

PÜFF

My First Winter on the Prairie



by John Cayden

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for little protectors of earth
in the making

This is a work of fiction. Animals, trees, rocks, plants, locales and incidents are either the products of the author's weird imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual prairie animals living or dead, or actual places with grass or grassy memories or events involving grass or touching grass or eating grass is purely coincidental.

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...we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we know. We know only what we are taught. - *Baba Dioum*

Note from the Author

Grasslands are areas or ecosystems on our planet where not enough rain falls for trees to grow in large numbers. Smaller plants grow low to the ground with deep roots that can withstand fire and the munching by animals passing through the wide-open land.

Grasslands have different names depending upon where you are. In North America, we call them prairies, in Africa we call them savannahs, in Asia they are steppes, Australia downs or rangelands, and pampas, cerrado or llano if you are South of the United States.

The few remaining grasslands provide natural habitat to a wide variety of animals. Grazers, which usually move in large groups, eat the grasses and herbs. The carnivores or hunters, like the big cats and large prey birds, eat the grazers. Scraps they leave behind are eaten by scavengers, like the hyena or coyote or dingo.

Decomposers like insects, fungus and bacteria eat what's left over and help to put good stuff back into the soil, which in turn helps the grasses and herbs grow. A full circle of life.

This story is about one of the remaining grasslands in North America and the animals that make up that incredible circle of life.


You can explore more about the grasslands in distinct parts of the world and see how unique the animals are in each part or ecosystem.

These areas are in danger of disappearing as much of them have been removed for buildings, homes and farms for people.

The more you learn about how these fragile systems work the more you might be able help them survive and thrive for years to come when you get older.

Places like the World Wildlife Organization are a good place to start exploring, especially if you enjoy leaning about the beautiful and amazing diversity of life.

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With the first day of winter
I saw the sun was getting smaller
and the days were getting shorter
and the grasses grew no taller

The air was getting cooler
and the moon's rings were gold
and this would be my first time
with a season long and cold





A landscape photograph of a desert. In the foreground, there are various desert plants, including cholla cacti and sagebrush. The middle ground is a vast, flat, rocky desert floor. In the distance, a low, rounded hill or mesa is visible against a clear blue sky. A large, bright full moon is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the sky, partially obscured by a few wispy clouds.

I'm not sure what is coming
and not sure what to do
But maybe watching others
I might learn a thing or two

There are many critters here
each different and unique
each fit within a niche
and have the know how that I seek



Like take this little guy
So green and fast and strong
They lay their eggs on plants
to sleep through winter long

In the spring when I was born
I saw hopper eggs that just had hatched
When the ground began to warm
as did the plants where they attached



Laying eggs is his survival
This wind critter I've named Anor
He lived long and full and fat
but soon he'll be no more

His body is amazing
with pegs on legs and beautiful wings
He grew big into his age
and learned that rubbing made wings sing







While Anor's babes all sleep
under protection from the leaves
with the second day of winter
I learned from Zephyr in the breeze

Zephyr is a yellow jacket
who lives with his family in a hole
They moved in there in March
driving out a little vole



Zephyr's working with his colony
to fatten a foundress they call queen
who will sleep throughout the season
with new eggs to hatch in spring

They are healthy happy eaters
getting power from fish and meats
but prefer the last fall sugars
from fruit, flowers, sap and trees








With the third day of winter
I watched a weasel named Haizea
She was filling her small tunnel
which gave me one idea

She was storing up some food
to feed six hungry brood
and packing it in good
from what I saw from where I stood





Haizea's fur was changing color
from summer brown to winter white
Only half of her had changed
Makin her quite a pretty site

