

PLACES THAT MATTER

By Ashley Stimpson

It was Theodore Roosevelt who sealed the deal. His biography told us he had retreated to the Badlands after his wife Alice and mother Mittie died within hours of each other. The Dakota Territory was as empty as a new locket and out there he could wail into the expanse. Crumble like the shale beneath his boots.

Between our decision and our departure, everyone asked *Why South Dakota?* No one ever asks *Why New York City?* *Why Yellowstone?* As if at some point we all agreed upon the places that matter and the places that don't.

The day we disappeared into the Badlands, the sky was white and heavy. We stepped deliberately through the tall grass because all the books said rattlesnakes. The three gallons of water on our backs heaved back and forth like a protesting toddler.

We came upon a group of bighorn sheep, handsome in their tracking collars. Ripping the grass without mercy from that fragile earth before considering us with their sunflower eyes. We did not rate; they resumed lunch.

We stalked a mountain bluebird, teal as a tropical fish. We sat atop brule formations and ate pretzels. We marveled at delicate spires, reaching into the sky like hands that know the answer. We squinted into dusty wind and felt something primal in ourselves. We learned that for all this time we had been using the word *wonderful* wrong.

At night, a relentless wind tormented our tent while the flood-light full moon lit up a gray valley of sage. As I pressed my face against mesh to taste the warm air, I thought about all those people who had asked us why, and I thought about Teddy.

The coyotes sang their hungry and heartbroken songs until dawn.

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