

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 30
Issue 3 *Winter 2000-2001*

Article 33

2000

Ending up and Landing out in the Prairie

Joni L. Kinsey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kinsey, Joni L.. "Ending up and Landing out in the Prairie." *The Iowa Review* 30.3 (2000): 132-140. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5345>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Joni L. Kinsey

ENDING UP AND LANDING OUT IN THE PRAIRIE

To commemorate a colleague's retirement I recently spent considerable time contemplating the expression "to end up." Evocatively suggesting the joyful or hopeful end of a long journey at an elevated destination (a sorrowful arrival at a valley location might be to "end down") the phrase is used, of course, much more often to refer simply to a concluding arrival of any sort, regardless of how mundane or how short the trip ("I ended up at the refrigerator staring at last night's leftovers" or "We ended up at a bar downtown until midnight"). And arrival, of course, however unremarkable or extraordinary, concerns location and our position in it. While thinking about a figure of speech in this way could lead almost anywhere, after some thought I decided that the notion of "ending up"—notwithstanding its more banal implications—can prompt us to some fascinating insights about our notions of place and our place within places, issues we too often take for granted.

I once had a roommate from coastal Maine who never said "ended up"; she said "landed out," as in, "We landed out at a restaurant until two a.m." or "She lands out doing all the work." I, who hail from the central U.S., had never heard this before and didn't even understand it at first, but it was clearly something that made perfect sense to her. After some discussion (which also included the all too similar "winding up" whose etymology we never satisfactorily explained to ourselves), we decided that "landing out" had nothing to do with airplanes in the hinterlands—something we contemplated momentarily, but more probably referred to the experience of standing on shore facing the ocean. There, one has obviously reached the end of *terra firma* and "landed out."

The widespread nature of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the well-known retailer and several famous peninsulas throughout the world called "Lands End." Too, the spectacle of the solitary individual who walks the beach and faces the enormity of the ocean (the figure of a young, windswept Jack Kennedy comes to mind) is common to a number of cultures and has a long tradition in literature and the history of art. It is an image, for example, that has preoccupied countless artists, including Caspar David Friedrich, Gustave Courbet, and James McNeill Whistler. What is so perennially appealing about

the subject, of course, is the fragility of the individual against the power of nature, the endlessness of the sea compared to the humble figure at its shore. But just as compelling, is the concept of the *end of land*, especially when it is considered from the vantage of the middle of a continent as vast and varied as ours.

It is an uncomfortable notion to me, this “end of land.” I grew up in the Oklahoma prairies, lived for a time in Missouri, and now reside in the “heart-land state” of Iowa. Unlike many of my academic colleagues here, I am content in this great middle. It is home to me. I *like* knowing that the rest of the continent is wrapped securely around us and that nearly everything is available equidistantly in any direction. Rather than being distressed at the lack of mountains or oceans or other dramatic attractions, I revel in the subtlety of softly rolling meadows, the anvil-edged flatness of the plains, the textural and chromatic differences in fields, and the ever-changing sky. I have visited the ocean many times and love it, but my perspective on the issue of place is, and will always be, that of the land-locked. And so it has been for my family as well, which has been rooted in this region for at least six generations.

Many people have passed through this great middle on their way somewhere else, but for others it is where they wound up. And whether they ended up or ended down, they could never *land out* here. There is too much land . . . out here.

Nevertheless, the issue of land’s end is not entirely inappropriate for this place, for several reasons. In the Nineteenth Century, for example, the vast central prairies were frequently likened to the sea by travelers who spent weeks crossing them. The waving grasses reminded many of rolling water and the sheer expanse was eerily similar to the boundless ocean. When the mountains finally came into view across the plains it was not unlike sighting the coast of a long-sought land mass at the end of a great sea journey. As the artist George Catlin, who traveled through the region extensively in the 1830s, expressed it,

For two or three of the first days, the scenery was monotonous, and became exceedingly painful from the fact that we were (to use the phrase of the country) “out of sight of land,” i.e. out of sight of anything rising above the horizon, which was a perfect straight line around us, like that of the blue and boundless ocean.

From Catlin's perspective, and many others who made similar comments, there was no end to the prairie; it was so vast and featureless that it could only be likened to the sea. It was as if land's end had been reached when the eastern forests were left behind.

Great grasslands originally encompassed over one third of the North American continent, some 750 million acres. Far from a uniform terrain, they varied from tallgrass in the east (in the Mississippi River watershed region) to mixed grass in the plains, to short grass in the high plains (the eastern portion of the Rocky Mountain states). Within these major distinctions, each type of prairie is an intensely rich ecosystem almost as complex in number of species as a tropical rainforest. The prairies are thus hardly the monotonous landscape they are sometimes thought to be. The problem is not that prairies have too little to offer; it's that we have only begun to appreciate their richness.

