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The Great Plains and Growing Pains

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The Great Plains and Growing Pains

I grow up alone. Or not alone, but devoid of human compatriots. My neighbors are large swaths of soybeans, rye, or corn, depending on the season. My parents work field and milk cows as I chew and spitt out cover crop, wile away days in the garden, and sit in trees trying to speak to squirrels. Seasons of childhood fly by, but all that gets caught in the craw of memory are the whims of the seasons; my worst days are dust covered from violent wind and hungry drought, my joyful days are Osage Orange leaves unfurling in March, my proudest accomplishments melt into standing waist deep in wheat, grinning.

At some point, perhaps I am twelve, my mother tells me *My Antonia* is one of the reasons she decided to immigrate to the central part of the US. She talks about seeing the prairie for the first time: understanding, for a moment, everything she had ever wondered, and feeling time dissolve before her. I buy the book in a used book store a year later, I read it in a day. It immobilizes me. I have spent not a negligible amount of time wishing I had been born somewhere else, perhaps in my mother's idyllic Swiss town, or simply a place with more opportunities. This book expells that out of me, at least for a little while. When I set it down it is evening. I go outside, feel the Earth breathe, watch the clear sky darken and fill with stars. I live in the most beautiful place possible.

I move away from the Kansas prairie, dragging *My Antonia* with me. I end up needing it. I feel lost, dizzied by the lack of open spaces, true solitude, the freedom to walk for miles without seeing a soul. I can not watch the sun sink wearily to the horizon. No one around me seems to understand the sacred, tense excitement that comes with rain. The weather and land no longer dictate my days. I am told this is success, moving up in the world. The fact that my hands are no longer numb and chapped from feeding calves and breaking ice is a victory, that I do not

remember to track annual rainfall is indicative of ‘making it’. All I want is sun-warmed dirt in my hands. Antonia at once comforts and stabs me; allowing me to visit home for a moment, then leaving me more distant than ever, staring at a blank dorm ceiling.

In the first semester at school, a professor tells me she thinks I would enjoy *PrairieEarth*. I mention it to my mother, she pulls it down from her shelf, mails it to me. Now I am swimming in this ‘thick description’ of Chase County, Kansas. The past merges with the present in the same spiralling way that it does when you lay in the wallow of a buffalo, or touch the trunk of a very old tree. I am the people in the book, or I was, once. I feel shame for my betrayal. The narrator ponders the future of a place that everyone leaves. Fossil records bring me to tears. I am understood. The madness induced by living in a version of reality very few people can identify with is quelled. I call my father, he tells me the book is actually his, and it had saved his life when he was in Europe, fiending with homesickness. We sit in silence for a minute. He asks me about the weather.

With time, my new environment becomes easier to navigate; I learn where the wild parts of Forest Park are, compose poems to the Pawpaw trees that greet me on my morning walk to class, and pour over *A Place With No Map*. The author and I grew up in the same place and had been exchanging letters about poetry for years. He had given me a copy of his book when I turned fifteen, the pages heavy with annotations and comments. But only now, four years later, do the country cafe conversations and baling hay by hand and controlled burns the book documents hit me. Some nights I fall asleep with the thin spine held tightly in the crook of my arm, the way I had once held stuffed animals.

I visit home. When I go to the one gas station in town, the girl who called me slurs in highschool is my cashier, we avoid eye contact and I head home, where the better part of my

book collection is piled, in stacks and crates and shelves. I reread *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Though set in the Northeast, small town despair seems to be the same everywhere. Sometimes I forget how badly I had wanted to leave home, and I watch Little Dog live parts of my life I had repressed; starting manual labor at fourteen, watching friends succumb to addiction, feeling ostracized on the basis of sexuality. I do not know what it means, or how to reconcile how badly I miss home to how badly it has occasionally treated me. All I know is that I ache, with beauty and pain and unspeakable things, and that Little Dog explains it in a way that helps. I do not know which direction I am heading, but I will bring books with me, lay in fields when I can, watch the birds go about their lives, and try to feel lucky that I get to live my own story.

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