When Nostalgia Is the Scent We Follow

Bruce Ballenger

1.

The first radio caller is Charlie, who reports that Kuba, his German shepherd, has a strange behavior, one that isn't necessarily a problem except that it's so odd. Kuba, says Charlie, "likes to merge with the vegetation." When the dog approaches a shrub, he slips into a kind of trance and enters the bush in "slow mode." The German shepherd seems to gaze distantly and deliberately at certain trees and bushes as if they have psychic power, and as I turn up the volume on my car radio, I think, yes, Charlie's dog is like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown, who was called into the dark heart of the New England woods by the wicked wails of fallen Salemites. Should I worry about Kuba, Charlie wonders? Is there something wrong with him? The radio host, zoologist Patricia McConnell, explains to Charlie that Kuba's condition wasn't all that unusual and was perhaps caused by "some kind of mild electrical glitch" that scientists are unable to explain. Some dogs, apparently, are inexplicably intoxicated by certain landscapes.

And so, I thought, am I. So are we all.

2.

I have lived in the Northern Rockies now for nineteen years, off and on, and while I am in love with western landscapes, what have been haunt-

ing me lately are the tallgrass prairies of my midwestern home. Like many native ecosystems in that region, prairies exist in isolated islands—sometimes as small as a cemetery plot that was never plowed, and rarely larger than a few hundred acres. No doubt this melancholy quality is one thing that appeals to me about the prairie—lone plant survivors who are unknown to each other, quietly holding out, separated from each other by highways, farm fields, and subdivisions. At one time, eighty percent of the northern Illinois region where I grew up was covered by tallgrass prairie, vast expanses of high grass that utterly confused the settlers who could not explain the absences of trees, and left William Cullen Bryant convinced that only poetry could adequately describe the prairie's "boundless wastes and awful solitudes."

The urban sprawl I see when I fly into Chicago fills me with a sadness that even poetry can't fix. I am being sentimental, of course. But what's strange is this nostalgia for a landscape I know mostly from books. I grew up in the suburbs, and the prairie, with its legendary fourteen inches of topsoil, was long gone well before I was born. Lake Michigan is there, as it always was, and as the plane pivots in a long, slow arc to land at O'Hare, I stare at the water and remember Kuba the German shepherd. This must be what it's like to be intoxicated by a bush.

A hunger for what seems timeless is one of the things that call us back to places. Memory is proprietary, possessive, and easily betrayed; we are pleased when we see things as we remembered them and disappointed when they are not and yet. This may be one reason that I am always drawn to Lake Michigan when I return home (or the ragged peaks in the Sawtooth range, near where I now live, and the granite shoreline of the Maine coast, near where I once lived), places that because of their immensity seem immune to change. That's why the obliteration of the Illinois prairie—falling to the plow in less than twenty years—is so stunning. It's the equivalent of draining the lake, a change so massive that I find it hard to imagine what the tallgrass prairie might have looked like, even with William Cullen Bryant's help.

Instead of poetry, these days we have Google Earth, which gives us a new way to imagine the colossal loss of place. As I write, a smoky smear, clearly visible from a satellite, stretches from Los Angeles to the Nevada

line from fires that burned 250 square miles in Angeles National Forest. I sometimes study the Google Earth image of North America at night, which from space appears, ironically enough, like the night sky seen from the Boise foothills, far from street lights on a clear night. I look for an expanse of black and see it only in the northern reaches of Canada. New York City, Boston, Miami, Los Angeles, and the Chicago shore, where I grew up, are solid clusters of light surrounded by a galaxy of stars that will be inevitably drawn into the whole.

3.

