

Kory Reeder

Great Plains Songbook

For voice and ensemble
(2025)

Instruments and Ensemble

The piece is variable, but there are primary roles:

- Voice/Guitar: It is ideal that the voice double on guitar. While not completely necessary, it may be easier considering the performance practice (see below).
- Piano is explicitly called for in the piece.
- Open Ensemble: the ensemble is open. The initial idea for the piece called for flute, bass clarinet, violin, cello, and sine waves (MIDI keyboard).
- Each movement has a drone. This can be done with the sinewaves or with another instrument such as a double bass.

Field recordings are used throughout these can be made yourself or provided by the composer.

A public domain recording is used for Song 6 *Love's Old Sweet Song*. This recording can be procured online or by contacting the composer.

Performance Practice

Approximately 36-45 minutes. On average, the songs should be between 4-5 minutes long.

This cycle is not an arrangement of folk music, but an attempt to capture an aura and a state of mind. Imagine you're sitting on your front porch with your guitar, daydreaming in a melancholic mood, sort of strumming and quietly singing to yourself; not the songs themselves, but reflections on them, and aura, a ghost of the tune. Sometimes you wonder off, but the essence of that tune is still there within you. This will be the role of the singer/guitar player as the focal point. The ensemble is the aura, the ghost, the quiet long tones that hold a harmony and a frame around this daydream.

To catch that aura, everyone will have to know the source material, so please familiarize yourselves with the source materials.

Voice: soft with no vibrato. More folk song and vernacular than lieder singing or "classical."

Voice: notated rhythms are not metric and are rough approximations. When the original folk songs are written in full notation, it is for reference only: a way to enter the reflective mindset, and not intended to be 100% reproduced in performance.

Ensemble: in general, the guitar and piano play individual tones or partial pitch collections from the chords, and occasionally the chords themselves.

The winds and strings play long tones throughout. However, any fiddle/strings can act as an intermediary, occasionally connecting, commenting on, musically reminiscing on the original folk tunes; fragmentary memories come in and out of mind.

Defining the Aura

As stated, the ensemble is the aura, the ghost, the quiet long tones that hold a harmony and a frame around this daydream. Most of these tones are 3-chord songs with pentatonic melodies, with the pitches for the aura coming from the keys of the original songs with added, choice chromaticism.

The aura is quiet, occasionally thin, fleeting; the harmony, the background. Not necessarily accompanying the songs but providing a space to be; where memories quietly float by.

Songs

1. From the Commonplace Book: *Going Home*
2. Place: *The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim*
3. From the Commonplace Book: *The Hospitality of Having Little and Giving Much*
4. Place: *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*
5. From the Commonplace Book: *The Myth of Stability*
6. Memory: *Love's Old Sweet Song*
7. Memory: *Nebraska Land*
8. From the Commonplace Book: *Nocturne for the Plants That Grow at Night*
9. Hymn: *Sweet By and By*

Bibliography

Texts for songs 1, 3, 5, and 8 are derived from fragments of quotes in the composer's commonplace book. Quotations used are assembled and fragmented from:

Ehrlich, Gretel: *The Solace of Open Spaces*

Frazier, Ian: *Great Plains*

Heat-Moon, William Least: *PrairieErth*

Jones, Stephen R.: *The Last Prairie*

Leopold, Aldo: *A sand county almanac*

Norris, Kathleen: *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*

Savage, Candace: *Prairie: a natural history*

Simpson, John W.: *Yearning for the Land*

2. Place: *The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim*

Written ca. 1880 by Oliver Edwin Murray (1857-1919) of South Dakota, originally sung to a tune by William S. Hays (1837-1907). According to Louise Pound in *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (1921): "*The Little Old Sod Shanty* was printed somewhere about the later seventies or eighties in many Nebraska newspapers, with the statement that it could be sung to the tune of *The Little Old Log Cabin*. Some old settlers remember having cards with photographs of a sod shanty on one side and on the other the words of the song." Dr. Murray arrived in South Dakota in the early 1880s and was the first graduate of Dakota Wesleyan University. He spent his life as a minister, orator, and lecturer.

