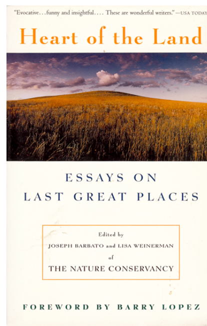

Playing God on the Lawns of the Lord

By Teresa Jordan

From *Heart of the Land: Essays on Last Great Places*
Edited by Joseph Barbata and Lisa Weinerman
The Nature Conservancy, Vintage Books, 1996

There are a thousand of us and three hundred of them. We are *Homo sapiens* and they are *Bison bison bison*. We have come to this spot in the Flint Hills of northern Oklahoma to watch them released onto five thousand acres of native tallgrass prairie. The prairie and the bison evolved together over thousands of years. They have been separated for well over a century. They are coming together now, some order is being restored, and we are in a celebratory mood.

Each of us feels honored to be here. This is an invitational event, open to members of the Osage Tribe, which owns the vast oil reserves under this ground but not the ground itself; to members and friends of the Nature Conservancy, which now owns the ground; to General Swartzkopf, Retired, of the US Army, who has just a few hours before, at dawn, received his Osage name of Tzizho Kihekah, or Eagle Chief; and to a swarm of school children who sit restlessly on the grass waiting for the bison to appear.

No one denies that we are part of a spectacle. CBS is here. NBC is here. CNN is here. The New York Times is here. They have the best seats in the house, on the elevated platform near the gate through which the bison will run. Excitement fills the air, something akin to what one feels at a homecoming game, and we all have our cameras in our hands. Now we see the bison in the distance, a bounding line of darkness above the tallgrass, heading the wrong way at a dead run.

The cowboys do not ride horseback, but in pickups and on four-wheel all-terrain vehicles. They turn the bison toward the gate; the bison turn back the other way. The cowboys turn the animals again; once more, they refuse. The cowboys try a third time, and this time the great shaggy beasts come through the gate on the run, three hundred head, a diversified herd, ranging from calves born only a few months earlier, in the spring, to massive bulls a dozen years old that weigh nearly a ton.

We have grown quiet, as we've been instructed to do in order not to startle the animals, and our silence turns quickly to awe. So it's true, what we have read in books and seen in movies. The sound of bison on the run really does travel over a long distance. This is a quintessential American sound, something we must carry in our genes, bred into Native Americans by thousands of years hunting and eating and living side by side with the beasts; bred into Euro-Americans as a haunting legacy of what our ancestors annihilated in a few short years only slightly more than a century ago. This is the sound of history and valor and triumph and squalor and sorrow, and it really does sound like thunder. But thunder would be born by the air. We would feel it in our chests, our diaphragms. This sound comes up from the ground, through the soles of our feet. The sensation increases as the bison near,

and they move like a dark roiling sea, swift and high bounding, closely packed. The damp overcast of the sky brings out the full spectrum of gold in their shaggy roughs and darkens the burnt sienna of their atavistic forms. They pass and we are no longer members of a crowd of spectators. Each one of us is alone, watching as if from great distance something primal and real. And most of us are weeping.

A few days before the official release, the bison had been trucked to a holding pen on the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve so they could acclimatize before being set free. Minutes after being unloaded, several of them found old wallows, depressions in the ground hollowed out by their ancestors when they had rolled to rub off flies or shed their winter coats. No creatures had used the wallows for at least a hundred and twenty years, but the newcomers, fresh off the truck, instinctively made for the depressions and started rolling. It was as if both the animals and the land remembered.

It is easy to romanticize such a thing, and yet the bison and the prairie had evolved together since the last ice age, or for what would be, in Oklahoma, somewhere in the neighborhood of twelve thousand years. The prairie ecosystem is "disturbance dependant," driven by the interaction of climate, fire, and the grazing of vast nomadic herds. Before white settlement, it was one of the most far reaching ecosystems in what is now America, with bison numbering between thirty and sixty million and prairie grasses -- tall, short, and mixed -- covering well over a million square miles.