Goose Lake Prairie, in east-central Illinois, is a 2,000-acre remnant of original prairie, spared the plow because the ground was too wet for crops. At the visitor center there, I climb wooden stairs to a high vantage point and see a 360-degree view of the prairie around me. Writers in the 1830s frequently compared the Illinois prairie to a great sea, beautiful but fearsome to navigate, and as I slowly turned on the high platform, trying to surrender to the idea that I was aloft on a great mast, lost in a sea of grass, all I could think of was how midwestern landscapes have been, like those in New England, largely reduced to framed scenes as seen through a camera's eye. The word *landscape* itself implies such limitations; it was used historically to describe a partial and often idealized view of the world on canvas or paper, a scene constrained by the edges and angles of a wooden frame.

In the American West it is still possible for a landscape to bust free of visual borders, inviting us to slowly pivot on our heels to take it all in. But from the lookout on top of the visitor's center, Goose Lake Prairie was more a beleaguered island than a sea. It was bounded by two-lane roads, and in the distance, there was the pale, shimmering image of a nuclear power plant and its network of high-voltage towers radiating to the east and west. I am married to a woman who looks at the garden, robust with blooms, and only sees the weeds. It seemed that was exactly what I was doing that afternoon at Goose Lake Prairie. Later, it occurred to me that I felt a sense of loss that I had not really earned—after all, this 2,000-acre remnant of Illinois prairie was more prairie than I had ever seen. How could I genuinely feel the loss of something I hadn't ever really known?

In fact, the whole trip back to Illinois from my home in Idaho felt melancholic. I was on leave from the university and, in addition to hunting down the last Illinois prairies, I would spend time with a childhood friend in Indiana. Frank had been ill, but we would sit, as we had always done, on his deck along Lake Michigan's southern shore and look at the water. We would talk about our astonishment at finding ourselves fifty-five, inventorying the things we would—and could—no longer do. We knew, but did not admit to each other, that we were working through a familiar script: the predictable dialogue of middle-aged men who have trouble with grief. It was early September, and that first evening Frank and I watched the sun sink behind the Chicago skyline a hundred miles away, bloodied by the smoke from the steel mills in Gary. I didn't wonder then, as I do now, whether I returned to see what's left of the prairie because it was a convenient place to project my feelings of loss about other things.

According to historian Paul Shepherd, Anglo response to the American West in the nineteenth century depended on whether or not they believed the land had practical value. While many were awestruck by the immensity and strangeness of the frontier, Shepherd tells us that "one reaction" to an "encounter with radically unfamiliar vegetation and terrain" is to "swiftly and unconsciously ransack" it for what is familiar. "What do invaders in an alien habitat do about strangeness?" he writes. "They concoct explanations for it, and may make it an imaginative and aesthetic experience—but only if they have no practical interest in it. If they have practical interest in it, they change it to something familiar."

Recently, it occurred to me that a "practical interest" in place may be more than the promise that a prairie can be turned to corduroyed corn as far as the eye can see, or that a remote stretch of Idaho desert can be irrigated by an underground aquifer the size of Lake Erie, or that a town can be built at the convenient confluence of rivers. A "practical interest" in place can be much more personal. It has to do with the need to colonize the landscape with our own feelings, and in doing so we are unable to see a place on its own terms, compounding our loss. I am talking, I think, about a particular kind of nostalgia that is a nightmare version of homesickness. Psychiatrists call this "pathological nostalgia" and note that it is, among other things, "a substitute for mourning," a way to avoid accepting

loss and change and then moving on with your life. This might explain, I thought, my own melancholy that fall, and especially my interest in the beleaguered remains of tallgrass prairies. But it also might explain why I always come back to Frank's deck on the lake and why I found myself there once more that September.

Frank's lakeshore home was once a beach house, owned by his two aunts and uncles, part of a small resort community of Chicago Jews who were politically active in the city. The house, surrounded by sand and marram grass, was two stories—a floor for each couple—and every few years when we were teenagers, Frank and I would paint it red. We would visit often at other times, too, swimming to the sandbar just off the beach and wandering the large dunes. Lake Michigan has many dunes on its shoreline, remnants of the glaciers that formed the lake beginning 14,500 years ago. On the southern shore, some of these dunes have been preserved in Indiana Dunes State Park, adjacent to Frank's beach house, and also in a national lakeshore, created in 1966, that is wedged between Bethlehem Steel on one end and the Michigan City power plant on the other.

