Aldo Leopold – Sand County Almanac

Odyssey; X is an atom (of any element)

X had marked time in a limestone ledge since the Paleozoic seas covered the land. Time for an atom locked in a rock does not pass. The break came when an oak root developed in a crack and began to pry at the rock. In the flash of a century the rock decayed and X was pulled out of the rock and into the world of the living. He helped to build a flower, which became an acorn, which fattened a deer, which fed an Indian all in a single year. From his birth in the Indian’s bone, X joined again in chase and flight, feast and famine, hope and fear. He felt all these chemical pushes and pulls that tug timelessly at every atom. When the Indian took his leave of the prairie, X mouldered briefly underground only to embark on a second trip through the bloodstream of the land. This time it was the rootlet of a blue stem that sucked him up, and lodged him in a leaf that rode the green billows of the prairie in June. A mouse cut the leaf in which X lay to build a nest, but a fox killed the mouse and X lay in the soil again, foot loose and fancy free. Next, X entered a tuft of oats, then a buffalo, then a buffalo chip, and again the soil. Next, a plantain, then a rabbit, then an owl, then a tuft of sporobolus, through the biota, X lay in the soil and was carried by the rains, inch by inch downhill. Living plants retarded the wash by impounding atoms, dead plants by locking them in their decaying tissues. Animals ate the plants and carried them briefly uphill or downhill depending on whether they died or defecated higher or lower then they fed.

One year while X lay in a cottonwood by the river, he was eaten by a beaver, an animal that always feeds higher than he dies. The beaver starved when his pond dried up during a bitter frost. X rode the carcass down the spring freshet losing more altitude each hour then heretofore in a century. He ended up in the silt of a backwater bayou where he fed a crayfish, a raccoon, and then an Indian, who laid him down to this last sleep on a mound on the riverbank. One spring an oxbow caved the bank and within a week, X lay in his ancient prison, the sea.

For every atom lost to the sea, the prairie pull out another out of the decaying rocks.