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Milky Way
Jim Richardson

IN THE LIGHT OF A PRAIRIE NIGHT

JIM RICHARDSON

The Flint Hills in Kansas are one of the few places where you can still see the Milky Way. Light pollution has obscured the Milky Way's majesty east of the Mississippi River. Light pollution even affects the reproductive life cycle of fireflies. With the ability to see the Milky Way slipping away, most children born today will never have a chance to see this beautiful spectacle. The Kansas motto is Ad Astra ... To The Stars. Our inspiration fades if we can no longer see the stars.

— Jerelyn Ramirez

On a calm, still night in the Flint Hills, I entered another world.

You can still do that out here on the Kansas prairie, but for how much longer, I do not know.

Lightning 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 floating over the wild blue alfalfa. Deep blue lingered in the sky above the Tallgrass Prairie National 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 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, primroses and blue wild indigo, I saw the heart of the galaxy. Light that had

traveled 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 the distance of 100,000 light years, 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 toward me, light which entered my eye though 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 amid the deep soundless night, I thought about it for a while. A prairie is a good place to think about the meaning of things.

There is much to think about when sitting on prairie grasses made mostly 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 supernovae, atoms that then drifted across the vastness of space before gravity gathered them together to build our earth. 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 toward me. Every last atom in my body was forged in the nuclear fire at the heart of a star,

along with the air I breathed; the same air where fireflies floated, blinking in the night. Cosmic thoughts: when I gazed at the Milky Way, there was no distance at all between us, nor any time at all.

Fireflies do not much think about the cosmos. When they flash 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, an erotic semaphore in the dusky evening, males cruising just above the plant tops, the coy, come-hither females down in the grass... fluorescent flirting. Mixing luciferin with luciferase (sounds Satanic) makes the light — dim light as any child with a Mason jar full of fireflies knows. To mate, they must be able to see each other; too much light is blinding. Cities are firefly wastelands. They cannot survive the onslaught of streetlights. But the meandering dirt roads of the Flint Hills 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 across eons and eternities in the dance of light and dark, each necessary for the workings of a galaxy or a prairie or a Flint Hills rancher.

Without much thinking about it, ranchers here drive dirt roads that

wander along hilltops across the ancient, dried-up seabed of another epoch. It's a big land that needs to be big; it takes much land to collect enough sunshine to convert prairie grasses into a living wage for a herbivore, whether bison or cow. That simple equation of land area times intensity of sunshine times chemical efficiency of photosynthesis, times the digestive productivity of a bovine stomach, determines that ranchers be solitary people. Cowboys are loners because physics, chemistry and biology define the lifestyle. They are fluent in the language of silence without feeling obliged to fill the emptiness.

Likewise, Flint Hills cowboys gathering for the spring burn 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, cyanobacteria invented photosynthesis and, simultaneously, producing oxygen. When atmospheric oxygen reached 17 percent, something hugely important became possible: open fire. With open fire the grasses could beat back their old enemies, the trees, opening 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

demand that humans travel further distances, so they walked upright. When lines of fire snake across the Hills in early spring like strings of flaming pearls, they connect earth's deep history to 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 our home 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.

We who live now are the first generations of humans who can 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 has passed since Edison invented electric light bulbs. In that brief time, we 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 obsession to light up the night. Astronauts in the Space Station orbit a world laced with streetlights connecting 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 artificial glow, our ability to see the Milky Way is slipping away. Already it is difficult to see in Europe, most of India and anywhere east of the Mississippi River in the United States. By some estimates, 80 percent of children born today will never see the Milky Way.

This malady has a name: light pollution. And it has a victim: stars that shone brightly when the night was still dark. This unchecked scourge sweeping across the planet robs us of a most beautiful spectacle: the milky light of the Milky Way painted across the night sky. Shall we let it slip away?
Ad Astra.

Jim Richardson is a photographer for National Geographic Magazine who documented the world and his native Kansas with equal relish. Jim and his wife Kathy live in Lindsborg, where they feel lucky to have a base for Jim's travels in a small town with big creative energy.

Jerelyn Ramirez is a member of the Kansas Astronomical Observers, an organization dedicated to promoting the enjoyment and understanding of astronomy. She has been a dedicated volunteer with the Stargazing team for 19 years, inspiring guests at our Signature Event with the beauty of the Flint Hills night sky.



Fireflies Gather
Jim Richardson