Writing from the Center

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Vol 1

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Volume 1 Theme: Kansas!

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Prose

Kansas "Red"

Gretchen Cassel Eick

Most Americans view Kansas as the reddest of [Republican] "red states." The mystery, however, is why so few Kansans—much less the rest of the nation—know that Kansas has birthed and housed an array of radicals on both the Right and Left. From its inception, advocates of radically opposed philosophies have battled here, figuratively and literally. Free State Jayhawks from Massachusetts battled with proslavery advocates from Missouri for nearly a decade before their struggle escalated into a national four year civil war. Railroad oligarchs, who ran track across the state and owned the grain elevators essential to Kansas farmers, battled those farmers' organizations, the Grange and the Populist Party. Railroads and farmers joined together to destroy Native Americans' buffalo-based economy and acquire Indian land.

In the early twentieth century a thriving KKK fought the NAACP, the Unions, and William Allen White Republicans. The John Birch Society with three Kansans on its national board took on the same groups in the 1950s-1970s, charging them with the all-powerful "C" word, Communist.

Kansas radicalism took many forms. From Medicine Lodge Carry Nation wielded her temperance hatchet against the evils of alcohol in the largest movement attracting American women. In Girard, the Socialist Party of America published its most influential publication, Appeal to Reason, which carried its pro-working class analysis and Little Blue Books of the classics to half a million Americans. Labor organizer Eugene Debs made his home in Girard during the first decade of the twentieth century working on the Appeal and made two of his five campaigns for president from Girard, running as the Socialist Party candidate in 1904 and 1908.

By the 1950s, young Wichitans drew national notice with their counter culture poetry and art that identified America's affliction as fake prosperity, boring homogeneity and hypocrisy. Kansas Beatniks—precursors to Hippies—attracted Allen Ginsberg, whose best known anti-war poem, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966), was set in Kansas. In 1958, Wichita African American students conducted the country's first successful, student-led sit-in. Sustained civil rights protest brought the first federal investigation of school segregation in the Midwest.

The twenty-first century introduced additional radical strategies. An anti-abortion true believer gunned down Dr. George Tiller in his church in 2009, Governor Sam Brownback experimented with a radical anti-tax policy aimed at eradicating income tax, and Wichita's Koch Brothers donated millions of dollars to political campaigns to "redden" the face of American politics. The Kochs pursued another strategy—working through the American Legislative Exchange Council and Americans for Prosperity to draft legislation for local, state, and federal governments to implement their agenda. We see how effective this was in the state laws making voter registration more difficult and the template list of books that radicals on the Right are besieging school boards across the nation to remove from schools and ban.

Amidst all this Kansas radicalism, perhaps the best kept secret is the story of Earl Browder, another variety of Kansas "Red."

Earl was a Wichita boy born to a school teacher/farmer family in 1891, when everyone who was anyone believed Wichita was about to become the Chicago of the Great Plains. A dozen universities were planned and streets plotted on the city's highest area, Fairmount, with names that were harbingers of the city's anticipated greatness: Vassar, Harvard, Yale and Holyoke. Expansion was the name of the game and real estate the business to be in…until the economy went sour.

A major economic depression in the 1890s dissolved those dreams, dramatically reduced prop-

erty values and propelled out-migration. Even the brand new Garfield University, (today Friends University), whose Proudfoot and Byrd clock tower building was the largest educational structure west of the Mississippi, stood abandoned, inhabited by livestock and rats instead of students. The Chicago of the Great Plains became a boondoggle nicknamed Doo Dah.

At fifteen with only an elementary education Earl Browder joined the Socialist Party. By twenty-three he was speaking out against the Great War in Europe—a rich man's war and a poor man's fight sucking the world into a ghastly struggle over meters of land, with the armaments industry the only winners.

When President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war, reversing his campaign pledge to remain neutral, lads from across the nation were drafted into military service. Earl was sent instead to Leavenworth prison, charged under the new Espionage Act that forbade criticism of the war or the draft.

When he got out at the end of the war, Earl joined others who the government had prosecuted for their exercise of free speech. Together they formed the American Communist Party in 1919, which grew to 60,000 members in its first year.

Earl was a Kansas boy, soft spoken. People said he connected the best of America's past with the economic changes the Communist Party sought and he made sense. His passion for "the under-served" was evident from an early age. "In school…he was always insisting upon the rights of students who were discriminated against by their teachers... He was the vocal friend of all underdogs in school," wrote journalist Cliff Stratton, in the Topeka Capital in September 1936.

That year Browder was the American Communist Party's candidate for president, running against Franklin Roosevelt. He told Stratton, "Today the choice is more like this: Shall all the progressive forces in the country join hands together to keep the Fascist-minded men of Wall Street out of power, protect our democratic rights and improve our living standards, or shall we surrender to Landon, Hearst and the Liberty League?"

He won 79,315 votes and ran again in 1940, this time from prison where he was sentenced to four years plus a $2,000 fine for passport fraud, having traveled to the Soviet Union, which was illegal (The Kansas City Times, January 23, 1940). Between these two elections Soviet leader Joseph Stalin made a secret pact with Nazi leader Adolph Hitler to allow the Germans to march through the Baltic states that the Soviets had taken by force and incorporated into their U.S.S.R. empire. But by December 8, 1941, when the U.S. entered World War II, the Soviets were U.S. allies, and Earl was released from prison a year early for good behavior.

When World War II ended in August 1945, Earl Browder, who had led the Party for fifteen years, proposed that the Communist Party change from a political party to a Marxist educational organization, the Communist Political Association. He wanted to Americanize the party, break its close ties to the Soviet Union and base it more on Jefferson's ideas and less on Marxist dogma, according to a March 15, 1960 article in the Kansas City Times. He believed communists and capitalists could collaborate and compete with no need to fight each other.

These views were similar to those expressed by Wendell Wilkie, the Republican candidate for president in 1940, in his book One World. But Browder's ideas were heresy to Stalin, and Stalin's protégés in the U.S. party attacked Browder vigorously. He was expelled from leadership of the American Communist Party in 1945 and from membership in the Party a year later. He said in a speech in 1950, "Socialism is nothing more nor less than the social, political and ideological system which breaks the fetters upon economic growth created under capitalism and opens the way to a new period of economic and social expansion on a much larger scale."

No longer officially a "communist," he was called to Washington in 1951 to be interrogated by Senator Joseph McCarthy (R/WI), part of McCarthy's hunt for "Reds" in U.S. institutions. Browder was a cooperative witness, but he refused to identify other communists. Tried in federal court for Contempt of Congress, the judge acquitted him, according to Topeka Capital (March 9, 1951).

In March, 1960, he wrote an article published in Harper's to explain his break with the Commu-

nist Party. He wrote,

"The American Communists had thrived as champions of domestic reform. But when the Communists abandoned reforms and championed a Soviet Union openly contemptuous of America while predicting its quick collapse, the same party lost all its hard-won influence. It became merely a bad word in the American language..."

"[M]y break with the Russians had led me into a basic re-examination of Marxist theory.…I have opposed the Communist cold war line ever since, both by public utterance and by private help to trade unionists breaking free from the Communist influence... I have not considered myself a Communist, nor even a Marxist in the dogmatic sense, [since then]..."

"What remains constant for me, during the last 15 years, has been the conviction that the cold war was a calamity for the entire world, and that it can be justified by no consideration of theory, nor by any supposed national interest. I can only hope that Khrushchev's new line of talk portends a new line of action to which America can respond in kind. Such hopes are, however, tempered by years of disillusioning memories, which remind us all that it takes two sides to make a peace."

Browder was a Kansas radical and a "Red" independent thinker who found himself rejected and pilloried by radicals on the Right and Left for his rejection of blind obedience to a political party.

Today, amidst culture wars, distrust of elections, and a fear of the unfamiliar, Kansas radicals continue to battle over the future of the state and nation. Today's "Red State" leaders are a far cry from Earl Browder, but they could learn from him and from Wendell Wilkie, the 1940 Republican presidential candidate, the importance of rejecting lock-step allegiance to One Way thinking. How will Kansas navigate the profound disaffections of the present and what kind of "red" will its leadership be?

Little Red-Haired Girls

Mark Scheel

An Excerpt from a Memoir-in-Progress

Upon viewing a television tribute to the late Charles Schulz, I couldn't help but muse how, comparing our early years, he and I had a lot in common. Sandlot sports. Favorite pets. Some socially awkward little-boy moments. Like, for instance, my third-birthday party when I accidentally steered my go-cart down the steps into the woodshed and came up spitting out wood chips at my guests. There was that penchant, too, for fooling around with an artist's pen—his certainly a tad greater and longer lasting than mine. But in my green-salad days my dream was to be an illustrator. Not least, however, was that lingering grip on both our souls of a devastating encounter with a red-haired girl. His came about at the cusp of adulthood. But mine extended back to the roots of my psyche, my earliest childhood memories.

