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In the Light of a Prairie Night

Jim Richardson
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Flowing Lands
Jim Richardson

IN THE LIGHT OF A PRAIRIE NIGHT

On a calm, still night in the Flint Hills, I entered into another world. You can still do that out here on the Kansas prairie, but for how much longer, I do not know.

Lightning that was far to the west, out beyond the one-hundredth meridian in the shortgrass territory, beyond my hearing its thunder, was too faint to disturb the fireflies that floated in swarms over the wild blue alfalfa. Deep blue lingered in the sky above the Tallgrass Preserve, giving way finally to blackness the way sleep comes to a restless child. I was alone in the Flint Hills at night.

And then the big show began.

At first, it was just a faint veil of light, not even visible when I tried to look straight at it, but something I could see when I just barely glanced away. Spreading from south to north across the inky blackness, it was the Milky Way and I was in the middle of it. Gazing up from amongst the Bluestems, the Primrose, and the Blue Wild Indigo, I could see the heart of our galaxy. Light that had been traveling for 100,000 years, light from stars halfway across the galaxy, light that had escaped the wicked vortex of our black hole, light that magically had not hit a single thing in 100,000 light years of travel, light that had curved through warped space made known to us by Albert Einstein, light that now descended through the atmosphere of our planet heading directly towards me, light which entered my eye through my cornea (barely a quarter inch

in diameter) and ended its 100,000-year journey by hitting my retina, light that inspired me with awe.

I sat down.

Sitting there amidst the deep soundless night I thought about it for a while. A prairie is a good place to do that, think about the meaning of things.

There is a lot to think about when you are sitting on prairie grasses made mostly out of carbon and breathing in the oxygen those grasses exhaled just that afternoon. All those atoms were forged in the hearts of once-living stars, long since exploded in supernova, atoms that then drifted across the vastness of space before gravity gathered them together to build our earth. And everything in it. Every atom in the long intricate carbon molecules that make prairie soil rich and pungent. Every atom in every horse and saddle. Every atom in the thunderstorm now coming towards me. Every last atom that was in my body was forged in the nuclear fires at the heart of a star. Along with the air that I was breathing, the same air where the fireflies floated as I watched them blinking in the night. Cosmic thoughts, as if when I looked at the Milky Way there was no distance at all between us, nor any time at all.

Fireflies do not think about the cosmos very much. When we see them flashing their neon love calls, they are thinking about one thing only—sex. You can't blame them. They don't have much time, living for only three or four weeks, always hell-bent on mating, not even eating (or turning cannibal if they do). Their flashing is code, a sort of erotic semaphore in the dusky evening, the males cruising just above the tops of the plants, the coy come-hither females down in the grass. Fluorescent flirting. Fireflies are not very honest and sometimes lie to each other to get what they want. Exhilarating but fleeting times for insects that spend most of their lives as larva buried in the ground.

Mixing luciferin with luciferase (sounds Satanic) is responsible for the light. Dim light as any child with a mason jar full of fireflies can tell you. In order to mate, they have to be able to see each other; too much light is blinding. Big cities are firefly wastelands. They cannot survive amid the onslaught of street-lights. But the Flint Hills where wandering dirt roads are more common than street lights are kind to lightning bugs, for which I am grateful.

The fireflies glow and waltz. The Milky Way swirls above me. Physics and chemistry connect them across eons and



Patterns in Flint
Jim Richardson



A Sea of Hills
Jim Richardson

eternities. The dance of light and dark, each is necessary in their turn for the workings of a galaxy or a prairie—or a Flint Hills rancher.

Without much thinking about it, the ranchers here drive the dirt roads that wander along the hilltops across the ancient dried-up seabed of another epoch. It's a big land that needs to be big; it takes a lot of land to collect enough sunshine to convert prairie grasses into a living wage for a herbivore, whether it be a bison or cow. That simple equation of land area times the intensity of sunshine times the chemical efficiency of photosynthesis, times the digestive productivity of a bovine stomach determines that ranchers must be solitary people. Cowboys are lonely because physics, chemistry, and biology determine that it must be so. Hence, they are fluent in the language of silence and can say nothing for a long time without feeling obliged to fill the emptiness. Prairies are as they are for simple and necessary reasons.

Likewise, Flint Hills cowboys gathering for the spring burn may (or may not) think much about cyanobacteria and the Great Oxidation Event of some 2.4 billion years ago—but they are connected, nonetheless. Back then oxygen was exceedingly rare, but by the most stupendous biological trick

of all time, the cyanobacteria invented photosynthesis and (by the way) started to produce oxygen. When atmospheric oxygen got to 17 percent, something hugely important became possible—open fire. With open fire the grasses could beat back the trees (their old enemies) and open up vast stretches of grassland prairie.

Our Flint Hills are but one such place along with the Savannahs of Africa and the Steppes of Central Asia. By some reckonings these vast grasslands demanded that humans travel further distances, so they started to walk upright. (Which, incidentally, is why cowboys stand on two feet.) So, when the lines of fire snake across the hills in early spring like strings of flaming pearls, they connect to earth's deep history with cowboys, horses, and the essential nature of a prairie.

That we know all these arcane things, that we can look up at the Milky Way with more than just wonder and bewilderment, that we know that this is our home, that our planet circles a star about two thirds of the way out on one of the spiral arms of a galaxy, that every atom in our being came from those stars, all of this we have only known for about a hundred years. It was news to our grandparents. We who live now are among the first generations of

humans to be able to look up at the night sky and know what we are seeing. Tragically we may be among the last to ever see it.

Already we are losing the night. Barely a century and a half have passed since Edison invented electric light bulbs. In that brief time, we have lit up the night. Humans lived almost our entire history under dark skies filled with sparkling stars. For much of humanity, that world is gone, victim of our passion to light up the night. Now astronauts in the space station fly across a world at night laced with streetlights that connect urban centers into one great glowing mass. Any aliens spying on earth from outer space will surely have noticed: the dark side of that third planet from the star is no longer dark.

With that glow our ability to see the Milky Way is slipping away. Already it is difficult to see it in Europe, most of India, and anywhere east of the Mississippi River in the United States. By some estimates 80 percent of the children born today will never see the Milky Way again. This malady has a name: light pollution. And it has a victim: stars that shone brightly when the night was still dark. By letting this scourge sweep unchecked across the planet, we may be robbing ourselves of one of our most beautiful spectacles: the Milky Way

Painted in milky light across the night sky. Incredible that we might extinguish the flame of wonderment that brings light into the eyes of our children.

Shall we let it slip away?

Ad Astra. Like all Kansas school children, I know this bit of Latin. To the stars. Such a simple thought: like the infinite heavens above, may our ambition know no limits, may our children always dream. High atop our Capitol dome, Ad Astra aims his arrow for the North Star. It's a riveting idea, part of our pioneer heritage, sacred to who we are. We cherish it and give it to our children as a gift, one that once given, cannot be taken away. But left unsaid is this: we must be able to see the stars if we want to look to them for inspiration.

Ad Astra.

Jim Richardson is a photographer for *National Geographic Magazine* and a contributing editor for its sister publication, *Traveler Magazine*.



Straight as a Stone Fence
Jim Richardson

FOLLOWING SPREAD
Meditation on Time and Space
Susan White

