

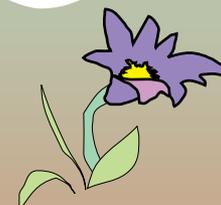
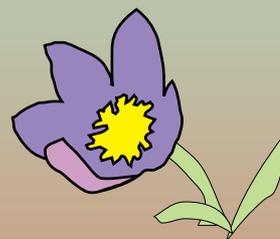
The Magic Field

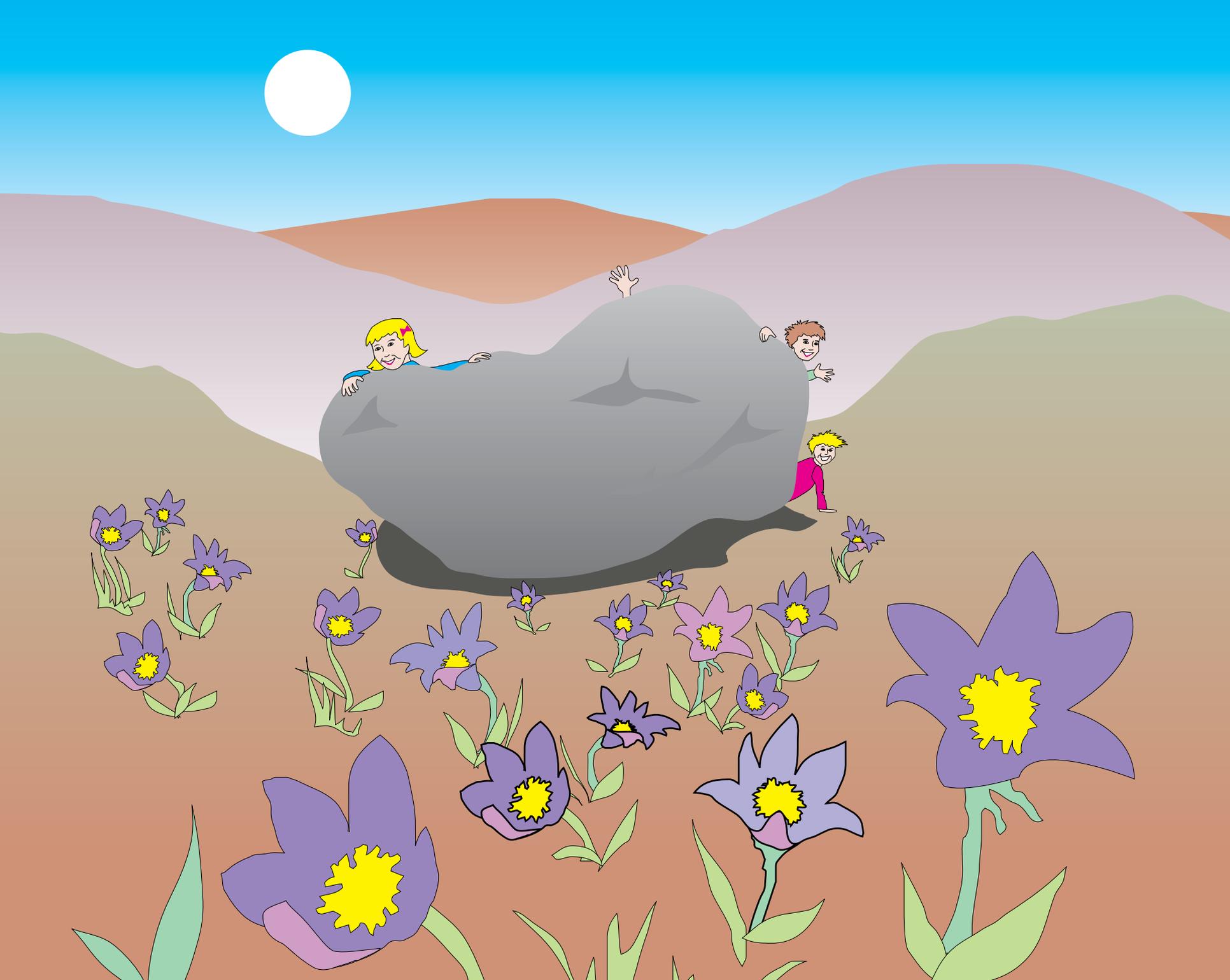


Once, in a far away land called North Dakota, there was a magic field. It didn't look magic. The two little boys and their two sisters who played there thought it was just an old field, too hilly and rocky to farm and so left wild for them to play in.



