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The Wind's Cry

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Old Gaucho Trail, KS
Kandace Creel Falcón

THE WIND'S CRY

It was 70 degrees in Manhattan, Kansas, when I entered the world as my parents' first child. In the early afternoon, the wind blew a bit. Just a bit, though — it gusted at 7 mph about noon.

The data notes stillness the hour in mid-November when I began my life's journey outside of my mama's womb. The wind must have had others to visit that day as she flitted across the Flint Hills, riding currents through the hair of children playing outside.

Forty years later, it's amazing to me that I can ask the internet about the weather on the day I was born, and so many statistics are at the ready. Temperatures, averages and records, precipitation, dew points, wind and visibility on the prairie — all easily available on my computer as I time-travel back to my first sense of the weather. Back to when I gulped for air and cried out for this life.

Perhaps that calm weather, the zero mph reading around 4:30 p.m. on that unseasonably warm day in the Flint Hills, is why I often bristle at the sounds of the wind. My heart rate quickens when I hear the wind gust. My anxiety sits in the pit of my stomach on bad days. On good days, it stays higher in my chest, and I only notice it when my body reminds me I've been breathing shallowly. The constricted muscles around my rib cage loosen with a deep belly breath, and then I remind myself to unclench my jaw and drop my shoulders.

When I say, "I'm anxious," my wife often asks me if it's something that I can pinpoint, or if it's more general. I remind

her that anxiety isn't rational, but sometimes I can pinpoint it — sometimes it is the wind.

The wind has been rattling Matfield Station, a renovated Santa Fe Railroad bunkhouse in Matfield Green, for the last three days of my current stay in the Flint Hills. Last night when a train went by Matfield Station in the early hours, I awoke mistaking it for a tornado. It was difficult to discern which vibrations were from the trains rumbling by and which were from the wind's fingers as she rattled the windows. And the door jambs. And the curtains.

Outside, the past-their-bloom, willow-leaved sunflowers have been whipping in the wind day and night. Amazingly, they spring back to vertical after being knocked relentlessly toward the ground. This morning, I watched as a crow fought with the wind over possession of a fence post. The crow won, but the wind kept at it, ruffling wings, tail, beak and feathers as she stared right into the force and cawed, as if to say, "Not this time, Wind."

I want to be more like Crow. Facing the wind head-on when it rushes the grass. But I find myself more like a creature who burrows, much more comfortable with feet touching the ground. I do not like when the wind tosses my hair or whips

across my exposed skin, burning my ears, making them ring.

I was not bothered by the wind until I moved to quieter places. Or places known for the wind, the prairie in particular. I first noticed it when I moved from Minneapolis to Fargo, and then from there to the 20 acres of mixed grass prairie and oak savannah we tend in west central Minnesota.

When the wind blows, she makes her presence known. She knocks on doors, jiggles the doorknob, whistles through the cracks of homes that move on their concrete slabs "settling." She rattles windows whose sealant has loosened just enough to let the air and bugs inside our domestic sanctuaries. She moves objects with her power. She twists fallen leaves into cyclones. She caresses grasses in a sea of waving tendrils. In the ever-increasing wind gusts brought on by climate change, she's uprooted elderly oaks and elms and ash, thrown tables into lakes, knocked eggs out of nests. We can't see her, but she makes herself known.

I think of the wind personified as La Llorona, the Weeping Woman of Chicana folklore. There are the stories about her that involve the death of children at her hand for any number of reasons. She walks the earth forever trying

to find them by crying loudly for them- regretting the actions she took or was perhaps coerced to take. The tale suggests that men and children should beware of a pretty maiden who may trick them with her beauty- only to drown them later.

She has different regional flavors- and various details about recent sightings trickle throughout the stories passed on in Mexican American families. Chicana feminist scholars have reread her beyond only the patriarchal warning of the bad woman trope. Regardless of the reasons she's wailing- the story of La Llorona is sometimes passed on to children on windy nights. Is it the wind? Or is it La Llorona?

There is no escape from the wind on the prairie. I wonder if the original families in the Matfield Station bunkhouse- who were Mexican American- ever heard her outside. Did mamas tell their children to run directly to the outhouse and come right back because if they didn't- La Llorona might get them? Did they ever mistake the train's horn blast for La Llorona's cries? Might they have heard her wails- thinking that tonight we will stay in- safe from the wind that knocks the fruit from trees- that pushes tall grasses to the ground?

I'm trying to learn how to stay calm when the wind gusts ruffle my equilibrium- wherever they find me.

I'm trying to learn the lessons the past has for my present. While my Mexican family lived in a different part of the state and worked for a different railroad, my family's migration trail mirrors those who found their way to Matfield Station. La Llorona has traveled with us from Guanajuato to Kansas. She, too, has come to know the ways the grasses bend in the breeze.

As Mexican Americans in Kansas, we are probably more like La Llorona than not, mourning losses that remain difficult to be named. Wind currents swirl and move like magic in our atmosphere; like stories, they remind us that nothing is linear and that the echo can be just as powerful as the sound of the cry's origin.

Kandace Creel Falcón, Ph.D., is an interdisciplinary feminist scholar, writer and visual artist. Their life's passion grounds the power of narrative for social transformation. Born in Kansas, raised in New Mexico, they currently paint and write in rural Erhard, Minnesota.