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# Nine-Mile Prairie

Lisa Knopp

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# NINE-MILE PRAIRIE

LISA KNOPP

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## Manner of Speaking

I'm going there today. But I can't find the right preposition to capture the experience. Will I go *onto* the prairie, as if it were the upper surface of something, a plane or a platform to pass over? Will I go *into* the prairie, as if it were something that can surround or envelop me like an economic recession or a waiting room? Will I go *through* the prairie, as if it were a substance like water or an ordeal like menopause to move into and beyond? Or will I go *around* the prairie, metaphorically skirting its edges, since it is an enigma whose meaning I've yet to discover?

And what of the articles *a* or *the*? Will I go to *a* prairie, *a* being a fragment of the once vast grassland in the center of North America, or will I go to *the* prairie, the whole from which the relict is preserved or somehow escaped destruction, a whole that still exists, even if only in the imagination? What I can say: I'm going there today.

## Fervor

Nine-Mile Prairie is so named because it is five miles west and four miles north of the City Campus of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL). Not so long ago, these nine miles were more open and rural. Now to get to Nine-Mile, you cross Interstate 80, pass new housing developments and apartment complexes, turn west on Highway 34, pass the Kawasaki factory that employs over a thousand people, pass the north side of the Lincoln Municipal Airport, pass fields planted with corn or soybeans, pass a Casey's convenience shop, an RV storage site, a pallet manufacturer, and turn west onto Fletcher Street. South of where West Fletcher dead-ends is Nine-Mile Prairie. At first glance, the prairie is nothing but weeds, brush, sparrows, and fences—what you'd find at home if you let the yard go. But if you become acquainted with this prairie, you will find it remarkable. All but twenty of the 230 acres that make up Nine-Mile have never been broken, none has been grazed since 1968, and each has been burned about every three years since 1979. This small prairie relict supports astonishing diversity: over eighty species of birds, 392 vascular plants, including the threatened prairie white-fringed orchid, and the rare regal fritillary butterfly. In these early years of the new millennium, 270,000 of us live in Lancaster County. But if you keep your eyes to the ground at Nine-Mile, you can imagine what most of this county in southeastern Nebraska looked like a century and a half ago when there were but 153 residents.

My first encounter with prairie occurred at Nine-Mile in the fall of 1989 though Ecology of the Great Plains, a course I was taking at UNL. On a Saturday morning in September, I rode the bus the nine miles between the City Campus and the prairie with the other students in the class and, since I hadn't been able to find a babysitter, my five-year-old son. We walked the rutted lane between two pieces of fenced-off land owned by the airport and entered a whole new world. When the professor showed us big bluestem, the premiere grass of tall-grass prairie, I fell in love with it. Then it was a different common name, "turkey foot," a reference to the shape of the seedhead (three long racemes or flower clusters, three long turkey toes), that made this grass easy to remember. Now, it's the scientific name, *Andropogon gerardi*, that intrigues me, because of the link it

suggests between this grass and humans. The Greek *andros* means man, *pogon* means bearded (the seeds of big bluestem are very hairy), and *gerardi* is the name of the botanist who first described the species in scientific terms. Big bluestem is a tall, bearded man. The other common name, big bluestem, has always puzzled me. While the stem is big, there's nothing blue about it that I can see. During its growing season, it's green. Big greenstem. In a damp year, it greets my September birthday with bronze-purple stems and seedheads that I look up to. Big winestem.

I don't remember what else the professor showed us that morning, but I do remember the pond, which then had water in it, and the cottonwoods near it. I remember that the late morning was prickly hot and that my attention was divided between the lecture I was supposed to be hearing and my son who had grown bored and restless. Nonetheless, something happened at Nine-Mile on that September morning that led me there again and again and to seek other swatches of prairie, both native and restorations. After my daughter was born in 1991, it was seven full months before I had the time, energy, and attention to finish a piece of writing. That piece was an essay about wildflowers that I'd seen that summer at Nine-Mile.