They liked to run in the grass and hide behind a big smooth rock set in a little hollow, like a cup in a saucer. In the early spring, when the snow finally went away, the lavender pasque flowers bloomed on the warm, south slopes and the children picked them. Not many flowers grew there the rest of the season, and the dead brown grass from past years was a cushion for them to run on.





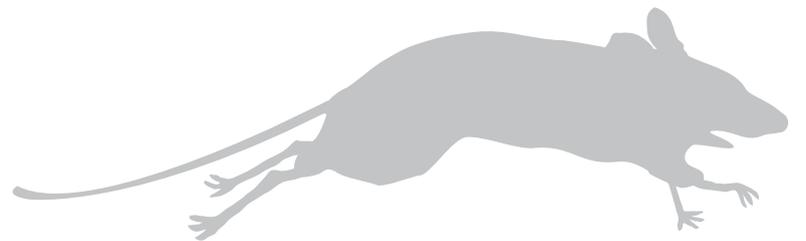
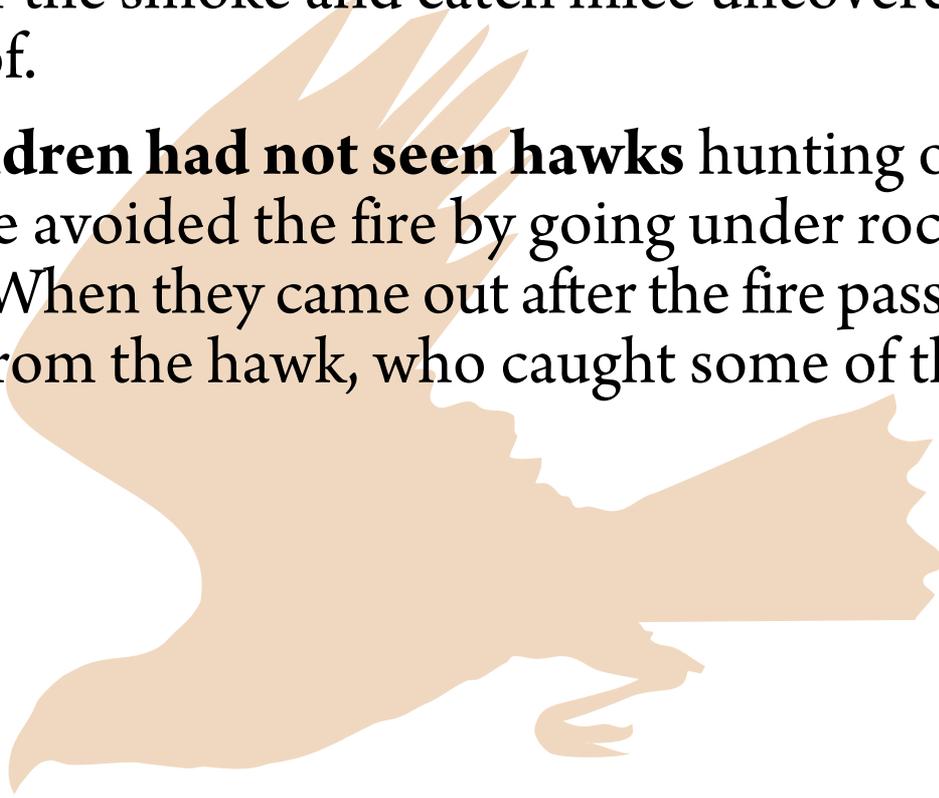
One day after their school had ended for the summer, the children were playing on the prairie when their father Herb came and told them to get off the grass. They ran out onto the road and watched. Their father lit the old dead grass afire and carried some of it on a rake all along the prairie where it met the lake. They watched the line of flames eat back into the grass, burning the brown and green alike, the smoke blowing white out over the blue water. Where the fire burned, the ground was black, so black, with only the rocks left unburned, showing white.