I was born and raised an only child on a farm near Emporia, Kansas. My most distant recollections are of the sounds and sights of my new world—cows mooing, birds chirping, sun shining through mulberry leaves. And the little catalogue of eternal truths I began assembling in my mind: don't put honey bees in your mouth, don't turn your back on a mean rooster, move fast when dragging a cat by the tail across the kitchen floor. Playmates were few and far between before I started grade school, but there were enough to formulate some rudimentary social guidelines. Share your toys when Mother's watching. Don't hit if they're bigger than you. Don't play games with a girl who's coming down with the measles. That last precept was my first inkling that little girls can mean big trouble.

Glenda Rae, a blonde with red ribbons and black patent leather shoes, was the one who introduced me to illness. But not long after that, another girl arrived on the scene—Katie, a redhead a year older than I. Katie's parents had moved into the old Wilson farmhouse and her father worked in town. My mother had met hers at a farm-wives' club meeting and graciously suggested she bring Katie by to play with me sometime. A few days later there was a knock at the door, and, sure enough, there stood a red-haired girl with pigtails, freckles, tennis shoes and a great big doll in her arms. The doll's name was Samantha.

Katie must have sized me up in a heartbeat as someone who could take directions. I was more a "cowboy-and-Indians" type of guy; nevertheless, in no time at all preparations were underway to play house.

"You're going to be my husband," Katie declared. "And you have to build Samantha and me a home."

What might have been a daunting task was accomplished in short order with Mother's indulgence and helping hand. Two chairs were tipped over facing one another, the backs butted together at the tops, and a blanket thrown over the backs and one side. And, presto, we had a cozy, makeshift dwelling.

"We're going to have to cook," Katie explained. "We need some pots and pans!"

Once again Mother came to the rescue with some basic utensils and two dishes and a hassock as a make-do table. Katie took her housekeeping very seriously. She even borrowed a broom and swept our living area.

"Now," Katie instructed, "your job is to bring us food. You need to go out and kill a bear."

This did present a challenge. The only bear I knew of thereabouts was my favorite stuffed teddy bear, Herman. And I loved Herman and didn't want to kill him. But what's a husband with a hungry family to do? So I cocked my little cork pop rifle, trudged into my bedroom and shot poor Herman with a cork. Then dragged him back to our abode, much to the delight of Katie. At least I was a good provider.

We sat down then to an imaginary meal of bear meat. In the middle of everything Katie suddenly asked me a question I'd never been asked before. She tilted her head to the side, smiled and inquired, "How was your day, dear?"

"Okay, I guess," I replied.

What's a fellow supposed to say, I thought?

After our "meal" Katie announced the day was done, and it was now time to go to sleep. So we crawled into our dwelling, lay down with Samantha between us, pulled an afghan up over us, and pretended to sleep for five minutes. Then suddenly it was morning and "time to go to work"! And, for me, time for yet further enlightenment.

Over a breakfast of left-over bear meat, completely out of the blue, Katie dropped an emotional bombshell. All at once she began to wail and cry crocodile tears.

"I've tried to be a good wife," she lamented. "But you don't appreciate me. I don't think you love me anymore!" More sobs and tears. "I'm going to take Samantha and go stay with Mother!" And I stood by the hassock utterly bewildered. All this was unknown script to me.

By the time Katie and Samantha departed that day, I'd gained a new perspective on life. Whether as stress relief or symbolic gesture I couldn't say, but I immediately marched into the living room, stood and stared out the bay windows at the meadow, and unceremoniously peed my pants. So much for domesticity.

Katie's parents moved away within the year, but the influence of those times Katie and I played together was indelible. For me the dye was cast for bachelorhood until middle age. Later years would see several young women pleading the case for matrimony, but they had no idea what they were up against. Katie as boss and mentor had taught me well the perplexing and ominous aspects of the tender trap.

Still, there are those times when I, like good old Charlie Brown, think gently of the little red-haired girl. I wonder what road in life she traveled. Did she have children and grandchildren? Did she have a good man beside her who could reassure her of his love? Did she ever prepare real bear meat?

I Never Saw the Sea

Julie Stielstra

***I Never Saw the Sea* was previously published in *The New Plains Review*, Spring 2010.**

After Herb died, I had to get a better job. Except for when the kids were little, I always did work. But on my own, I wasn't going to make it on what they paid me at the farm-and-feed store cash register.

We were married almost twenty five years. Herb was the guy whose laugh you heard over the crowd at the Eazy Street bar. He was the life of every party, always the center of attention, so when he shone a little of that light on me, I was hooked. Trouble was, once you'd seen all his acts and heard all his stories, you weren't such a great audience any more, and he'd be going out looking for a new one. But by then Vern was two and Sheila was on the way, and Herb had made foreman out at the Goodland feedlot where he'd been working since he was seventeen, so we carried on as best we could. I told him his two-pack-a-day habit (two packs of Marlboros and two six-packs of Budweiser) was going to kill him before he ever saw his grandkids, and I was right. He was hugging the steering wheel of the tractor when they found him, blue around the mouth and way past any sort of help.

Sheila flew in from Atlanta, and thought I should come stay with her and her husband Bill for a while. They've built a huge house in a new subdivision, but to be honest, I just didn't know how she and I would pass the time together down there. I said I'd feel better at home.

It was Marge at the Daylight Donuts who put me onto the Kansas Turnpike job. I used to stop there on my way to the feed store to fill up my travel mug. I must have half a dozen of those mugs – there's always one or two rolling around in my car, one in the sink, and a couple in the booth next to the coffeepot. Well, I've always got one to hand when I need one. Anyway, she'd seen an ad in the Garden City paper and the pay was pretty good. So I applied. I had plenty of experience with a cash till, and I told them I could relocate. So they posted me as a toll booth attendant outside Admire.

I sold the house in Lakin and found a tiny little shingle cottage in Council Grove. I got a dog too. Herb never would have a dog in the house – it ruined them for hunting, he'd say. Since he didn't hunt but once a year with a buddy over in Great Bend who already had a good duck dog, we never had a dog at all. Till I picked out this wiggly little wiener dog pup from a litter for sale in the supermarket parking lot. Fritz is a great little guy – always glad to see me, barks like a banshee when anyone comes up the walk, but wagging his tail at the same time. Just something warm and lively and cheering to put my hands on.

I heard Marge retired and the Daylight Donuts closed up. I don't know where you get a decent donut in Lakin any more.

So anyway, the Turnpike sent me out here to Admire. I drive over and slide my namecard into the slot so it reads: "Arlene S. is helping you today." I sign off on the cash drawer with the last shift and check the weather advisories. People getting on the pike just take a ticket from the machine, so unless they're lost or the machine doesn't work, they're pretty much on their own. But when they get off the pike at my booth, I take their money and make change and maybe a little conversation. I keep a box of dog biscuits to hand out with the change if they have a dog in the car. They like that.

The thing about this toll booth out at Admire that I never expected is that it's in about the prettiest place in Kansas. Whoever named it Admire knew what he was doing. I sit in my booth and look out at this rolling, curvy, green-velvet plain cut with little creeks and lines of cottonwood trees. The sky changes all day long, and the light goes all different colors from morning till night, depending on the clouds or the weather. With those long

hills all green and billowy, it's almost like being on the ocean, though the closest I've ever been to the ocean is Cheyenne Bottoms when it floods. Summer nights, we get a near blizzard of bugs around the lights, and then the bats come swooping in and gobble them up.

You can see things coming out here. There'll be a purple veil of rain to the west, or low cold snow clouds come running in, and you know what to do. I can pull the blinds against the sun or crank up the heater against the sleety wind, and there I am, safe in my little nest.

A couple miles west of the booth is the Admire Cemetery. A little old place with curlicue gates and cows and horses on the other side of the fence. And meadowlarks. You can be driving along at sixty-five miles an hour with the windows rolled up, and you can still hear them singing as you go by. I guess I just never noticed things like that before.

I've wondered if they'd let me be buried there so I could be near the meadowlarks and the hills, but Herb and Vernon were laid to rest in Lakin, so I expect that's where I'll end up.

Vernon. He was his father's son, for sure: cheerful, a little cheeky, always looking for a laugh and a good time. But a good kid, really, a good kid. Captain on the track team – they were state champs his junior year. His grades maybe weren't the best, but Herb gave him a part-time job at the feedlot and figured that had worked out well enough for him. Vern wasn't so sure, and he'd been talking to an army recruiter in Garden City. "Don't worry, ma," he said to me, "I can always go to college later on the army's dime." He was a smart kid, really, trying to think it all through. As he put it, he was "checking out all the options."

