

*Critic's Choice Essay***MUSINGS AT DUSK**Reprinted from *Gaillardia*, Fall 1998

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When I get into the field, I find myself overwhelmed by the profound spirit of Nature and am driven to locate a secluded space from which to observe the world around me and contemplate questions of life. It is comforting to settle at the base of a rock or tree or simply recline on the open ground and mull over questions of 'what' and 'why' and at the same time experience visions, sounds, scents, and the physical contacts of Nature. Chief Standing Bear, a Sioux, said "...to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and feel more keenly...see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer to kinship to other lives...."

How does one translate these personal experiences into words? Most of us lack that talent and it is at this time the ability to communicate via the written word that is so important. When beautiful passages such as Standing Bear's come to mind I, once again, offer a sincere prayer of thanks to Mother for the hours spent at her side as she read to her children, cultivating our love of reading.

While surrounded by the tranquility of Nature I have watched the world about me and searched through the reaches of my mind for those special words appropriate for the experiences of the moment. Once a careless vole, caught momentarily away from the security of its burrow, had its life quickly snuffed out. The approach of the hawk was silent, and it appeared the vole's first awareness may have been talons piecing its

flesh. I had just witnessed the end of a life. But what is life? Yes, we biologists have a detailed definition steeped in technical terminology but at that moment I found the final words [attributed to] Crowfoot, a Blackfoot spokesman, more meaningful.

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the Sunset."

It has become impossible to walk across a hot, dry, Oklahoma prairie in August without reflecting on a passage from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Mornady as he described part of a journey to the grave of his grandmother:

"A single knoll rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil's edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet. There are green belts along the rivers and creeks, linear groves of hickory and pecan, willow and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the steaming foliage seems almost to writhe in fire. Great green and yellow grasshoppers are everywhere in the tall grass, popping up like corn to sting the flesh, and tortoises crawl about on the red earth, going nowhere in the plenty of time. Loneliness is

an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one tree or one man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where creation was begun."

Some of my more gratifying experiences have involved finding an isolated spot on a ridge shortly before sunset and sitting quietly until the sun has disappeared below the horizon. Often it is difficult to willfully break the spell as Nature swiftly changes her face. With darkness the creatures of the day settle down, replaced by those of the night. During that magic transition, as the shadows creep toward me, I think of a small book of nature essays, *From the Stump*, by Bob Jennings of the Tulsa Oxley Nature Center and his interpretation of that moment:

"From the scrubby trees along the dry ridge, the first tentative notes of a whip-poor-will's song emerge. The bird will make a false start or two, checking to make sure the tone is just right, that the acoustics are perfect. Soon it will start the evening concert, unbroken strings of notes calling the shadows out of the woods and across the grassland, weaving night out of the remnants of shady places."

You know, we of the Native Plant Society may be approaching our field activities wrong by scheduling the mid-day. That time has probably been selected for convenience, the dew is gone, insect activity low, the sun is high, and flowers open. But perhaps we should get out in the early evening, botanize until near dusk and then close the day, as a group, with a silent sunset vigil: an approach which might place each of us in closer harmony with Nature.

The logo for the Oklahoma Native Plant Society (ONPS) is rendered in a highly decorative, black cursive script. The letters are interconnected with elegant flourishes, particularly around the 'O', 'N', and 'S'. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional calligraphy or a formal, artistic typeface.