The first of the magic began to appear. A red-tailed hawk came to soar over the smoke and catch mice uncovered by the loss of their grass roof.

The children had not seen hawks hunting on their prairie before. The mice avoided the fire by going under rocks or into holes in the ground. When they came out after the fire passed, they were no longer hidden from the hawk, who caught some of them to eat.

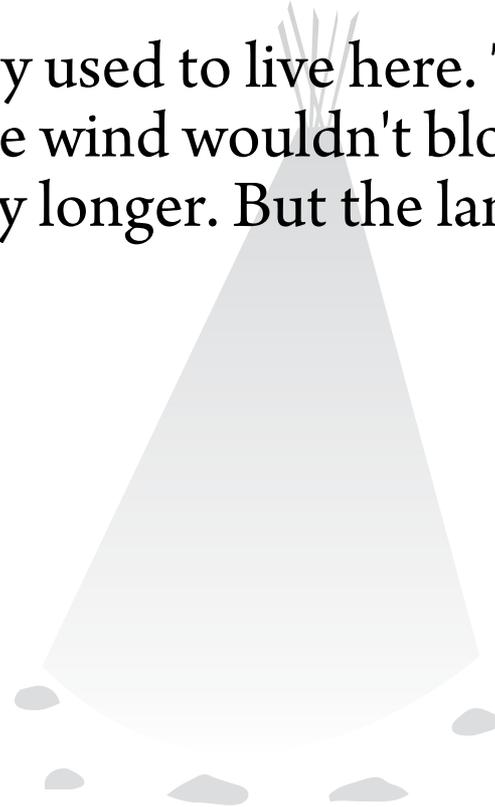




The fire ate the grass back into the wind, just a low, tame fire, burning slowly and easily. It uncovered stones in the sod and the children could see that some of them formed circles.

Why were they set in circles, they asked their father, who put them there?

It was the Indians, he told them. They used to live here. They used the stones to hold down their tepees so the wind wouldn't blow them away. They don't live here in their tepees any longer. But the land remembers them.