Till a drunk in a pickup truck bigger than Vern's crossed the center line on route 50 and crushed him to death against a telephone pole. When they pulled the drunk out of his truck, with a split lip and a sprained wrist, he just kept whimpering, "But I'm a good guy."

I hope to God you don't ever have to be waked up in the middle of the night by the sheriff's car door slamming and that revolving light flashing round and round, sliding off the cottonwood leaves. To this day, the sight of police lights makes my hands start to shake. I'm a really careful driver.

After that, I think Sheila must have felt she just wasn't as important to us. She was up and out of there the minute she got out of Lakin High, and went up to Fort Hays State, where she met Bill. He was an ag school star, and got himself a plum job with one of the big companies that invent new kinds of corn and wheat and such. He makes more money in a month than Herb ever did in four. Their lives are so different now, I don't think Sheila can understand at all how I can live by myself in a little old house and sit in that lonesome tollbooth every day.

It's mostly quiet out here, between vehicles. I asked my boss if it was okay to have a little TV in the booth, but he said no, it wasn't professional. The night guy has one, but he brings it back and forth so maybe they don't know about it. I never was much of a reader, but I brought a Danielle Steel paperback I got at a garage sale for fifty cents. Sheila says her books are real popular, but I couldn't get into it. These glamorous people with cocktail parties and flying to Europe and high-powered business – I just didn't care a whole lot about their problems. Then one night, I happened to catch this old movie on TV and I liked it a lot, about a dirt-poor farm family trying to get to California just to make a living. The credits said it was based on a book. So I went to this secondhand bookstore in Council Grove, to see if they had it.

The woman who ran the place must have liked plants in theory, because there were plants all over the place. On the shelves, hanging from the ceiling, lined up along the windowsills. I say in theory because they were all dead or dying. There were leaves and dirt and cobwebs and dead flies everyplace and you couldn't even begin to see in through the windows. I doubt anyone swept or ran a vacuum in there for years. But the owner, she didn't get around too well – she was in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank strapped to it. She was on the phone when I came in, hollering at a bank clerk about her accounts, swearing and sweating. I felt sorry for whoever was at the other end. She slammed down the phone and said, "You want something?"

"Do you have *The Grapes of Wrath*?"

"You think I know every book we have in here? Je-

sus. Fiction's in that row, by author. Just go look."
"I don't remember the author…. Thanks anyway, I guess."
"Steinbeck. S. No, not there! That row."
I was afraid to piss her off any more, so I stepped over two boxes of books and crouched down on the filthy carpet. I figured I'd pretend to look, then get out of there.
But there it was – four copies of it. I paid her a buck and left as fast as I could.
I liked the book even more than the movie. That got me started reading other books, but the bookstore was so creepy that I started going to the public library instead. I think the librarian was thrilled to have someone to pick books out for. She helped me find out about this bird I saw too. One day I kept hearing this long, windy wolf-whistle. It sounded both close by and a long way off. Then this tall tan bird sailed in and landed on a fencepost. It had long pointed wings, and it tipped them straight up then hinged them back down perfectly smooth in an instant. It stood there on these tall legs and gave out that whispery whistle again. It was so elegant. The bird book we found said it was called an upland sandpiper, which seems like the right kind of bird to have in an upland place that looks like an ocean.
That bookstore closed down last year when that woman died. There's a payday loan store in there now.
So I was reading some short stories the first time the old aqua-colored Oldsmobile pulled up to the booth to get on the pike. I learned to drive in a car like that, with three on the column and a wide, slippery bench seat in front. An old man's car, the kind they keep sitting under a carport and use just for trips into town when they don't want to drive the pickup. It was an old man driving it, too, with his wife. He took the ticket out of the machine, but then just sat there. I slid open the window and asked if they needed help.
The man was peering at the ticket, then handed it to his wife who couldn't seem to figure it out either.
"How much is the toll?" he asked.
"Depends how far you're going. When you get off the turnpike, there'll be another nice person like me at that booth, and you pay them." I smiled at them. He sat with both big freckled hands on the wheel, tapping his thumbs on the rim. His John Deere hat sat funny on his head, too bright and clean, not broken in yet.
"Going up to Topeka," he said. "Taking my wife to see a cancer doctor up there. At St Francis."
"Charlie." His wife turned her face away to look out the window. "She don't need to hear all about that."
"You know how to get there?" I asked him. He pulled a folded paper out of his shirt pocket.
"Yeah, I got directions." He handed the paper up to me. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with it, but I saw what exit they were supposed to take and gave it back.
"You just follow those directions, and when you get to that exit booth, the toll'll be a dollar eighty."
I bent to look over at his wife. "You take care, now. Those doctors up there will take good care of you, I'm sure." She just kept on looking out the window as he put the car in gear and rolled up the ramp to Topeka.
They came back through that afternoon. The old man handed me a dollar bill, three quarters and a nickel.
"Guess I'll be stocking up on these," he said. "We'll be back and forth a bit."
"Everything go okay?" I asked. Meaning did they find the right exit and the hospital and all.
"Well, they took lots of tests and things. They think the chemo will do her some good, so we'll be going up regular for that for a while."
"Okay, well, good luck then," I said. "Guess I'll be seeing you." He lifted a hand and pulled away.
I saw them a few times a week for a while. The old man always had the exact change. I told him about buying a K-Tag, so they could just drive on through the electronic lane without stopping to pay, but he said, naw, it wouldn't be worth it just for a little while. His wife sometimes looked a little better, sometimes smiled and said hi to me. Other times she looked like she might be trying to sleep, and she was peaky and pale.
One afternoon he came back alone.
"They thought she should stay up there a few days," he said. "Her blood counts got a little low."
I bought some some yellow mums at the market, in a little ceramic pumpkin for fall. I took them

to the booth, and the next day when he came through I gave them to him.
"To cheer up your wife," I said. "Hope she's doing better."
"Aw, she's fine. Just needs to get a little strength back. That chemo can be pretty hard on you," he said.
I didn't see them for a while after that. I hoped that meant the chemo was done and she was home again.
Sheila and Bill flew me down to Atlanta for Christmas. I paid extra myself to bring Fritz in a carrier under the seat. Sheila fretted about him, though. Luckily I caught myself before I put my dinner plate down on the floor for him to lick or she'd have had a heart attack for sure. I let her think he slept on the folded blanket on the floor of the guest room.
It was sixty degrees in Atlanta when I left, and nineteen in Council Grove. I leaned into a freezing wind full of snow to get into my tollbooth, and I was happy to be there. And there came the aqua-colored Oldsmobile, with the old man and his wife. She was bundled up close in a big old coat, huddled in the corner of the front seat.
"You have to drive up to Topeka today?" I said. "Be careful. If it gets bad, you pull off onto that service plaza and wait. The plows are out, but it'll be slick in some places."
"Yeah, we will. She's just not feeling good, so the doc thought I should bring her up."
"You take care, okay?"
Funny how in this job, I see people come and go, and then they just disappear and I never see them again. Most of the time, I don't even think about it. They just pass on through and that's that. But I was glad to see that Olds coming through the booth a few days later, coming back from Topeka. The storm had passed off, and it was one of those brilliant, freezing cold blue days.
"Hey," I said. The old man was alone. He stopped the car, then started to look vaguely around for his money, like he'd forgotten where it was.
"Hey," I said again. "You okay? How's your wife?" He stopped pawing for his wallet and looked up at me, his eyes gone all shiny and wet. He just stared up at me.
"She's dead," he said. "She died." And he laid his forehead down on his hands hanging on the steering wheel. There was just a harsh and sorrowful wind booming across the asphalt.
"Sir? Sir?" I called to him. He raised his head a little. He was shaking.
"Sir? Just one minute." That poor man was in no shape to drive. I couldn't let him. I filled a coffee mug from the pot, and dumped in some sugar. I zipped up my coat, came out of the booth and pulled open his door. "You slide over, now." Like a lost kid, he did what I told him. I got in behind the wheel and handed him the cup.
"I'm going to pull your car over right here, out of the way, for a minute. Drink some of that coffee. It'll warm you up." We sat there.
"Is anyone at home with you?"
He thought hard. "My niece is coming," he said. "From Kansas City. She said she'd come down."
He stared out the windshield. Then he said, "It don't seem fair. At our age. All these years, you'd think if you got this far, you'd be home free. You wouldn't think it'd be laying there in wait for you. I don't know what I thought. Just didn't think it would be like this.
"It'd be fifty… fifty one years in April." Fifty one years. More than twice what I got with Vernon. Or Herb. Did that make it twice as hard? Or should he just be damned grateful to have had all those years? I remembered some of the things people said to me when Vernon died, and when Herb died too. Well meant, I know, but I had enough sense not to say any of them.
A cattle truck came chugging up to the booth.
"Sir?" I remembered his name. "Charlie – you sit there a minute and drink that coffee. I got to go take care of this truck, and I'll be right back, okay?"
The damn trucker wanted to flirt, needed receipts, needed change for a twenty. When he finally pulled away, the Olds was gone. And that was my favorite Daylight Donuts cup. Oh well. God knows I got others.
Last week when I got to the booth, there was an envelope for me. Just addressed to Arlene S., The Admire Tollbooth, Admire, KS.
"Dear Arlene S," it said. "I am sorry to drive away like I did. Please know your kindness is remembered. You happened to be the first person I said

those words to, so I hope you understand. I will be all right in time. Maybe some time I will drive over and bring your cup back. Thank you. Sincerely, Charles S. Robertson, Osage City, KS."