This is the place as I've always known it—a prehistoric strip of sand and bluffs caught in an industrial bear hug. When I was a child, perhaps eight, my father first took me to the state park, where we would roll down the dunes and bring sand home in our hair. My father was younger back then than I am now, and I remember him in a charcoal tweed jacket and brown fedora set back on his head. He smoked a pipe and pulled now and then from a flask of liquor buried in a pocketful of change, or at least that's how I remember it. For a time, my dad was a Chicago newspaper man, and I can still find his *Tribune* articles in the online archives, including one about a protest by taxi cab drivers in which they drove in a long caravan to Washington, D.C., only to be stranded by a Pennsylvania snowstorm, and the protesters, my father with them, were forced to turn back. This strikes me now as an apt metaphor for his life. He was always talking about getting somewhere but got waylaid by booze, which finally killed him at fifty-seven.

The Indiana Dunes State Park "bathhouse" is still there—a large brick-and-stone structure with a high arched colonnade, which was built in the 1920s when the park was created. The original parking lot is, too. I found

all of this reassuring when I hiked down the beach from Frank's house to see the place, and it made me slightly drunk with sentiment. I ran the old reel in my head—my dad in his fedora, the two-tone '59 Chevy, the picnic lunch in the parking lot—and from that moment on one of the few things that brought me back to the present was my resentment at the things I noticed that weren't the same. There were at least three new parking lots, and the dunes nearest the park building were fenced off to prevent erosion. There was a new campground with 150 sites and each had 50-amp service. All of these things were missing from that old movie in my mind.

Years ago when I was a graduate student, I studied Native American literature. I saw then, through the work of contemporary writers like Sherman Alexie and M. Scott Momaday, that nostalgia for lost Indian cultures, a feeling I recognized from my own youth in the sixties and seventies, while well intentioned, was a sentiment that blinded us to the lives of Native people who are with us *today.* Nostalgia is little help in seeing what is before us at this moment, and pathological nostalgia, in its endless mourning for what is lost and can never be recovered, is living like a vampire: we greedily feast on the living and only have eyes for the dead.

4.

The "savannah hypothesis" suggests that a primal instinct draws us to natural landscapes that we recognize as good human habitat. While there is ample evidence that people find that plants relieve their stress, make them more productive and less fatigued, the savannah theory predicts that we are especially drawn to certain *kinds* of plants and habitats. Water is one, which may help explain the white settlers' response to the arid West. There is also evidence that people prefer trees over other plants, particularly trees with broad canopies that resemble the isolated stands on the African savannah, the kind of vegetation that early humankind saw as a refuge from predators.

This might help explain why the treeless deserts of south Idaho, where I live, often leave me feeling uncomfortable. It is also possible that I simply haven't lived here long enough to adjust my visual palette to a landscape of browns. The great novelist and teacher Wallace Stegner wrote that a "westernization of perceptions" is necessary for us to appreciate a place

like this, particularly for those of us who were born and raised in the green places where rain often fell. We must adjust not only to the color of this landscape but also to its immense spaces. "You have to get over the color green," Stegner wrote, "and you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time."

If it's true that nostalgia is often the scent we follow back to certain places that seem to matter, then my affection for the landscapes of the West will ripen over time and turn into attachment. But I've been here sixteen years. Wouldn't that seem long enough? Last weekend, I took a short backpack up Logan Canyon in Utah and camped at a high alpine lake filled with brook trout. It was surrounded on three sides by high cliffs of pale granite, towering perhaps eight hundred feet above the water. When I arrived in late afternoon the September light was beginning to thicken, and for the next several hours until dark, I watched as the stone cliffs took turns holding onto what light remained, unwilling to give up on the day. The mountains here do things with light that Lake Michigan never did, and should I ever move away from the Northern Rockies, I suspect that evening at Alpine Lake will offer itself up as a reason to mourn what is beautiful and seems lost forever. But isn't it a broken relationship with the world when the lesson always seems to be that I can't really love a place until I've lost it?