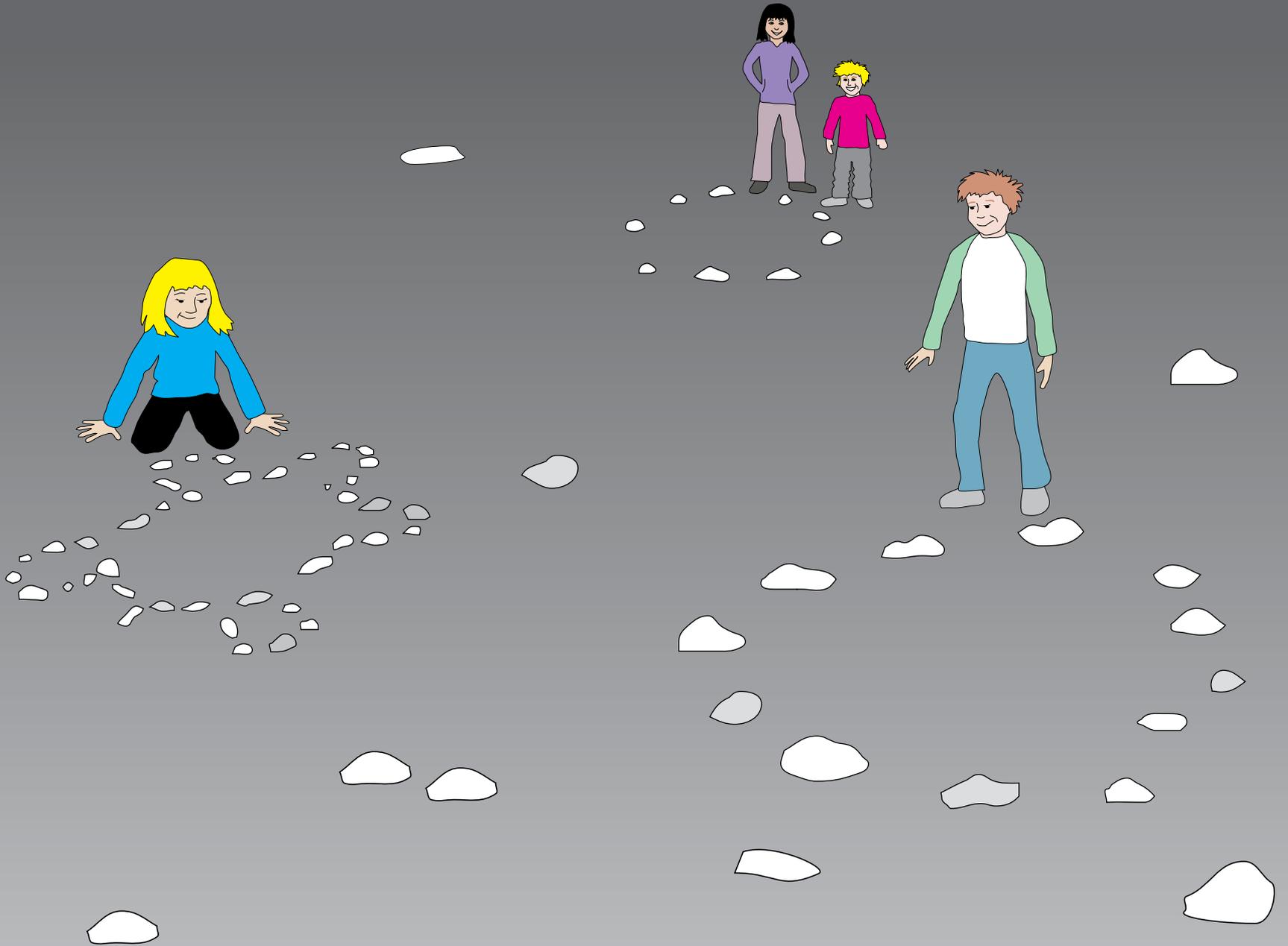




The oldest child, Mary Jo was her name, found a lot of stones laid in the shape of a turtle.

It is an effigy, her father told her. The turtle was wakan, sacred to these Indians so they drew a picture of it with the stones.