4. Place: *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*

Ballad adapted from the sea song/lament "The Ocean Burial" by Edwin Hubbell Chapin (1814-1880) in 1839 and was set to music by George N. Allen (1812-1897). The earliest written version of the song was published in John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910, but the version used in this piece is derived from a version by Sam Shackleton. Chapin was a prominent American preacher, lecturer, and author, best known as pastor of the Broadway Universalist Church in New York City. Renowned for his eloquence and inspirational sermons, he became one of the most popular orators of his time, addressing topics of faith, morality, and social reform. Chapin also wrote several works and was deeply influential in advancing Universalism in 19th-century America. The pathway that led "The Ocean Burial" to become "Bury Me Not" is lost to time, but according to Victor Francis Calverton: "The most famous of the cowboy songs is the one entitled *The Dying Cowboy*, sometimes called, *O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*."

6. Memory: *Love's Old Sweet Song*

Music by James Lyman Molloy (1837-1909) with lyrics by Graham Clifton Bingham (1859-1913). The historical recording used here is by John McCormack with Edwin Schneider, piano (recorded 1927). Extremely popular sheet music for parlors among the bourgeoisie of the Great Plains, the song was first recorded by Thomas Bott. Something about this song and its historical relationship with class resonated with me in the words of William Least Heat-Moon in *PrairieErth*: “The American prairies and plains eat pretension and dreams of aristocracy with the slow patience of inevitability, corrupting, eroding, and quite dissolving them in some places, and in others leaving only a carcass as a kind of memorial, a monument, a memorandum. Drive the rock roads of Chase Country and you can see old, cut-stone walls of abandoned houses roofed and unroofed, windows broken and gone even down to the frames; in the houses still having roofs and floors, you’ll find gnawed holes [...] in a final defiling of the wish for nobility”

7. Memory: *Nebraska Land*

Based on 1876 Hymn “Beulah Land,” music by John Robson Sweney (1837-1899) with original text by Edgar Page Stites (1836-1921). Sites served in the American Civil War in the provisions department of the U.S. Army and was a home missionary in the Dakota Territory. Although “Beulah Land” is a hymn of celebration, “Dakota Land” serves as its parody and sharp contrast. The song conveys the disappointment of Dakota pioneers, whose homesteading experience proved far harsher than the glowing promises they had heard. Numerous folk song versions of the lyrics exist with “Dakota Land” being the most popular in the tradition, but “Nebraska Land” is the earliest varified version, dating from *The Farmer and Labor Songster* of 1891.

9. Hymn: *Sweet By and By*

Original words by Sanford F Bennet (1836-1898) with music by Joseph P. Webster (1819-1875), with lyrics edited for this piece by me. Written in 1868 between two friends in 30 minutes in Elkhorn, Wisconsin. The hymn was extremely popular in the 19th century and appears in several hymnals I have found in archives and antiquarian books. Something about this song hits several points for me: the first is a nostalgic connection to the spiritual, but the lyrics too have a resonance in a yearning for place. This yearning for place, for me, writing this note in 2025, I find myself wondering about the connections and a critique of expansionism and the mythologizing of manifest destiny.

Lyrics

From the Commonplace Book: *Going Home*

Liturgical time
That took us away from everything

They came with vision
But not insight

Place: *The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim*

Verse:

*I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim
And my victuals are not always served the best;
And the mice play slyly round me as I nestle down to rest
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.*

Chorus:

*The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
And the board roof lets the howling blizzards in.
And I hear the hungry coyote as he slinks up through the grass
Round the little old sod shanty on my claim.*

Verse:

*Yet I rather like the novelty of living in this way,
Though my bill-of-fare is always rather tame,
But I'm happy as a clam on the land of Uncle Sam,
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.*

Chorus:

*But when I left my eastern home a bachelor so gay,
To try and win my way to wealth and fame,
I little thought that I'd come down to burnin' twisted hay
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.*

From the Commonplace Book: *The Hospitality of Having Little and Giving Much*

He had five children
And took the fall to feed them
It doesn't give an inch
To sentiment or Romance

Place: *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*

O bury me not on the lone prairie
These words came low and mournfully
From the pallid lips of the youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day.

