Broken Kettle Dawn, When the Past and Present Merge

We were standing atop a miniature mountain, looking out over the Big Sioux River from a statuesque bluff not all that far from the confluence of the Missouri and the Big Sioux, over the prairie land of Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, 3000 acres of sheer beauty. No one else was there.

Behind us, shadowy prairie grasses ran up to the edge of the hill and a horizon that, right then, couldn’t have been more vivid. Through the lens of my camera, the earth was black to the east, but the sky was so triumphantly showy that it was hard to look clearly into the face of what was about to come.

When I swung back west, I saw what we’d come to shoot, a yawning valley whose scattered farm places—darkened, colorless clumps of trees and buildings—created the only visual difference between what this landscape looked like that morning, and how it might have appeared 200+ years ago, when Lewis and Clark were in the neighborhood. From where I was standing, I could almost see them, I swear.

We were up on a swell on the northernmost reaches of the Loess Hills, looking over an endless russet landscape of open fields and only occasional trees in the golden breath of the breaking dawn.

On the broad land before us there was not a door in sight; the open world was all window. Here and there on the cross-sections of gravel and pavement, an occasional truck moved toward the city, its funnelling headlights out front like the long snout of hound. Otherwise, we were alone, waiting for dawn.

Painted up against the flat-line clouds, sunrise was coming, not so much in luminous yellows, but in a rich caramel, a long swath of butterscotch that ran
for miles across the eastern horizon, at its heart a brilliant smudge of bright gold.

But nothing stays the same in early, early morning; blink and the hues have shifted. Turn away for seconds, and a new painting stretches across an endless sky. A photograph doesn’t catch the dawn any more than a story captures a lifetime; a photograph is a glimpse, one fraction of a second, a single frame of a film that re-runs every morning, but has never, ever been the same.

Still, the sun was not quite up. The broad plain that filled half the frame was already beginning to glow. Just above it, the ridge of clouds at the western horizon had reddened in sunlight that hadn’t yet fallen to our level. We were caught in a fleeting moment neither night nor day, but something richer than both—a dim-lit zone experienced only for a few seconds each glowing morning. On those fields across the river west, silver barn roofs began to shine as the curtain of dawn opened, not as sunlight rose, but as it fell silently over the land.

And then, suddenly, in a magician’s flick of a wand, all around us the prairie grass was sheathed in bronze, as if taken from the fire. Down at our feet, the world turned to Oz, the big bluestem, golden rod, and blazing stars burnished as if sacred. We forgot the sprawling open miles to the west because the show right there beneath our feet made us feel, honestly, that we were standing on holy ground.

Lewis and Clark couldn’t have been more than a day away from here when, one night, the whole Corps of Discovery feasted around the fire on their very first buffalo steak, the prairie’s finest cuisine, from a bull they’d just downed.
Not that long before, they’d buried Sgt. Floyd; but that night, they “discovered” the American bison, a feast their First Nations hosts had been loving already for generations.

Broken Kettle Preserve is a wonder, not simply because it exists right here on our doorstep, on the far north edge of the Loess Hills, but also because it is so gorgeous in its own, peculiar native ways, dressed out as it always is, especially at dawn.

You can’t help but wonder whether the Corps of Discovery didn’t feel pretty much the same joy on August 22, 1804, the bright morning after that great first taste of buffalo, somewhere right here in the neighborhood.