When the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton was selecting poems to be included in a new collection, he realized that those that he'd written during his early years in the monastery, when the communion, intimacy, and asceticism were so new and so intense, were his best. "The fervor of those days was special and young," Merton wrote. "It can inspire one to seek a new and different kind of fervor which is older and deeper." I, too, have sought an older and deeper kind of fervor. Seventeen years ago, I was eager to match names in the field guide to the plants that I saw and to learn the characteristic grasses and forbs and thus, the boundary lines between the different types of prairies—tall, mixed, and short; upland and lowland. Now I'm less interested in names and divisions than in learning how the prairie works, both as individual plants and as a whole, and how a prairie landscape works on my body, mind, and soul. What, in another seventeen years, will an even older and deeper fervor lead me to see and love about this place?

## Horizontal

On a mild December day, my daughter takes a photograph of me standing atop a knoll at Nine-Mile. I imagine that the picture will show the grassy hilltop, a little sky and me, the only perpendicular. My presence is intended to give scale to my surroundings, yet I imagine that it will appear as an assertion, an effrontery, an impertinence. "Raise your arms," my daughter shouts before she snaps the photo. I do but then drop them. It seems that there is already enough of me in the picture. But when I get the developed film back, I'm unsettled by what I see. The hilltop is not a hilltop but an ever so slightly curved horizon, the line of which extends beyond the frame of the photo. I'm just a dark dot on the horizon, smaller than the dark seedheads in the foreground, one and a half inches of grass beneath me; two and a half inches of sky above me. I'm about to be squashed or canceled out by sky.

In *Prairie Plants*, grassland ecologist John E. Weaver defined prairie as a landscape that "appears almost monotonous in the general uniformity of its plant cover. Its main features are the absence of trees, the scarcity of shrubs, the dominance of grasses, and a characteristic xeric flora." In other words, a horizontal landscape. In the photo my daughter took, there are no trees or shrubs. The only plant that I can identify is switchgrass. What I see in the photo are flat, gold islands of that grass against a dun background. But what I remember are clumps or crowns of switchgrass the size of hula hoops, the many-branched seedheads reaching farther into the sky than me. Weaver says nothing in his definition about the sky; yet, its presence in the photo of me on the hill is overpowering. A wide, open sky with its ability to divest me of any notions of my own power and importance is as essential as grass to my definition of prairie.

We're easy with horizontal landscapes. There's nothing there that can fall down or if there was, it's already done so. No threat. Horizontal lines follow the earth and extend into places that we can visit or imagine. At

Nine-Mile, that means Iowa and Colorado or South Dakota and Kansas, places I either know well or at least am acquainted with. Consequently, horizontal lines suggest repose, peacefulness, and spaciousness. Vertical lines, however, are dramatic and dynamic. One end touches the earth but the other extends into the blue, beyond our ability to follow or imagine. Because the tree, person, steeple, tower, tornado, or lightning bolt has defied gravity in its vertical reach, we feel tense, uneasy. What goes up must come down.

I seek prairie, but not because I find it to be an easy, tranquil setting. On the contrary, the more I learn about prairie, the more I see it as a place of keen competition between the various plants for water, light, and nutrients. Rather I seek prairie because of the revision that this landscape demands of me. In the city, I walk or drive through a world that is crowded with perpendiculars—houses, utility poles, trees, billboards, and lots of people. The interior of my house and office are just as upright since there I am enclosed by walls lined with tall bookcases, look out through vertical windows, enter and exit by vertical doors. My days are ordered and enclosed by routine, a vertical list of priorities. When I'm in or on or around prairie, it is tempting to visually latch on to the rare perpendicular, the clump of eastern redcedars near the fence or the cellular phone tower a half mile away, because that's what I've been taught to see and value. I'm like those famous kittens who were reared in the dark except for a brief period each day when they were exposed to one kind of line, vertical for some kittens, horizontal for others. When researchers tested the kittens' visual behavior at the end of five months, they found that each group showed clear visual deficits. For instance, those exposed only to vertical lines gave no response when a researcher held a rod horizontally before them. But when the researcher turned the rod so that it was vertical, the kittens played with it. Likewise, those kittens who were only exposed to horizontal lines were comfortable only in the presence of such. Live and move in a world that is primarily vertical, that's what we come to see and expect.

