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An Open Letter to the Wetlands

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Dear Wetlands,

We've had this relationship for over two decades now, me driving along your side back and forth, sometimes multiple times a day: in the early years on the way to the country, the land where we would build our house, and in the later years, home. I've seen you in flood and thaw, snow and shaggy grasses, bursting with verbena and chiggers, and with curling wisps of water, magnets to the crossing flight of blue herons, one at a time, each dawn and dusk. And I've gone from a young woman who believed she could simply think or work hard enough to make anything come true into a middle aged woman who knows much more about the foibles of human limitations.....and also the vastness of the sky, the sturdiness of the ground, the impenetrable miracle of gravity, and the green that still comes.

I've driven thousands of miles on the roads on either side of you, Louisiana Street or Haskell Avenue, the tar shimmering in that above-100-degree fervor that makes everything seem closer than it is. I've gingerly steered a dozen vehicles down you in slow motion while giant snowflakes exploded on the windshield or while side-swimming ice coated each blade of grass, each slim tree branch, each dried stem that was once all blossom. I've smelled the fires on your edges, even one that seeped out of control and kept running toward the road. And I've seen the clusters of people holding signs about you: "Protect the Wetlands," "Save Our Heritage," "Stop the Traffic way."

The long stretch on either road I take opens me into the expanse of you, brings me to the brink of coyote disappearing into the grass, a vole skittering toward its life across the way: the hidden airstrip within you giving rise to duck and red-tailed hawk, and the doe munching casually at your edges, letting the headlights swims over her until she's back in the darkness where she best knows her way.

Crossing you is part of my routine, yet the crossing has always been beautiful. It has always been changing. It has not always been easy.

Remember when I crashed into you, the black ice derailing my van full of kids from the clear track of our daily schedule? Although anyplace but the one place where I went off the road would have been safe – just a casual slope down – my children and I were pulled right to the one truly dangerous place: where the mouth of water meets the roots of the road, a five foot drop. The van flipped over, spun around, all of us screaming except for my youngest son, then five at the time, who was flung out the exploded-clear window and onto the snow.

When I loosened myself from the upside-down driver's seat, found my son and daughter with minor injuries, crying or numb, and raced to my youngest son, unconscious upon you, I didn't know if he would die here, if most of me would too. Not until my oldest son, his hand on his brother's heart, said, "it's still beating." I could only gather my youngest up, enough motion to make him come awake into screaming, and stumble up the snowy bank, yelling out, "Please, someone help us."

Help came – cars full of people bearing blankets to wrap us in, ambulances, the life-flight helicopter that evaporated my baby over me as the other kids and I were raced off to the local hospital.

Days later, all of us just enough intact to knock a glimmer off my numbness, I returned to you, crawled around in the just-melted snow, found my glasses, my son's, some small plastic animals and crayons. Weeks later, everyone long home from the hospitals, I came back with my family and friends. Laurie, with her backpack of brownies hiked over from her home; Jerry with his keen attention to you; the kids and my husband, Ken: we sorted through the grasses for all we left at this place, the imprint of our van long gone but the bits and pieces of pretzel wrappers, pens, and even more toy animals, and crayons embedded in your surface. We climbed up and down the banks with our trash bags, the shape of the water changing its expression daily, and cleaned out the impact of the accident.

Then we stood in a circle upon you, thanked you, thanked the earth and sky, thanked each other. The first wisps of spring wind threaded through the last wisps of winter air. Your ground held us up, and crows crossed overhead. The sounds of the cars on the road, and the sounds of the water moving again toward some invisible center, filled the space between us.

It is not always so dangerous, so dramatic. Across from you are the combines combing your fields by headlights in the dark, the milo higher and thicker one year than another, the stubble a sharp contrast to your out of control grasses, like two brothers on either side of the road, one who was left to his own devices, and one who wasn't.

There are the times you remind me of how everything can rise in its own way or fall unexpectedly. I remember looking up, a quarter mile south of 31st Street one day and seeing the high crescent of goldfinches, the sun landing on the motion of their wings. Everything silver and gold. Everything shining in its tumbles and pouring down into you like gold coins.

And many moments of the opposite: the clouds that lost momentum and fell to you, blanketing the road with invisibility. A person who hates driving in fog, I gripped the wheel tighter those nights, aiming toward the small distance I could see until I could see another glimpse of distance. All the way home, and when I crossed the Wakarusa, the thickening white haze made me know that I was crossing water.

Sometimes I crossed more than road: over the history of the wetlands, road over the multiple storylines of water. A squirrel, a turtle, and once a coyote already dead. A deer just on the other side of my car, perhaps killed just an hour or so ago, and years before, the deer I killed. Only in my early twenties, I never intended to go on a deer hunting expedition, but there I was in the middle of the night, standing beside the steaming radiator of my car, the deer at my feet, and the sheriff preparing to pull out his gun.

"Isn't there something that can be done?" I asked Ken.

A year later the deer crashed into us, not at the wetlands, but perhaps on his way from Kasold Avenue. The buck leapt over our small Toyota, not quite clearing it enough, flipped right over us and landed on his feet to keep running east. The shattered window and dented hood were a small price to pay, maybe a kind of payback.

There is no way to avoid these brushes or crashes, these lost or found scraps of experience here, ours and the species that live here. You hold all the unmarked graves of American Indian children taken from their parents' arms, children with newly-cut hair who disappeared into you. You hold thousands of years of the passing of animals and

plants. Yet you blossom with birds and rain, reminding us how alive the earth is, and how life is much wilder than even the wildest of our imaginations.

I stop here today to tell you this, to stand on your western shore, out of my car for this rare moment when we're not just speeding toward each other with intention or new growth. It has been an impossible day, one of consistently being just late enough to worry for each appointment. On the radio, I've just heard of the terrorist bombing in the London subways, a man's voice telling us in America how afraid he is, how he doesn't know how to get home.

A dragonfly moves on a current of old sun; the grasses tilt this way and that in the slight wind of a July afternoon. The bushes and the trees crowding your southern border sing with birdsong. Movement of water plays in stereo from all directions. You: holding fish and fowl, holding time, holding the origins of life. You simmer and sway with life. Stars swim past in the dark, and the cool morning rises from the veins of water and throughout your terrain. I look into the dark mirror of the moving water and hear wings opening behind the Big Bluestem, ready to take off again. "Thank you," I tell the air and the water.

The wind and heat answer. I am in my place again.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D. is a poet and writer. She is the author of five books, including three volumes of poetry – Animals in the House (Woodley Press), Reading the Body (Mammoth Press), and Lot's Wife (Woodley Press) – and her poetry and prose has been published in many literary magazines and anthologies. She is founder and coordinator the Transformative Language Arts program at Goddard College, which educates people to use the spoken and written word for social and personal transformation. And she facilitates writing workshops for many populations, including workshops focused on eco-poetics and how to write in connection with the earth. She is also active in the bioregional movement locally and continentally, and serves on the boards of the National Association of Poetry Therapy, and the Healing Story Alliance. Winner of the 2004 Phoenix Award, and the 2005 artist-in-residence at Rocky Mountain National Park, Caryn makes her home south of the Wakarusa with her family.