It matters not, I've been told,
Where the body lies when the heart grows cold
But grant, o' grant, this wish to me
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where coyotes howl and the wind blows free
Where not a soul will care for me,
O bury me not on the lone prairie

I wish to lie where a mother's prayer
And a sister's tear will mingle there.
Where friends can come and weep o'er me.
Well bury me not on the lone prairie.

Well bury me not..." And his voice failed there.
But they took no heed to his dying prayer.
In a narrow grave, just six by three
Well we buried him there on the lone prairie.

And the cowboys now as they roam the plain,
For they marked the spot where his bones were lain,
Fling a handful o' roses o'er his grave
With a prayer to God his soul to save.

From the Commonplace Book: *The Myth of Stability*

The past
Much more colorful
And populous
Historical markers everywhere
Small towns never change

Memory: *Love's Old Sweet Song*

Lyrics not sung but vocalized.

Memory: Nebraska Land

[Verse 1]

We've reached the land of desert sweet
Where nothing grows for man to eat
The wind it blows with feverish heat
Across those plains so hard to beat

[Chorus]

O Nebraska land, sweet Nebraska land
As on thy fiery soil I stand
And I look across the plains
And wonder why it never rains
Till Gabriel blows his trumpet sound
And Says the rain's just gone around

[Verse 2]

We've reached the land of hills and stones
Where all is strewn with buffalo bones
Buffalo bones, bleached buffalo bones
I seem to hear your sighs and moans

[Chorus]

[Verse 3]

We have no wheat, we have no oats
We have no corn to feed our shoats;
Our chickens are so very poor
They beg for crumbs outside our door

[Chorus]

From the Commonplace Book: Nocturne for the Plants That Grow at Night

The sun did not shine in vain
The pre-dawn pact lasts
Only as long
As the darkness
Humbles the arrogant
We only grieve for what we know

Hymn: Sweet By and By

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar,
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

Refrain:

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

We shall sing on that beautiful shore
The melodious songs of the blest;
And our spirits shall sorrow no more-
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.

[Refrain]

Program Note

"As a fifth-generation Nebraskan, growing up on the native lands of the Chatiks si chatiks people (Pawnee), this project is a part of my process of learning, listening, and developing a relationship with the land and its stewards in my home state: a beautiful place with a rich history that is as much a part of me and my family as it is part of the settler-colonial project of displacement and genocide"

- Kory Reeder, March 2025, revised August 2025.

This piece was written as part of my time with the Tallgrass Artist Residency in Matfield Green, Chase County, Kansas. This cycle is not an arrangement of folk music, but an attempt to capture an aura and a state of mind. Imagine you're sitting on your front porch with your guitar, daydreaming in a melancholic mood, sort of strumming and quietly singing to yourself; not the songs themselves, but reflections on them, and aura, a ghost of the tune. Sometimes you wonder off, but the essence of that tune is still there within you. This will be the role of the singer/guitar player as the focal point. The ensemble is the aura, the ghost, the quiet long tones that hold a harmony and a frame around this daydream.

In many ways this piece is an ethereal address, a meditation on belonging and an elegy to the process of growing up, family, leaving home and the loss of naïveté that comes from age: my Self, shaped through an imperfect recall of family, history, and geography, blending the concrete field recordings of my lived experience with the abstract "memories" of my creative life, juxtaposed to collapse timelines through sound, to summon domestic detail and ancestral echo in the same breath. This composition invites listeners to inhabit the tenuous space between place and memory, between the concrete and the abstract, and to listen for the thread that holds past and present together.

By shifting the lens back to home, this piece becomes both an archive of belonging and a sonic exploration of what remains when memory fractures and the process of learning and listening reforms previously held truths in unexpected ways.

From the Commonplace Book: *Going Home*

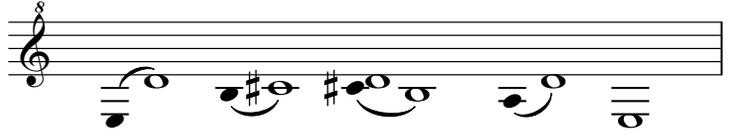
Structure: piano, drone, aura, guitar, song, aura, drone fades

Done: A2

Piano intro (first) repeat ad lib. throughout



Guitar intro (once)



Aura throughout (second)



Guitar and voice (in unison or octaves)