Seeing and accepting the openness and the open-endedness of prairie counters what I've been taught—that open space, like silence, is an uncomfortable emptiness to be filled, even if all that one has to put there is clutter or chatter. When I'm on or in prairie, I try to keep my attention from contracting and moving in the usual up and down pattern. I soften my vision, loosen my grip, and allow my awareness to expand forward, backward, and sideways. Then I feel as though I'd just thrown off my corset, broken the habit, paid off the debt, been cleared of the charges. In the presence of such freedom, I'm giddy and wary. Reason enough to preserve prairie landscapes.

As a study site now owned by the University of Nebraska Foundation, Nine-Mile is relatively safe, though global climate change may cause, may have already caused, some grasses to retreat and be replaced by others that can thrive in droughtier conditions. At the moment, the main threat to Nine-Mile is vertical and aerial. In 2005, Lincoln Electric Service (LES) planned to meet the electrical demands in Lincoln's growing northwest quadrant by erecting steel poles over one hundred feet tall along the western edge of the prairie to support wires carrying 115 and 345 kilovolts. Environmentalists were successful in persuading LES's administrative board not to install the tower on the prairie's western edge, but they couldn't stop the board from planning to erect them along the southern edge. Yet one more obstruction in the sky. An open sky above the prairie creates a sense of vastness. A sky broken by tall, heavy towers diminishes the breadth of the land beneath it by putting it on a human scale. Put perpendiculars on, in, through or around the prairie and it is no longer the horizontal landscape that can unsettle, reorganize, and ultimately restore us.

## Prairie Roots

John Ernest Weaver was a man of open spaces. He was born in Villisca, Iowa, in 1884, a time when there was still plenty of prairie in southwestern Iowa. He arrived in Lincoln in 1905 and spent all but a few of his adult years there, first as a student at the university, where he received his B.S. in 1909 and his M.A. in 1911, and later as a professor of Plant Ecology. During his thirty-five-year tenure at UNL, Weaver directed forty-two doctoral dissertations and over fifty master's theses, and wrote numerous books and articles, as my

bookshelves attest. Weaver was remarkable in that he spent his life studying and trying to preserve what most people of his time and place broke up and filled in with no remorse for what they'd destroyed. Two weeks before his death in 1966, he delivered the manuscript of *Prairie Plants and Their Environment: A Fifty-Year Study in the Midwest* to the University of Nebraska Press. The reviewer for *Defenders of Wildlife News* proclaimed that in this book, Weaver "reports upon the hidden workings of a plant community that he knew better than any [other] man who has ever lived." A Lincolnite who knew Weaver says that the old man was buried with prairie soil beneath his fingernails.

Nine-Mile Prairie was where Weaver tested the botanical philosophy of Frederic E. Clements, his mentor at UNL and at the University of Minnesota, where Weaver received his Ph.D., and it was where Weaver was eventually forced to depart from the tenets of Clementsian botany. For Weaver, Nine-Mile was a laboratory and a philosophical testing ground.

Weaver and Clements believed that the prairie formation was a single organism. In the 1929 edition of their widely adopted textbook, *Plant Ecology*, they write, "Each formation [large unit of vegetation] is a complex and definite organic entity with a characteristic development and structure." All plant succession, by which Weaver and Clements meant the series of plant communities that occupy an area as the vegetation develops, was progressive. In other words, plants evolve toward the final or "climax stage" best suited to that climate: pine and hemlock forest near the Great Lakes; Basin Sagebrush in Nevada and Utah. The relatively flat, open center of the continent was meant to host bison and grasses, but the type of grasses and their associates varied according to climatic factors. From central Indiana to eastern Nebraska was tall-grass prairie, dominated by big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass. Mixed prairie, which covered all but the eastern- and westernmost edges of Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas, comprised mostly grasses two to four feet tall—needlegrass, prairie dropseed, little bluestem, June grass, side-oats grama, and western wheatgrass. The grasses of what Weaver called the "short-grass disclimax" (so called because it wasn't a natural stage but one caused by overgrazing) of the western plains and the eastern high plains were six to eighteen inches tall and dominated by buffalo grass, blue grama, and triple-awn. Weaver and Clements insisted that the dominant climax form of prairie wasn't tall-grass but "true" prairie, which once formed a fairly distinct band between tall-grass and mixed prairie. They considered tall-grass to be "postclimax," a corruption of sorts that resulted when true prairie was damaged by cultivation and overgrazing. In response, big bluestem moved up the slopes and displaced needlegrass and prairie dropseed as the dominant species. Nine-Mile is within the belt of what was once true prairie.

