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“Konza Prairie, Mid-September, Mid-Day”

By Elizabeth Schultz

On our drive from Lawrence to the Konza, a lid of clouds weighted with heavy grey, presses down on us. Faucets of rain keep turning off and on as we continue down I-70. On to Route 177 and approaching the Konza, we stop at the Scenic Lookout to gaze out toward the horizon, a dark stroke between the ridges of glowering clouds above and the ridges of densely inhabited green below. My friend examines the ground around us, elated to identify false-boneset and snow-on-the-mountain, white flowers amidst the green of grasses. It will be a day of creating an equilibrium between the prairie's immense generalizations and its intimacy of detail, between the prairie's vibrancy and the nation's sorrow.

We take The Nature Conservancy's path turning up into the prairie, crossing King's Creek over the narrow bridge spanning this deep cut. The gurgling of flowing water provides an invitation to enter, and we pass through the band of trees--hickory, hackberry, walnut--nourished by this water along its banks, out into open fields. While the evidence of earlier blooms--perky coneflower and prairieclover seedheads, red rose hips, stiff compassplant and bundleflower clusters--dots the field, late summer flowers glory among the grasses. Magenta gayfeathers, azure pitcher sage, snowy stenopsiphon, wooly verbena, golden rod, and sunflowers embroider a riot of color across the field. Nestled closer to the ground, contributing to this crazy quilt, are white sage, prickly yellow buffalobur nightshade, and slender, elegant wild onion, lavender-headed.

We climb to the top of a limestone outcropping and follow the path north, around to the east. Here the wind is unloosed and lashes. On this windy ridge, sweeping grasses--Indian, big bluestem, side-oats grama, rye--of subtle greens and pale browns dominate over the idiosyncrasy of singular flowers. But the sumac, hunkering scarlet among the grasses, is flaming. The Kansas River valley and the prairie expand out in full compass around us, and green swaths, dark wedges of trees, a bison herd seem to flow beyond us, carrying us away to the earth's margin. Moving off the ridge, dropping down from the wind, going south now, we come to ground again, held in a grassy cauldron with stone terraces rimming it. Mist licks this lip. The bright chirps of crickets and grasshoppers stir the silence, and above us, a red-tail circles solemnly.

We pass out of this great hollow, following tumbled stone slabs, through a thicketed gateway of low trees and shrubs--dogwood, redbud, hazelnut--and into forest-bordered meadows. Deer tracks and coyote scat show us the way. From ascent and descent, we now approach a level playing field, a pastoral meadow, enclosed by woods. We return to flowers. Here are milkweeds--common, whorled, and butterfly--and here, too, are the monarchs, drifting in from the mist as if they'd emerged from a magician's sleeve, their fluttering familiar and always bewitching. The final leg of the trail skirts woods where chinquapin and bur oaks thrive and where an American elm, thick-waisted and long-limbed, droops dead and leafless. It enriches the prairie soil; it serves woodpeckers and countless insects, algae, and fungus.

A deluge still waits in the clouds, and the horizon is erased for a while. But the crickets chirping escorts us out, and all day the prairie's largesse has allowed us to focus on connection and continuity and eternity.

Elizabeth Schultz, author and KLT member, explores her own response to the natural world in "Senses of Place," a *Stewardship Notes* feature.