. William Clark’s notes are for me
epigraphically seductive, so much from which to carve, from the sensuous math of his sightings, first accounts: 51 bird, 44 mammal, 15 reptile and amphibian and 12 fish species (not including the 178 previously unknown plants sketched by his pen) to his suggestive tables of data on 50 tribes, not to mention 14 vocabulary lists, blank sheets offered by President Jefferson, so eager was he to know new native words, he ordered them captured along the way. All were filled, and all misplaced, or lost. Surely there’s loss in making epigraphs ... whole texts are left behind to feature a cinched sentence, maybe just a clipped clause, and isn’t it just like a writer to omit, abandon, especially if it’s not her own work? Epigraphs, once born, lead double lives—

the jilted lover, cast
aside, torn by past textual loyalties, yet so fickle, curious about the future, and the new love interest, bold overture set apart, quick study, island for metaphor. All deserving of close readings, for what’s there, what’s not. For this poem’s epigraph, I here fess up to cutting Clark’s entire journal entry for July 19, 1804, and at its center the epigraph I lifted for an even earlier work, one about the explorer’s awful sense of the bound less Prairie … You see, dear reader, I needed it to support my own poem about boundlessness, so I trimmed what I didn’t need then—Clark’s context, frame: a breakfast of rosted ribs of Deer and a little Coffee ..., his walk alongside the keelboat’s slow tack with the river, his seeing fresh elk sign, his following it, getting bit lost in

lowland woods but coming into what we now know is loess, then vast with prairie, the end of which he couldn’t see, nor could he see, at least at first, anything they contained but grass 2 feat high and being so suddenly entertained, taken in by its seeming endlessness, he forgot everything, turned his eye to the Variety Which presented themselves to my view ... I restore here then his full view, for all it extends from that July day, but more for what it doesn’t take away.
Dégringolade

A raucous character—wiggling to an uncertain destiny—collapses in broad daylight, completely undone. I abandoned this small work only to retrieve it twenty years later with new interest.

--Sheila Hicks, notes on her 8.58 x 6.75” weaving, titled Dégringolade: woven, floating warp; cotton, silk.

Tumble collapse it’s hard to read this weaving’s gradual unravelment how the steady gold warp goes soon loses its grip the weft drifting loose left to bundle slip run colors askew a single-strand mauve silk giving way to slubby worsteds rust and navy green grey while a thin snarl of undone maroon threads tangle a patch remnant dangling ajar orphan does it still belong or want to drift the fraying river like tresses for mourning repair

Even the word tumbles dégringolade like a full shuttle traveling across over under almost all the vowel threads while bumping up back and forth against a couple of hard-knock consonants those d’s, those g’s just a nudge then a rest on the n of in the l of la like loess it’s flux forever in a state of undone completely raucous uncertain destiny
Exotics: Found (even in) Poem

Today, between 30 and 60% of the plant species on the Great Plains are not native to the region . . . . The best known exotics are the cultivated crop plants on the High Plains, especially wheat and corn. Their cultivation of necessity destroys the prairie sod.

--Jane Bock and Carl Bock, biologists, from “The Challenges of Grassland Conservation”

A single mature purple loosestrife plant produces 2.5 million seeds annually. Japanese knotweed can spiral its roots sixty feet underneath a highway to send up shoots on the other side.

--Cornelia Mutel, historian, from “The Great Transformation,” The Emerald Horizon: The History of Nature in Iowa


Queen Anne’s lace, daylilies, oxeye daisies, smooth brome, smooth sumac, reed canarygrass, wild parsnip, meadow fescue. Common roadside standards,

populators of small urban strips. Early matures, profuse producers of seeds, survivors of everything harsh, resisters to local diseases. Be banished carp,

sweetclover, yellow and white. Dandelion, cattail, house mouse, night crawler, Norway rat, foxtail—can’t you go back where you came from? Kazakhstan,

ancestral home of our sweet apples. Bromus tectorum, you cheatgrass. Crested wheatgrass, tall wheatgrass, quackgrass, orchard grass, Timothy, all are Eurasian
in origin. Oh South Africa, your monocultures
of lovegrass are here too, and so like love in its irony—
introduced as it was to restore overgrazed grassland, but
ending up flimsy forage for our grazers. Accidentally
introduced Russian thistle (whose seeds were present
in sacks of flax imported to be sown in South Dakota
in 1873) and other surreptitious castaways: hidden
in live-stock feed, mud-oozed from boots, afloat in ship
ballast. Nurseries cradle fungal parasites in their stock,
and all manner of invasive fugitives get rides
in hinges of railroad cars, or lie in wait, pinched between
their floorboards. Even verbs with some straggler
modifiers oblige these sly hitch-hikers: to establish,
usurp, invade, play havoc, cost. They continue to threaten,
often pose, easily out-do, start a chain of effects, smother,
flaunt, no problem driving out, will kill, are
killing, patient killers, have killed, creep, impede. Are
Sow, See

What is so compelling about this place, what is in part the visual seduction of the Plains, is the ability to see, without great interruption, how each element, silo, grain elevator, treeline, roadway, pond, farmhouse, railroad line sits and occupies its place in the scheme of things…. It is not the heroic space one finds at the rim of the Grand Canyon; it is instead a distance that is at once human in its visual and emotional scale—a scale in both the land and its relationship to sky that embraces, shelters, and signals the visual journey forward without intimidation. For me, it always has implicit in it the outer expression of an inward journey.

--Keith Jacobshagen, painter

Across the plain worn
face of an old pillow lined paper canvas for a new
seed single strand for bobbin-lace dab of paint word placed
a seeding first stroke crisscross then another another then
strandstrandstrand or strandstrand and stranded strand
line flax hemp gimp oil hair-thin cotton image
held tangle-free by grooved wood reel brush bone shuttle
sleek fitting the palm the seeing
heart hand land-sky silo river of silk uncertain turn
clasp a clasping pass doubt
with ease or snag rhythm wait
a weight dangling at on edge
until needed or not slip
woven stanza journey: no matter what: something: lace-scape net
Yield Prayer

Corn thus becomes incarnate; for what is a hog but fifteen or twenty bushels of corn on four legs?

--Writer from the 1860s commenting on the use of surplus corn to feed hogs, whose numbers were growing rapidly

… we North Americans look like corn chips with legs.

--Todd Dawson, biologist, in reference to isotope ratios in human tissue

You, commodity corn, trillion-rowed, your traces in our hair, beer, ketchup, dairy. We ingest you, now that you are everywhere—feedlot, fryer, toothpaste, relish, whitener, you even in the waxy sheen on our Safeway beans. Patron saint of surplus, Church of the Corn Palace, lockstep, you, your family of hybrid giants—once a grass, now a monoculture—stand domesticated. Oh, eternal high volumist, consumer of tallgrass prairies, secure our futures.