Native Americans historically seem to have regarded the great grasslands as something not separate from themselves, but for everyone else it seems, until the land was dramatically changed into the regularized landscape we have today, the hugeness of the prairies and their lack of regular landmarks distorted the relationships of parts to the whole, challenged notions of scale and proportion, and disoriented directions. This was particularly disconcerting for artists who traveled through prairie country in the Nineteenth Century. Intensely visual and preconditioned to expect, even require, traditional scenery with which to construct images (trees, rocks, hills, etc.), they were at a loss for how to deal with such stark terrain. Until modernism validated the prairie's minimalist offerings, they resorted to filling their views with whatever was available—wagons, animals, people—or else they avoided painting prairies altogether. Their response was mirrored in that of settlers who set about transforming the prairies as quickly as possible to a landscape more familiar and more reassuring to them, one filled with trees, fields, houses, barns, and other landmarks that could alleviate the “emptiness” that had been there. In addition to being a consequence of settlement, this process was an aesthetic reaction to the very character of the land. And although the modern prairie is no longer vacant, the issue persists. Many people, especially visitors from the coasts, for example, perceive the central region to be monotonous, empty, or boring. They not only fail to recognize the prairie's subtle beauties, but they also mistakenly interpret it as simple. It is in fact a complex and challenging landscape, and grows more interesting when this fundamental characteristic is recognized and acknowledged.

Difficult landscapes such as prairies are important in a variety of ways, but one is that they remind us that we must work to perceive our place within a place. Sometimes we struggle to make sense of that—whether through visual means, the written or spoken word, or simply in our own thoughts. Landscape forces us ultimately to consider where we are—whether we have ended up, landed out, or are lost within—questions that can be especially difficult without the reassurance of familiar landmarks or other visual clues to help locate ourselves.

In the past century and a half the American prairies have been so dramatically changed, however, primarily by agriculture, urban and suburban growth, and the spread of trees, that it is difficult to find what Catlin and other early travelers through the region felt they could not escape. The once seemingly endless grasslands are now transformed into a vast continental quilt of cities, interstate highways, farms, forests, and fields; and natural prairies remain only in relatively small enclaves that pockmark the once seamless expanse. It is easy now to find ourselves within the modern prairie—we are reflected everywhere—but it is much harder to locate the prairie itself. The uninterrupted view of nothing but grass is so rare now that it is sadly possible to consider what was previously unimaginable—that prairies themselves may have *landed out*.

We have only begun to recognize what we have already lost, and initial efforts to preserve what little remains have been initiated in halting ways throughout the vast region. In the past decade increasing numbers of publications have celebrated the once great ecosystem; a few substantial areas of original prairie and many more smaller ones have been designated as preserves. Other tracts are being restored to prairie after years of other use, although this is still an experimental process and one that will take decades, if not longer, since a mature prairie is not unlike an old-growth forest in its complexity. The appreciation for the grassland landscape is only in its infancy compared to that enjoyed by woodlands, mountains, or even deserts, but it is growing.

And yet the lingering fear remains. Is the prairie essentially landed out? Have we changed it so fundamentally that it has lost its essential character? Remnants remain, but is their piecemeal form so scattered as to render the ecosystem past the point of no return? Biologists, conservationists, and others are grappling with the problem in various ways, but another perspective is offered by artist Terry Evans (b. 1944) who has made the grasslands a primary

focus of her photographs for over twenty years, and whose work this magazine has been featuring on its covers all year. More than compelling images of the prairie, Evans's work is an informed study of the landscape that can offer important insights into its changing character and our relationship to it. She recognizes, as only a relatively few others do, that the prairie lands, both past and present, pristine and corrupted, are equally complex and interesting. This recognition, and the tension between natural and human environments form the the message of her stunning images which, perhaps more than those of any other artist today, go to the heart of this landscape and its changing circumstances.

Evans began photographing some of the last unplowed prairies in Kansas in the late 1970s. She was drawn to the subject not by the sweeping horizon as we might expect, but rather by the infinitude at her feet. She has written that, "One day on the prairie . . . I wandered around looking and suddenly began to see the ground. The realization came that I could stand in one spot and look at the ground for at least an hour and still not see everything happening at my feet. I started to photograph the prairie ground." She embarked on a long series of close-up photographs of different plants and their formations in both black and white and color, works that reveal not only the endless variety of patterns, texture, and color in this supposedly monochromatic landscape, but also in the specificity of the subject as indicated through the often alliterative and lyrical names of the various plants which are the titles of the photographs—*Nodding Lady Tresses*, *Dropseed*, *Leadplant*, *Wild Blue Indigo*, *Beard Tongue*, *Mugwort Wormwood*, *Blazing Star*, *Daisy Fleabane*, and *Bracted Spiderwort*. And these are some of the common prairie plants. The more unusual ones, as Wayne Fields noticed, have names like *Rattlesnake Master*, *Scribner's Panic Grass*, and *Bastard Toadflax*.