Weaver and Clements believed that if prairie is damaged or destroyed, it will eventually return to its original state, provided that people don't interfere. The more-or-less predictable sequence of species that occupy a disturbed site is called "old field" or "secondary" succession. Aerial photographs show that twenty acres at Nine-Mile were cultivated in the early 1940s and probably abandoned shortly thereafter. Aerial photos from the early 1950s show the return of prairie vegetation. After sixty-some years of secondary succession, the edges of "Old Field," as it's now called, are dominated by big bluestem and look like the rest of Nine-Mile. But nearer the center of Old Field are tufts of little bluestem and side-oats grama. Eventually, tall grasses will dominate there, too. This process also occurs on a larger scale. Weaver and Clements believed that short-grass would eventually become mixed prairie, which in turn would eventually become true prairie. Ultimately, secondary succession would triumph. While humans could interfere with this natural process, nothing could destroy the prairie.

Prairie once flourished between southern Manitoba and north-central Texas. Because Lincoln lies near the midpoint, Weaver believed that data from Nine-Mile was representative of conditions over a vast area. There was no better place for him to be. He conducted experiments at what he called the "true prairie station outside of Lincoln," which may refer to Black's or Belmont Prairie, 180 upland acres three miles north of the university, probably destroyed for a farm which later became the site of a housing development or stores and

parking lots, or to Nine-Mile, the prairie which Weaver named. Weaver had various methods for studying the plant communities at these stations. My favorite is the “bisect,” in which he and his students dug trenches in the prairie deeper than the deepest roots and excavated the root systems. A photograph in *Prairie Plants* shows a fair, rather young man in a dress shirt and a derby standing in a trench a good three feet taller than him. This man—perhaps he is Weaver—points at something in the trench wall with what appears to be a small bowling pin. Weaver excavated the underground parts of each plant with a hand pick, washed, dried, and measured them, and then plotted the entire root system to scale on coordinate paper. These drawings not only show the form of the root systems of different species but revealed their relationships to each other and to the different layers of soil. In a bisect drawing from mixed prairie near Hayes, Kansas, one can see that the root system of wild alfalfa or scurf pea, a legume, plunges eight feet. Diminutive buffalo grass, only five inches of leaves and stems above ground, sends its roots down five feet.

Three things strike me about Weaver’s bisect drawings: the root systems are intricate, beautiful, gracefully branching affairs; there is more prairie beneath the ground than above; the roots of the different plants draw nutrients and water from different locations, the tall grasses in the moister lowlands and the shorter grasses on rockier, drier or hilltop sites, as if they were sharing resources. How could one not have faith that such an organism would persist?

## Oceans, Islands, Coasts

The comparison people are most likely to reach for when describing grassland is that of an ocean. Aldo Leopold, who like me was born and raised on a wooded bluff above the Mississippi in Burlington, Iowa, but moved away to settle in a prairie place, wrote of watching an Illinois farmer cut down an ancient cottonwood: “Time was when that tree was a buoy in the prairie seas.” In *Flowering Earth*, botanist Donald Culross Peattie wrote of prairie, “There is no close-up here and no detail. Instead, there is horizon like the sea line; there are seas of grass here, running before an unwearied wind, waves of grass winnowing one way to show all silver and dimpling another to darken all green.” In *The Prairie World*, a collection of lyrical essays packaged as an ecological textbook, David F. Costello wrote, “Whenever I cross the shoreline of the grassland sea I stop and eagerly examine a niche or two of this extraordinarily variable boundary to see what it harbors.” When prairie stretched from central Indiana to eastern Nebraska, it took weeks to cross and was as dangerous as an ocean passage. When the tall grasses are ripe and head- or shoulder-high at summer’s end, walking across the prairie is like trudging through water. Like the ocean, prairie is or was a horizontal landscape that made people feel small, insignificant, and vulnerable. And unless you know how to see it, prairie, like the ocean, appears flat and monotonous. Years ago when I showed Nine-Mile to my former husband, who had grown up near the lush and vertically-crowded rain forest of South America, he said, “This is it? It looks like a corn field.”