I thought about writing him back. Or looking him up in the phone book and giving him a call, just to see how he's doing. But there's a balance to keep. I'm just the tollbooth attendant, you know?

It's nine o'clock now. My turn on the evening shift. One of the stories in that book was about a sea captain, who builds a house in the middle of the prairie when he retires because it's the only way he can feel like he's on the sea again, watching the grass ripple in the wind like waves. So my idea about the ocean and the prairie wasn't so silly after all. It's dark and still and cold, and I snuck Fritz into the booth tonight with me. He's sleeping under the counter, nice and cozy, and the lights from the booth are shining out into the night, like a little lighthouse. It's starting to snow.

On the Edge of the Storm

Julie A. Sellers

Aimee knew instinctively she was on the edge of an approaching storm the instant she stepped outside the Kansas City airport. The strange mix of sadness, solitude, and rejection alerted her as it had since she was a child, even before she looked to the sky. Nothing, not even all the years she had lived so far from the inclement summer weather of the Midwest, could erase her uncanny sixth sense. It was something visceral that took her back to her earliest memory of cowering underground in total darkness while wild winds shrieked, glass broke, and her mother sobbed. Aimee shook the cobwebs of memory from her mind as the thunder boomed. She dashed through the first drops of pelting rain to the rental car shuttle, tasting the bitter irony in the thunderstorm that was her prodigal's welcome.

By the time Aimee had waited in line for her rental, completed her paperwork, and maneuvered out of the airport, the storm had passed, leaving downed leaves and branches in its wake. She rubbed her throbbing forehead, her finger glancing across the scar, as she continued west, relieved to be alone at last. The solitary three-hour drive through Kansas would be her only respite for the next two weeks while she helped clean out the family farmhouse and prepare her mother to move into a nursing facility.

"Mom's mind is going," her brother, Brad, had told her over the phone. "She's really confused—sometimes thinks I'm Dad. And she keeps asking for someone named Angela. Any idea who that is?"

"No, none."

"We had to take her keys. She'd drive into town and couldn't remember how to get home."

Aimee knew she'd regret the question before she even asked it. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come back and help me and Jenny clean out the place." Brad's voice showed irritation. "Mom's in line to go to assisted living, and we're ready for a bigger place now that the kids are in their teens. The house has been in this family for four generations, and it's only right since we've worked this farm since Dad died. You need to come do your part."

She'd wanted to tell him "no"; she felt she had every right to tell him "no", all things considered. It wasn't that she had a bad relationship with her mother; she had no relationship with her. Aimee's mother had always seemed completely indifferent to her, treating her more as a boarder than a daughter. The only time her mother paid much attention was when Aimee displeased her. Aimee had lived those eighteen years in the farmhouse feeling as if she tiptoed along the edge of a precipice, always one misstep away from her mother's disapproval.

Now, she was headed back to that uncomfortable setting, even though her better sense told her to stay as far away as possible. But even she could recognize that it was one thing to stay away with only an occasional visit under the guise of study and work all these years; it was another under these circumstances. She was teaching no summer classes at the college, and her exhibition, "Arches", had closed following a successful run. She had to go; there was no excuse—at least, no excuse she would offer.

The sky was still gray as Aimee turned south, and although her gut told her the bad weather had passed, coming back to a storm, being hit by that awful barrage of emotions that always foretold severe weather, had her out of sorts. She hadn't felt this way in years—fifteen, to be exact. She had been hanging out with a group of grad students one afternoon in May when the tornado siren went off. A rarity at that altitude, the others rushed nervously to look out the windows. But Aimee sat unperturbed.

"What, too cool to look at a tornado, Kansas?" Rick teased her with the nickname.
"There's no tornado."
"How do you know?"
"I get a feeling when there is."
He looked doubtful. "What kind of feeling?"
She shrugged. "Just a feeling. I can't explain it." But she didn't want to explain it. She knew the group and drunk on the infinite wisdom of twenty-something graduate students, they would have to analyze her. She knew she was damaged goods; she didn't need her friends to diagnose all her issues.
"Sounds intense. Can you predict the winning lottery number, too?" Rick joked, his dark eyes shining.
Remembering, Aimee sighed. "Ah, Rick," she said. Even this many years later she still regretted cutting things off with him when they'd barely even gotten started. She just never seemed able to trust someone enough to give romance a real shot. She was always sure that, just at the moment when she felt most vulnerable, she would be rejected.
She had spent the evening being asked—though it felt like an interrogation—about tornadoes.
"Have you ever seen a tornado?"
"Yes, of course."
"What was it like?"
"Greenish black skies. Rotation, a funnel. And it was loud."
It was always the same thing: anyone who did not grow up with them was fascinated by tornadoes, while Aimee knew to respect them. It was one of her least favorite topics, and it always came up whenever anyone learned she was from Kansas. That evening, with the storm as a backdrop, the questions had come rapid-fire. And of course, there was always the question of whether she had gone storm-chasing. Her response that no, they had gone down the cave, was followed by the requisite explanation of what she meant; didn't her family have a basement?
"Not in a farmhouse built in 1870," she answered, explaining as best she could the underground limestone storm shelters known as caves built by settlers in the Flint Hills. The big blocks of stone that formed the cave's walls, arched ceiling, and steep steps had been cut out of the pastures in the surrounding hills. A wooden shelter with a window at one end covered the descending limestone stairs accessed through a door from the living room. At the bottom, a wooden door latched from the inside as the final barrier against a storm. It was always cool, dark, and damp there in the belly of the earth. Shelves lined the back wall where the women of Aimee's family stored home-canned goods. A long-forgotten bench was the only seating available to wait out a storm, but Aimee had preferred to sit on the smooth stones of the floor and press herself against the rough walls, willing herself to sink into the coolness and darkness, searching for some distant point of beginning where she still belonged. Despite what had happened there, she was never afraid of the cave.
Aimee glanced out at the boundless horizon, watching for her turn. Within moments, she had left the highway for a dusty county road. She slowed as she drove past what had been the Jones's farm, now owned by her older brother. Josette Jones had been much more than a neighbor to Aimee; she was her self-proclaimed godmother, her confidante, and her friend. A war bride, the Frenchwoman was linked to Aimee's earliest memories as someone who cared unconditionally for her. Josette loved to tell the story of how she was given the honor of choosing Aimee's name because she stopped by to visit and ended up driving Aimee's mother to the hospital to deliver her. Aimee always loved how Josette pronounced her name, and more so when she learned it meant "beloved" in French. At least she had been that to Josette, if not to anyone else
It was Josette who discovered Aimee's bleeding forehead the morning after the tornado when she came over to see what damage they'd sustained. No one had realized Aimee was injured, and then they all assumed she'd cut herself on the broken glass littering the cave stairs from the shattered window above. Josette had asked for details, but Aimee couldn't speak over the lump in her throat. But Josette was gone now, Aimee reminded herself as she pulled into the long laneway leading to her family's home. And for the next several days, it would be just Aimee and her mother with no Josette to run to.

