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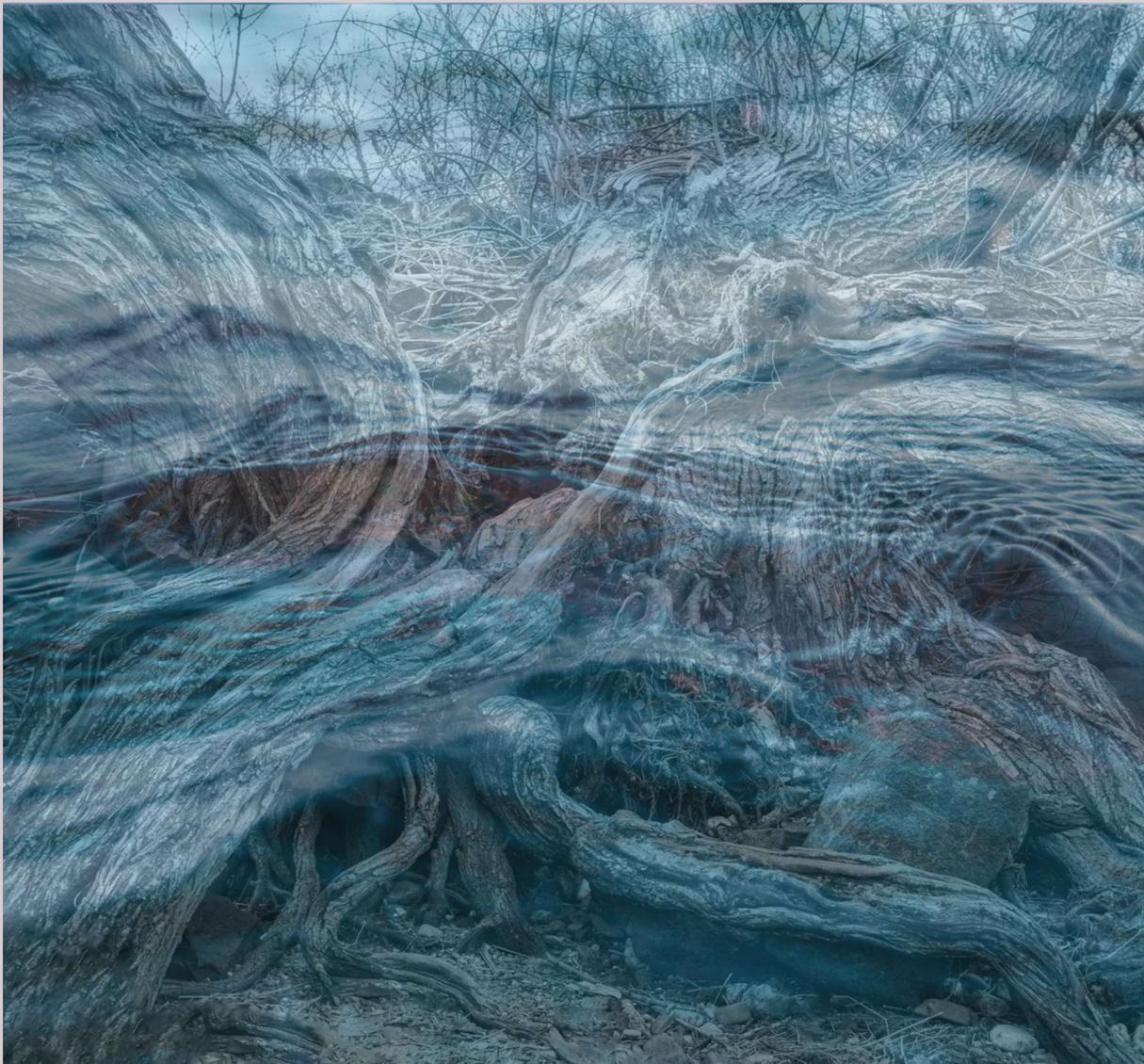
IN CONVERSATION WITH:  
NICA C. TANAKA

FEATURED ARTWORK BY  
NICA C. TANAKA BRIDGING  
WORDS AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE

INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHY AS  
A SPECIAL ADDITION BY  
KIRSTY ANNE RICHARDS

# Thorn & Bloom

Rooted and Ruptured



# Campfire Beside the Prairie

by Rob Rogers



Ever the persnickety backpacker, I arrived at the Dry Pond campsite closer to sunset than I'd hoped, relieved that I had my home for the night to myself and knowing that it was time to get to work. I cherish my adolescent weekend escapes into the Florida wilderness, but as usual, there was a checklist to complete before the night arrived. Sleeping accommodations had to be assembled on an ideal tent spot, the bear bag had to be hung from a tree that still needed to be chosen, and materials for sunset dining and grooming had to be organized and arranged. Out on the trail, I am a slave to my routines. I knew the most time-consuming task would be preparing the campfire.

