



WALKING

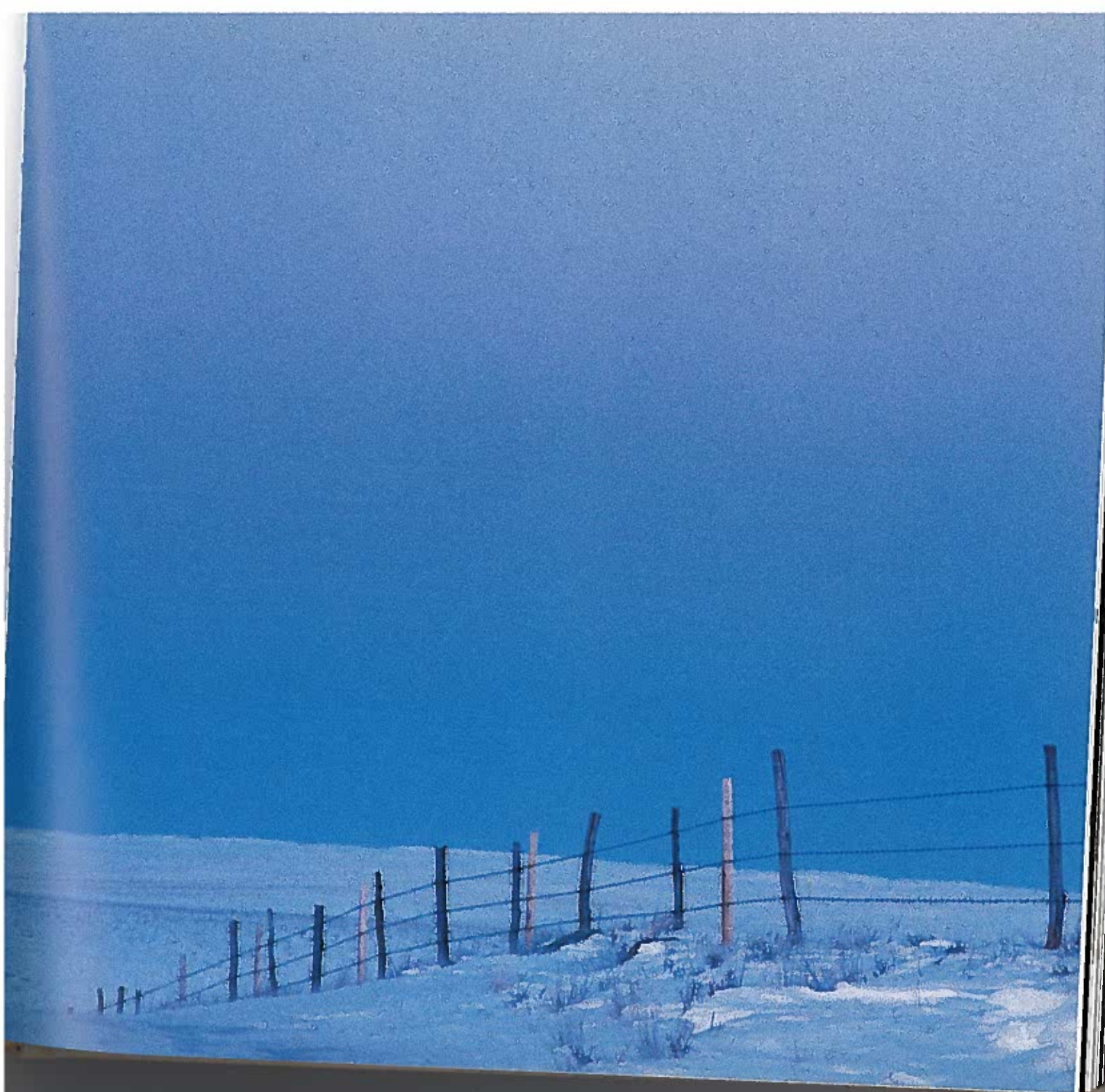
I came into this place—I like to say that I came into the landscape to live—when I was already in my mid-thirties. I came as a new bride into a world about which I knew virtually nothing, and into a landscape I had not even known existed in Saskatchewan, despite my having lived nearly all my life here. I think now, although I'd never have admitted it then, nor for years afterward, that I married this stunning landscape as much as I married Peter. To live in such beauty seemed to me nothing short of a gift from God.

