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The Prairie

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The Prairie

Casey Fuller

Winner of the 2023 Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry

You should wake now to remember the prairie. For it is reappearing as we run our eyes over the words. It may be false to imagine what you only fly over: so what details we place

in the erasure might feel like a flower crown laurelling the brow of the dead. A death we imagined, yes, since it's one that circulates in memory, so we might call it "un-remembering the prairie."

You should rise now and un-remember the prairie, for, in that recollection, you might rearrange it to "just above the prairie." See how the falsity begins in present, ending

somewhere where these words start to end, infecting that first layer, the anti-place where memory shines brightly, that ash. (Not the treasure house you dreamt of, but the gray-scape

where you honestly spend most of your life wandering in your mind, which, oddly feels firm, footed, empiric, for that place is inside a river, nevertheless, you could call it "of the prairie,"

where no one can truly drift below, no oil resides, no person, no town is drowned by a dam.) And gray in life, too, lost in the first layer, to that anti-place you dis-remember, a flower crown

circling your own head, black oil there, as if footed, firm, empiric, for that place is a river, like a windrower mowing down grass from the land. Meadowlarks and blackbirds flute

above and below where no oil resides, no person, no town is drowned by a poorly planned dam.

And gray in life, too, flute and twitter beyond a pale rage for order, circulating in time,

that ash, where river rocks glisten under a crosshatch of broken branches, where the air is scent-flecked with fresh hay, the meadowlarks and black birds flute above and below, a musk of smoke circling the pale air. They flute a song beyond the rage for order, enskyed: everything flies over us here. Where the air is scent-fleck with fresh hay (in the place we are landed) the prairie is redacted, in a mixed musk of diesel and impending cold, beside a catchment of brown brambles, ice-still and blue starred, tall grass and silver sage, prairie clover and wild rye, a blue plastic bottle—everything flies over us here, stainless. No branch can swing above a brook in a place we weren't born, the prairie was redacted, no enclosure can stop the width running in all directions. You can understand what I'm saying when I tell you an endlessness runs all ways at once—the way tallgrass and silver sage, prairie clover and wild rye, a plastic bag from a superstore—is not a kind of limit. Sometimes I imagine us lying down looking up at the planes flying above us (...tallgrass and silver sage, no branch above the brook in the place we weren't raised) in a space that is nothing like the prairie. But certainly we can imagine a truer place, where the real ground is covered (you can understand what I'm telling you when I say endlessness runs all directions at once) by needlegrass, by common cattail—nothing acts as a kind of limit. And slow below the leaves of grass, bleached in the alkaline salt shallows, a system of roots. But certainly we can see the other place, also, where the ground is covered in steaming windrows of upturned land, so grave-like, so life-giving, also, by needlegrass, by common cattail. We were once found in the prairie, so circled in, and yet so grave-like and upturned, too, but the truth is, it is founded in us now.

– after Susan Stewart

Casey Fuller is a PhD student at the University of North Dakota. He somehow finished his course work last fall!