Li- turgical time

(brief pause)



that to- ok us

(brief pause)



a- way from e' - ry- thing



[Aura and piano only, occasional guitar tones]



They came with vision

(brief pause)



But not in- sight



[Slowly, everything fades]

Place: *The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim*

Done: F3

Guitar Introduction

Structure: drone/guitar intro
 Song begins: verse, chorus, verse, chorus
 Everyone ends together
 Done continues briefly and then fades out

Guitar chords through song ("oom-pa" like)

Chords only played on the downbeats starting phrases
 and in the pauses between the lyrics

Aura throughout

Rare F's
 Very rare B \flat /B \sharp (tasteful dissonance)

Lyrics: occasionally mumble, indiscernible words, but still pitched; exceedingly interior.

Pause singing between each phrase for a brief moment, as if remembering

I am look - ing rath - er seed - y now while hold - ing down my claim, And my vict - uals are not al - ways of the best;_
 Yet I rath - er like the nov - el - ty of liv - ing in this way, Though my bill of fare is al - ways rath - er tame,

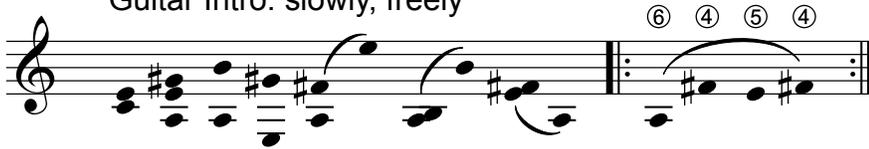
9
 ___ And the mice play shy - ly round me as I nes - tle down to rest, In my lit - tle old sod shant - y in the West. ___
 ___ But I'm ha - py as a clam ___ on the land of Un - cle Sam, in my lit - tle od sod shant - y on my claim. ___

18
 The hing - es are of leath - er and the win - dows have no glass, While theboard roof lets the howl - ing bliz - zards in, ___

26
 ___ And I hear the hun - gry ki - yote as he slinks up through thegrass, Round my lit - tle old sod shan - ty on my claim. ___

From the Commonplace Book: *The Hospitality of Having Little and Giving Much*

Guitar Intro: slowly, freely



Place: *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie*

Done enters first: Eb3

Guitar intro

♩ = 186



Song: guitar continues like introduction

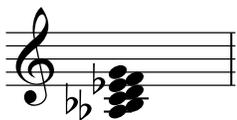
O bur-y me not on the lone prai - rie

5 These words came low and lourn - ful - ly

9 From the pal - lid lips of the youth who lay

13 On his dy - ing bed at the close of day

Aura



Emphasis on F and G

During verses: long tones

Between verses: reminiscences and lamentations from the melody



Outro:

Aura: reminisces/lamentations fade to long tones

Guitar: intro "repeat to fade"

Lyrics:

O bury me not on the lone prairie
 These words came low and mournfully
 From the pallid lips of the youth who lay
 On his dying bed at the close of day.

It matters not, I've been told,
 Where the body lies when the heart grows cold
 But grant, o' grant, this wish to me
 O bury me not on the lone prairie.

O bury me not on the lone prairie
 Where coyotes howl and the wind blows free
 Where not a soul will care for me,
 O bury me not on the lone prairie

I wish to lie where a mother's prayer
 And a sister's tear will mingle there.
 Where friends can come and weep o'er me.
 Well bury me not on the lone prairie.

Well bury me not..." And his voice failed there.
 But they took no heed to his dying prayer.
 In a narrow grave, just six by three
 Well we buried him there on the lone prairie.

And the cowboys now as they roam the plain,
 For they marked the spot where his bones were lain,
 Fling a handful o' roses o'er his grave
 With a prayer to God his soul to save.

From the Commonplace Book: *The Myth of Stability*

Very spacious - very resonant

Field Recording enters

Guitar

Piano



Guitar

Piano



Guitar and voice

the past much more col-or-fu and pop-u-lous

piano String(s) string



voice sings B \flat

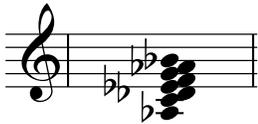
His-tor-i-cal mark-ers eve-ry-where small towns nev-er change

tutti

Memory: *Love's Old Sweet Song*

Drone Enters: Ab2

Recording begins



Recording is in A-flat Major; wait for the recorded voice to enter before playing

All musicians are the aura: gentle, nostalgic long-tones.
Follow the recording, but never superspeed it.
A few plucked notes, here and there.