5.

The philosopher Edward Casey recounts the story of a fleet of British ships lost in the fog for eleven days while sailing back to England from Gibraltar in 1701. On the twelfth day the sailors were quite certain they had cleared France but still had no idea where they were. That night, the ships wrecked on the English coast, and two thousand men died. Fog was the immediate problem, but the disaster's cause was a familiar one to sailors three hundred years ago: there was no way to determine longitude. Navigators could determine their latitude fairly easily—latitude lines are parallel and therefore it's easier to measure one's distance from one—but longitude, whose meridians converge at each pole, is less a matter of place than of time. If you want to know your east-west position, you have to know the difference between the time in Greenwich, England, and the

precise time wherever you are at sea. Stars won't help you with this calculation. Only a highly accurate timepiece will.

Three years after the loss of ships and sailors in the fog, the British government created the Board of Longitude to oversee a £20,000 award to anyone who could invent an accurate clock that would work on a rocking ship for months at sea. It took fifty years for an uneducated carpenter's son named William Harrison to perfect the chronometer and win the prize. But Edward Casey is less interested in what this story says about navigation than what it implies about the relationship between time and space. The "logic" that solved the longitude problem, according to Casey, was this: "when lost in space, turn to time."

"Where one is can be determined by when one is*,"* he wrote. I keep turning this over in my mind. I leave next week for another trip to the Midwest, and while there I'll see Frank, this time at his cabin on Gunflint Lake in Minnesota, a gateway to the Boundary Waters Wilderness, a place we both visited often as teenagers and young men. This is a wild place on the Canadian border that will be little changed, and I imagine that nostalgia will settle in like a fog, and at times I'll be lost in it like those British sailors. *Where one is can be determined by when one is.* This may help explain the real problem with pathological nostalgia. You can't get your bearings unless you know when you are, and for people who have trouble with grief, the clock runs backward.

When am I?

About four hundred miles from Gunflint as the crow flies is Plymouth, Wisconsin, where I attended summer camp forty-seven years ago. In 1963, three things occurred that made me feel, as victims of trauma often do, as if my life is divided between the before and the after. In November of that year, of course, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. I still have the crudely clipped pictures from *Life Magazine* of Jackie in her bloodied pink dress, and the series of grainy color photographs of the impossibly long presidential limousine in the seconds before and after Oswald's bullet shattered Kennedy's head. I remember with equal clarity that there was a total solar eclipse in northern Wisconsin a few months before the events in Dallas. I was ten, and at the summer camp in Plymouth, and before the sky went dark I saw how the shadows on my tent lost their edges and, for a moment, adopted the smooth curves the converging sun and moon.

That eclipse, the records show, took place on July 20 and lasted for seven minutes. The third event was also at that summer camp, too, and it began when my young counselor invited me to go on a "solo" camping trip in the woods above where my fellow campers slept on their cots. The counselor, slightly overweight, hairless, and with the pale, pink skin of a white kid from the Milwaukee suburbs, did not leave that night, as you probably guessed, and the abuse continued for five days before I finally found a way to tell my brother that I had to leave camp immediately.

There was the before, and there was the after, and sometimes they collide unexpectedly. Just the other night I was watching a home movie from my childhood, shot with jerky 16mm film and slowly hemorrhaging color, and suddenly there I was in 1963, following my older brother through a village of white-walled tents at Camp Anokiji, smiling and pushing up my glasses, which were slippery with sweat. My parents were there, posing in front of Little Elkhart Lake, my mother with her Polaroid camera slung loosely around her neck, and my father, then still unravaged by alcohol, smoking a pipe. They were dropping us off at camp. A week later, they returned unexpectedly to take me home.