It worked like this. As herds of bison, elk, and other grazers ate their way back and forth across the country, their hooves tilled the soil and their dung fertilized it. Parts of the prairie went ungrazed and those grasses aged and dried, becoming less palatable and more susceptible to fire as fuel loads increased. Fire occurred naturally from lightning strikes and was also set by the native tribes that used flame to help with hunting, defense, and ceremony. Millions of acres burned every year; fire could move so fast and devour so much territory that some Plains tribes called it the Red Buffalo. Fire removed old growth and returned minerals to the ground; once an area had burned, it greened up almost immediately. New, tender shoots attracted herds which were then more likely to ignore areas that hadn't been so recently burned -- often those that had been grazed a year or two earlier. These areas would then accumulate plant material that would make them more susceptible to fire and the cycle would start all over again in the miraculous combination of leapfrog, synergy, and chance that we call nature.

Tallgrasses covered the more humid, eastern parts of the prairie, some 200,000 square miles of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and southern Manitoba. There, this constantly shifting balance of elements provided habitat for a staggering variety of plants, birds, and animals. But Westward expansion eliminated the bison, suppressed fire, and plowed up the land. Today, the tallgrass prairie exists only in small and isolated patches.

The largest expanse survives in the Flint Hills of Oklahoma and Kansas where the soil is rocky and thin and the land, for the most part, has never been plowed. Unfit for farming, the grasses have continued to be grazed, by cattle rather than bison. The cattle have been managed well, and responsible ranching has kept much tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills in good shape. The Barnard Ranch that forms the core of the Nature Conservancy's 36,600-

acre preserve is an exemplary case. According to Bob Hamilton, Director of Science and Stewardship, all of the grasses and other plants in the original tallgrass prairie are present on the preserve, at least so far as range experts have been able to determine. The prairie *ecosystem*, however, that living give-and-take of nature, is essentially extinct. The suppression of fire and the somewhat different grazing habits of cattle from bison have changed the proportions of things; woody plants, once kept at bay by fire, have in some places invaded; seeds that need fire to germinate have laid dormant in the ground; broad-leafed plants that are more appealing to cows than to bison have been grazed back and other, less tasty ones have come in. Whatever natural evolution and progression was in place before whites came has been interrupted; as naturalist John Madson has pointed out, this may look like a prairie, but without fire or bison, it can't act like one.

The hope on the preserve is to restore the functioning ecosystem. Fire has been reintroduced and about one fifth of the bison unit goes up in flames each year in a number of small, controlled burns designed to mimic the original frequency of fires -- several large burns in the dormant fall and spring, which historically would have been set most often by Native Americans; more frequent but smaller fires in the more humid, mid-summer lightning season when the prairie is actively growing. Burn unit locations are designed not on the basis of a pre-determined formula, but by the build-up of fuel. "The prairie," Hamilton says, "tells us what to do."

The newly introduced herd of bison will increase, over the next few years, to eighteen hundred head; the management team will cull them to simulate what predators once achieved. And, as their numbers increase, the bison will eventually range over the full preserve, in areas that are now being grazed by cattle managed to imitate the habits of bison.

There is irony that we need so much management to recreate what nature once did by herself. Once the ecosystem operated within boundaries defined by climate and geography; today, in an area populated by both Native Americans and Anglos, dotted by ranchsteads and towns, and crisscrossed by highways, it must operate within boundaries defined by man. These boundaries are too narrow to allow nature to follow its own course; untended fire, for instance, could wipe out neighboring homes or cause havoc with Osage oil reserves. When asked what the Conservancy will do about lightning strikes or accidental fires, Harvey Payne, the preserve's director, answers without hesitation: "Any fires we don't set, we will extinguish immediately."

