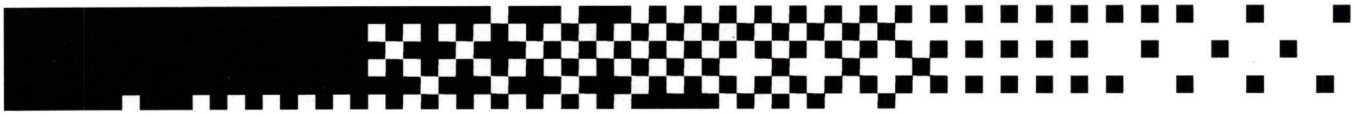
The illusion of gray created
by an arrangement of
alternating black and white dots

G R A Y S C A L E



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Sunflower Forest

It's been wonderful this summer, biking to work and back. I started riding sometime in March. We had an early spring. In May, my bike was stranded for two weeks hanging on its rack in the garage because of the monsoon rains flooding the Midwest, but other than that, the biking season has been great. One of the neatest things about my ride to work is the flora, which is an unusual thing for me to focus on, believe me, not being what anyone one would think of as a gardening sort of person. You will notice the absence of any actual technical plant names in the following account.

Most of my route to work traverses a 3-mile stretch of asphalt path poured over an abandoned railroad bed. (Another mile goes over city streets.) One half-mile section of the path is carefully tended on both sides: one side is taken up with 12 community gardens, (on whose waitlist any Madison resident who doesn't have a yard can enroll), and on the other side is a prairie. Both prairie and community garden extend outwards away from the bike path for about a half a city block. I've enjoyed watching the little prairie evolve over the last 6 years. Each year, prairie stewards dig up a 12' x 12' garden somewhere within its boundaries, into which they transplant typical prairie plants. The specially cultivated patch fills with amazing colors and varieties throughout the summer and in the fall its plants release their seed to the winds and propagate downwind across the prairie, which stretches conveniently west-east, which is the direction most winds blow in this part of the country. Each fall, the stewards scramble through the waist- and shoulder-high grasses, digging out non-prairie plants, i.e., weeds. Every few years, on a windless spring day, those same folks burn the prairie in order to remove invading scrub oak and aspen, which left to their own devices would transform this little prairie strip into a softwood forest. Buffalo, however, are not grazed in the area, not that I've witnessed anyway. A few weeks after the burn, the ground ripples with green sprouts and flowers. This year, the colors have been riotous, and each morning as I swung onto my bike, I looked forward to seeing how the view changed from the day before. I love those moments when I glide through cool morning breezes along the narrow band of prairie in the middle of a city. It's moments like that that I understand how my childhood images of the Little-House-on-a-Prairie world were pinched, limited visions of a mere un-mowed, lawn. The variety of plants in the real thing is amazing and gorgeous.

The gardens on the other side of the bike path have always been fun to watch too. The contrast between chaotic prairie on the south and carefully plotted and planned gardens on the north keeps me amused. But it's also cool to be able to predict which vegies are about to premiere at the farmers' market by noticing which crops are close to harvest in the gardens. When orangey-pink patches start peeking through the tomato vines, you can be sure that there will be sweet, juicy tomatoes available Saturday morning at the square. The community gardens don't function well as sweet corn barometers, though, since there just isn't enough acreage in a single person's plot to grow anything *except* corn if they're going to do that. And most of these urban farmers prefer to plant several dozen kinds of vegetables and flowers in the space allotted, one crop crowding, intermingling and overlapping the other. It's fun to notice the differences between plots as I roll past and to speculate

upon the personalities responsible for the various farming techniques. The plots all start looking basically alike in the spring; the winter temperatures have killed practically everything, and most of the farmers start with good intentions, and have rototilled their entire plot and seeded carefully. But even in the early part of the year, the subtle differences are visible. Big compost piles tended throughout the winter will give the plants of some plots an early boost. Terraced topography and lovingly built structures for climbing plants suggest that some farmers have big ambitions for their plots. These differences will cause one plot to bloom eventually into a *Garden Beautiful* photo op, while another languishes into a virtual briar patch of weeds (which is of course frowned upon fiercely by the prairie stewards across the path who fear contamination if their prairie).