Brad and his wife Jenny were waiting impatiently in the kitchen with her mother when Aimee arrived. The tension in the air was palpable.
"'Bout time you got here," Brad said.
"There was a storm…"
"Look who's finally here, Mama Caroline," Jenny interrupted her. Aimee cringed at the nickname and Jenny's and tone.
Aimee's mother turned to her. "It's so good to see you, Hannah," she said.
Aimee glanced at her brother with raised eyebrows, but he just shook his head.
"Look closer, Mama Caroline," said Jenny. "This is Aimee. Aunt Hannah passed away three years ago."
"Well, I know that," Caroline said. "But Hannah still comes to visit me."
Brad stood. "I gotta get back to the field. Jenny will tell you what needs to be done."
Aimee bristled, but she swallowed a retort, reminding herself that she was only back for two weeks; she could endure anything for two weeks, couldn't she?
"I have a list here for you," Jenny said. She handed Aimee her orders, explaining even the most obvious points as if Aimee were five. Being an artist and a college professor had long ago branded her as impractical and without common sense.
"Oh, Jenny. All that can wait," said Caroline. "I haven't talked to Hannah for ages."
Jenny patted Caroline's hand and shushed her "But this isn't your sister. This is Aimee, and she needs to do her part. Brad and I can't be expected to do all the work around here forever."
Aimee gritted her teeth. "Well, considering you've already inherited the house and all the land, it doesn't exactly seem unreasonable," she said.
Jenny's jaw dropped. Aimee was relieved that for once, she was speechless.
Caroline looked confused and uncomfortable. "Oh, dear," she said, wringing her hands.
"You've upset your mother," Jenny accused her. "There, there," she spoke in a baby voice, patting Caroline's shoulder.
"Jenny, get Hannah a glass of tea. My goodness, she looks hot, and you're just sitting there."
Aimee smirked. "Thank you. I'd love a glass of tea. Now, give me that list, and let me take a look at it."
Aimee spent the next five days cleaning every closet and drawer, each nook and cranny in the house, feeling the pull of the past with each item she uncovered. She had been gone for so long, had pushed thoughts of her cold childhood so far from her mind that everything seemed familiar and strange at the same time. She worked doggedly, separating out the items Jenny had designated for her mother to take to the facility from those that would be donated, burned, or taken to the dump. Jenny and Brad stopped in regularly to check on her progress and offer their critiques. Aimee was in a constant state of exhaustion from the mental and emotional strain, the physical work, and the weight of the heat of late June in the un-air-conditioned farmhouse. Her mother went by spells when she recognized her and was distant, and other moments when she confused Aimee with Aunt Hannah and was cheerful and even chatty.
"Aunt Hannah's gone, Mom," Aimee repeated on the fifth evening. She was sitting on the floor in front of the old metal filing cabinet, going through each drawer as sweat pooled between her shoulder blades. She begged her mother to let her turn on the window air-conditioner to no avail; money didn't grow on trees, after all.
"I know that. But where is Angela?"
Aimee had answered that she didn't know who Angela was so many times she'd lost track. She sighed. "Ready for bed? You look tired."
Her mother put up no resistance, so Aimee helped her into her nightgown and put her to bed. She glanced at the clock. It was still early; plenty of time to tackle the last drawer of the filing cabinet. It creaked as she opened it, weighted by yellowed folders. Aimee worked through the documents, the mantel clock above her marking time in the heavy, night air. Sweat ran down her neck, and the dust she stirred up clung to her arms. After two hours, she reached the last folder; it was unlabeled and thin. She opened it to find only a single sheet of paper. Aimee recognized her mother's handwriting, and in it, a list of names—girls' names. Almost half-way down the page one was circled: Angela.
"Who are these people?" Aimee said, exasperated at trying to understand all the family silences.

She tossed the single sheet of paper into the trash and rose. She wiped the sweat from her brow and climbed the stairs to her old room. Exhausted, she didn't even change out of her clothes before going to bed with the single fan trained on her.

It was 4:30 in the morning when Aimee awoke to the awful mix of emotions: incredible sadness, complete loneliness, and utter rejection. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled to attention, and her nose tingled at the scent of the storm. She rose and fumbled for the light. The feeling was dizzying and almost overwhelming, and Aimee knew a severe storm was approaching. The wind beat the branches against the house as she rushed down the stairs. She hurried to her mother's room, turning on the light even as she reached for Caroline's shoulder. "Storm's coming. Let's go."

Disoriented, her mother looked at her with frightened eyes.

"We need to go to the cave."

Fear spread over her mother's face. "No, no, no," she wailed, grasping the covers. Ever since that long ago night, her mother refused to go down the cave during storms. Her father had finally given up trying to convince her, but Aimee wasn't taking any risks.

"We'll be safe, but we have to go to the cave," Aimee insisted.

"No, not there…" Caroline's voice trailed off into a wail.

The hail came, battering the house. Thunder rolled, shaking the structure to its foundations. The lights flickered. Desperate, Aimee reached under her mother's frail frame and raised her to sit on the edge of the bed. She coaxed Caroline's feet into a pair of slippers before lifting her to stand. With one arm around her mother's waist, Aimee led the sobbing, shaking woman to the cave.

Aimee opened the door and switched on the single unshaded lightbulb. Lightening shredded the sky outside the window at the end of shelter. The damp, musty coolness of the cave and the violent scent of the storm filled Aimee's nostrils, reducing her in an instant to the child of four who had sought shelter in that cave.

"I can't," Caroline insisted. She gripped the doorframe at the top of the steep steps.

Aimee pressed her body against her mother's, blocking her retreat. "No time for that, Mom. Move."

Something in Aimee's voice broke through, and Caroline descended the steps as the storm lashed the house harder. Somehow, they made it to the bottom, and Aimee latched the rickety wooden door behind her. She led her mother to the wobbly bench. Caroline continued to whimper, and Aimee sat on the limestone floor with her back against the rough-hewn rock of the wall, tucked her knees to her chest, and rested her head on them. The rainwater had already saturated the dry earth, and in places, it trickled down the walls in cool rivulets and dripped from the arched stone ceiling, plinking off the lids of long-forgotten canned goods in Mason jars. A beetle scampered by Aimee's foot, and a spider web in the corner reflected the bulb's glare.

Another crash of thunder shook the house, and the light went out. Inky blackness enveloped them. The darkness intensified each sound: the wind and rain, the scurrying insects, the drops and rivulets, and Caroline's tears. Aimee knew she should try to soothe her mother, but she found herself unable to move. It was the same scenario, the same rerun that had been stuck on repeat in her mind since she was four: the storm, her mother's inexplicable tears, Aimee's childlike attempt to comfort Caroline, and those hands… Could she ever forget her mother's hands? Hands placed solidly, determinedly, and unequivocally on Aimee's little chest, shoving her back, telling her along with her mother's harsh words to get away from her. Every cell in her tiny, childish being had felt that rejection as she stumbled back through the darkness and into the sharp edge of a stone in the wall. Even now, she could remember the salty taste of the blood from her cut forehead as it mixed with the earthy rainwater seeping down the walls to the spot where she sat curled so tightly on the floor that not even her father or brother noticed when they came rushing down. That night had been the only time her mother said anything directly to her, but every little gesture, each slight, every single inattention after that: they all came back to that single moment in the cave. Aimee had spent her entire life slinking to the shadows, huddling in solitude just past the reach of the

light, filled with the precarious sense that she was on the brink of an abyss, on the edge of a storm, one solitary mistake from irremediable rejection.
Caroline's wails intensified with the storm. At last, she drew a ragged breath. "I hate it down here, Hannah," she shouted.
The whirl of emotions inside Aimee collided with her mother's reproof. "Well, tough," she shouted back. "We're staying down here, because no matter how messed up my life is because of you, I don't have the slightest intention of dying in a tornado."
"Don't talk like that to me, Hannah. You of all people should understand why I hate it here. This place took my baby, it took my little girl, my Angela."
Aimee's breath caught. "What are you talking about?"
"You know I tripped coming down here in that storm. I fell, and I lost her. I don't care what anyone else says, I know it was my fault. It was my fault I lost my little girl."
Low moans of grief echoed off the walls and the arched ceiling. Aimee heard the old bench creak as her mother rocked back and forth on it in her misery.
Recognition pulsed through Aimee. She felt she should say something, but she was at a loss, torn between empathy for her mother's decades of self-reproaches and indignation that she had somehow been held responsible for surviving, for even existing.
"My little girl," Caroline repeated.
"You had another girl, you know," Aimee reminded her.
"I know that, but I never had the courage to love her. I never believed she'd be born. I was sure I'd lose her, too. I couldn't bear another loss."
Aimee rubbed her temples, her finger tracing the scar. She knew. At last, after so many years of asking what she'd done to merit her mother's coldness, she had her answer. And even though that answer could never erase all the effects of those years of pain, at least she knew the truth. And something about that truth was liberating.
"Mom… Caroline," Aimee said.
"Yes, Hannah?"
"You know Aunt Hannah… I mean, I'm gone, right? I died three years ago."
There was a pause. "Yes, I know, Hannah."
"Well, I've seen Angela here, and… she says it wasn't your fault."
"You saw her?"
"Yes, and she told me to tell you it wasn't because you fell. To stop thinking that."
"Really?"
"Yes," Aimee whispered.
The single bulb blared back on. Both women blinked through the glare at each other. Caroline shaded her eyes and looked intently at her. "Aimee?"
"Yes, Mom." She stood slowly, stiffly, and sat beside her mother. Caroline patted her arm.
"I've just had the loveliest conversation with your Aunt Hannah."
"Oh?"
"Yes. She's given me some news that's made me very happy."
"I'm glad, Mom." She stood and stepped to the door, opening it a crack to listen, to sense the storm. It had passed. "Let's go upstairs and have some coffee and you can tell me all about it—that is, if you want."
Aimee reached for her mother's hand, and Caroline rose and took it. Slowly, Aimee led the way up the time-worn limestone steps and into the first gray streaks of the new day.