I haven't been back to Plymouth since then, though I went to college in Green Bay, less than fifty miles away. The experience at Camp Anokijii was never a secret—I shared it with my closest friends—but when I told the story it was without feeling. Instead, I hoarded sadness and dispensed it on things that had nothing to do with grief, including a nagging nostalgia for places like the tallgrass prairie, the lake, the dunes, and my hometown. I have, I'm afraid, reduced these places to backdrops—static scenes painted on plywood that are wheeled in whenever I need to repeat the performance: here is where I suffered; there is where I was misunderstood; and that place is gone forever.

6.

There are sand dunes in southwestern Idaho where I live now. The most famous of these, in Bruneau, features the tallest dune in North America at 470 feet. Geologists who study the Martian landscape often mention Bruneau because the sand in both places behave in similar ways, each creating star and linear patterns that suggest a turbulent collabora-

tion between shifting winds and uneven topography. In the spring, before the desert temperatures become uncomfortable, we brought our kids to Bruneau to climb the smaller dunes and roll down them, arms tucked into our chests, as I once did many years ago in Indiana. Sand insinuates itself in clothing and hair, and for days afterward all of us would leave traces of each Bruneau trip on the floor of every room.

We take the places that matter to us and carry them away like a bit of sand in a sock. They don't have to be beautiful, and they can even be unseen like the lost tallgrass prairies in northern Illinois, a landscape I imagine into existence from the surviving fragments at Goose Lake and a description in a book. This is, of course, what memory does. But what of the remembered places that are hijacked by grief? Apparently we stop seeing them. For easterners to appreciate the West, Wallace Stegner advised, they have to "get over the color green." Similarly, nostalgia, in its extreme form, is a perception problem. I return to the Indiana Dunes, or Minnesota's Gunflint Lake, or the ravine behind my old house in Highland Park, Illinois, possessed by sentiments that resist any way of seeing except the ways I've always seen—where I am is when I *was*. There will be no £20,000 reward for a man who figures longitude this way.

But is navigation really necessary? From Odysseus to Thomas Wolfe, the journey always seems to lead back home. And yet I seem to have confused origins and destinations and in the process diminished the power of the places I've been along the way. The man who returns to the Midwest forty years after he left it is not the same man, and his homecoming should remind him of this. Instead, I return home and feel as if the journey never really mattered. And then there is this: every few weeks, I meet a massage therapist who works with abuse victims, and we often begin each session talking; some visits I barely make it to the massage table. The work I must do, she tells me, is to find my way home, but this is a homecoming I did not expect and still don't fully understand. "It is typical for victims of sexual abuse to leave their bodies when they are assaulted," she says, "and that's one reason why later in life the mind-body split can be so profound. Your body is a stranger that you must re-inhabit."

When I was a college student in the early seventies, we eagerly passed around *Be Here Now*, a book by Ram Dass, formerly Richard Alpert, Timo-

thy O'Leary's collaborator in their experiments with LSD. I found an old copy of the book online, and when I saw the familiar blue cover, I smiled and remembered how easy it was back then to believe in the sacredness of the moment before us—"to be here now." Because we were young and running hard at new experiences, it wasn't even a hard thing to do. Edward Casey writes that "to be here is an all-or-nothing affair"; we are either bodily present in a particular place and time, or we are not. "Hereness" is, inescapably, about embodiment in place, and now I wonder about my massage therapist's advice. Is it possible that the reason I couldn't fully appreciate two thousand acres of tallgrass prairie that fall was because I wasn't really there? Is "herelessness" the reason that after sixteen years in Idaho I keep looking back to places I left long ago, returning again and again to indulge in sentiment and count my losses? And is this the reason why? Am I trying to find my way back into a body I deserted in the summer of 1963?

7.