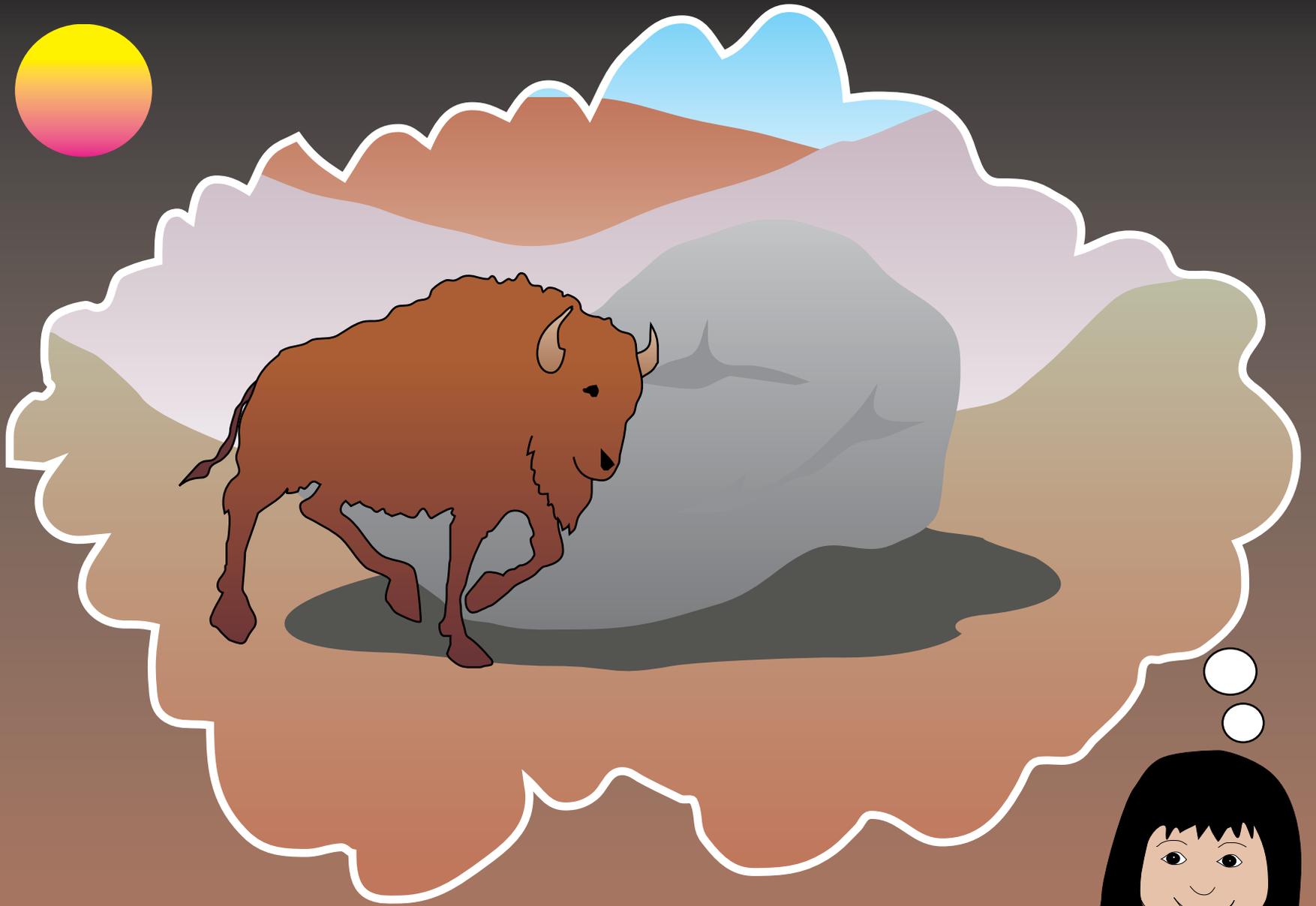


Now the fire had eaten past the big, smooth rock where the children liked to hide.

Is that a special rock, too, Daddy? asked the other girl. Her name was Linda.

That's a buffalo rubbing rock, her father told her. The buffalo lived here, too. They had no trees to rub their itchy backs on, so they rubbed on rocks. See how smooth they made it? When the rain made the ground muddy, they wallowed there to keep the flies and mosquitoes from biting them. That wore the hollow deeper.





The fire continued to eat the grass. Daddy, why are you burning the grass? asked Peter. He was the older of the boys.

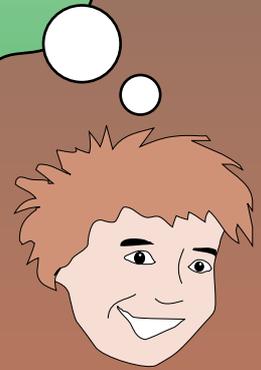
So the land will remember how to grow the prairie that lives here, said his father. So the ducks will nest in the prairie, and the other birds and animals will live here again.

But aren't the ducks nesting now? asked Peter.

