

The call of a remnant prairie

I've seen artists enchanted and haunted by the prairie, their work changed by spending time in the grasses.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [March 2025](#) issue

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Century illustration

There is a field next to my office. It's set apart from the campus by an old split rail fence, and beyond it most of what you can see is a footpath, disappearing into tall grasses. It's been there from time immemorial—not the fence, which dates to the 1890s or so, but the field, which is not really a field but instead a prairie.

I work at an artists' residency—not as an artist but rather more as an email sender. For 18-day stays, the residency welcomes cohorts of about 15 artists at a time to pile into an assortment of historical mansions, state-of-the-art studios, and cozy living rooms to work and chat and focus in a way that otherwise can be impossible. (I should know, I'm often 50 yards and an entire world away, wrestling with HTML formatting.) Artists who have spent time at the residency talk about it as if it is full of some kind of creative magic. I take their word for it, for the most part—except for the prairie. The prairie I believe in.

My first week on the job, I joined a cohort of these artists under a sprawling crab apple tree for a tour. Jess, our garden and land manager, passed around a laminated sheet, one side with a recognizable, if somewhat patchy, map of the state of Illinois, all in red. "This is the amount of prairie land that Illinois had in the early 1800s," she said. She flipped over the sheet to show a pinhead's worth of red. "And this is the amount of untouched prairie that remains in the state, collectively. We're standing next to part of it."

And for all that it was a pinhead, I can tell you that angels were dancing on it. It was early September, and so the compass plant flowers were nodding above our heads, finches making a racket in the goldenrod, bottle gentians glowing an electric blue at knee height, bluestem and rye and milkweed curtaining us into our own little world. This particular bit of prairie, maintained today by volunteers and conservation experts, is what's known as "remnant prairie"—prairie that has always been prairie, that has never been plowed or developed or encroached on in any way. Prairies are defined by the diversity of species that call them home, but they don't contain the kind of visibly awesome species that other ancient landscapes do—no towering redwoods or sequoias, no saguaro cacti, just the grasses that would lose their foliage come winter but would remain, alive but dormant in their mat of roots and mycelia under the earth. As we walked, Jess would call attention to this or that thing, pass around a leaf for us to smell, a seedpod to roll around in our fingers, each stop on the tour making this place more legible, rendering it more clearly from unmown field into the unique ecosystem it actually is.

I've been working next to the prairie for six or so months now and have seen it in many guises. My coworkers and I use it as a kind of holding tank for the feelings that are too big for the office—we went on prairie walks every day the week after the election, leaving my favorite sweater burred with seedpods shaped like alien landing craft from a dozen species laying in their plans for the spring that would eventually come. I've seen it resplendent in golds and browns in the autumn, dusted in snow, and burned—part of the prairie's conservation process. I've heard great horned owls calling at night from the trees around it, have watched deer delicately pick their way through the grasses and sandhill cranes make their weird, almost dial-up sound as they circle overhead. The biodiversity of the prairie, its changing face across the seasons: this ecosystem is a community, living and breathing and renewing itself, older than the houses and the trees around it.

Inasmuch as the prairie is a community, it also sustains one. My coworkers and I, the animals hunting and hiding in its plenty, and the artists that come and visit it for 18 day stretches. I've seen some hundred-plus people come and go, have watched artist talks and done studio visits, and the prairie is a head-turner.

People who came into the residency with fixed ideas of what they were there to work on instead spend hours of their time cross-legged on the edge of a path, sketching bluestem. Leaves mysteriously sprout from writers' pages. Roots twine across a sculptor's work. Dancers lean and sway against each other like grasses in a breeze. I've seen people enchanted and haunted by the prairie, their art changed by spending time in the grasses.

But this is, after all, how prairies work. In addition to their rarity, their near extinction, the other thing that is significant about prairies, Jess told us, is that prairies need people—especially tiny pockets of prairie like the one near us. They need regular burns to scale back the amount of growth and control invasive species. They need the collection and dispersal of seeds. The community of the prairie goes far beyond the plants commingling, beyond even the split rail fence that hems it in—this particular prairie makes converts of people particularly well placed to appreciate its beauty and to share it with the world beyond. There are traces of this prairie in books and paintings and sculptures, a diversity of new life springing up around it to protect this fragile corner of earth.