Dreaming...

The song ends...

The aura fades...

The drone fades...

The field recordings fade...

Memory: *Nebraska Land*

Structure: Drone E2
 Field Recordings
 Song
 Drone Fades
 Field Recording Fades

Guitar/Voice: Just the song, as-is. Played straight through. However, as quietly as possible (barely audible).
 Allow your right hand to miss some notes.

Capo on 2, chords: A, E, D

Aura: thin, wispy, airy, no piano, ornamenting the air and field recordings – perhaps inaudible

Drone E2 and then field recording starts this song

Verse

we've reached the land of de - sert sweet where noth - ing grows for
 5 man to eat the wind it blows with fev -'rish heat A - cross the plains so hard to beat

Chorus

O Ne - bras - ka land, sweet Ne - bras - ka land up - on thy fier - y soil I stand, I
 15 look a - cross the plains, and won - der why it nev - er rains, Till
 19 Ga - briel blows his trump - et sound, and says the rain's just gone a - round

[Verse 2]

We've reached the land of hills and stones
 Where all is strewn with buffalo bones
 Buffalo bones, bleached buffalo bones
 I seem to hear your sighs and moans

[Verse 3]

We have no wheat, we have no oats
 We have no corn to feed our shoats;
 Our chickens are so very poor
 They beg for crumbs outside our door

From the Commonplace Book: *Nocturne for the Plants That Grow at Night*

No Aura

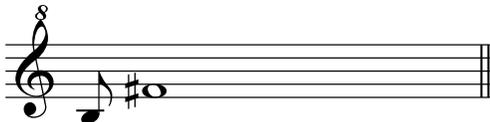
Drone enters: C2

Field recording for a long time

guitar and voice (let guitar ring)



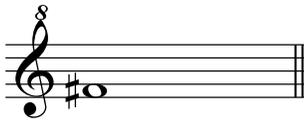
Long pause (repeat several times before singing)
Then, play this gesture again before singing each line
Lots of space between stanzas



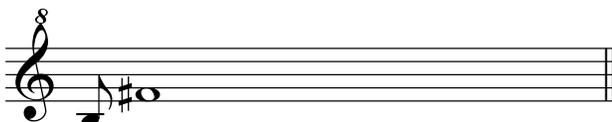
The sun did not shine in vein



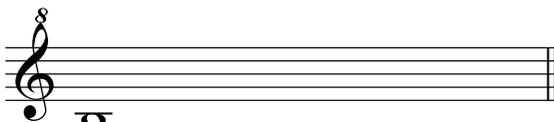
The pre-dawn pact lasts



only as long as



The darkness... humbles the arrogant



We only grieve for what we know



After the last line, guitar repeats this gesture again and again
as piano begins to segue into the last song.

Hymn: Sweet By and By

Structure:

- Piano introduction
- Aura and drone (G1) enters
- Verse
- Chorus
- (Pause – aura only)
- Verse
- Chorus
- Chorus (repeat last line of chorus)
- Music fades
- Drone sustains for a long time, *al fine*

Piano introduction (about 20 seconds)

Use this as material for transition, but do not play in full until this song

Musical notation for piano introduction, showing a treble and bass clef with chords and melodic lines.

Aura

Musical notation for the Aura section, showing a treble and bass clef with sparse, individual plucked tones and long tones.

For 30-40 seconds, after the piano introduction, before the song
 Sparse, individual plucked tones
 Long tones from the ensemble: tasteful inversions permitted
 Very occasional F#'s

During the song, the aura continues; full-bodied, never silent

See notes for lyrics

Musical notation with lyrics and chord symbols. The notation is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "There's a land that is fair - er than day, and by faith we can see it a - far; for the Fa - ther waits o - ver the way To pre - pare us a dwell - ing place there. In the sweet by and by We shall meet on that beau - ti - ful shore; In the sweet by and by We shall meet on that beau - ti - ful shore". Chord symbols include G, C, D, D(7), G(7), and Chorus.