Sunflowers were more numerous this year in the community gardens than they've ever been before. I've been meaning to ask someone if sunflower seeds have recently enjoyed a surge in popularity that has caused their price to skyrocket. Perhaps these Madison gardeners all read the same gardening newsletter and hope to make a killing in the sunflower seed market this fall. In any case, the sunflower plants — a fairly new varietal which allows several sunflowers to bloom per plant — were rampant this year. In one patch (or possibly two adjacent patches), farmers had chosen sunflowers as their major crop. The flowers seemed to bleed yellow into the air around them. Smaller lower plants squatted beneath the waving, giant flowers, but a biker spinning past this portion of the gardens might be excused for exclaiming one morning, "It's a sunflower forest!" which were my exact words one morning. On the third day, while I was filling my packs getting ready to leave in the morning, I remembered to stick a camera into my gear so I could snap some photos of a scene Van Gogh would have been wild to paint. (Did you know that Wisconsin shares approximately the same plane of latitude as the south of France?)

Some of you asked whether I was back on my bike again. Very much so. The first weeks were weird. The temperature had crept above 40°F by late March, which is usually my cue for checking out my tires and spokes, looking around in the basement for my gear, and thinking about switching transportation modes from bus to bike. This year, for a few days in spite of warming temperatures, I kept procrastinating and invented pretty amazing rationalizations. The day I heard myself say that I'd take the bus one more day so that I could finish reading a novel was the day I realized I was a bit afraid of getting back onto my bike. I realized that I was worried about that first moment when I would have to lift my right leg up and over the seat. I wasn't sure I could do it again, even though the pain that crippled me last year was completely gone. Even so, when I finally beat back my fears with logic and gathered my gear together and went out to the garage, I was still nervous. In fact, I found it impossible to simply get onto my bike in the normal way. I positioned my bike so that I could lean my left side against the house as I raised my right leg up and over the bike. That's the way I did it last year, just before it got too damned painful to put my weight on my left leg and too scary to try without support. But I didn't have to cheat for long, just a couple days, and I finally convinced myself that my leg wasn't going to ambush my brain with pain. Soon afterward, I was swinging my leg up and over, and a few weeks after that I'd gotten into acceptable aerobic shape so that I could pedal hard and resume my usual habit of attempting to beat bus time to work. ...Slowing down, of course, to enjoy the sunflower forests along the way.

Further west along the bike path, the narrow fields along the bike path are untended by either community gardeners or prairie stewards. The city mows the grasses and weeds in the spring and fall, but mostly it all just grows wild. But even these strips of weeds have grown unusually colorful this summer. One side effect of the community gardens' highly productive sunflower forests has been an unexpected crop of volunteer sunflowers further down the path. Birds, I suspect are the major vector here, since the direction is counter to prevailing winds, and in fact it is not yet the season for unharvested sunflower seeds to actually dry up and blow in any direction. But however the seeds got there, some of them have had enough time to grow to 4 or 5 feet before the fall mowing, and some of them are far enough back from the bike path to avoid the blade altogether. I eagerly anticipate a ride to work, several years in the future, that will take me through several miles of overarching sunflower forest on both sides of the bike path.

Having assured you that my leg has recovered miraculously and that I am enjoying lovely rides to work and back, I now must add that Scott has been driving me to work these last two days, and that I am currently leaning on a cane to navigate house and office. My bike chain jammed Monday afternoon on my way home and I had a little accident. I was in the middle of an intersection, all cars stopped around me as I crossed when it happened. I was partially standing up to get up to speed quickly when the chain jammed, causing me to lose balance entirely, and to immediately topple over sideways. Whoops. I felt sore afterwards, especially around my left ankle and elbow, but nothing was broken and I was able to stand up just fine. My hip seemed quite firmly attached. I thanked another bicyclist for stopping, waved and smiled ruefully at a concerned motorist, checked my bike over but found nothing wrong. So I remounted and continued home. Unfortunately, at the next street cross-