For all the wonder of these images, we are lucky that Evans did not limit herself to the world at her feet. She began to look around and photograph the prairie horizons, the undulating sweep of the rolling Flint Hills and the knife edge flatness of Saline County, recognizing and capturing, of course, their different characters at different times of the year, different weathers and lighting conditions, and during dynamic change such as fire. More importantly perhaps, she took to the air, ending *up*—literally—and portrayed the prairie as it had rarely been before, not as the giant quilt we see arrayed before us as we fly over the farmlands of the Midwest, but rather as an enormous and infinitely fine textured carpet that changes with the seasons. These aerial views

are some of Evans's most remarkable images, both for their lustrous appearance and for the issues they raise about viewing the prairie. Perspective, or point of view, is at the heart of vision, especially when it concerns landscape, and the three different points of view in Evans's early prairie work—up, down, and across—offer us a kind of multivantaged parallax that allows us to finally see the prairie clearly and on its own terms.

The prairie is not usually taken on its own terms, of course. As Robert Sayre writes of Iowa, "For all its rural appearance, Iowa [and other farm states] is not a 'natural' landscape. It is almost entirely a human-made one: measured, cultivated, planted, and built upon by the men and women who have lived on it. The original prairies were the complete antithesis of the monocultures of corn and soybeans that cover most of Iowa today." And while this has its own visual beauty, it is not always so. "The ugliest sights," he writes, "are the signs of bad farming . . . but it is also depressing to drive into a once thriving town and find everything closed up." In the recognition of the marvelous there is the tempering of its opposite and this is true throughout the prairie region, not just in agricultural Iowa.

Terry Evans has also been exploring this balance, especially after recognizing that the pristine prairie is only a part of the grassland's story. "After spending eight years photographing the fragmentary but still extant undisturbed prairie in Kansas, I came to a stopping point. It wasn't that I was bored with its intricate life, its sensuous colors and textures of grass, wind, and sky. It was just that I had photographed it to the limits of my vision."

She left the subject for awhile, but was brought back to it by a friend's photograph of an abandoned Pacific island atomic test site which focused on a large concrete mound with a red circle painted around the top. Its resemblance to a breast reminded Evans of one of her own prairie photographs in which a natural formation looked similar and, as she recalled, "Suddenly I realized that the inhabited prairie was part of the body of the prairie and I could not understand prairie if I didn't look at the whole of it. Now I find myself needing to photograph the prairie in all of its disturbed, cultivated, inhabited, ingratiated, militarized, raped and beloved complexity."

Evans was not the first to portray the inhabited prairie. Historically it was this landscape that attracted artists more than the pristine original. The animals, houses, farms, and humans on the land offered important substitutes for the classic compositional elements of more traditional landscapes—trees, mountains and other natural features that the pristine prairie lacked. Some portray-

ers, such as Alexander Hogue (1898-1994) in the 1930s even recognized the analogy between the land as body and focused on the mutilation it has endured. Hogue's *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (1938, Philbrook Museum of Art) is the most striking example of this, a searing image in which the barren gullies of a deeply eroded field form the figure of a woman lying helpless amid the devastation. Evan's work is neither so literal nor so metaphoric, but the issue of the cost of human habitation is nevertheless equally present in her images.

In her recent work Evans does not flinch from photographing gravel pits, bomb targets, salvage yards, garbage dumps and suburbs in the prairies. They are, she says, part of the continuum of the prairie's identity as well as our own. But she has learned not only to look for abuse but rather to see patterns of use as stories in the land, "layers," as she calls them, "of loss and recovery, and loss again." Seeing within the single view, for example, a former Native American village site, an abandoned farm, a relatively new tract house or mobile home, and a wandering deer, she visually ponders both the interconnectedness of those inhabitants, their dependence upon the land, and the geologic instant they represent in the continuum of the prairie's ongoing history.

