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Burning the Prairie

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Name of Author: Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, 1357 N. 1000 Rd., Lawrence, KS 66046, 785/766-7159

Website: www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com, www.BraveVoice.com

Bio: Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D., the 2009-13 Kansas Poet is the author of 19 books, including *The Divorce Girl*, a novel; *Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other*, a non-fiction book on the Holocaust and Kansas Notable Book winner; *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*, a bioregional memoir on cancer and community; and five poetry collections, including the award-winning *Chasing Weather: Tornadoes, Tempests, and Thunderous Skies in Word and Image* with weather chase/photographer Stephen Locke. Her edited anthologies include *To the Stars Through Difficulties: A Kansas Renga in 150 Voices* and *Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems*. Founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College where she teaches, Mirriam-Goldberg also leads writing workshops widely, particularly for people living with serious illness and their caregivers. With singer Kelley Hunt, she co-leads writing and singing retreats, and co-writes songs Hunt performs across the country.

Publication Info.: “Burning the Prairie” is unpublished. “Landed” was previously published in *Landed* (Mammoth Publications, 2009) and *Animals in the House* (Woodley Press, 2004), but I own the right to it. I included it because I thought it spoke to the theme of this book. If “Burning the Prairie” doesn’t quite fit, I do have other pieces I could share, but I thought this might do as something about landing here and rooting into place.

Burning the Prairie

Having grown up in Brooklyn and central New Jersey, I never imagined that on a January afternoon, I would be dragging fire across a field in Kansas, just down the slope from the house we built on land that's been in my husband's family for five generations. Having landed here, this has become more my home than the Brooklyn triplex or New Jersey Levitt house where I grew up. Right now, living in this time and place translates into winding dry blue bluestem and other grasses like spaghetti around a pitchfork, then walking along the ledge of a field, dripping tiny flames all the way. The line of fire I'm laying on the west side would soon, if the wind keeps its casual light push southwest, will march across the field to meet the fire others started on the east side. Fire meets fire, flares up in a majestic curtain, and burns itself out.

Usually, we make and witness this spectacle the first weekend of April, but drought changing the contours of the seasons led my husband Ken and son Daniel to start lighting fires right now. With a few of Daniel's friends in tow, we went to work, carrying water sprayers to aim toward fire heading the wrong direction, and shovels to stomp escaped flames. It's freezing outside, but the fire heats everything like a giant outdoor furnace, occasionally drowning us in blasts of smoke.

As the lines of fire got longer and push diagonally across the field, I think about what I always think about when burning prairie: that it's a ritual of catharsis, clearing away all the overgrowth from past years. There's also the danger, with any clearing of the ground in our fields or hearts, that what's started may not be containable, and may leap fences and other kinds of boundaries. One corner of what you think you know might ignite, and before you know it, run the opposite way to transform a nearby cedar tree into a Moses-like burning bush. Sometimes the fire may ebb and vanish, refusing to get started. Wind can shift, rain can come, change can unfurl or suddenly vanish, and you realize both how little control you have over most everything, and how alive you feel in such moments.

A half hour after we started the burn, the wind changes direction. Ken yells for everyone to run

to the east side of the field where the fire is catching onto a large stand of cedars, too close for comfort to our house. We charge through the smoke to spray or stomp. Having only a pitchfork in my hands, I jump up and down, a fast staccato dance to kill bits of fire.

A cedar stand, about 10 feet from the prairie, catches on fire, so all of us run over with our water cans and shovels, spraying and hitting the fire in the sudden haze of smoke. My eyes burn, my lungs hurt, the cedar branches scratch my face, and it's hard to breathe for a few minutes. We catch a break when the wind shifts back, keeping the whole stand from going up in brilliant flames, changing the face of this land.

The burn also reminds me how change can happen, and how, once set in motion, can curve ways we never anticipated. Transitions hardly ever show up when you expect them, and like house guests from hell, they can make a mess out of everything. I can always tell the calm times in my life by how few dirty dishes remain; and if we can actually see the floor of the laundry room, it's as if the supreme peace of nirvana rose up from the valley between big changes. Change can reek havoc among every new shrub and hedgehog home of the soul, and toss all your old ideas of who you were and what you were supposed to be doing with your life right into the fire pit of "ha ha ha." When a big transition ends, it can be hard to see much because of all the smoke. There's a black field in the dark, and your life still underground, not yet uncoiled into the air where you can prove it exists. And there's you, lying on the ground, wishing you were covered in flannel and could just sleep here for a long time.

But there's things you can see lying on the ground that you can't see any other way. I remember when I failed all my PhD comps years ago, a surprise move on my part that touched off a series of changes in how I viewed myself and the world of academics. I had discovered in that slow-motion fall to earth that I wasn't who I thought I was, a minor transition compared to some of the more searing ones in my life, but, of course, it hurt for a few weeks. I hung up the bad phone that brought me the news and went outside to lay on the ground.

There was something comforting about the change, a peace that came from seeing the line of

fire burn right through all those scholarly papers in my mind. When the fire cleared, and later the smoke, I began to see the fibers of the newest grass there among the black ruins of what had been burnt as well as the writing and teaching that I had never imagined before.