ing, my chain jammed again, and again I fell over. Same side, same elbow, same ankle. This time I got back onto my bike a little more gingerly. Boy, that ankle is going to be sore later on tonight, I thought. I rode home very, very carefully, in a much higher gear and decided to transport my clearly ailing bicycle by car to the bike shop the next day. Unfortunately however, my prediction of pain was right on target, though a bit understated, and that trip is now scheduled for early next week. My ankle (twisted? sprained?) hurt like hell; I could hardly stand up on it. I stayed home Tuesday and in fact didn't even attempt the stairway down from our bedroom till late in the afternoon. But I'm much better now. I'll hang up my cane tonight and will walk with a romantic limp tomorrow. Next week I'll be talking sternly with the bike geeks at Yellow Jersey.

At the Office

If it weren't for the fact that I worried about the huge amount of work I really should have been doing at the office finishing up the design and layout of "Wisconsin Forests at the Millennium," I might have enjoyed taking Tuesday off more than I did. This forestry report is a 200-page, duotone, full bleed publication with about 150 photos plus dozens of graphics, charts, and maps that the Forestry Department had hoped to get to print several weeks ago. Politics intervened, however, which has been happening more and more frequently ever since our right-wing, idiot Governor Tommy Thompson made the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Secretary a Governor-appointed position. Dozens of my fellow DNR staffers have been double guessing three-years-worth of writing and several scientists' lifework, hoping to avoid controversy upon publication of the report, editing the life out of it, and eliminating as much clarity as they can get away with. If it weren't for the fact that I had to read practically the whole manuscript in the course of making the zillions of edits called for by these frantic, last-minute editors, I wouldn't be as *steamed* as I am now. But I can see quite clearly how scientific language has been used to obscure issues that were clear (and dangerous) before in the draft of the report that was initially given to me. *sigh*

Nevertheless, the actual design job is fun, and the book looks good, and when I get to this stage of a project — close to the end, I mean — I get very invested, psychologically, in getting it DONE. The hard part for me in any project is actually starting it. Once I invest time into it, I tend to get very wrapped up in it, sometimes even obsessive. So on Monday morning, when crawled out of the bed and touched my left to the floor and experienced that flash of pain in my ankle, my first thought was of this report that I really really wanted to finish. But sanity prevailed, and anyway there was something at home that I wanted to finish too. I was about a quarter of the way through Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon,* and in fact the novel was sitting right there on my bedside table waiting for me. *Cryptonomicon* or Forestry report...? Well that didn't turn out to be such a hard decision after all.

I'm really liking *Cryptonomicon.* I'm now almost done; it's a big 900-page book, but I'm within hailing distance of the end, just 200 pages more. But it's one of those books that, for me, once I begin and realize how good it is, I'm happy that it's so long because it won't be *over* soon. It's impressive: I've found myself thinking several times about one of my favorite novels, *Catch-22,* which would fit in quite nicely as a longish chapter within *Cryptonomicon.* Certainly Heller's and Stephenson's view of the world and the bureaucracy of war have a lot in common. Another book I've occasionally thought of as I read along is Melville's *Moby Dick.* Like Melville, Stephenson launches into complex digressions from the main story, and delves into arcane and technical detail, which ultimately turn into metaphors that weave organic strength into his story. Plus *Cryptonomicon* is very funny and a truly engrossing story and has some great characterizations. Scott just finished reading it, which has been nice for me, because every once in a while I look up from its pages and tell him where I am and what the characters are doing and we can immediately talk about it (and usually end up laughing ourselves silly).

The North Shore

Scott and I went camping on the North Shore in August — i.e., to the Minnesota coast of Lake Superior — and a bit north of there into Canada, up to Thunder Bay. We had a fine time camping in the forests and hiking through the Minnesota parks up to gorgeous waterfalls. I was much relieved that I'd passed yet another hurdle in hip surgery recovery: lots of hiking and sleeping on the ground turns out to be entirely OK with my new leg.