Poetry

[belonging]

Lindsey Bartlett

In between 18 and 37, belonging
found me when I wasn't expecting
it. Pulled up a chair at the table and
asked me to sit, happy to include the
ghosts of all the people I had once been.

All those ghosts who never fit in,
always searching, searching for a place
I could not have then named. It found
me here, now, among these people
who take me as I am.

Suddenly, this place was everything,
and I knew myself, because I carved this
niche from past selves who had been waiting
all this time for an open-armed welcome.

I took up my chair, and I took a seat at the
table with a grateful sight. Finally, here,
in this place, I was home.

Alchemy on the Edge of the Flint Hills

Iris Craver

Some folks think that alchemy is just the stuff of myth.
Turning rocks into gold.
Or a long-forgotten craft, seeking truth in the philosopher's stone.
As hard as it is to believe today,
(and I am certain there are others)
I have met two alchemists,
practicing their trade out on the rolling Flint Hills of Kansas.
Using drums, colanders, herbs, and shovels,
these two, these two, stir up their concoctions,
turning hatred and weapons of mass destruction
into the throbbing music of peace.
Creating recipes with the life-sustaining harvest
growing out of that same soil, where not long ago…..
a single push of the button would annihilate the world.
Hiding out, pretending to be a mild-mannered high school history teacher
and a meticulous, gentle speech therapist, these two, these two alche
mists have quietly now, for years, worked their magic.
Their home is Subterra Castle and at the entry door,
the sign proclaims it as "The House That Love Built".
The truth be told these two……
these two alchemists are changing the world, one heart at a time.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

Kay Duganator

Kansas is supposed to be full of wheat fields,
as far as the eye can see.
Houses must be one story and have a basement,
so they do not get sweet away by tornados.
Every family resides on a farm,
with cows, chickens, and stray barn cats.
Flat as a pancake, with a gentle yellow brick road.

Would anyone else recognize the Kansas that I know?
I grew up driving through the Flint Hills,
as the land unwinds up and down it's terrain.
Climbing trees with my sister,
and hanging out in the branches to see how
the world spread out below our dangling feet.

I have never seen a tornado,
but I have watched storm clouds come undone.
Rain coming down in sheets until a flash flood
made us pile up all of our household items
in the room with the highest ground.

I have played hide and seek
in corn fields that housed
the graves of civil war soldiers,
marked by stones that have long since faded away.
Yet the stories are still whispered around bonfires at night.

I have never traveled on a yellow brick road,
though it might hold up better then the ones that we have.
Aim your car for the space in between potholes,
prying your tires hold up.
Summer makes me think of the color orange,
they type that is on construction cones and Detour signs.

My Kansas does not look like the one
that the rest of the world talks about,
but I will admit,
I have owned a chicken or two.
Just for the eggs.

The Catfish Burps

Gretchen Cassel Eick

The catfish burps,
bubbling
the skin of
the river.
The goose,
its bottom
tickled,
moves over.
The child,
skipping
stones,
sees stone
connect
with goose
who was not
there
a moment
ago.
Hear the catfish
chuckling?

I am starting to live in color,
she wrote.
Not always pink or orange.
Some days are brown,
but brown is earthy,
softened by rain,
polished by simple
survival of
seasons of loss.
I've learned to love brown.

I've started to live in color,
she wrote.
Pinks and orange, yes,
but some days browns.
Browns are earthy,
softened by rain,
polished by those
seasons of loss
and change.
I've learned to love brown.

Today is end of May
Sunshine.
Wind off the prairie,
saturated greens,
sky so high
you almost believe
in heaven.
And 19 young children
in Elvalde, TX
will never feel this
delight again.

Grief Is

Gretchen Cassel Eick

a cat you never wanted
who invites himself in
and stays.
You give in to his persistence,
set out food and water,
let him in and out.
With reluctance you
welcome him to your bed.
He teaches solitary cat skills,
when to keen and when to hum,
how to ask for what you need.
You persist the year he is near.
Then one day he is gone.
Moved on.
You miss his warm spot
on your bed and
rearranging your legs
to make room for him.

July Morning on Park Place, Wichita

Gretchen Cassel Eick

Dust rises in clouds where
I place my feet and heat
groans its hallelujah.
The day plays slow speed.
A man sits on his porch
slowly drinking coffee.
Two Assemblies of God
ladies arrange dresses
and baby things for today's
big yard sale.

I pass the self-important
Pharisees of our 'hood.
Ice cream-colored ladies,
Victorian grand dames
showing off their feathered
siding, haughty with trim
and time-faded beauty.
Out front stone obelisks
with black iron circles
wait for reins.

Boxwood and old roses
keep away humbler houses,
worn frame cottages and
one-story brick apartments,
repurposed churches and
those with new Spanish names,
fenced lots with no buildings,
Craftsman bungalows with
leaded glass and roof ribs
of dragons.

A dog barks, then more,
loud and threatening. They
bound to fences to alarm,
chihuahuas the fiercest,
panting huskies laidback.
Sly-eyed cats unperturbed
glance at the intruders,
then retreat to catch some
rays on the only grass
to survive.

Bathtub madonnas sweat
in their porcelain shrines.
Yard angels turn to stone.
Vegetables wither and
plastic pools melt and sag.
Sunflowers barely shade
bird feeders that circle
in the damp, languid air.
Five birds hold on and snack.
Do birds sweat?

Not chicken Lazarus.
He strolls and struts his turf,
rolls his neck back and forth
judiciously seeking
the last grubs.
I hear a rooster,
a call and response
down the block, house to
house. It sounds practiced,
welcoming.

Mexican flags and Stars
and Stripes droop exhausted.
Lettered mailboxes read
Fowler, Berg, Hidano,
Montes, and Obrador.
People here claim their place,
decorate their small space,
nourish identity.
It has nothing to do
with politicians, their
cruelty and cunning
and everything to do
with being at home here,
Kansan Americans.

Driving Lessons

Beth Gulley

1.
I stand in the laundry room
reading labels.
I actively avoid writing
about the time my dad
taught me to drive.

2.
In a story corps
interview recently
the speaker
focused on learning to drive.
I have a story about that.
I should write it.

3.
When my son Asher learned to drive,
he was a bit older than his peers.
He had been in China while they
sat behind the wheel
of the Paola drivers ed van.

4.
I was seventeen, really,
the summer I got my license.
Kids like me who live in Ecuador can't
drive
until they're eighteen.
I didn't have a chance to learn.

5.
Because you died before you finished
teaching me to shift, reverse,
check my mirrors, avoid the potholes,
pay attention to where I was going,
to not be afraid of the other cars.

6.
My sweet sixteen birthday present
was ten hours of driving lessons
with my dad. It was typed up,
printed on a dot matrix.

7.
This is where I get stuck.
I drive now, all the time.
Still, something feels unfinished.

I was promised ten hours of driving lessons
with my dad, and by my count
I'm still owed six or seven.

The Way to Reznicek's Farm

David Hann

The truck was a Toyota '79 that carried a half-ton load,
The trailer a chopped down pickup bed, converted to be towed.
"Almost two tons," Joe said, "A cinch, if we have some luck."
He thumped with his fist the epoxied bed of his weathered pickup truck.
Canned foam called "Great Stuff" filled holes in the Toyota's doors.
A plywood piece was judged good enough for gaps in the front seat floors.
The passenger seat was a wooden chair screwed tight to the dubious frame.
The cracked windshield leaked some air, the tires did the same.
The blacktop we took was one rough ride, and Kansas 9 I'm told,
Is called by some "The Devil's Pride," but worse, is Reznicek's road.
Call it a road? Don't make me laugh! It's rough as a dry stream bed.
Rusted wrecks line the path, and vultures wheel overhead.
But no matter what, we had to go and make the pickup strain.
Cause we wanted our baby chicks to grow and Reznicek had organic grain.
The pickup assaulted potholes and ruts. Was my chair screwed tight enough?
Joe said, "Once we get over this easy part the going might get tough."
He spoke these words with nonchalance. Joe had made the trip before.
Our bodies would heal from this beating. Could the pickup take much more?
A long way to go for corn and beans, you say, over bad roads and weather.
But in eight weeks five pounds they'll weigh, those little fluffs of feather.
Two tons of grain will multiply, coming out in feathers and flesh,
On 200 chickens ready to fry, slaughtered and frozen fresh.
We came upon a flooded stretch we had to try and ford.
I just yelled, "Talley Ho!" and gripped the charred dashboard.
Joe yelled, "Right on! We've got nothing to lose."
"Except ourselves," I said to myself, as the water flowed over my shoes.
The Toyota plowed ahead just like a mountain goat.
At last I was able to swallow the lump that was in my throat.
The clouds finally parted, our race was almost done.
And there was Reznicek's farm illuminated by the sun.
Reznicek sat there waiting, slowly shaking his head.
"My hopes for you were fading," he said. "I thought that you were dead."
Yes, we got to Reznicek's all intact. He helped us with our load.
Brought ourselves back with two tons of grain, safe from Reznicek's road.
That's how it is until again we drive over roads for hours.
Reznicek waiting on his end, and the chickens waiting on ours.

