

June 24, 1854: Some of these flowers must be preserved—not that they can ever be made any more beautiful or arranged with any better taste than now. But this great prairie flower garden as arranged by the hand of the Creator is now exposed to the plow, and the lowing herds are already making their paths and selecting their shades and watering places, and it is plain that the native beauty must give way to the artificial. —From the diary of Mitchell Jackson in Lakeland, MN. (Blegen 1939)

Restoring prairie

You were right, we plowed so well,
we stripped the earth
of nearly everything life-giving.
But today, close to your old farm,
Prairie ironweed blooms purple flowers,
their tall stems and pointed leaves
announce a ground in transition again.
Corn and Kentucky bluegrass have long
withered my senses, in those fields
birds don't sing like they do here.
Now I understand, why it was hard
to say goodbye to flowers,
so long to prairie-chickens dancing.

Mitchell, did you cry
when the last roots ripped
from the tip of your shovel,
heavy, with black soil clinging on?
And what will we write for the unsung
deaths today, the seeds too late to save?
For them I grieve—
among autumn's big bluestem,
drunk in coppery-red as wind swirls
cotton-tops off open milkweed pods.
I bow to the bitter acorns
anchoring to the ground, forage only
forgiveness under open burr oak arms.

**Restoring prairie by Leslie Thomas won fourth place in Saint Paul Almanac's Break Through Writing Contest in the category of poetry March 2022.*