Sometimes when I walk on, in, through, or around prairie, I try to imagine it as an ocean of grass. Bunches of little bluestem, light green in the spring, purple and coppery in the autumn, are an archipelago. At the bottom of the hill, a swell of big bluestem. As the wind moves across the prairie, the grasses and forbs bounce, quiver, or sway in response, a sea of movement. This is a tide that slows but never recedes. Prairie coasts aren’t clean affairs. Borders fluctuate; the size of the islands of grasses and forbs expand and contract according to the moisture level. A fence attempts to part a prairie preserve from the adjacent golf course or pasture or housing subdivision or airport runway, but plants slip beneath it. A little buffalo grass over there, a little leafy spurge over here. Like water, prairie doesn’t stop at the property line.

But the prairie-ocean metaphor fails in significant ways. To what do I compare this variegated surface, composed of blooming milkweeds, gayfeathers, orchids, clovers, leadplant, sageworts, thistles, goldenrods, and the prodigal number of asters? And what of size? The coasts or borders of oceans and prairie are changing, yet one is expanding and one is contracting. As glaciers and ice caps melt in response to rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the seas grow deeper and wider. An article in the January 16, 2007, *New York*

*Times* claims that the melting of the Greenland ice sheet is not only changing the coastline of that country (what once seemed to be a peninsula is now an island that was once joined to the mainland by ice) but will raise the sea level twenty-three feet. Wider oceans threaten such major, low-lying US port cities as Boston, New York, Charleston, Miami, and New Orleans, as well as such low-lying or island nations as Bangladesh and the Republic of Maldives. In contrast, the North American prairie is less than one-tenth of one percent of its former size. No other North American biome has suffered such destruction. What remains of the once vast prairie are these little fenced off relicts, just a few hundred or dozens of acres preserved by Audubon and other conservationist groups, each relict in danger of being devoured by sprawling towns, cities, and highways or so invaded by alien species that they're just another weedy plot. Prairie is not an ocean.

## Revision

Weaver couldn't imagine that anything could destroy the prairie and allow it to be replaced by some import such as Kentucky bluegrass or smooth brome. What shook his exuberant faith in this stability and in the certainty of progressive succession was the Great Drought of 1933–1942. Weaver began studying the effects of the drought in 1934, then the driest summer on record in Nebraska. For thirty-nine days that year, the air temperature in eastern Nebraska was above one hundred degrees. In July of 1934, Weaver observed that no water was available in the soil for plant growth to a depth of four feet. From a distance, the prairie looked normal, but when Weaver studied the basal cover, he found “holes or openings in the prairie carpet.” Dead rhizomes of big bluestem and Indian grass. Dead crowns of little bluestem and prairie dropseed. Pale stem-bases of needlegrass and blue grama grass. Weeds that flourished in the once healthy sod. Where the drought was most severe, the soil was bare. Western wheatgrass, that drought-adapted opportunist, quickly invaded such stretches. Buffalo grass and the invasive six-weeks fescue followed.

Weaver doesn't say that studying the effects of the drought was painful for him, but I can't imagine it being otherwise. “Each prairie studied,” he wrote in *Prairie Plants*, “was known intimately; hence any changes were readily and clearly observed.” For Weaver, Nine-Mile was a graveyard of sorts, both for the true prairie plants that he loved and the micro-paradigm which his research supported.

