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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2012 – The Prairie: Its Seasons and Rhythms
(Laurie J. Hamilton, Editor)

Flint Hills

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Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, Andres (2012). "Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2012/prairie/11>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Flint Hills

ANDRÉS RODRÍGUEZ

Across the dried, burnt wheat fields of Kansas,
blue herons skimmed close to the shaggy grasstops
looking for a spark of sky, distant morning's shower
that stirred the crackling plains into old new song.
Clouds rolled back on the warp horizon and blazed,
the cottonwoods nodded, waiting for more rain,
and those sleek gray birds, sovereign messengers,
circled past, slowly, hands waving goodbye.

We drove through the late August heat toward evening,
the land changing itself almost impudently
to a tide of low hills that held flinty earth compact.
“The Indians carved serpents into the buffalo grass
and grass roots,” you read from your book,
“here where the wind endstops.” That was ages ago.
Your voice kept my eye falling down across the hills,
the calm valleys in between dark with shadow.

Past Strong City, you snapped your book shut
and squinted through the windshield at the first stars.
Naming them, before the great pale light had turned
to a sensuous dark of galaxies, of nebulae,
you knew how forced that was and fell silent,
contenting yourself now with the wind
that blew cool, warm, for miles,
repeating the song of light freed from earth.

For me, seeing your land for the first time,
the visit was swallowed whole by summer's untimely end,
by the stories of the land I tried to dream up,
stories no one can possibly see
in the wash of starlight on hard blacktop.
I mumbled that there were still trains to Kansas City
and that thought was swallowed too
as the shadow of the arena rose in the west.

Music blared from the wall of the bleachers topped
by a halo of shooting floodlights. We locked arms,
maneuvering through the scrambled lot of pickups,
station wagons, old battered sedans, and jeeps,
headlights and dust raking the ground,
the only clear image in a wilderness of noise.

Spinning beyond the lights into dazzling shapes
the pageant of flags entered the oval field,
men and women racing on horseback,
crisscrossing rapidly, flawlessly,
ribbons of color pulled by our eyes.
They sliced through the air like gulls or geese,
till finally a lone man-at-arms gestured
and all the lines stopped at once.

Leaving the oval field at the far gate,
the riders waved to the hoots of the crowd.
We looked down into the fading afterimage
as clowns and bellowing steers absorbed the scene.
There were other scenes, and midway,
a brief rustle of kids and critters.
Always the crowd, the lights, the stars above,
figures and forms innumerable and unnamed.
We left the arena, hoping to see the hills alone.
Others stood outside in the lot, silent,
dreaming on the stars, the night that gives nothing
but what we ask: faint stars on which to dream,
a voice of unimpoverished desire at our interior.
You threw your hands upon my downcast face
and gave me back my own lost look.
The parched grass spread tracers of light at our feet.

It Was the Wind

H. C. PALMER
Flint Hills, Kansas, circa 1936

Winter whiteout rattled her windows, slipped beneath
doors and frosted wooden floors, smothered fence
posts and a side of the barn. Cattle, even the dogs,
frozen in drifts.

Spring twister stripped shingles, ripped clapboards
and launched the barn like an ark into Wabaunsee
County. Hail shredded the cornfield
and her garden.

All summer southwind bent the landscape. An empty
sky sucked everything dry. The windmill, frantic
for water, pumped air and the Dust Bowl overflowed
with waves of dirt.

In fall, the wind made her think to stay as cool gusts
scattered black walnuts. She relished picking the nutmeats,
but scrubbed at husking-stained hands into winter again—
and first snow melt.

Andrés Rodríguez is the author of Night Song (Tia Chucha Press), a collection of poetry, and Book of the Heart: The Poetics, Letters, and Life of John Keats (Lindisfarne Press), a work of literary criticism. His poems have appeared in Bilingual Review, The Cortland Review, flashquake, Harvard Review, Hubbub, New York Quarterly, Palabra, Valparaiso Review, and other journals. In 2007, Rodríguez won the Maureen Egan Writers Exchange Award in Poetry sponsored by Poets & Writers. He has an MA in poetry from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz. He lives and works in Kansas City.