I always like learning about the geology of a place, and this place offered some fascinating things to learn. It turns out that a huge fault runs parallel to the Minnesota-Wisconsin boundary and up along Lake Superior's shoreline. It is actually a rift, like the one in Africa, though a lot less active these days than the African one. But a long time ago a lot of lava spewed out of the Midwest rift, so that there is now a huge ridge of basalt in this area (think the Masabi Iron range) that slopes downward from west to east. The volcanic stage of Minnesota's history was followed by a quieter stage. A huge, shallow ocean laid down sediments and layers of

limestone and shale was formed. (This part was familiar to me: a lot of Wisconsin's geology includes this story.) Mud turned to soft erodable shale was deposited by this ocean and later scoured out by glaciers, which created the Lake Superior basin; the very hard basalts were merely scraped as the glaciers passed by. Eventually the mile-high slabs of glaciers melted away which caused the land to rebound in relief from the weight of millions of tons of ice, and as the glaciers disappeared, the lake level dropped because there was less water melting into it. So the hundreds of rivers flowing eastward down from the basalt ridges into Lake Superior had to carve their way to the retreating Great Lake's shore. They carved some amazingly beautiful canyons, and at the place where basalt gives way to carved away shale, there is a ridge over which the rivers flow and make lovely waterfalls. (Why do so many people like to look at moving water? I'm one of those people for sure.)

My favorite waterfall was "Devil's Kettle" in Judge Magney State Park. When the Brule River hits the escarpment in this park, it is split into two forks by a pile of big rocks perched right on the edge the precipice. The left fork of the Brule River plunges down into a steep-walled pool, sending billows of mist up hundreds of feet, and cooling the faces of the hikers who gaze down from above. That's lovely, but it's the *other* fork that one tends to stare at. The right fork of the Brule River also plunges over the edge of the escarpment but not into a lovely pool. The right fork plunges into a deep, wide *hole* in the rock. The hole is a formation called a pothole which is created when a rock gets trapped in an indentation by the current of a river and just rushes around and around in that indentation until it manages to carve out a really big hole. This one was huge — about 10 feet in diameter, an unknown depth. It looked like you could drop a VW Bug into it without scraping the chrome if it weren't for the thunderous whirlpool. The right fork of the Brule River plunges directly into that maelstrom ... and doesn't come out again. Millions of gallons of water an hour seem to whip around in a frenzy and then ... simply disappear. It's a *big* hole, but you look at it and you expect to see it overflow or rush out somewhere else from *another* hole. Where does the water go, I asked. The Ranger answered that nobody knows. Apparently they've tossed dye and ping pong balls into the pothole and stationed people all along the river and Lake Superior's coast, but no one ever saw any of those ping pong balls or dyed water. The ranger thinks the water goes down really deep and comes up again *underneath* Lake Superior. Or maybe it goes directly down to an aquifer. Who knows? But I could have stood there for hours watching it disappear. But eventually we had to turn away and hike back to the trailhead.

We went back to camp and I probably read a few more chapters aloud from *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove* by Christopher Moore, which is a very funny book. I read parts of it on our drive up to the North Shore, and parts at our campsite. Sometimes I wonder what some of our fellow campers thought about the hysterical laughter and very weird stuff that they might have overheard from our campsite.

One of the most unexpectedly interesting parts of our trip were visits to two "historical recreation" facilities. The first was the Grand Portage National Monument in Grand Portage, located near the U.S.-Canadian Border. This was a rebuilt version of the fur-trading headquarters of the Northwest Company as it looked in the late 1700s. The other was the Northwest Company headquarters at Old Fort William, in Thunder Bay, Canada — as it looked in the early 1800s. (The Northwest Company moved its headquarters after the American Revolution to avoid new U.S. taxes being applied to goods transported across the border. That's why there are two Northwest Company "headquarters" sites.) At each of these historical recreation facilities, actors are employed to play the roles of aristocratic owners, officers and artisans, as well as Native Americans and of course, the Voyageurs. The actors pretend to know nothing about any time later than the one in which their character lives. At Fort William, each day was scheduled with a series of specific historical reenactments of actual events. We witnessed the Captain of the Fort "putting out" (i.e., divorcing) his Native American common law wife. What an interesting way to learn history.