New Route

Debra A. Irsik

New Route
Hay…rolls and rolls
Of fresh baled hay
Corn fields,
Dried and brown
Ready for the
Giant green jaws
Sunflowers bowed heads
Their zenith gone
Fruit ready for harvest

Concrete dinosaurs
Dot the horizon
Silver mammoths
Hold the bounty
Until grain cars
Lined like soldiers
Await hungrily

Barren wheat fields
Seed soon ground
Bags of flour
Begging luscious concoctions
Of golden bread
Cinnamon wafting
In sticky daydreams
Deserted farmsteads
Roofs collapsed burying
Lost memories of
Past inhabitants
Red Cedars invade
Pastures without notice
While cattle graze
Chewing their cud

Serpentine
Aluminum and steel
Spout water into
The atmosphere
Ignoring new technology
With the age old
If it's not broke
Don't fix it

Seeing Kansas
With eyes into the past
Settled in sameness
Like time stopped
Getting by
In slow motion

Barefoot

William J. Karnowski

I have been tempered
I have been twisted
I have been chiseled by the wind
If I ride north
The South wind is my sweetheart
If I ride South
The South wind is my enemy
In this infinite anniversary of God
Thou shalt not kill innocent babies
Thou shalt not steal thy neighbor's
country
I remember running
Barefoot in the breeze
Making sunflower stalk spears
Boxelder bows and arrows
When I look over the Flint Hills
I see humanity back there

Kansas Burning 2017

Nancy Julien Kopp

On a golden winter day
in Kansas, cattle fed
on prairie grasses and hay
under an endless sky.

Peaceful clouds, gentle
breezes, brisk temps
until the powerful bent
of Satan shadowed all.

Where came the tiniest spark
that set the prairie ablaze
in only one small place,
with sudden gales and gusts?

Wind-whipped flames sped
across the prairie devouring
grass, hay, cattle and fences,
ranch homes threatened, too.

Billowing clouds of smoke,
charred ruins of prairie,
cattle and calves dead,
others still bellowing in pain.

Ranchers, townspeople
and fire fighters toiled
night and day to no avail.
Fire won and men wept.

Six-hundred-thousand acres
burned, scores of cattle
dead, or dying, fences
gone, homes smoldering.

A record-setting loss
of blazing earth
with Satan's handprint
branded over all.

Ranchers from nearby
brought hay and fencing,
searched for and buried livestock
dropped cash into trembling hands.

Spring—a time of rebirth.
Herds will be replenished,
prairie grass will regrow,
broken hearts will mend.

Kansas Haikus

Madeline Male

In the evening breeze
my field of sunflowers nods
to such a shy sun.

Cars drive by the farm
as horses keep on watching
the tractor pull their plow.

[candid]

Kevin Rabas

The deer in the game camera
touch noses, kiss, sometimes
early or late, when no one
knows to look.

Jackalope

Kevin Rabas

Jackalope is small, but deadly,
if provoked: those
antlers, these teeth.

Step into a den,
like a snake hole,
and you will regret it.
Antlers, teeth. Many.

You cannot outrun
the rabbit. Climb.
Fly.

You cannot always
see them
at night: bedded,
like rocks. But look!
Red eyes.

Do not forget,
if on the run,
they can jump.

Dark of night,
you can hear them:
a chortle, a shriek.

They are small, but their antlers
are sharp. Take care.
Make way.
Stay away.

[on fire]

Kevin Rabas

Dad says, “Come look. Come look, Joy. Call the fire department.”
He calls her to the bedroom window. Out back, flames
behind the back fence, but in just one spot.
“Maybe it’s a fire pit. They’re playing around it. The kids,” I say, the 40-some
thing son
come home to visit, but father waddles across
the backyard in his suspenders, half of his huge shirt
untucked, half not, Mom at his side (“Calm down. It’ll be ok. Ok?”)
When they return
Mom says, “We met the new neighbors.”

Driving through the Flint Hills

Julie A. Sellers

A Golden Shovel Poem after William Stafford's "Across Kansas"

A sunny breeze whispered in the tallgrass, and I
heard its echo of meadowlark and horizon as I drove,
resonating somewhere ancient and distant, down
in the depths of the chambers of my soul. An
unbounded symphony of sky and earth flanked an aisle
of humming gray under flying tires, a ribbon of
movement carrying me on its current of sound.

I Miss Manhattan

Julie A. Sellers

I miss Manhattan,
Kansas,
the Little Apple on the plains.

In dreams, I walk
in K-State purple
among the limestone halls
of my alma mater
and study in a library
with a previous name.

I sip coffee with friends
in a café no longer there,
discussing current events
that are now history.

I have the world at my feet
and still believe it.

True,
I miss Manhattan,
old friends,
iconic spots,
forgotten nooks—
these, and many more.

But the space
of my truest longings
is even farther away.

Off Highway 99

Stacy L. Thowe

Off Highway 99
Down a long dusty road,
through a canopy of sycamores,
over the low water bridge,
up a hill and to the west
lies the old stone house.
You'll spot it by the red roof,
placed there by a woman
who at one time loved the house,
but left it, for another.
So there it stands,
red roof and all. In front is
the porch, where a farmer
used to stand, pipe in hand,
which now slants to the east.
The windows four in a row
flash figments of children
leaning out to catch the first snow.
If you dare to enter,
you will find a hearth
in the center of the main room,
where the farmer's wife
would turn and smile,
as she warmed the soup.
If you venture upstairs
amongst the cobwebs
and creaking boards,
where the sun sends shadows
darting across the floor,
are the dreams of those children,
lying in the fog, thrown up around
your ankles, as your feet kick up dust.
As you walk being careful of the holes,

you sense a whisper,
of family, of laughter, of sorrow.
If you sit silently
and stare out the west window
at the blanket of
golden stalks, wavering, in the
breath of a summer's day,
and you close your eyes,
you will hear
the rustle of branches,
swaying in the wind,
the sweet chirp of
the meadowlark
lazily resting on the bark
of the Elm tree,
and the bubbling
of the creek
that lies beside the field
as it collides with the stones
that block its destination.

Visual Art

Julie Ann Baker Brin

Wichita Gleo Co Grain Elevators 21st St.

Roy Beckemyer

Upland Sandpiper

Prairie Falcon

Madeline Male

Prairie Grass in Kansas

Goose Photo

Julie Stielstra

Foggy Sunrise

Barbara Waterman-Peters

Early Spring

Flint Hills 5

Kevin Rabas

The Path

Book Review

I've Been Fighting this War within Myself

Emilie A. Moll

Book Review of Sanchez-Day, Antonio. I've Been Fighting this War Within Myself. Daldorph, Brian, Meadowlark Press, 2023, Emporia, KS. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-956578-33-1.

This collection of poetry, published posthumously in the name of former convict and, perhaps more importantly, author Antonio Sanchez-Day, examines, scrutinizes, and candidly presents the life and experiences of a man who took the punches that life threw, punched back, and fought this battle to find peace within his own spirit. To understand the significance of this book being produced after the death of the author, one needs only to look as far as the introduction, written by Brian Daldorph with an intimate appreciation for Sanchez-Day's story. The introduction concludes that Antonio has a unique ability to "tell us all how it is possible to move beyond trauma and to appreciate the simple joys of being alive." The final line written by Daldorph states the particular interest of Antonio's work, which echoes throughout each subsequent page. This prelude of sorts is perhaps as integral to the story as any one of the pieces written by Antonio himself.