I hadn't bargained for the difficulties of an urban, single-parent academic marrying into rural agricultural life. I often felt that people were speaking another language—although they all spoke English—and for years I could not even get a grip on how to be a person, a woman, in this strange environment, for all my training had been to live an urban life. I lost my footing then; I fell into confusion; as the years passed I sometimes hovered on the brink of despair.

I had thought that I would live in beauty. I had not conceived of what that beauty consisted beyond endless vistas of grassy hills, a sky so vast that early settlers—women—sometimes went mad and ran from it until their

Bush rabbits (Nuttall's cottontail) nowadays are nearly always found around buildings.

Right: These old cedar fenceposts have withstood nearly a century of bitter prairie winters.



lungs burst and they died, and living life in time with nature's slow rhythms, the arcs of the sun and the moon, the stars wheeling overhead, blazing with light in a silver-haunted, indigo night.

On a ranch occupying an area of about four miles by five miles, as with the settlers, I was the only woman for miles in any direction. In my frequent (and eventually overwhelming) solitude I began to go for walks on the prairie. It was something I could do that didn't require special knowledge, or special equipment, or a companion. I walked because the four walls of our settler's-shack home offered me nothing but a past I hadn't been part of and couldn't understand, and that could not be changed by me to fit an urban standard of home. Time hung heavy on my hands; I walked.

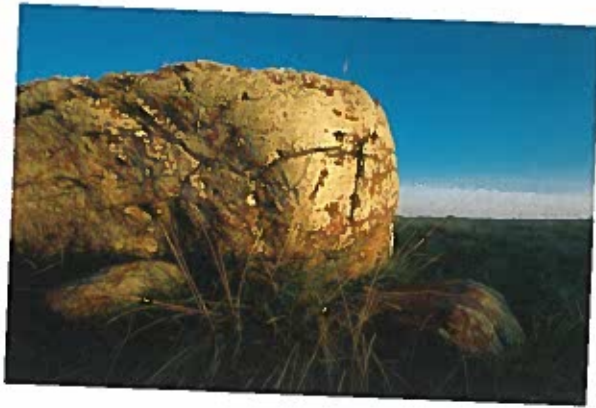
Little clubmoss (prairie selaginella), magnified here many times, has the vital task of covering the soil to help prevent wind and water erosion.





Lichens are both algae and fungi and live on air and rock in a symbiotic relationship.

My mother-in-law, driving out to the ranch one day from the town of Eastend where she'd retired, came upon me as I walked. She said, "It's been a long time since a woman walked this prairie." There was an echo in her voice, of some life I knew nothing about, an emotion that I couldn't find a word for, but couldn't forget, either. I was surrounded by the past, not just the recent homesteading past, her past and her family's past, but farther back, the ranching past, the past of Aboriginal hunter-gatherers, and before that, the past of the glaciers, of the eons of geological time that had brought us all to the moment in which I found myself, a solitary woman, walking the endless prairie.



IN THE BEGINNING . . .

The Bible tells us that in the beginning there were the waters of chaos moving in darkness; scientists say, just as poetically, that there was rock and collision and a fiery birth from stardust; Aboriginal people say variously that there was a rock, the juices out of which became the world and all that is in it, or that Skywoman fell onto the back of a turtle which was the world, or that Wisahketchahk sent a muskrat down to the bottom of the primal sea to bring up soil from which Wisahketchahk made the earth.

Eons passed, according to the scientists' story, as the stardust consolidated into a misshapen globe. Oceans began to form, and continents to emerge, and what would become Saskatchewan began its northward drift, for a time even lying north of where it is today, until by 1.5 million years ago it had shifted into its present position, with its southern boundary at 49 degrees north latitude and its northern at 60 degrees. Just ten miles north of the 49th parallel a traveller will arrive at the southern boundary of the Old Man On His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area. On clear days, turning to face the south, from the hills of the OMB the traveller will see the low peaks of the Bears Paw Mountains of Montana resting gently on the

This large bison rubbing stone, a soft rock having been stranded on the prairie by glaciers, is called an "erratic."