Within seven years of the beginning of the drought, Weaver watched the true prairie of central Kansas, eastern Nebraska, and eastern South Dakota being replaced by mixed prairie in an area one hundred to 150 miles wide. Big bluestem, which thrives in moist lowlands, nearly disappeared. The changes that he and Clements made in the 1938 edition of *Prairie Ecology* reveal that their faith in the resilience of the prairie had eroded. The coauthors still maintained that climax communities may display superficial changes “with the season, year, or cycle,” several years in a row of abnormal rainfall or unusual temperatures would have “little or no permanent effect upon their composition and structure.” Yet, Weaver qualified his and Clements's earlier claims about the inevitability of progressive succession and admitted that “Man alone can destroy the stability of the climax.” Historian Ronald C. Tobey suspects that these revisions were Weaver's rather than Clements's. Indeed in “The North American Prairie” which appeared in *The American Scholar* in 1944, after Weaver had seen the full effect of the drought and after the rains had returned, he grimly and eloquently concluded, “Prairie is much more than land covered with grass. It is a slowly evolved, highly complex entity, centuries old. It approaches the eternal. Once destroyed it can never be replaced by man.” Gone was his faith that the true prairie would reclaim the heart of the continent. Perhaps Weaver wanted to revise every present tense sentence he'd ever written about the prairie, changing “the prairie is” to “the prairie was.”

If Weaver were conducting studies at Nine-Mile today, I suspect that he'd be fencing off square meters of prairie with steel tapes and stakes. In these “list” or “census” quadrants, he'd note the number and ratio of the different plant species from year to year, so that he could quantify the retreat of prairie in the face of global climate change. This year, a little less of the moisture-loving tall grasses. Next year, a little less. Each year, a smaller and smaller chance of recovery. The prairie *was*.

# Relict

In March 2001, the US Postal Service issued an international postage stamp bearing a photograph of Nine-Mile Prairie taken by Lincolnite Michael Forsberg [see back cover]. This stamp is part of the Scenic American Landmarks Series, which includes photos of the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, Yosemite, and the Great Smoky Mountains. In “October in the Tallgrass,” one sees tall ripe big bluestem, thick and sumptuous, shagged and tawny as fur or pelt; in the misty distance, scattered trees; above it all, an unobstructed blue sky with wisps of white clouds. The scene is so pristine that it doesn’t seem of this world. Forsberg says that he went to Nine-Mile every morning for seven days in October of 1994 before he shot the photo of the six-foot tall grass. None of the shots were right. But on the seventh day, “I got there just as the sun came up and the fog was lifting. There was no wind and lots of dew, so the color was really rich.” Because he wanted to give people a sense of what the tall-grass prairie would have looked like to someone traveling across Nebraska on horseback or in a covered wagon 150 years ago, he took the photo from a stepladder.

I walk Nine-Mile looking for the spot where Forsberg set his camera. North of Nine-Mile is land owned by the Lincoln Municipal Airport Authority. To the east is the skyline of Lincoln, a city of almost a quarter million people. To the southeast is a white and orange checkerboard water tower. To the south is a pole building for farm machinery, a windmill that I’ve never seen spinning, and an enormous, rather new house. The deck on the house faces east for a view of the city rather than north for a view of the prairie and airport. The land near the house is divided into fields, one gray, one yellow, rather than the blended colors of the prairie. Soon, LES will erect towers and electrical lines along this border. To the southwest of Nine-Mile are towers, ladders, ropes, poles, and a guillotine-like contraption: the University’s Challenge Course. To the west is rather open land, the site of ominous-looking bunkers and a former ammunition dump. Forsberg would have had to position his camera very precisely to keep the shot clear of these obstructions. I read that if LES had erected the towers and lines on the western edge of Nine-Mile, they’d have cut right through the scene that Forsberg shot.

By what accident, by what good fortune or act of will was Nine-Mile saved in a place where so little prairie remains? When Weaver conducted his studies at Nine-Mile, it consisted of eight hundred acres. The western part had been part of the Flader homestead. During the Cold War, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) in Bellevue took over the Lincoln Municipal Airport and the prairie. Just west of Nine-Mile, the government built eighteen bunkers. In the interests of “security,” SAC strung barbed wire, kept the place brightly lit day and night, and limited the university’s access to the prairie. In the 1960s, SAC left and Nine-Mile became surplus government property. The Airport Authority bought the land and the bunkers for a hundred dollars per acre and now rents the bunkers as storage space.

In 1978, Ernest Rousek became interested in preserving the prairie. He was the perfect person for the job. While Rousek has a background in conventional agriculture (he trained as a soil scientist at UNL, was a district manager for a hybrid corn company, and invented planter plates that were used to plant three-quarters of the corn crop in the 1970s), he was passionate about saving the landscape he’d always loved. The one-room school that Rousek had attended in central Nebraska had been surrounded by prairie: the school playground. While herding cattle on the family farm, he passed the time by matching the prairie plants that he saw with those in the Nebraska prairie plant identification book. “Prairie just kind of got infiltrated into my system,” he says.