The Middle Fork of the Salmon is a wild river that drives through the heart of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in central Idaho. A few summers ago, my wife and I took a raft trip on the Middle Fork, a five-day journey through deep canyons from which there is no escape except by plane. The river's rapids are legendary, with names like Hell's Half Mile, Rubber, and Haystack. Occasionally a rapid or rock acquires a new moniker like Bob's Big Mistake to memorialize an incident on the river that survives in the stories that guides tell their customers. Guidebooks of the Middle Fork list the major rapids and sometimes offer advice about which line to take through them to avoid the worst waves and obstructions. But the river is fickle. High water, fallen timber from a fire, or a rock slide can create rapids where there wasn't one before and tame the fury of one that was. A Middle Fork guidebook tells an old story of the river, and it is no substitute for getting out of the boat and scouting the wild water that is before you now. Veteran guides say that with each journey they rediscover the river all over again; it is a place that refuses to be known as they've known it.

Perhaps that's the appeal of the Middle Fork of the Salmon and places like it; they resist the full force of nostalgia. The Middle Fork will never

be held hostage to memory because it will keep remaking itself in ways that travelers down the river cannot ignore, even those who know it well. The dunes country of northern Indiana, and of Bruneau, Idaho, for that matter, aren't so different from the Middle Fork—they remake themselves, too, only the change is too subtle to see if you're not paying attention. In 1897, Henry Chandler Cowles published his dissertation on the ecology of the Indiana Dunes; it is considered a pioneering work on succession, the process that describes the fall and rise of certain animals and plants over time in a particular ecological community. A faith in succession is what helps westerners believe in the renewal of a landscape scorched by fire. The greening of Yellowstone Park in the years following the 1988 conflagration is relevant scripture to believers. Nonbelievers mourn blackened forests and sage deserts and wonder why more wasn't done.

What enchanted Cowles about the dunes country is that succession—several thousand years of it—is visible to any hiker willing to walk from the beach to the hardwood forests behind the sand ridges. It is a story that begins where Lake Michigan's waves and wind strip the beach bare, and then up about fifty yards or so the fine leaves of the marram and sand reed grass reach up like an outfielder's glove and snag the sand grains to hold them in place. These are the plants ecologists call "dune-makers," and as a walker breaches the first line of dunes other plants take over—willows, cherries, rye and, farther on, cottonwoods, poplar, and jack pine. The story climaxes with hardwood forests—oak and maple and beech—some of which have taken two thousand years to earn their victory over wind and sand.

It is possible, then, to walk from Frank's house on the beach and within a mile experience, firsthand, present and past simultaneously. I can be both here and there; with each step away from the thundering waves of Lake Michigan, I am walking through time, at the time. What appeals to me about this idea is that, if I pay attention, a landscape may have a story to tell that can compete with the one I bring to it. Nostalgia is like the loud drunk at the party, dominating the conversation, demanding attention, and always telling the same stories. I have grown to love Idaho's Middle Fork (and other places like it) because it refuses to be talked over, but then I have always reserved the most sentiment for the Midwest, not the places

I've lived since then. Home is the one place that cannot compete with the master narrative of the homesick, especially if that story has anything to do with grief.

8.

John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* wrote, "If we can see the present clearly enough, we shall ask the right questions of the past." Anyone who has been in therapy knows there is truth to this. The work is to unknot the two—present and past—knowing that our reactions to things today are tangled up with old histories of hurt. That was then and this is now. *Where one is can be determined by when one is.*

This fall, my wife and I hiked to the summit of Teapot Dome, a remote ridge at the edge of the Snake River plain, near the southern Idaho town of Mountain Home. Teapot Dome was a landmark on the Oregon Trail, whose tracks are still faintly visible in the desert valley below. As we climbed, it wasn't at all obvious why travelers would imagine that this ridge of red rhyolite resembled anything remotely like a teapot. It was only when we descended to the valley floor and drove in the car to where the old Oregon Trail crossed the gravel road that Teapot Dome suddenly resembled one. "Oh yes," I said to my wife, Karen. "Now I can see it. From here it's impossible to miss."