A recent bout of the flu and its theft of two weeks of weekday exercise had surprised me by sapping my energy on what should have been an easy five-mile hike to my sanctuary in the live oak hammock beside the Kissimmee Prairie. Or perhaps I had been hampered by the cold front that chilled my panted breath. As I stripped off my backpack and crumpled onto the picnic table, I momentarily teased myself into thinking I had ten minutes to rest before pitching my tent, but I knew better. A bank of clouds that rolled in an hour before promised the early arrival of darkness, and if I wanted to stay warm

before retreating to the tent, the campfire had to be ready to light as soon as I finished eating my boil-in-a-bag dinner and bathing with my disposable body wipe.

Erecting and loading my tent and hanging my bear bag had been easy, but the fire took more effort than usual. There was no iron fire pit to contain burning embers, just a small clearing among the leaves with a few oversized charred logs on a pile of silver ash. What few unused pieces that had been left behind by the last campers were too big for a sensible backcountry fire, so I'd have to collect and break apart my fuel before preparing the pit and then building my hearth. It was at this point that Professor Boy Scout took command.

Since I rediscovered backpacking in middle age three seasons ago while crippled by depression, I've come to love campfires. Alone in a dark forest with unseen creatures rattling nearby palm fronds and coyotes howling in the distance, nothing seems to quiet my hyperactive mind more than tending a campfire. Instinctively and compulsively, my left brain is always churning, looking for some subject to analyze and plan and debate. When left without distraction, it will search for unhealthy quandaries to ponder, be they conflicts at work, interpersonal turmoil, or the political crisis *du jour*, just to extinguish the pain of boredom.

Campfires are the tonic for my unhealthy compulsions. Every step of preparation and execution indulges my party planning impulses, then somehow spits out an end-product that leaves me serene and silent, simplifying the final chore of quieting my rambunctious thoughts enough to slip into slumber.

But for whatever reason, I was off my game at Dry Pond.

My busy mind is usually sated by my exhaustive scrutiny of potential firewood. I take only the remnants of trees I find on the forest floor, but like any ounce-counting backpacker, I don't carry a tool larger than a pocketknife. So, I build my pyre only from sticks small enough to be broken by hand or by applying force to fallen branches wedged between the legs of a picnic table. Months of practice have also taught me that variety is essential—tiny twigs for kindling, finger-width shoots for ignition and reignition, and the largest wrist-thick branches to make the fire last. Oak limbs are best; pine will do, but the sap can boil and pop off cinders in high wind. Anything too big will burn only partially and will be too hard to extinguish before retreating to the tent.

Collection that afternoon was tedious, despite the seeming bounty I found on the trail near my campsite. The morning storm had shaken many branches off the trees, but precious few seemed small enough to break down or dry enough to burn. After testing and discarding numerous candidates like fruit in the produce aisle, the Professor settled on several five-foot limbs and dragged them back to camp.

Then came pruning and sorting. Step one was to snap off the twigs for kindling. Then the fingers were broken off and cracked into nine-inch pieces for the sustenance pile. Eventually I was left with four trimmed boughs nearly the length of my body, which I strategically broke into the logs that would anchor my opus. The fresh wood resisted my wrists and knee, so the bench of the picnic table was used as a fulcrum. When I was finished, I had a dozen logs. I mercifully avoided splinters.

Not yet satisfied, the Professor demanded more organization. The kindling pile was divided into sets of small and large twigs, then the piles for

sustenance and anchor logs were doublechecked, with pieces spread beside the fire pit for easy identification once darkness fell. Each piece was examined for density, size, and dryness, with early formulations made for order of use. Daylight was fading, but the checklist had to be followed.

Eventually it was time for construction, itself a two-step process of laying the foundation and then erecting the superstructure. With steady breezes anticipated and the forest floor covered in combustible debris, the burnt logs were laid as windbreaks and several inches of sand were scraped from the bottom of the fire pit with an improvised spade, then heaped in four corners for use later to extinguish the last embers. I then dug a pair of trenches with my hiking stick, to allow fire-sustaining oxygen to enter from below the fuel.

As the sun began sinking toward the western horizon, the time had finally come to build the temple. A frame of crisscrossing finger pieces was laid atop the tunnels to function as a floor for the pile of kindling, with the driest, most ignitable pieces fashioned into a nest for the cheater fire-starting cube brought from home. Then two stumpy support pieces were laid across the trenches to hold a specially selected log that would be propped above the kindling and fire starter. Much would depend upon the leadoff log reaching sustainable combustion before the kindling and the cube from home burned out. But as insurance, several finger pieces were pitched like a slanting roof against the central log.

“No sane person takes this much time to build a fire. For God sakes, man, finish this damn thing. We need a break before dinner.”

Fatigue was beginning to set in, but the pieces of my masterpiece kept falling out of position. Despite my best efforts, my creation was beginning to look like a first-grade popsicle fort hit by an earthquake, and I sensed my Wilderness Survival merit badge

“But humans are a  
diverse garden  
not a manicured lawn.  
Bursting blossoms of  
differing height, weight  
colors of hair, skin, eyes  
strengths, weaknesses.”