Right: At moments such as these, the great mystery of the prairie strikes awe in the human heart.





horizon. Or should the traveller come down from the north and turn back to face the way she has come, a dark smudge of resonant blue-purple on the high horizon will remind her that that way lies—for centuries a sanctuary for both humans and animals—the fabled Cypress Hills.

I came to the Butala ranch from the northeast, seeing first the openness of the land, and feeling, at that first sight, all my worries recede beyond my reach in the face of the sheer overwhelming presence of so much nature. I relaxed, I calmed down, I felt a touch of awe always with me at what seemed to me to be the *otherness* of it, mixed with the bewildering knowledge that I had come from it and that it couldn't be other than I was. Nature had returned to me with the full force of her power and, once I got over being constantly stunned by this new sense of what nature is that I couldn't even quite articulate, I puzzled and puzzled over what it actually was besides dirt, grass, stones, sky, moon, sun, and stars. In an agricultural world where grass was to fatten cows, or to be turned upside down in order to grow something else, where land was money and power and prestige, I felt sure there was something else. But what was it? What was land—nature—for? How should I fit with it? How did I fit with it, or in it?

Once I'd come to the ranch to live, I, who couldn't remember dreaming at all, began to have vivid, beautiful dreams. The first of these was probably the greatest, and it isn't an exaggeration to say that it changed my life. In the dream it was night and I was standing at the door of the old ranch house, looking up at the sky where an eagle was soaring. It was so huge that its outspread wings covered the entire ranch yard of about forty acres. The palest beige and cream, with slender, stylized wings and body, it was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. But on the cement square in front of me stood an owl that must have been six feet tall. It was a creamy white mingled with grey, and on its breast there were evenly spaced, fan-shaped markings in a deep turquoise and dark grey. The owl was every bit as beautiful as the eagle, and it seemed to want to join me on the porch. Yet, I tried to hold it out while I watched the eagle soaring above.

The far-ranging space of the prairie can deceive the traveller into miscalculating distance.

Although over the years I continue to find new meanings for it, many of which have to do with the eagle and the owl as symbols for the masculine and for the feminine in the world, I believe that the dream was stirred into existence by the new life I was leading in that old ranch house in the midst of miles and miles of prairie in its natural state. The dream happened because every night as I went to the outdoor toilet I walked under a sky brilliant with stars, the very history of the universe riding on my shoulders; it happened because the presence of the moon and her monthly passage had become part of my life; it happened because I began to live each day according to the rising of the sun and its place along its arc through the heavens until it set on the other side of the sky. The lives of birds and animals began to fit in for me with the seasons, and I began to get a sense of the way the chain of life operated. Most miraculously of all, I could understand my womanhood in the light of the rhythms of nature, as part of nature.

Thus, after my busy life in the city and at the university, walking all day on cement, asphalt, and tile, my feet rarely touching the earth, living largely indoors, my entertainment movies, television, house parties, when I returned to nature (having lived in it as a child), its effect was so powerful that it stunned open all my senses and toppled me into a new vision of the world: the mythic world of the human species opened to me. And having been so altered, I opened and became another person, one with much wider boundaries and a far greater sense of my humanity, and yet with a sense of my humanity as merely a tiny part of a whole so great that its extent and boundaries seemed limitless.

I was out of place in my new world, struggling for my footing, my experiences on the prairie and my new dreaming combining to shake me out of any placidity and, yet, mystifying me. I believe now that I thought that if I studied the prairie itself, and learned the social and cultural history of its inhabitants, maybe even learned a tiny bit of science about the landscape in which I now lived, I would get a kind of control over it, as I felt I had been in



*Tracks on the prairie may
be as old as a hundred
years, revealing the
fragility of the grassland.*

control of my urban environment. If I understood it in all these ways, surely it would be mine then; I would understand the conversations I overheard, I would understand the people and the land, and I wouldn't be lost any more.