When Rousek became interested in preserving Nine-Mile, he found that part of the eight-hundred-acre spread had been overgrazed and part had been cultivated. But the southern 230 acres were native and in good condition, except for the twenty acres that had been cultivated in the 1940s. In the late 1970s, Wachiska Audubon, the chapter to which Rousek belongs, rented the 230 acres. Because paying the \$4,600 rent each year was a strain for Wachiska, Rousek cut the grass and sold it as hay to the Omaha Stockyards and other



customers. Rousek and A. T. Harrison, a professor of biological sciences at UNL, teamed up and sought more permanent protection for the prairie than a year-to-year lease. Initially, the Airport Authority's Board of Directors offered to sell the land for fifteen hundred dollars per acre, a steep increase over the one hundred dollars per acre that it had paid in the 1960s. When Rousek asked the Board to reduce the price, the directors said that the state constitution forbade them from selling land for less than market value. To reduce the price would be tantamount to making a charitable contribution to the Audubon Society.

Rousek and Harrison went to the state legislature to see if they could change the law. Their request sailed through the unicameral body unopposed. In April of 1979, the Airport Authority approved a resolution to preserve 230 acres of airport land, then leased to the Wachiska Audubon Society, and agreed that the uniqueness of the native prairie would be recognized in any future deposition. And it agreed to sell the land for six hundred dollars per acre—still too high, Rousek thought. He and Harrison tried but failed to persuade the Nature Conservancy to purchase the land because at that time the Conservancy was more interested in preserving larger tracts. They garnered the support of then–University Chancellor Martin A. Massengale, an agronomist, and the Board of Regents, but that wasn't enough to save the prairie. Finally, the University of Nebraska Foundation and Marguerite Hall Metzger, whose late husband, Neil W. Hall, had managed the prairie during World War II, each donated sixty-nine thousand dollars toward the \$138,000 purchase price. The purchase was transacted in 1983. Since then, the Foundation has leased Nine-Mile to the university for one dollar per year.

The kiosk near the entrance to Nine-Mile that Rousek built and that Wachiska Audubon maintains provides a map and a brief history of the prairie, several of Weaver's drawings of prairie root systems, and Weaver's words of praise for the prairie: "One is awed by its immensity, its complexity, and the seeming impossibility of understanding and describing it. But after certain principles and facts become clear, one comes not only to know and understand the grasslands, but also to delight in them . . ."

## Revision

As always, I begin my walk on a mowed path. On this January day, it's the path along the east fence. Nine-Mile sits two hundred feet above the city; so as I walk, I look down on the Lincoln skyline, a familiar place of routine, compactness, and verticality. At this moment, the distance between the city and the prairie seems slight. My prepositional choice of the moment: I am *up on* the prairie.

I turn and walk along the south fence and into the bowl of the former pond. Because of the current drought, the tall grasses haven't lived up to their name for several years. In the past few summers, I've seen more than one pond go dry. The gray high-water marks on the trunks of the cottonwoods encircling the dry bed are probably from the summer of 1993, the wettest summer I've seen since I became acquainted with prairies. Then, the grasses were tall, dense and lush.

In the canyon, sparrows cheep and twitch in the shrubs. The rusty, eastern redcedars are studded with blue, berrylike cones. The red-orange berries of a bittersweet vine clinging to a bare branch are the brightest thing I see at Nine-Mile. Looming in the background is the medieval watchtower at the university's challenge course. Thoreau lamented that sometimes he'd walked a mile into the woods "bodily, without getting there in spirit." I am not yet *in* this demanding landscape. I'm not yet *in* the prairie. As I walk, I adapt. Horizontal. Present tense. Body and spirit.