You make any major change in your life, and you open the door to mystery. I went to the Midwest, fell in love with the bigger sky here, then with a man and community. I chose graduate school, various jobs, to start a family and build a house, and voila! The match is thrown into the field. Even if what lay ahead were bouts of agony, self-hatred, despair, rage and all the other emotions that keep therapists in business, plus long strengths of uncertainty, or skidding through fields of terror.

Then there are those changes you don't ignite yourself– the ones that come by surprise in the form of illness or death or natural disaster or pregnancy or just a slow or sudden breakdown of some aspect of your life. Some are daunting in the danger they threaten. Years past failing my comps–after I retook and passed them–I lay belly down on the prairie the day before cancer-related surgery. It was winter but unusually warm, and the wintering grasses sheltered me as I asked this place I loved to help me. I had just finished six months of chemo for breast cancer, and now the surgeon found masses in my ovaries that could also be cancerous. Lost as a field mouse after the field is burned, I stayed there until I fell asleep. Then I got up, walked to the house, put a pizza in the oven for the kids, and got ready for the surgery that would show I was all clear.

But sometimes the danger of losing something, someone, some place is siren of what's to come. Just a little over a year ago, one of our dear friends Jerry died. He loved the field we were now burning and had helped us with many burns over several decades. His death came both quickly and slowly enough to have almost a week with him in the hospital to say goodbye without knowing for sure it was goodbye. He had been found very sick in his apartment where he lived alone after he had refused the help of friends and family who wanted to bring him to doctors to help him with memory and other health issues.

His death was another return to the ground, this ground of community and love, even if he was

on a ventilator and in a hospital bed with only a view of the tops of winter trees. A few nights before he died, I sat alone with him, his eyes wide and intense as he stared at me, his hand grasping my hand. I joked with him for not keeping up his end of our conversation because of the ventilator, and from my iPhone played him songs I knew he loved: an old song we sang together at many bioregional gatherings, "As one we walk this earth together." I reminded him of when he gave me a CD of James Taylor's music, and with his eyes, he told me how much he loved Taylor's "Close Your Eyes" as I played that song.

So many times when he came to our house for dinner on the back deck, facing the brome field we don't burn and the prairie we do, he lifted his arms to the sky, tilted his head back, and talked to the wind, letting it sweep through his small body. "I ask the wind to let its will be done" he once told me, adding that he stepped outside to lift his arms and face to the sky each morning, his gesture of prayer and homecoming, surrender and grace.

Now he was dead. Having occupied the land of grief before, I knew I was lost, out of balance, off-kilter and discombobulated. I thought we had years to hang out, talk to the wind, burn prairies, and eat fajitas. His death catalyzed a panorama of emotions: guilt, irritation, anger, relief, love, frustration, despair, joy for the beauty we shared at the end of his life.

Death, like life, has a way of spinning us around, and in the end, making us more ourselves than we were before. Change walks and runs, rushes or seeps slowly through everyone on earth. Even rocks. Even mountains. It might be easier to see it coming from the vantage point of a flat field, but it's not necessarily any easier to understand or direct or find your way across the change.

Now, burning this prairie, I thought of the quote from Wendell Berry that Ken and I used in our wedding speaks to what's behind this: "In life, in the world, we are never given two known results to choose between, but only *one* result that we choose without knowing what it is." Watching the very end of the fire, the last rising of walls of flame before the field swallowed every seed of fire, I knew that witnessing change is only possible by committing to a place and its people. Being rooted means

marrying where you are: reinhabit your home, community and eco-community. It's never, as Berry says, a choice between two knowable results, but only a choice to say, "I do" to something, someone, some place to live out the mystery of your beautiful, changing, heartbreaking and shining life.

It's a blessing to see change so visible, and working for that change in partnership with the air and its currents, the ground on the cusp, the water we carry to keep things in check, and the fire we bring. When it's over, I walk into the middle of the field and reach down to touch the burnt grass. Without knowing how this will one day be a gesture to remember a beloved friend as well as a gesture to give my life, once again, to this place, I lift my arms, turn my face toward the dusk-changing sky, and take a long breath.

Landed

Here everything is a list of its details:
the surface of crow feather where it bows,
or echo of whippoorwill through the closed window
over the bed. The chiggers and the slow-creeping
cedar trees, milkweed webbed with spittlebug,
and the grass above and below ground,
mirroring out from a single point
of root and longing.

I'm landed here, in the center of something
not my own doing, and although I keep thinking
I'm alone, I'm dying, I'm afraid,
I'm making all that up.
The man I love is coming out of the woods,
the long crescent of his body closer, bowing to touch
something, say its name.

When he stands back up, he walks slowly to show me
whatever we think of love is just the aerial view
that tells you nothing compared to the soft green stems
that curl and fall with the wind, compared to how
each step across the grass is a form of falling
out of and into what losses make life possible.
The quick flashes, like the sun balancing
on the lip of the horizon right before
it goes out, like that moment the field golds
everything opaque, like how love strips us
out of the stories we have for love.