

Richard F. Fleck

PRAIRIE WINTER

Winter comes early to the Wyoming prairies with winds that would put the South Col of Everest to shame. You can see the snow harden into drifts around tufts of sagebrush which stretch onward to infinity. To the far west the Rockies rise with constant mystic strands of snow banners waving outward like prayer flags at some Asian temple in the Himalayas. Boards from an old cowshed lie scattered about, becoming all the more gnarled and bleached by a strong sun in the thin air of a mile and a half above sea level.

To the immediate east rises the Laramie Range, once called the Wyoming Black Hills. Dark pine-fringed canyons snake their way down, looking like spiritual entrances to Mother Earth. From high up on the even windier plateau of this range (over which goes an old stagecoach trail between Laramie and Cheyenne), one can see across the clear prairie to the Snowies of southern Wyoming and the Rawahs of northern Colorado.

Northward stretches vast open space much like the view John Muir had when he ascended Herald Island in the Bering Sea in 1881 to look for the lost whaler *Jeannette*. Vast bands of whitened land stretch onward to the pale blue winter sky. Winds generally come from the northwest, dropping the chill factor to something beyond human endurance unless one has a snug tipi with a crackling fire to crawl into. To the south more grey clouds conceal the high blue-grey humps of thickly forested foothills. But the hills clear to reveal the deep shadows of their canyons.

All four directions of the sacred circle are sources of power for the human spirit. Black Elk, holy man of the Ogalala Sioux, believed (knew) that the north brought a spiritually cleansing wind and the south growth, fertility, and warmth. The east brought peace and illumination while the west brought storms and conflict. One can sense the truth of all this sitting out here in early winter facing the warmth of the glowing sun where it is best to lean against the remains of an old cowshed to get out of the fierce wind from the northwest. Mother Earth rises up to the East with her dark and inviting canyons filled with frail aspen and dried chokecherries. Perhaps Henry Thoreau sensed what

was out here on the prairies (which bloom so delicately each June with an array of miniature flowers) when he wrote in "Walking" that he always ambled westward toward freedom.

Someday, maybe, I shall return to my native Pennsylvania with her warm and gentle hills as densely wooded as are those of Buddhist Japan. But twenty years of living here in the sometimes plutonian landscapes of the American West have given my spirit certain energies which shall always be retained within. Edward Abbey (another native Pennsylvanian) says of the Colorado Plateau that "the land here is like a great book or a great symphony; it invites approaches toward comprehension on many levels from all directions." He is right. And so much the more so on a winter plain, where memories of earlier golden sunflowers and purple larkspur on a warm, green prairie come to life. These rich sensations of the prairie complement so forcefully the seemingly intangible, invisible human spirit that it indeed becomes somehow felt and seen.

Yes, the great circle of the prairie gives the soul a wholeness that is almost comprehensible.



Priscilla Long

TO CALIFORNIA

The road that leads away from you
winds through semi-arid land:
red earth cut by canyons.
I follow a dry streambed

into the unknown.
The plants are strangely succulent
and feelings come in twisted shapes.
I walk alone, old as the chaparral

now. Like the brown hills I go
down to the immense sea.