**Prairie Whispers**

Anna Sochocky

Prairie grass holds the color of pine trees and sunlight, rosewood, and lavender, changing course with the wind like ocean waves. Sunflowers lean into the heat, faces curve toward an open sky awash with cotton clouds. I ride my horse through nameless wildflowers and miles of pasture. Sweetgrass scraps the surface of his belly. He beats down a new path, his head bobbing just above the horizon, gathering burrs and dandelion seeds without intention, his mane knots up. The trill of a red-winged blackbird startles him; he stands with pricked ears.

Waiting.

My hips shift back and forth to the cadence of his walk. I loosen the reins. Two fingers curve around the worn leather. I trust this horse. I close my eyes, sure that he will not run, and lean back in the saddle. My boots drift in and out of the stirrups. The animal tolerates my listlessness. I push my fingers underneath his mane to feel the heat rising from his body, reaching down between his front legs to touch his heartbeat, gripping his body tightly when tears begin.

Long minutes pass before I realize we aren’t moving; I am sitting on an island of pulsing muscle and blood in the middle of a prairie sea. For a time, my horse stands quietly, chewing on a blade of wheatgrass, stomping absently at the biting flies. I lie slumped forward like a wounded cowboy refusing to abandon her mount. His mane smells of dust and sage; the sweet fragrance makes me cry harder, the moistness soaking into strands of his mane I wind around my fingers.

Growing impatient, my horse cranes his neck around and nudges my boot his muzzle licking the leather, hoping to find the taste of salt on my hands. I offer my hand to satisfy his craving and rub my fingers against his lips. In the stolid morning heat, I dismount in one motion laying my forehead against his face, listening to his gentle exhales. I draw his breath into mine, breathing in the smell of dry hay into my lungs.

So many mornings have passed like this between us since my father’s death. I ride for hours, galloping at dangerous speeds, jumping over fences, and dodging trees. Sweat pours out of my horse’s skin when I cue him into a trot, a canter, a gallop. I feed rein to his mouth until the muscles in his neck strain far ahead of his thundering legs. I push up on the balls of my feet, balancing.

The ground below me sweeps by like the countryside from a train window. A blur sienna narrows, meeting the turquoise skyline. I focus my eyes between my horse’s ears pushed flat against his head. I cannot turn away not because I fear a loss of balance, but because this path is all I can manage this morning.

If I can find the edge of my grief, mark it, know it, and turn away, maybe I will get through one day. The prairie heat melts the horizon perimeters thawing the precision of its borders. Heat and wind push hard against my face until my eyes burn from dust and sunlight. I cannot keep my eyes open. For a few wild moments, there is only hot wind and the brilliance of flight.

I came by my love of wind, honestly holding onto a vague memory sitting in my stroller underneath a huge maple tree, listening to the leaves deep in conversation. I do not remember my mother watching me from the kitchen window while she cooked dinner. I do remember sunlight falling through branches, my hair crossing over my eyes. Now I am learning wind can drown out a thought as well as a sentence, leaving behind a certain kind of silence in my mind, one I am willing to bear.

I open my eyes, feeling my horse slow its pace. Blowing hard and loudly through damp nostrils, steam rises from my horse's body like a car overheating. He has led us to water. The creek has slowed to a trickle, banks shriveling under long days of sun without rain. He tugs at the reins to lower his head, splashing water over his tired legs and simmering lips. I squeeze his sides, coaxing him to walk. If he drinks without caution, he could get colic. I pivot out of the saddle, leaning down to rinse my sweaty palms in fresh water.

Though the air hangs with humidity, the sun heats the water’s surface. I tease my horse with my fingers, splashing his eager nose with water; he snorts, showering my chest with his own rebuttal. Hands cupped, I drink water from my dirty hands, drenching my face with the only summer coolness I know. My horse led us to water and guided me through the prairie of my grief.