

The Prairie's Edge  
By Jill Riddell

Illinois was once so thickly covered in tall grasses and prairie flowers that it was nicknamed the "Prairie State." If photographer Jin Lee had made her frequent journeys between Chicago and Bloomington three hundred years ago, ninety-five percent of the land she traveled across would have been prairie. Because the topography is so unwaveringly flat, in early spring, before grasses and flowers grow tall, she could have gazed for miles over a prairie sea.

Lee's 120-mile commute from her home in Chicago to Illinois State University, in Bloomington-Normal, takes place across an area that is the state's flattest. Chicago occupies what geologists call the "Chicago Lake Plain," the smooth, featureless floor of an old glacial lake that was much larger than today's Lake Michigan. The land between Chicago and Bloomington is the bed of an even more ancient glacial lake, the 17,000-year old Lake Pontiac. Throughout Lee's entire drive, flatness surrounds her.

Even if they had wanted to, early settlers could not have done much to counteract the essential flatness of their new homeland: a glacier's steamroller effect is more or less unalterable. Aside from the creation of an occasional landfill, the only thing that can restore a hill of any significance to this part of Illinois is an earthquake or volcano. But unlike the steadfast nature of topography, the prairie ecosystem turned out to be surprisingly fragile. It is strange, in a way, because the midwestern grasslands once appeared vast and unconquerable, stretching all the way from western Indiana to Nebraska, from Texas to Saskatchewan.

Though a plot of prairie was easier for a pioneer to clear and plant than a forest, the prairie sod itself was formidable. In 1837, John Deere invented his famous steel plow, which replaced the cumbersome cast-iron plow; this set up the eastern prairie states, with their abundant rainfall and good growing conditions, for a population boom. By 1900, the hundreds of species of plants, flowers, and wildlife that had been part of the prairie ecosystem were largely gone: settlers had planted grass throughout most of northern and

central Illinois. Oddly enough, the single species that seems to rule former prairies today is a giant, sturdy grass with huge seeds: *Zea mays*, or corn!

To view a prairie as vacant space awaiting human habitation seems hardwired deep inside us. To the eye of a farmer, a real estate developer, or a mother needing a place to raise her children, in a prairie, *there is nothing there*. But where utilitarians perceive a blank slate, Lee has discovered a rich, fully realized world. She has sought out preserved remnants of original prairies as well as prairies that landowners are laboriously replanting and restoring. Rather than being overwhelmed by the immensity that the early pioneers saw, or dismayed by contemporary urban distractions, Lee directs our attention to linger on components of the tangle: the layering of plants, the diversity of species, the textures. In the thick, chaotic environment of the prairie, she has used her camera to create a sense of order. The photographs provide an opportunity to enter the denseness and immerse ourselves in the interior.

Lee's close-up view alters our usual frame of reference: instead of walking through the prairie and viewing the flowers and seed heads at eye level—or, even more likely, by driving past them at high speed from the car—we view the plants from the ground. Slowly and deliberately, Lee's angle helps us regain the sense of being small in a big world. It allows us to absorb this subtle landscape from a fresh perspective. The skies tend to be austere: the absence of detail in them compels the viewer to confront the abundance of detail and texture at ground level.

Scientists judge the health of a prairie by its diversity: the greater the variety of true prairie vegetation that is present, the higher the quality of the prairie. Greater plant variety means little has been lost from the site because of human disturbance. It also means everything else will be richer as well: there will be a greater diversity of butterflies, beetles, bees, worms, and microorganisms.

The ever-changing qualities of an individual prairie preserve echo contemporary human culture. Richness and diversity contribute to the health of the whole. Like the human cycle of life and death, brush grows up, then recedes. One group of plants might do

extraordinarily well for a period of years, and then go into a decline; another wave of plants may increase its dominance. This rapid pace sets prairie apart from an ecosystem like old-growth forest, which might look much the same for an entire human lifespan. This malleable quality prevents us from attaching too much sentimentality to the way a prairie looks right now, because within a decade, it will be quite different.

Lee's work doesn't reflect a yearning for the prairie to be other than it is right here, right now. She accepts weeds; she embraces the wind. Even in the highest quality prairies, she chooses to show holes in leaves chewed by insects, faded blooms, and blossoms blurred by wind. She acknowledges that landscape shifts have occurred, and that changes will continue day in and day out, far into the future, until the arrival of the next wave of glaciers—or volcanoes.