Two of Evans's most interesting projects have dealt with military installations on the prairie—one in Kansas at the Smoky Hill Bombing Range which was established during World War II as a base for long distance bombers and is still in use by the National Guard. It was carefully selected in 1942 for its isolated location in a quest for international security that has continued through the atomic age, bringing a whole new and sinister use to the prairie landscape. Ironically, as in the case of the Kansas bombing range, meant of course as part of the protection of American society, it ended up actually preserving large areas of land which could no longer be inhabited. Amid the bunkers, targets, and wrecked planes used to simulate foreign airfields, prairie grasses and even some wildlife continued to grow. These areas which clearly reveal the vestiges of the use to which they were put as well as the vegetation which has continued to thrive amid it, offer striking images that challenge our conventional notions of landscape and our use of it.

Evans's other project deals with the former Joliet Arsenal near Joliet, Illinois. The largest TNT factory in the world in the 1940s, it was finally abandoned by the military in 1997, taken over by the United States Forest Service in cooperation with the Open Lands Project, and given a new name, the Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie. The entire site encompasses more than 90,000 acres, many of which were allowed to grow unchecked as a security

buffer to the clustered factories, bunkers, and other military structures, and it contains large tracts of open land as well as a very human-storied landscape. 17,000 of these acres have been designated as the prairie preserve, a unique area which, along with its more violent history, is also home to sixteen state endangered and threatened species, including the loggerhead shrike, the upland sandpiper, and a number of songbirds. The entire project is unusual, an unexpected peace dividend, which, as Tony Hiss writes, reversing the natural order of things, is a butterfly that has finished its time as a caterpillar and is returning to being a butterfly. The new name itself, the Midewin Prairie, is taken (with permission) from the Potawatomi who lived in the region until the 1830s when they were removed to Oklahoma. The word means “healing society,” a group effort to mend and restore until something or someone is well again.

The Joliet Arsenal will never be fully removed from the Midewin Prairie; it is now part of its history, both literally and figuratively. The vestiges of habitation and use, the bunkers, concrete, and other residues of the military installation, will linger indefinitely, just as tiny sea fossils are still found in prairie limestone. And it takes at least a century to create an inch of mature prairie soil, so the process of renewal is only beginning. The project is a restoration rather than preservation, but it is this complex relationship that attracts Terry Evans’s interest. She insists that her photographs are neither a critique of land use nor a statement about the irony of its beauty. They are not about abstract visual design, but rather about specific places whose contradictions and mysteries, what environmental historian Daniel Worster calls “tapestries of change,” raise questions about how we live on the prairie and how it has sustained us in so many ways. In a recent commentary on Evans’s photographs, Worster explains that it is neither useful nor accurate to think that the untrammelled natural prairie has *ended up* in its current state, but that it is merely undergoing another change, like many that have gone before and many yet to be.

Evans’s photographs, like the prairie itself, are an interesting contradiction. As they reveal to us the superficial appearance of the land and all its beguiling subtleties, they invite us to delve deeply into the mysteries of this place and its changes. Even as it evolves into something else, the images seem to tell us, and amid transformations, uses, abuses, the prairie will never be landed out.

SOURCES

- Catlin, George. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (1841, reprint). New York, 1973.
- Drobney, Pauline M. "Rebuilding a Pre-pioneer Prairie," *Garbage* 6 (Fall 1994).
- Evans, Terry. *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky*, with introductory essays by Wes Jackson and Gregory Bateson. Lawrence, 1986.
- _____. *The Inhabited Prairie*. Lawrence, 1998.
- Fields, Wayne. "Lost Horizon," *American Heritage* 39 (April 1988).
- Hamilton, Alissa. "A Peaceful Prairie," *Audubon* 97 (May-June 1995): 110-12.
- Hiss, Tony. "Turning Bullets into Birds," in Terry Evans, *Disarming the Prairie*. Baltimore and London, 1998, pp. 1-17.
- Kinsey, Joni L. *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie*. Washington and London, 1996.
- Kurtz, Carl. *Iowa's Wild Places*. Ames, 1996.
- Madson, John. *Tallgrass Prairies*. Helena and Billings, 1993.
- Mutel, Cornelia. *The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook: For Prairies, Savannas, and Woodlands*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997.
- Quayle, William. *The Prairie and the Sea*. Cincinnati and New York, 1905.
- Thacker, Robert. *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*. Albuquerque, 1989.
- Samuels, Sam Hooper. "In Iowa, Restitching the Torn Fabric of the Prairie," *New York Times* (Sept. 21 1999).
- Sayre, Robert F. ed., *Recovering the Prairie*. Wisconsin, 1999.
- _____, ed. *Take This Exit: Rediscovering the Iowa Landscape*. Ames, 1989.
- Sullivan, Jerry. "Bringing Back the Prairie," *Audubon* 90 (July 1988) p. 40-7.
- Worster, Donald. "A Tapestry of Change: Nature and Culture on the Prairie," in Evans, *The Inhabited Prairie*.