

THE LAST WORD



CURT MEINE

THE YEAR OF AUTUMN LILACS

I am pandemic sheltering at home, along the lower Wisconsin River, at the eastern edge of the Driftless Area, amid a grassland expanse called Cassell Prairie. One basic fact of life here is that the soil is sandy. The sand is the legacy of a great flood that roared down the valley to the Mississippi River at the end of the last glacial epoch, seventeen thousand years ago. The flood moved massive amounts of sand from what is now central Wisconsin, transporting it into the unglaciated Driftless, filling in the river's channel and leaving a level terrace that rises slightly above today's forested floodplain. The terrace is just high and dry enough to make it a happy home for drought-resistant prairie grasses and forbs—even

prickly pear cactus—and for their grassland bird companions. It is high and dry enough to provide at least the illusion of safe shelter above 2020's relentless deluge of uncertainty, anxiety, and change.

For millennia, the native prairie and Native peoples held in place this sandy land under the adjacent high bluffs. In the 1830s the forces of empire began to force open their ancient grasp. In 1832 the Sauk warrior Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, known to the white settlers as Black Sparrow Hawk, sought to lead his people back to homelands in Illinois from which they had been removed under a disputed treaty. The United States government organized a militia to prevent any such return. That July, Black Hawk and his mixed band of Sauk, Meskwaki, and Kickapoo held off the pursuing American militia on a ridge just upstream from here. The people fled across the Wisconsin. Twelve days later, out on the Mississippi River, the militia finally caught up to Black Hawk's beleaguered band, weakened by battle wounds, fatigue, and starvation. Some



THE LAST WORD

two hundred and sixty Native warriors, women, and children lost their lives, some to the militia's assault, others by drowning in a desperate attempt to escape back across the Mississippi.

The Black Hawk War marked the culmination of Native resistance in the American East and the opening of the next chapter in the trans-Mississippi West. Five years later, the Ho-Chunk Nation lost its homelands in this portion of Wisconsin through an egregious treaty imposed upon them by the expanding American nation. Settlers soon began to transform the land. Cassell Prairie took its name from its first white immigrant, a doctor and land speculator who arrived from out east in 1844. Cassell became a settlement as lumbermen began to exploit the forests of north-central Wisconsin, rafting white pine logs and lumber on the Wisconsin River to downstream mills and markets. The raftsmen paused at regular points along the river to restock, repair, and imbibe. Cassell Prairie was one of those stops. Farmers arrived in the 1850s, turning over the prairie sod to grow their crops. Cassell eventually gained several houses, a post office and store, a blacksmith shop and granary, and a one-room schoolhouse.

Nothing is left of the hamlet of Cassell. It is now just the spot where our narrow back road meets the state highway. Utility workers sometimes park their trucks there. My neighbor relocated here and preserved the weathered old granary and blacksmith shop. One legacy of Cassell, however, remains: a hedge of white and lavender lilacs a quarter mile long that lines the road and blossoms every April into fragrant glory. You don't have to watch for it to bloom; the valley's prevailing west winds will tell you when the lilacs have opened. Traffic on our road is usually light, dominated seasonally by tractors, combines, and manure haulers. But in the spring, lilac sniffers—including me—stop by for their annual hit of olfactory bliss.

The hedge is a local landmark and features a sign erected by our town's historical society. These are old-growth lilacs. The sign notes that Kate Bentley Babington, a teacher in the Cassell school, planted the hedge in 1896. Local lore fills in missing details. As the story goes, Ms. Babington took it

upon herself to plant the hedgerow to address an environmental problem. Cassell Prairie, its blanket of perennial native plants stripped away and its soils exposed, was vulnerable to the winds funneling up the river valley. Sand and dust blew through the schoolhouse doors and windows, disrupting her daily lessons and leaving her students coughing. I don't know if Kate considered herself a conservationist, but she understood what a windbreak was. She needed to calm the flying dirt. And she must have had a green thumb. Her lilacs thrived in the sands of Cassell Prairie. Others in the neighborhood took note. My place, a mile down the road, hides behind its own sheltering hedge of deep-rooted lilacs.

In this year of autumn lilacs, we have been forced to accept disorder and find the beauty in its midst. Stressed out, we have had to become remontant, to come up again and again and again...

In those years, the dairy revolution was moving across Wisconsin and came to Cassell Prairie. Dairying provided an alternative to the soil-exhausting regime of continuous wheat and row-cropping. The making of milk dominated farming here for the better part of the next century. But the marginal soils of the floodplain were not the best suited for agriculture. As Wisconsin dairies grew in size and efficiency, many of the modest dairy farms in this neighborhood blinked out. The old barns are *still* here, but they are still here. The once-busy local creamery, two miles away, long ago morphed into a tavern. The remaining farms now grow mainly corn and soy. The most sorely worn-out fields and pastures have been returned to their native prairie grasses, to milkweed and aster, lupine and goldenrod.

Nevertheless, Kate Babington's hedgerow persists. Kate might have chosen back in 1896 to plant more drab or functional shrubs—denser dogwoods, maybe, or edible hazelnuts. Two generations later, from the 1930s to the 1950s, neighbors

up and down the river valley established pine plantations to slow the winds and hold the soils. But Kate Bentley Babington preferred lilacs. She must have enjoyed their color and perfume as much as their utility.

