

The Grass Trail

THE FIRST DAYS of the new year at Selah began in freezing mist, wind-driven, so that the rock outcroppings, live oaks, and whitened ponds seemed to trawl through clouds and patches of blown rain. The deer appeared baffled by the half-light that wouldn't wake into day; a gray fox, usually nocturnal, rummaged behind dormitories at The Center. The raw weather made it appealing to be indoors, where the fire that my brother-in-law David Bamberger had made radiated from a fireplace large enough to warm a semicircle of comfortable chairs. But I had just driven from New York City via Biloxi, New Orleans, and Houston, all closed in by the same fog, a uniform dreaminess that blanketed swamps, skyscrapers, bridges, coastal washes, and the familiar limestone hills. The whole south of the nation had fallen under a spell. I needed to get out and walk.

The Selah ranch house is situated on a rise between the lower pastureland to the east called Windsong and a hill and upper pasture to the west called High Lonesome. To the northeast, where Miller Creek runs toward the Pedernales River, is Malabar and then, next to it, Pleasant Valley, names honoring Ohio's Louis Bromfield, the novelist and screenwriter who transformed himself into America's foremost activist for land restoration. Farther north is an airstrip erased in the distance, abruptly de-listed by the FAA when its last arrival, uninvited, had ended in pieces in the trees. I walked south past a makeshift shooting range, where hunters must prove facility with a rifle to avoid accidents and minimize the number of wounded animals staggering about. The road descends gently. A turn left leads to Jacob's Ladder Tank, but straight takes you past Hes' Country Store and on the rise to the right the Recycle

Cabin. I walked to the very heart of Selah, through the gate announcing the Wildlife Preserve and a convection of trails bearing the names of renowned naturalists.

Near Madrone Lake and the Nature Trail that runs up to The Center, there is a small garden on the right devoted to native grasses. It once displayed eighty-four species. The Grass Trail wound through the different grasses, and in the winter fog they seemed all the more dormant and skeletal. Yet when I looked closely, the individual plots of grasses—some as tall as I am, others rising barely an inch, the stems feathery, spindled, or spear-like—made small structural worlds of their own. Of the features of the Texas Hill Country, the grasses are among the most magnificent, so varied and yet unified as surroundings for the trees, rocks, creeks, ponds, canyons, and cattle.

When I recall my first visit, in January 2000, with my wife, Mary, one scene in particular comes to mind: the African grass area called “The Sahara” behind Little Mexico, where the Mexican laborers live on the ranch. It is the endangered species section devoted to the scimitar-horned oryx, no longer found in the wilds of its native North Africa. As elegant and powerful as these large animals appear, their horns arcing three feet over their backs, it was the way the grasses formed a savannah and the way the slope at the edge of the small plateau opened out over the far hills that I found so striking. This particular landscape provides a vague window on what the Hill Country might have looked like in the time of the buffalo and then the arrival of the first German and Irish settlers, except for the Kleingrass that had been planted specifically for the sheltered antelope. It was the grasses that fueled dreams of empires of cattle and sheep, never to be, engendering a cycle of mutual demise of landscape and rancher, the fragile soil unable to support the pressures of livestock or agriculture. Whole towns failed.

David, who restored the land and created a nature preserve, would say that the story of Selah is the story of water. While the Hill Country appeared to have water—thirty inches a year—it was susceptible to very high evaporation rates, and often the rain arrived in seasonal deluges,

dissipating quickly, and eroding the soil as runoff once grass and root systems were disrupted. It was a delicate system: soil retaining water, grass retaining soil. Few things give David as much pleasure as showing people the land, explaining these fragile balances and offering the sense and means by which we can all contribute to their conservation.

I was at home in Paris when Mary quietly celebrated an unlikely Christmas and New Year's at Selah with her sister Margaret Bamberger and her family. That autumn, Margaret came close to death after failed chemotherapy and then hospitalization for lung and liver cancer, her daughter Margie providing day and night care. Mary spent most of October and part of November in Texas trying to keep up Margie's spirits and helping out as she could before finally leaving Texas when Margaret was stabilized, soon to return home for final hospice care. By New Year's, however, thanks to a last-ditch effort using a molecularly targeted drug, Margaret began a recovery so uncanny that it left both us and all the extensive network of her friends in a state of awe.

