

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Grave of Sergeant Floyd

My voyage from the mouth of the Teton River to Fort Leavenworth during this autumn of 1832 has been the most rugged, yet the most delightful, of my whole Tour. Our canoe was generally landed at night on the point of some projecting barren sandbar, where we straightened our limbs on our buffalo robes, secure from the annoyance of mosquitos and out of the walks of Indians and grizzly bears. In addition to the opportunity which this descending Tour has afforded me of visiting all the tribes of Indians on the river, and leisurely filling my portfolio with the beautiful scenery which its shores present, the sportsman's fever was roused and satisfied. The swan, ducks, geese, and pelicans — the

[This description of the western border of Iowa, particularly in the vicinity of Sioux City, as it appeared to an artist nearly a hundred years ago, is here reprinted from George Catlin's *North American Indians*, Vol. II. The following incidents are likewise adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from the same source. —THE EDITOR]

deer, antelope, elk, and buffaloes were "*stretched*" by our rifles.

I often landed my skiff and mounted the green carpeted bluffs, whose soft grassy tops invited me to recline, where I was at once lost in contemplation. Soul melting scenery that was about me! A place where the mind could think volumes; but the tongue must be silent that would *speak*, and the hand palsied that would *write*. A place where a divine would confess that he never had fancied Paradise — where the painter's palette would lose its beautiful tints — the blood-stirring notes of eloquence would die in their utterance — and even the soft tones of sweet music would scarcely preserve a spark to light the soul again that had passed this sweet delirium. I mean the prairie, whose enamelled plains that lie beneath me in distance soften into sweetness, like an essence; whose thousand thousand velvet-covered hills (surely never formed by chance, but grouped in one of Nature's sportive moods) go tossing and leaping down with steep or graceful declivities to the river's edge, as if to grace its pictured shores and make it "a thing to look upon." I mean the prairie at *sunset*; when the green hilltops are turned into gold and their long shadows of melancholy are thrown over the valleys — when all the breathings of day are hushed, and nought but the soft notes of the retiring dove can be heard, or the still softer and more plaintive notes of the wolf, who sneaks through these scenes of enchantment and how—l—s, as if

mournfully lonesome and lost in the too beautiful quiet and stillness about him. I mean *this* prairie, where Heaven sheds its purest light and lends its richest tints—this *round-topped bluff*, where the foot treads soft and light, whose steep sides and lofty head rear me to the skies overlooking yonder pictured vale of beauty—this solitary *cedar post*, which tells a tale of grief—grief that was keenly felt, and tenderly, but long since softened in the march of time and lost. Oh, sad and tear-starting contemplation! Sole tenant of this stately mound, how solitary thy habitation! Here Heaven wrested from thee thy ambition, and made thee sleeping monarch of this land of silence.

Stranger! adieu. With streaming eyes I leave thee again, and thy fairy land, to peaceful solitude. My pencil has faithfully traced thy beautiful habitation; and long shall live in the world, and familiar, the name of "*Floyd's Grave.*"

Readers, pardon this digression. I have seated myself down, not on a prairie, but at my table, by a warm and cheering fire, with my journal before me to cull from it a few pages for your entertainment; and if there are spots of loveliness and beauty over which I have passed and whose images are occasionally beckoning me into digressions, you must forgive me.

Such is the spot I have just named. "Floyd's Grave" is a name given to one of the most lovely and imposing mounds or bluffs on the Missouri River,

about twelve hundred miles above Saint Louis, from the melancholy fate of Sergeant Floyd, who was of Lewis and Clark's expedition, who died on the way out in 1804, and whose body was taken to this beautiful hill and buried in its top, where now stands a cedar post bearing the initials of his name.

I landed my canoe in front of this grass-covered mound, and all hands being fatigued we encamped a couple of days at its base. I several times ascended it and sat upon his grave, overgrown with grass and the most delicate wild flowers, where I contemplated the solitude and stillness of this tenanted mound; and beheld from its top the windings infinite of the Missouri, and its thousand hills and domes of green, vanishing into blue in distance, when nought but the soft-breathing winds were heard to break the stillness and quietude of the scene. Not the chirping of bird or sound of cricket, nor soaring eagle's scream, were interposed 'tween God and man; nor aught to check man's whole surrender of his soul to his Creator. I could not *hunt* upon this ground, but I roamed from hilltop to hilltop, and culled wild flowers, and looked into the valley below me, both up the river and down, and contemplated the thousand hills and dales that are now carpeted with green; streaked as they *will* be with the plough and yellow with the harvest sheaf; spotted with lowing kine, with houses and fences, and groups of hamlets and villas. And I visioned these lovely hilltops ringing with the giddy din and maze,

or secret earnest whispers of lovesick swains of pristine simplicity and virtue; of wholesome and well-earned contentment and abundance; and again, of wealth and refinement, of idleness and luxury, of vice and its deformities, of fire and sword, and the vengeance of offended Heaven, wreaked in retributive destruction!

Many such scenes there are, and thousands, on the Missouri shores. My canoe has been stopped, and I have clambered up their grassy and flower-decked sides; and sighed all alone, as I have carefully traced and fastened them in colors on my canvas.

This voyage in my little canoe, amid the thousand islands and grass-covered bluffs that stud the shores of this mighty river, afforded me infinite pleasure, mingled with pains and privations which I never shall wish to forget. Gliding along from day to day, and tiring our eyes on the varying landscapes that were continually opening to our view, my merry *voyageurs* were continually chaunting their cheerful boat songs, and "every now and then," taking up their unerring rifles to bring down the stately elks or antelopes, which were often gazing at us from the shores of the river.

GEORGE CATLIN