Payne comes from a family that has ranched in the Flint Hills for five generations, and he knows the importance of being a good neighbor. He also knows that the natural ecosystem had room for the law of averages to play out; here, an unplanned fire could upset the balance the preserve is trying to attain. Man has always played a part in this ecosystem; now the only hope to save it is to totally control it. Payne is pragmatic. "On this preserve," he says with sadness rather than hubris, "we play God."

Some hours after the bison were released, after the bar-be-cue had ended, the band had left and the hundreds of guests had gone back to Pawhuska, Bartlesville, Tulsa and points beyond, I took a long walk. The bison had settled down and were contentedly grazing; one old bull had wandered off by himself. I enjoyed my own solitude, walking in grass that towered over my head.

After the bustle of the day, the sounds of the prairie were soothing: the buzz of cicadas and crickets, the dee-dee-dee of a black-capped chickadee, the rustle of a rabbit I couldn't quite see, my own steps swishing through the grass.

John Madson once described the tallgrass prairie as the lawns of God, and it was easy to hear a prayer in the whispers around me. I topped a ridge and looked out over thousands of acres of gently rolling hills, a sea of grass turned auburn with autumn, interrupted here and there, along creeks and on rims of limestone, with dark lines of oak. The grasses seemed to stretch forever and yet there were variations -- sagey green in wallows, brighter green on burns, darker greens and grays in gullies. The clouds broke for a moment and the grasses waved iridescent gold, eighteen karat; the sky closed back down and they turned smoky blue. I rubbed my eyes and everything was so rose colored I couldn't imagine anything could ever be wrong.

The lawns of the Lord are different than the lawns we mortals have created, those greenswards of infinite sameness. When I sank down on my haunches, I could number a dozen plants within a single arm's reach, from the big bluestem that soared over eight feet tall to the low-growing violet wood sorrel. Biologists have counted over five-hundred different plants on the acres around me and the names form a prayer of their own: Jack-in-the-pulpit and fire-on-the-mountain, wild white indigo and soft golden aster, witchgrass and weeping lovegrass, switchgrass and twisted ladies' tresses, shepherd's purse and button blazing star. And that doesn't begin to name the more than three hundred birds and eighty mammals that thrive here as well. Surrounded by such riches and hidden from view, I could forget for a moment the power lines and roads and fences that delimit this prairie world. It was a pleasing fantasy, but passing. We live within such boundaries. The question is where we go from here.

"When we have something valuable in our hands, and deal with it without hindrance," wrote Pedro de Castañeda de Najera over 450 years ago, "we do not value or prize it as highly as if we understood how much we would miss it after we had lost it." A member of Coronado's expedition north from Mexico in search of the mythical Seven Cities of Cíbola, Castañeda was among the first Europeans to set foot on the western prairies, and he presaged a sadness that many of us feel today. "The longer we continue to have it the less we value it," he wrote, "but after we have lost it and miss the advantages of it, we have a great pain in the heart, and we are all the time imagining and trying to find ways and means by which to get it back again."

Sometimes we notice in time, and we can go some lengths toward repair. There would be no bison at all without the work of conservationists nearly a century ago. When a census turned up fewer than 550 of the animals, Theodore Roosevelt, ammunition king William Hornaday, and Mary Goodnight, wife of Texas cattleman Charlie Goodnight, joined others to establish the American Bison Society and preserve a small herd through the New York Zoological Society. The bison that now roam the tallgrass in Oklahoma are direct descendents of those that once lived in the Bronx. With luck, the prairie ecosystem itself will enjoy a similar salvation.

The Indian tribes that Castañeda encountered lived within the arms of God. They gave thanks for the life of each bison that fed them. Modern agriculture, on the other hand, has given us the sense that we <u>are</u> God. Developed over thousands of years, it has been the enthusiasm and genius of many of the world's peoples, and it has led us to believe that the

earth should bend to our will. Science made us arrogant; now, as we begin to understand the ways in which we have damaged the systems that sustain us, it is making us humble. Perhaps, just perhaps, it can pave the path of our redemption. We have tried to tell the earth what to do; maybe now we can learn how to listen.

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