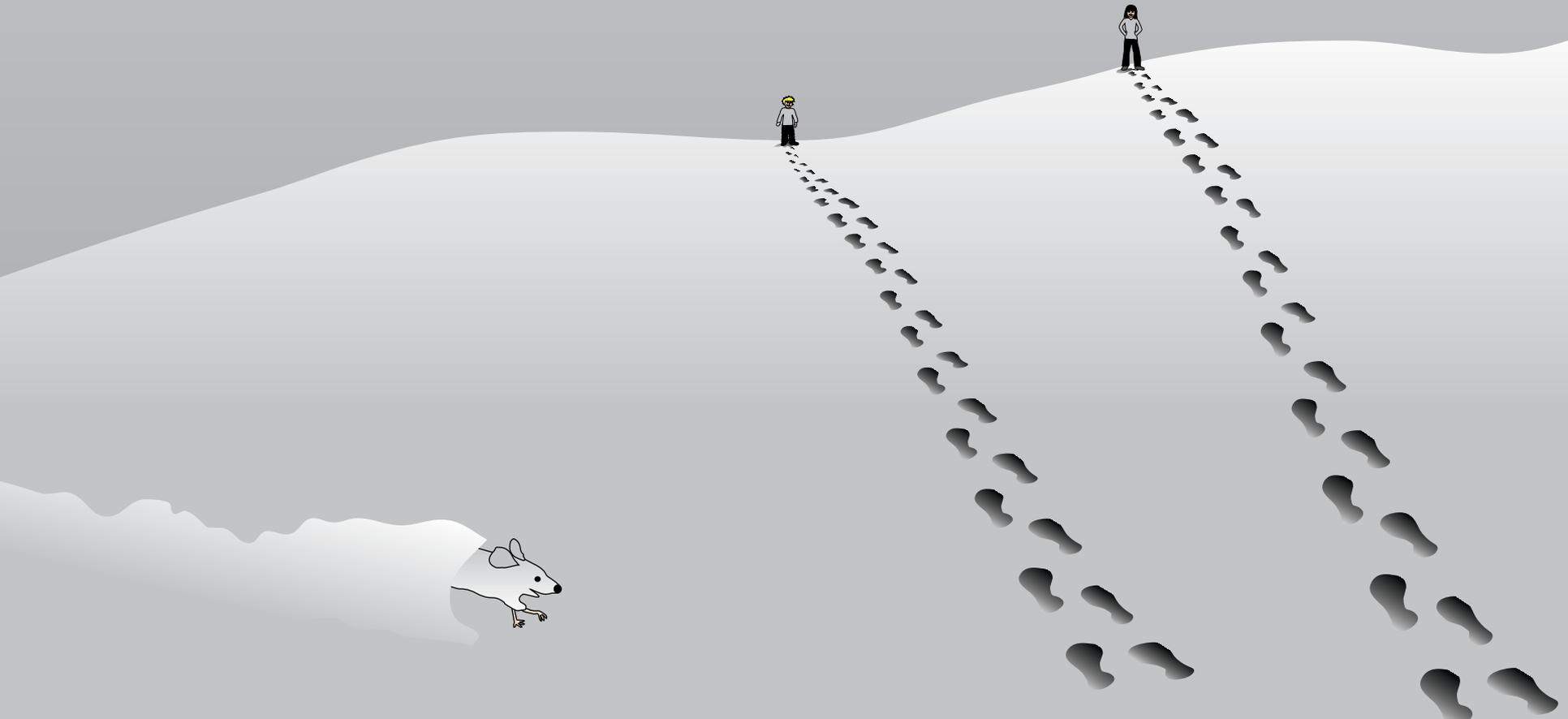
Yes, said his father, but not in this old prairie. It needs a fresh start. Watch, Peter, and tell me how the wildlife likes the new prairie that will grow here.

The hawk already likes it, Daddy, said Daniel, the youngest child. But the mice don't like it. The hawk is after them.