Sometimes there are feelings that run deeper than gratitude, and their power, as romantic transcendentalists will affirm, finds an inexplicable correspondence in the movement of autumn trees or in morning light catching the slope of mountains or in a silent freezing mist descending over grasses. A visceral appreciation of such correspondences is the only claim I can make to being a naturalist. I can't explain the chemistry of chlorophyll and the color green, I forget the names of wildflowers as fast as I learn them, and my hands are so unsteady with binoculars that there's no discernible difference for me between an earth tremor and the flicking of a black-capped vireo in shrubs or of a golden-cheeked warbler in juniper and hardwood. I am completely deprived of the pleasures of hunting, an experience with special bonds to father, brothers, family, and friends; the way heightened senses tune in to the patterns and signs of an animal's presence; our instinct for the kill; the ethic of it. And above all, Texas is not a native landscape for me, though I lived six years in Houston.

As I walked the Grass Trail, I knew that there was much to learn about native Texas grasses and the Selah story. I already knew that

David had to restore the grasses before water would return to former creek beds. The grasses would control runoff and erosion. Also, one could read the geological qualities of the land by where the grasses grew, where the seeps were and the clay. The grasses would provide an array of uses, including forage, wildlife cover, and birdseed. And what could be more delicate than the panicked inflorescence of plain lovegrass or bolder than the eastern gamma seedhead that Colleen Gardner, the ranch's assistant director, described to me as "a grassy version of the bird-of-paradise flower"? Margaret had assembled numerous pamphlets for Selah's nature education workshops, and I remember in particular her pen-and-ink drawings of grasses: bushy bluestem by the water and seep muhly by the damp ledges.

Over the years, it became clear to me that the story of Selah—the evolution of its programs and philosophies as well as its future prospects—is inextricably bound to my brother-in-law's own story, his unlikely trajectory from door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman to co-founder and board chairman of Church's Fried Chicken to spokesman for environmental policy at local, federal, and international levels. His story is not inspirational because he attained considerable wealth through industry and imagination. He undoubtedly could have amassed a far greater fortune. It is, however, inspiring because an early passion for nature instilled in him by his mother and his rural Ohio beginnings combined with entrepreneurial instincts led to an entirely unique approach to selling environmental causes. Growing up in the Great Depression inured him to a reflexive sense of resource conservation, and his business success provided the boldness and means to experiment. While David's background and the making of Selah form the body of this book, it was the additional story of Margaret's recovery that suggested moving parallels for me. The book imposed itself urgently, and though it is a tribute to two worshippers of nature, its other subject is the nature of survival: how our individual survival and our habitat affects all of us.

All inspirational stories are in large part fiction, if for no other reason than their omissions in service to a narrative line. There are always

inconsistencies, struggles with human weaknesses, and a myriad of contributions by good-hearted people who go unrecognized. There is also the fiction created when the experience of another is processed through a writer's imagination. Inaccuracies, however unintentional, are inevitable. As David often says, "Memory is the poorest record of history."

At first I had imagined pointed lessons from two naturalists, but what occurred was more anecdotal: long conversations in Texas, spending days and evenings with Margaret and David, often joined by others, sharing stories and knowledge. Experts would take me aside and explain how some preposterous mode of behavior or unlikely morphology can ensure the survival of an organism. I'm not a botanist or ecologist or even an informed amateur naturalist. I'm no David, and even he says of himself, "I don't speak genus and species." Still, learning is excitement, and teaching is a mission at Selah. While noting the stories of David's life and the making of Selah, a different sort of collaboration emerged: Margaret gathering strength; talking to groups again; appearing at public events, including the Relay for Life in the neighboring town of Blanco; and finally walking—a few hundred feet at first, then up to a mile or so, to render the features of Selah with penpoints and inks for this book while I'm five thousand miles away, putting together these words.