In 1967 a thirty-three-year-old poet, Donald Sidney-Fryer, paid a visit to Cassell Prairie. I don't know much about Sidney-Fryer, but he intrigues me. He was born and raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the port from which Herman Melville has the Pequod embark on its fateful voyage in *Moby Dick*. After serving in the U.S. Marines, he went to California to study poetry, ballet, and French. Sidney-Fryer came to this place in the company of the prolific Wisconsin writer August Derleth, who lived in nearby Sauk Prairie and in 1971 published Sidney-Fryer's first collection of poems. Among those poems: "The Lilac Hedge at Cassell Prairie, 27 May 1967":

Within the round of farms and far-off hills
Within this greater round of space and sky,
Amid the calls of owls and whippoorwills;—
This third successive twilight bids good-bye
To us alone below this one great eye
Whose deeper light of stars will soon descend.
Here by these lilacs breathing to the sky
Three stand enchanted at the twilight's dusk
Linked in this mystic round of friend to friend
to friend.

But this remains of Cassell Prairie now: this
lilac hedge
Extending more than half a mile, this line
without a bend.
Beside this old road paved with earth, touch-
ing the future's edge.

In future worlds of further stars, what friends
will stand at dusk
By Earth-born lilacs all abloom with laven-
der and musk?

I have had that poem magnetized to my refrigerator door for years. Its words show new shades of meaning amid the Covid crisis and as hard winds of change whiplash the nation and the world. Owls and whippoorwills still call blessedly over Cassell Prairie, solemn solace on these pandemic nights.

But we are touching the edge of a future for which warning sirens have long been screaming. We still stand friend to friend to friend. But no more than three, please, masked, and at a proper social distance. Through all of this, what friends will stand with us at the lilac hedge?

Stand with me there at this moment and you will see that the Babington lilacs have shared in the weirdness of 2020. Back in the spring they barely blossomed. It is hard to explain why. Temperatures and rainfall here were, on the whole, about normal. There was no unusual late snow or killing frost. But the lilac bloom was a dud, disappointing visitors to the hedge. Summer was a bit wetter and warmer when compared to the National Weather Service's "normal period" (1981 to 2010). There was one ten-day stretch of extra hot and dry, but conditions were not, one would think, beyond what the lilacs have endured regularly since 1896. Nonetheless, in mid-summer, all the leaves on the lilacs browned, shriveled to a crisp, and dropped. This year, autumn arrived in July. Then, in September, more oddness: the barren branches of the lilacs began to open new leaves, and then, remarkably, burst into flower. We have had several nights of light fall frosts, but the lilacs are "abloom with lavender and musk." This year, spring arrived in October.

Blooming out of season like this is rare but not unheard of. Some trees and shrubs—forsythia, rhododendrons, magnolias, apples, lilacs (evidently)—are capable of blooming more than once in a growing season. Such species set their buds for the next year right after their spring blossoming, so that the buds are ready to roll out come the following spring. But when faced with unusual or stressful environmental conditions, the plant hormones will intervene and the buds open in the fall. It does no lasting harm to the plant, though it will dull next April's display.

The botanical term for this ability is *remontancy*, from the French for "coming up again." (Oh, Donald Sidney-Fryer, where are you when we need you!) Horticulturists made note of the occasional remontant lilac even back in Kate Babington's day. Charles Sargent, founding director of Harvard

THE LAST WORD

University's Arnold Arboretum, observed one such specimen of *Syringa microphylla* in 1917, remarking that it was “far from being one of the handsomest of the Lilacs,” but that if it “keeps up its habit of flowering a second time in autumn it will be at least interesting, even if other Lilacs are more beautiful.”

In 2009, a commercial nursery developed a new commercial variety of remontant lilac: the *Bloomerang*®. It stirred up controversy. Lilacs are supposed to bloom in the spring. One skeptic remarked that “the prospect of lilacs blooming again in September [is] akin to watching a burlesque dancer perform the same act into her dotage—untimely and kind of creepy.” However, the new variety proved popular among gardeners and landscapers.

Kate Babington, who would have guessed it? Your local hedgerow lilacs were double-blooming way before double-blooming was cool or profitable. Before climate disruption and global weirding made us rethink such phenomena. Before 2020. It all feels so out of whack. A lilac in bloom in any season would smell as sweet—still, it just does not smell right. It is not normal. But, as has been said, it is what it is. The other day a friend stopped by for a wary and socially distanced visit. I showed him the flowering lilacs. He clipped off some sprigs to take home to his wife and young daughter.



In this year of autumn lilacs, we have been forced to accept disorder and find the beauty in its midst. Stressed out, we have had to become remontant,

to come up again and again and again—an ability that expresses itself along the future's edge. That future will bring more of the same, even as it disrupts the very definition of *sameness*. Sometime and somehow, the Covid-19 virus will work its way through the human population, and we will discover ourselves occupying a new status quo. Some will yearn and work for a return of good old days of normalcy and predictability amid accelerating social and environmental change. Others will strive toward a new and better normal that recognizes and responds to such change. If we are honest with ourselves—and if we strip the terms of their political baggage—we might see within ourselves both these tendencies, conservative and progressive. We human animals, like all beings, need stability *and* growth, simultaneously. In the necessary process of adapting, we might find ourselves blooming out of season.

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