~ Lorraine Jeffery



may be in peril. The cold front was about to drop the post-dinner breezes into the high 40s, and if this sucker didn't light, I was going to freeze as the ointment from the shower wipe dried. I might even have to put on pants.

But two seasons of experience and twenty-four months of therapy finally kicked in, and I stepped away and accepted that what would be, will be.

And then I returned to paradise.

Staring past my tent at the edge of the hammock, I saw the prairie immersed in an orange glow, and I took my camp stool to a small clearing in the grass just far enough from camp to see the sun setting in the distance behind my campsite. As the front continued to race toward the approaching stars, bands of cirrus clouds drifted across the sky like lines of white caps searching for a distant beach, their westernmost surges refracting the fading sunlight into its citrus hue. Cotton ball cumulus clouds rolled below like the cars of a train. Further down the southern treeline, in the shadowy oaks, unseen owls called and echoed replies. The last breath of humid warmth danced across my lips, waiting for the arrival of night to escape to the atmosphere above.

In my trance at camp, I had almost missed the finest moments of the day. But the right brain arrived just in time for his shift change and retook the helm, and the dreamer returned. I untied my boot laces, took off my shirt, and forgot about the world. For the last forty-five minutes of twilight, all thoughts were carried away in the evening breeze. I gazed at the sky in silence, barely aware of anything other than the beauty into which I was being absorbed.

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The moment of truth after dinner proved to be anticlimactic. With a belly full of rehydrated curry and now shivering in near nudity under a smothering of cool mint sanitizing liquid, I grabbed the lighter and fire starter cube, strapped on my headlamp, and crossed my fingers. A flick of the Bic would determine whether I would have entertainment for the next two hours.

To Professor Boy Scout's surprise, the fire sprang to life as scripted. The planks of the kindling floor held firm as the cube from home flickered in its nest, and the offerings from the forest took flame at precisely the planned order and speed. Each sprig ignited and exhausted quickly but remained lit long enough to spark up the finger branches resting against the roasting log. As I fed more kindling into the hearth, flames began spreading across the belly of the centerpiece, first above the cube, then toward the supporting stumps as smoke began puffing from the unlit ends. Within minutes, twinkling vines of crimson and amber intertwined and strangled the foundational log. Sustainable fire had been achieved.

It was hard not to chuckle at how much time and energy I'd spent on another campfire. But as I pulled over my camp stool and began prodding and probing at my invention, it began to dawn on me that the eccentric mechanics of my left brain have helped me do far more than manage a campsite.

In the months since I first began returning to the forest to live out boyish fantasies overnight, I'd made considerable strides conquering the demons that first drove me to the solitude of the backcountry. There were certainly speed bumps along the way. A pair of three-month mental health sabbaticals, a painful career transition, six weeks of partial hospitalization. I'd also been the beneficiary of heartfelt heroism, both from the foundational women in my life and virtuoso mental health

practitioners. But my busy-body analytical mind also played a starring role in carrying me through my struggles.

I attacked my lifelong psychological maladies and their latest mutations with the same critical eye and studious research that I apply to legal strategic planning, campfires, and, in moments of weakness, petty interpersonal conflicts. I voraciously read, asked, and listened, and experimented. Even in the deepest pits of despair, I studied my illness clinically, formulating and testing hypotheses and working to deduce answers and solutions. And I sought help from people I trusted to be candid, loved ones who risked telling me in heated moments that critical facts I knew to be true were delusions. I listened when encouraged to make difficult changes, and I used reason and the advice of professionals to reshape core beliefs that had been torturing me since childhood.

As I paced around my fire cloaked in the moonless chill, silently contemplating which log to turn and which branch to burn next, I realized that my eccentric routines might just be a superpower. Perhaps I had forgotten the lessons taught by my elementary school teachers, that even seemingly useless study and preparation can often precede a successful outcome, even if it's hard to see a causal connection. The scientific philosopher's compulsion to chart maps for the places he's left in the past and perpetually look for familiar topography in new worlds somehow helps him to find unseen paths through foreboding terrain.

So perhaps being an overthinker isn't so bad after all.

Time began to slow, and my engine purred down to idle.

Then, as planned, the left brain clocked out for the night and the right brain returned to the captain's seat, shifting the weekend woodsmen into autopilot. Now relaxing on my camp stool with

ankles crossed and head lamp extinguished, I instinctively poked and turned the cinders from my stool, barely conscious of my subtle movements. Each follicle on my chin and legs tasted the dropping temperature, savoring the fleeting Florida winter. The calls of the owls rang out like church bells, my mind's eye triangulating their origin and following their paths like radar. Having ignored the sky for too long, I turned my gaze to the stars sparkling through the live oak boughs above. All sense of time slipped away as I watched the constellations crawl by.

Eventually, the last of the scorched sticks faded from pink to gray, and I buried the last remnants of my creation in the excavated heaps of sand, hiding any trace of what I'd labored to create just a few hours earlier. With soft steps, I withdrew to my tent and crawled into my sleeping bag. Within moments, as blurry pixels of future campsites waltzed above me, I drifted away and evaporated into the starlit sky.

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