Buffalo Grass

I.

My father never stepped foot in an art gallery. He did go to The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago for the new model railroad exhibit. He had been there last in the 1940s. The original exhibit discussed the history of The Iron Horse. Now, modern railroading in America. Either way, there was something sacred to him about trains. And the sound of the late-night whistle echoing across Prairie Lake would make him shiver.

II.

He did not use the term Native American. To him, it was the Indians who were building a casino at Turtle Lake. And it was the Indians who were spearfishing in the flowage. He said he could see both sides of any issue, and never begrudged them food, clothing, and shelter, and a way to get it. But when some local groups began blocking public boat ramps, and using fast boats to make waves, he only saw one side.

III.

My father lived as a child in Wauconda, Illinois, which in Potawatomi means “Spirit Water.” His paternal grandfather built a house on Bangs Lake, and he grew up swimming and boating and fishing. He spent the last 30 years in Chetek, Wisconsin, living next to the water. Some think Chetek might mean “Pelican” in the Ojibwa, referring to the long-legged birds that loved the wild rice that once grew around the lakes. He said it meant paradise in any language you spoke.
IV.

A long-stranded weed that grew in the lakes up North he referred to as buffalo grass. It might instead have been called eel grass. I might be confusing what once covered prairies with the underwater weeds in Prairie Lake. These weeds would grow just below the surface and sway like the long hair of the dead woman in that Richard Hugo poem. But here again, I’m reaching for my own metaphor instead of his. He might say it looked like the wind blowing over the prairie in an old John Wayne western. Or that Wolves movie, where most of America learned that the Native word for the buffalo was Ta Tanka. Even he knew of that word.

V.

At dusk, my father would sit fishing in his boat on Prairie Lake, across the bay from the bare beachfront where his grandfather’s cabin once stood, nothing left but a brick chimney overgrown with weeds. He would turn on the transistor radio and tune into a station he said came from the Indian Reservation, although I never knew which station or which reservation. He said they played old-time country and western music, like he heard as a kid, and some nights they played songs with yodeling singers. He said it made him remember things.

VI.

I wanted to play his favorite song, recite a poem, arrange for a passing freight train to blow its horn. But it was windy and cold, and looked about to rain. So we put on life jackets and 12 of us squeezed onto a borrowed pontoon boat and motored up the lake. At his favorite fishing spot, I crawled out onto the bow and hung my arms over the water. And as the weeds below me swayed, a vast green prairie spreading out, I opened up the lid on the black box and I poured.