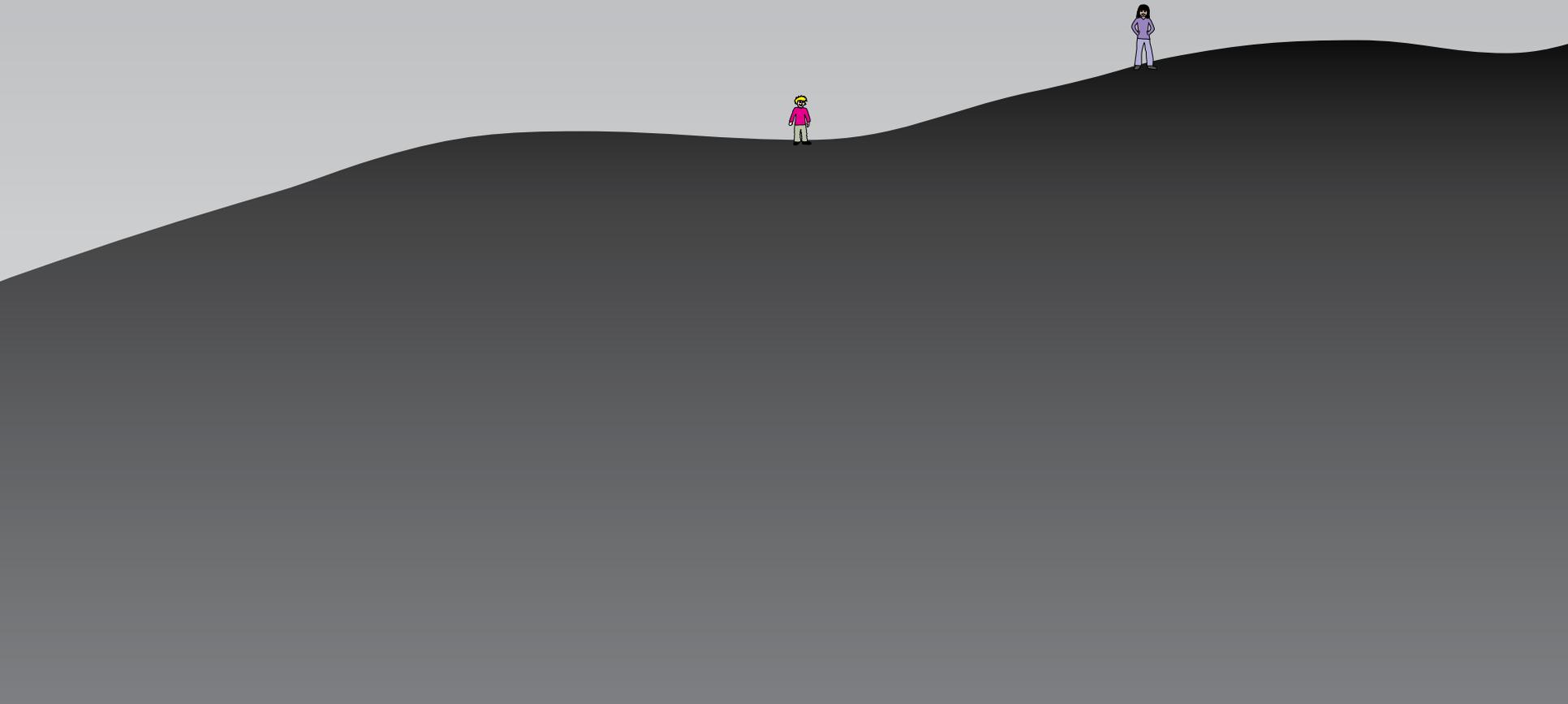


Finally the fire burned up all of the old, dead grass and all the new, green grass that was growing there, too. There seemed to be nothing alive on the whole prairie. Only white rocks stuck out of the grey, fluffy ash. The children walked through it and left tracks like in snow in the winter. But their feet and legs weren't white, they turned black from the ashes. They found trails through the ash where the mice ran, or holes where they ran under it.





That night the rain came and soaked the ground. The next day the children found the fluffy ashes gone. There were little black stumps where the grass, the wild rose, the snowberry and other plants had been burned off. But there was not a single green leaf on the whole prairie.