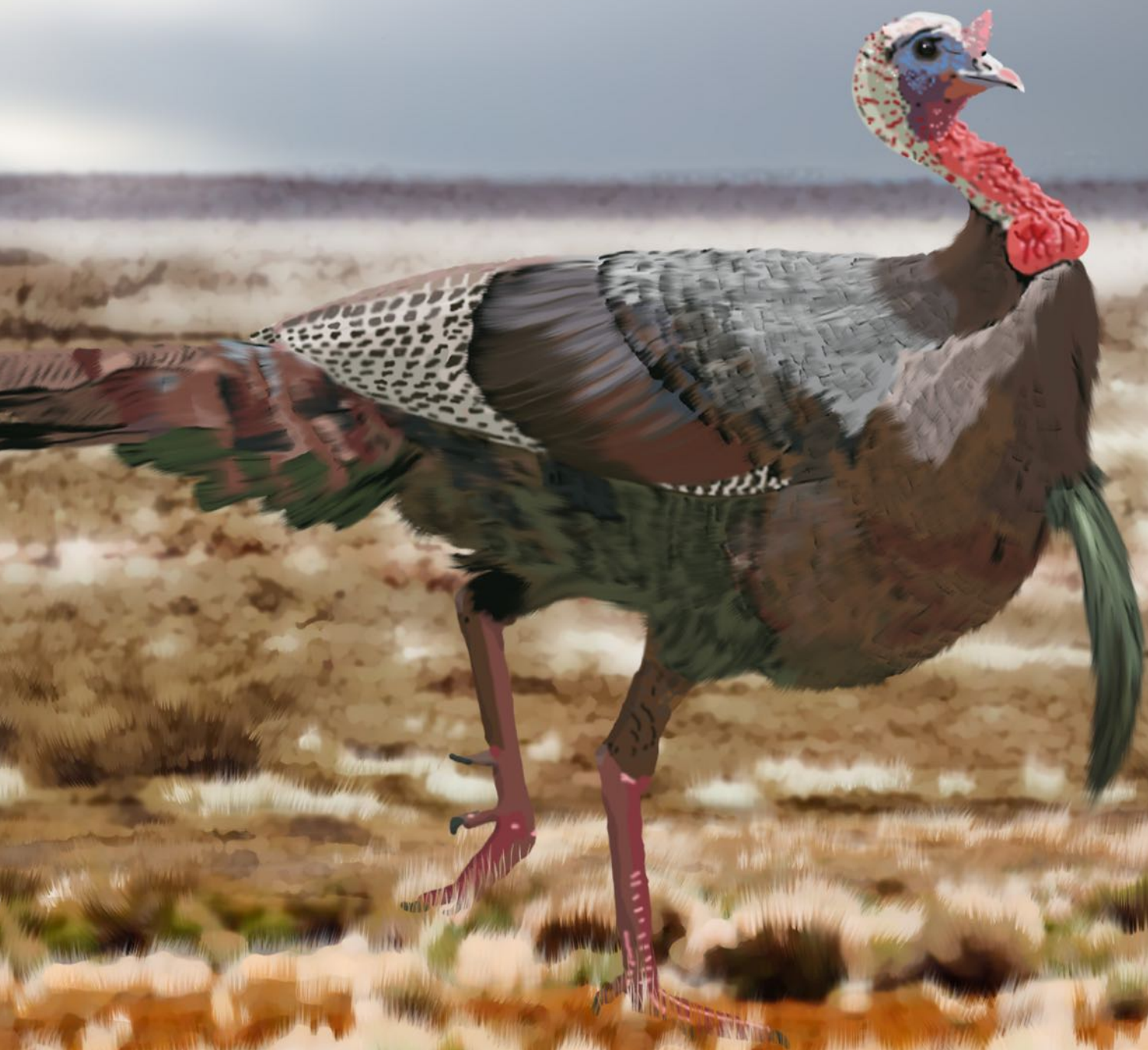
I could hear her kits below
Yelping for their mom
While lying on the furs
of what they once dined on



With the fourth day of winter
frost sparkled all around
covering each leaf and drying blade
that had grown from the ground

Enlil danced and tried to gobble
as he scratched along the dirt
in the distance I could see him
His beard and feathers say alert



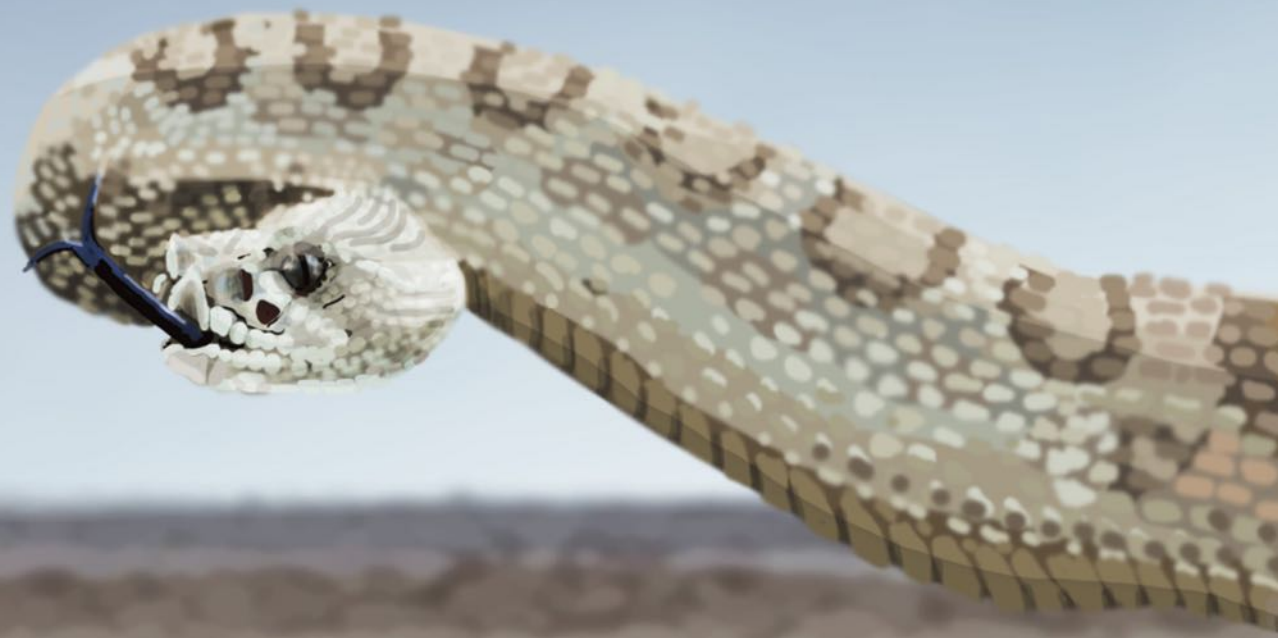


Enil has a beard and wattle
that few girl turkeys do
His added fat and feathers
makes for a beautiful view

He'll be heading for some deer trails
where food's not too hard to find
and he says he'll climb a tree
to escape deep snow sometimes







Speaking of the deer trails
as great spaces to view life
Amihan is out today
She's a venomous three-foot wife

She's what is called a rattler
with warning rattle on her tail
She has eleven children left
One was injured by a quail



She probably looking for a meal
Perhaps her last before the cold
On this clear fifth day of winter
with sun out, warm and bold



She'll use her last food wisely
as she goes deep underground
to winter with her babies
born with patterns rich with brown

