

Where the West Begins

There's a place where the prairie—that flat expanse
of wheat and corn, that place where you forget
your feet on the ground, the rhythm of your step,
and focus instead on the big bowl of sky overturned
above you, the way it cups your existence
as far as you can see, farther than you fathom,
farther still, the way the world orients to it,
crops to the light that lasts late into the night,
ten o'clock summers and not dark yet,
the rain and the way a storm comes sudden,
darkens the air though it's still warm out,
the way the wind can knock you clean over,
can whip into a dervish, pull things into its core—
gives way, margins out and begins to roll over and under
itself like a sleeping bag or hay in the fall,
where the topography rises up like braille
to make the myths of the land readable, to tell
the tales of the West, where it becomes rough,
more sudden than expected, mountains in range
and you realize you've moved your eyes from the skies
like the gopher you see in spring, the rabbit in winter,
outside their holes, staring up amazed at the world,
and you're left instead gasping at craggy peaks,
ragged and blue and purple in the light, hard.
The place where the West begins begins to change you,
and you focus on how to succeed, overcome,
how to move up and over these mountains,
trample their strength with your will.
How to march Westward, Manifest Destiny,
the world not resting under the sky as before,
instead now cowering under your foot.

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