Now more of the magic appeared. The children saw a lot of little, black bumps running about over their burned playground. When they ran to see what they were, the 200 black bumps flew away, twittering and wheeling, their backs flashing golden in the sunlight. They were golden plovers, black on their front and undersides but gold-grey-white on their backs and tails.





They had flown from the far end of South America and were on their 7,000 mile trip to their nesting grounds in the Arctic. Peter had read about bird migrations and he knew about them. With their black bellies, they were hard to see until they moved or flew away.

That is why they stopped on your burned prairie to feed on the insects here, the father told his children.



Then the killdeer and robins came to feed in the warm, black soil.
The children counted 127 killdeer and 62 robins. Before there had been none.



The second day the first green shoots appeared. Then, day by day, the whole prairie turned green, first with just the tips of new growth giving the land the look of a green dew, then more and darker and deeper and longer until it seemed the sod was bursting with it. Mary Jo thought the prairie was growing fast to catch up with the other grass that hadn't been burned.

The stumps of the wild rose and snowberry sent out new leaves. The children ran over the green prairie, still getting their shoes and clothes black, excited by the growth. The prairie was changing very fast now.





The first flowers appeared, the orange hoary puccoon. Then came
the reddish prairie smoke,
 bluestar grass,
 pink shooting star,
 white anemone,
 silverleaf psoralea,
 leadplant,
 and many more.

Where did all the flowers come from, Daddy? asked Linda. They weren't
here before.

It's just like magic, said Mary Jo.

The land remembers how to grow them, said their father.

yellow prairie coneflower

wood lily

purple prairie clover

scarlet mallow





hoary puccoon

blue spiderwort

black samson

Now the grasses grew tall. There was green needlegrass,
needle and thread, porcupine grass,
western wheatgrass, blue grama,
sideoats grama, switchgrass,
little bluestem, prairie junegrass,
prairie sandreed, Canada wildrye,
big bluestem, Indiangrass,
and even more.

The children chased butterflies through the grass, now taller than
they were.





The Monarchs laid their eggs on the milkweed and the children soon saw the black-white-yellow caterpillars eating the leaves. They saw the caterpillars spin their cocoons, green at first but then turning as dry and brown as the old prairie, and saw the beautiful orange and black Monarchs finally burst forth from them, dry their wings and fly away.

The children had read that these butterflies migrated far to the south, to California and Central America. They thought how the magic had started on their old brown prairie, cleansed and rejuvenated.





The father had tried very hard to awaken his children to the magic that was all around them. They saw it, burst their cocoons, grew large and beautiful and flew away. The father was sad to see them go, but the prairie had taught him that beautiful things must be released if they are to grow and flower.





He thought of the golden plovers flying 7,000 miles to nest, and again to winter, and again and again, cycle on cycle without end. He thought of the fragile Monarch flying across the Gulf of Mexico, following an invisible path thousands of years old, each insect tracing it anew, going unerringly to a place it had never been for a reason it did not know.



He wondered where he was flying to, why he did not know, but he thought of the beautiful flowering prairie and the beautiful flowering children and he thought that perhaps it was enough to tend a magic field for beautiful things to grow in.



The author,

Herbert G. Troester, began a 34-year career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1959. He began using fire in 1967 when he was refuge manager at Tewaukon National Wildlife Refuge in Cayuga, North Dakota.

He later served as Regional Fire Management Coordinator in the Pacific Northwest Region (1982-1989) and in the Mountain-Prairie Region (1989-1993), applying fire to a variety of ecosystems in 14 states. He enjoyed teaching about fire behavior and fire effects.

Mr. Troester holds a B.A. in Sociology (1957) and a B.S. in Wildlife Management (1959) from the University of Minnesota. He lives in Vernal, Utah.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been using fire since the 1930's to benefit natural areas and the millions of visitors who enjoy them every year. The Service manages national wildlife refuges in all 50 states and in every U.S. territory. There is at least one refuge within an hour's drive of every major metropolitan area.

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