I stand at the bottom of the hill. My eyes scan the jagged line where grass and sky meet. Here, the prairie seems immense. I leave the path and wade through the dry grasses. Burrs stick to my jeans. If Weaver dug trenches here, I see no evidence of them. From the top of the hill where I had my picture taken not so long ago, I can't escape the fact that Nine-Mile is a fenced-in relict, so small that I couldn't get lost here if I wanted to. Yet, I can lose myself here. A red-tailed hawk soars overhead. Beneath the grasses and forbs are the trails that

secretive, nocturnal rodents follow as they gather seeds and seek escape from hawks and coyotes, but I've never noticed the trails or the mice. I can identify some plants by their seedheads alone (the plumed and turkey-footed tall grasses, the thistle's prickly vase, the coneflower's cone, the milkweed's split pod), but to whom do these candelabras, torches, corkscrews, spikes, rattles, whisks, and burrs belong? What is this prairie like after dark, in an icestorm, or during a tornado? More than just nine miles separate the city and the prairie. My prepositional choice of the moment: I am *out in* the prairie.

The slanting afternoon sun lights up the rusty bunches of little bluestem's wire-thin leaves, stems, and its fuzzy white seedheads. At this moment, little bluestem is the grass of my heart. Weaver would have known it as *Andropogon scoparius*. Now, botanists call it *Schizochyrium scoparium*. *Scopa*, the indispensable part of the name, is Latin for broom, which is what the tufts of bronze stems and leaves look like. Soft little brooms that sweep me clean of distractions.

The essence of metaphor, says anthropologist Frederick Barth, is the use of the familiar to grasp the less familiar. What Weaver and Clements were grasping at when they described prairie as a single organism is the living unity they saw there, "each part interdependent upon every other part," as they wrote in *Plant Ecology*. If prairie is an organism, for me, it's mammalian. It is competitive and cooperative, hides and flaunts itself, wears different faces, and is pelt-covered. When I see the prairie as a sentient mammal gazing back at me, I feel even more tender-hearted toward it. Yet, the nature of the prairie changes according to the mammal whose characteristics I attribute to it—bison, deer, ferret, coyote, vole.

Many that followed the Overland Trail across Nebraska in the nineteenth century saw the prairie as the Great American Desert, a vast emptiness that stood between them and the new home or the fortune to be made in Oregon or Colorado or California. This metaphor persists. In *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris sees the prairie as a desert, specifically that of the Desert Fathers of fourth-century Egypt. In *Great Plains*, Ian Frazier claims that grassland is not desert, yet he conceives of it as desertlike, a blank screen, so to speak, onto which he can project his own desires. This metaphor of prairie as an empty expanse says more about what isn't there than what is. It simply doesn't reach far enough. In a variation on the prairie-ocean metaphor, botanist Peter Bernhardt compares prairies to icebergs, "since most of their mass remains below the soil surface." Like an iceberg, most of the prairie is hidden from my view and it is a vanishing thing. But a prairie is living; an iceberg is not. I reconsider the prairie-ocean metaphor. Despite its limitations, it reveals something essential to me that these other metaphors do not. The closest I can get to the experience of beholding the wide unbroken prairie is at or on or above an ocean, not a perpendicular in sight, nothing but water and sky stretching out farther than the eye or the imagination can follow.

While most explorers, immigrants, and travelers have seen the prairie as something to be crossed as quickly as possible and left behind, for me, it is the end of the journey. *Relict*, which Weaver and Clements defined as "a community or fragment of one that has survived some important change," is close kin to *relic*, the remains, ruins, or vestiges of something now gone or an object venerated because of its association with the sacred. Both words have the same Latin root: *relinquere*, *re* meaning back and *linquere* meaning to leave. To leave back. My pilgrim's journey brings me here to find what was left behind. Though but a shard or splinter of the once oceanic grasslands, this tiny island of prairie in the vast sea of towns, cities, farms, and highways is the essential piece that can evoke the whole. In the presence of this relic, I'm present, balanced, and spacious.

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LISA KNOPP is the author of four collections of essays: *Field of Vision* (1996) and *Flight Dreams: A Life in the Midwestern Landscape* (1998), both from University of Iowa Press, and *The Nature of Home* (2002) and *Interior Places* (forthcoming), both from the University of Nebraska Press. She teaches creative nonfiction at the University of Nebraska—Omaha and lives in Lincoln.

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