Except for the Native Americans, the Voyageurs had the lowest status in the fur-trading community. The people responsible for carrying manufactured goods far into northern Canada and returning with furs were the Voyageurs — young men, mostly short, stocky French Canadians, all of whom initially signed on with the company for three years. That's the length of time, according to their contract, that it would take to pay back the company for equipment and the "opportunity." No Voyageur, however, actually began earning money after their three years was up. Everything the Voyageur "bought" from the company — liquor, shoes, food, anything — they paid for with extra years added to their service; and there was no other source for some supplies than the company.... It was common after three years for a Voyageur to owe the company about 15 years of service. Practically speaking, no Voyageur ever freed themselves of debt to the company. Actors portraying wealthy owners or upper class officers pretended to sniff at our concern for the lowly Voyageurs. What more could they expect? one officer explained. They were, after all, nothing but illiterate peasants.

And work was hard. The first leg of the trip north into Canada was on foot, because the rivers emptying into Lake Superior were full of rapids close to the shore and waterfalls further up river. These waterfalls and rapids made it necessary to "portage" goods and canoes on human backs about 28 miles inland to the beginning of the river route. Each Voyageur was responsible for six 90-pound packs of goods (manufactured goods if they were heading north; fur pelts if they were heading south). A Voyageur carried the canvas-wrapped packs on his back with straps across their foreheads. They'd carry two 90-pound packs on their back, a 40-pound pack of personal gear in front, and they'd trudge hunched forward, up a hill, leaving the other four packs at the bottom. Then, they would put down their packs and go back down to the bottom of the hill for another two packs, and so on ... for 28 miles. Scott and I climbed some of those hills on paths cut by Park rangers and stairways built on the steepest portions. Even so, our hikes were exhausting enough with nothing but some water bottles, maps and a paperback book weighing down our backpacks. I can't imagine what it must have been like to push through all kinds of weather and deep forest on nonexistent paths, all the while carrying 220 pounds. I tried, but I wasn't able to lift even one of those 90-pound packs!

There were lots of injuries, of course, but there was nothing anyone could do to help a fellow Voyageur if he was hurt so badly that he could no longer walk. No one could or would carry an injured man: they'd be fined with additional years if they left any of their packs behind. An injured Voyageur might be helped to a less painful death if they were still near Lake Superior, which of course is ice-cold. You see, a person dies in considerably less pain if one's body freezes to death first: that's the only "first aid" that was offered.

Voyageurs spent the late summer and fall carrying manufactured goods (cloth, liquor, tools) north to the Indian settlements in northern Canada, and the spring and early summer carrying animal pelts back south to the Grand Portage. They slept an average of 3-4 hours a night under the stars or beneath their canoes. They carried dry tinder under their shirts for fire-making, and they took extraordinary pains to care for their packs, since they were fined (in years) for any damage to the merchandise.

It must have been an awfully hard life. Voyageurs who actually survived their ordeal for more ten years were often given leave from the trading route and allowed to work off the rest of their debt to the company in the headquarters stockade. There weren't many job openings there, but then there weren't many surviving Voyageurs either, so it balanced nicely. The hierarchy in the stockade was dramatically steep. The Scottish Owners who arrived each year for the Grand Rendezvous became multi-millionaires from fur trading profits. There was a small "middle class," of upper class Scot and British soldiers who could hope for promotion within the stockade and other trading stations along the Voyageurs' route. These guys were actually paid, as opposed to the Voyageur's time-owed deal. Even lower than the Voyageurs were the Native Americans, of course, but at least these folks slept in warm teepees and lived with their families. The Voyageurs were expected to cut all ties with their families. There was no time off to visit relatives. Once you signed on, you were with the company for life 24/7.

It quickly became obvious that this was a kind of slavery. Which reminded me of Scott's and my trip to Mexico last year, when we visited the silver mines and learned how the Spaniards formerly used Native Mexican labor to mine for treasure.

Nader

I wonder if this trip had anything to do with how easy it was for me to decide to support Nader this year. I feel as good about supporting this candidate as I did years ago in the 70s when I was backing McGovern. I may not be as optimistic about his chances as I was about McGovern's, but I sure feel a lot cleaner about my election plans than I have in years.

I'm sorry for the lack of mailing comments this time. I've started doing back comments and will finish them up in time for the next issue.

—Jeanne Gomoll