The element of finding inner peace embedded in this book cannot be understated – something that the reader understands upon encountering the piece placed at the very beginning of the work titled, "Sweat Lodge (Part I)". This piece is not a poem, but an entry describing a strong stirring of emotions in anticipation of a spiritual ceremony, an embrace of his cultural heritage as a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. After an explanation of the significance of this ceremony, the entry proclaims, "I am about to find my inner warrior spirit [...] Today I am about to be reborn." This collection revisits this particular aspect of his journey throughout, both as a way to juxtapose these beautiful moments of self-discovery against the ruinous events that placed him in prison, as well as a consistent reminder of the work being done in this poetry. The placement of this piece acts as a mission statement.

Many poems in this collection are complex, with discordant emotions of regret versus acceptance, anger versus letting go, paranoia versus peace of mind, and especially hate versus love. These negative feelings, this perspective on life, emerge through the most basic examination as the result of years of trauma and displacement in society. So many of these poems are full of recountings and contemplations that demand an inspection of the things that we typically want to turn our heads away from. But more importantly, these poems are self-serving, in a most unimpeachable way. The reason behind writing them is laid out clearly and without hesitation. The piece titled, "wordplay," ends with the succinct statement, "trying to siphon out / the love from / the hate / is why I / still write," a sentiment revisited almost obsessively, as if these poems are what might save his soul.

This introspective assortment of poems is structured into five sections, each with an underlying theme, extracted from the seasons of this brutally fought life. Each one is offered to be deciphered by the reader. While it is unlikely that these were written chronologically, the text draws the reader into this narrative in which the life of a man unfolds itself, literally piece by piece. By the end, these confessions of sin and raw, powerful moments of self-reflection bring the reader into an agreement of trust and honesty, in which the author has handed over everything, and the reader receives it.

The fifth and final section is titled, "V. Ending: when it's my time to go I will be ready". As with any great narrative, this segment offers resolution after the climactic section before, which spoke of his time in prison, referred to as his "concrete coffin". In this resolution, two consecutive poems

titled “In my absence” disclose outward apologies to those around him. These poems demonstrate an absolute acceptance of his actions, something that indicates and re-emphasizes the dynamic nature of this book. In a contented tone, the poem “Headaches and heartaches,” from which the section is titled, the text concludes that the mission has been fulfilled, and he has found a way to accept the death that he may have seen on the horizon, “for I will be thankful I / had time to switch / things around”. Anyone who reads this book may find themselves humbled and stunned by this holistic account of one man’s journey towards internal reconciliation.

Past KAC Award Winners

Nicky's Mother

Linda Ahrens Brower

2020

It takes everything in me today to get to this point, sitting in the gym, fanning myself in the stifling heat, dabbing at my tears with a Kleenex, pasting on a smile. I'm a happy person by nature, but this smile feels frozen in place like a mannequin. I'm not unlike the other families, the other mothers, in this room. The only difference is I'm on the sidelines today, surrounded by strangers, not by family.

I admit I'm feeling a little left out, voiceless, invisible. The other mothers and I were an alliance of sorts back then, sharing chores at school functions, rooting together at events, swapping stories, laughing. Not today. Not for a very long time.

I couldn't ask my family to come today, especially my sons. They wouldn't have understood what compelled me to come. They would have solemnly shaken their heads, averted their eyes, become suddenly too busy eating lunch, fixing machinery, watching TV. They have never known about the other times I slip away to those other school events or to a cold slab of cement at the cemetery. They have their own pain too, but never do they talk about it. Never does it surface. Never is it visible.

I think they try to protect me and their father, as well. If they don't acknowledge the grief and pain it isn't there. If it isn't there we won't see it. If we don't see it, it doesn't exist. If it doesn't exist there is no pain. No sadness. No tears.

I knew better than to ask Ben, my husband, to come with me today. He would have come if I had asked. He would have stood silent sentinel by my side, but his pain would have been etched in every stiff and silent movement, sadness deepening the lines of his face. I just couldn't do that to the man I love. Like the boys, his pain is silent, but his is raw. I see it in his eyes, the sag of his shoulders. I see the loosening of his guard. I don't want to inflict more pain on him than I know is already there.

I know he's not blind to where I am going today. He keeps up with events. He can calculate years. We have felt these years chip away day by endless day.

Five years ago I was always setting the table for six and remembering we were now five. Always calculating. Enough chicken for five, just enough so there weren't a couple of pieces left over. Learning to slice a pie into five slices so we wouldn't have to look at that leftover piece in palpable silence.

It's hard enough to bear your own grief; it's unfathomable when those you love have to bear it alongside you. Furtive glances. Hushed silences. Who knew silence could be so loud, so palpable, so articulate?

They say women are the weaker sex, but I have learned to be the stronghold, to hold them all up and power them through those years of darkness. Five years ago I had to remember I was waking up three boys instead of four, keeping them busy with chores on the farm. I ran the ship while their father couldn't remember exactly how to farm, how to put one foot in front of the other. He looked at us with blank lifeless eyes, glazed over in grief, confusion. He made attempts. He drove the tractor, those first days, around and around in widening circles in the field.

Ben is the one who found Nicky that day in that very field near that same tractor. Nicky must have forgotten about that ditch or was too busy with thirteen-year-old imaginings, and was thrown off. He was already gone when Ben found him, all the

life drained out of him, with no one there to hold his hand. Ben's grief was so raw as the events kept replaying in his head; screaming and crying, holding our son, pleading with God, yelling for anyone to help him out in that barren field. He has never been the same. None of us have. We are like stroke victims who forget they have an appendage they no longer can feel, dragging it along behind them. We drag our grief along behind us. We always will.

Today, May 14th, Nicky should be graduating from high school with his class. I've been to all their plays, musicals, prom parade and bore silent witness from the sidelines, always wondering what he would look like at fourteen, at eighteen, in his tuxedo, in his cap and gown.

I still see him everywhere, his mischievious smile, his sandy blonde hair, hear his grainy laugh. I know his name will not be announced today, but I see him anyway. I see him rise and walk to the podium as they announce "Nicholas Benjamin Carter" and receive his diploma. And then he turns to me and smiles.

I know no one sees me today, acknowledges me. I am no longer a class mother. I know they don't remember Nicky today, Nicky who sat beside them and played with them and grew with them for eight years. Today is filled with gaiety, the closing of a chapter, young people on the cusp of adulthood. I am happy for them- all the years I watched them mature, to become who they are today. I know them all by name.

There is a pause for a moment as the class trickles up to the podium, each taking a rose out of a bucket and walking back to present them to their mothers. As they all sit down, shy reserved Lucy Barker rises from her seat on the front row and walks back up to the podium. The audience is watching raptly, murmuring. This, you know, is not orchestrated. She takes a rose out of the bucket and then motions for the mike and it is handed to her by the principal.

"This rose is for Nicky," she says, "who was part of us through eighth grade and who should be receiving his diploma with us today. I remember his laugh, his energy, how sweet he was. Most of all, all those freckles. He should be sitting beside me today. I have never forgotten him and I never will."

She walks over to the sidelines where I am seated, tears running down my cheeks, and hands me the rose. She gives me a soft kiss on my cheek and whispers, "I have never forgotten Nicky and I have never forgotten you."

Ada and the Vote

Lindsey Bartlett

First Chapter of a Book, 2022

Fifteen-year-old Ada Rumley nestles against a mound of sun-warmed hay at the back of the barn's hayloft. Her knees, pulled up almost to her chest, are used to prop up the book she is reading. The only sound are the soft whines and nickers from the horses in the stalls below. Ada has been here for almost two hours, and so far, no one seems to have noticed that she has slipped off to read rather than doing her chores. Having remained undisturbed for this long is unusual, and Ada is sure it won't last much longer. As if on cue, she hears heavy booted footsteps enter the barn.

"Ada! Ada! I know you are in here!" Her brother Hamrick yells. His boots clomping up the stairs to the hayloft. The horses stir with all the noise he is making, shuffling in their stalls. "Ada!" He calls again, pushing open the trapdoor at the top of the hayloft steps. Hamrick is three years younger than Ada, but already about to surpass her in height. He is lean and strong from helping their father in the field almost from the time he was able to walk. He favors their mother with his sandy brown hair that hangs in loose curls over his head sometimes falling in front of his eyes. Ada, on the other hand, has her father's dark hair that refuses to hold a curl no matter what method Ada's mother tries.

With a sigh, Ada stands up brushing strands of hay off her muslin dress. There is no use in trying to hide, if her brother didn't find her, it would be her pa and that would mean more trouble than she cares to deal with right now. Seeing her, Hamrick makes a face. "You were supposed to feed the chickens and weed the garden," he says rather petulantly. "Ma won't like it if she finds all of the vegetables have been choked out by weeds."

"Then Ma could weed the garden herself," Ada replies rather sharply, but it is too late to bite back her words.

"You know Ma is busy with little Imogene and she is also baking pies to sell in town later this week. You know how much work it is to make a pie." Hamrick, whether intentionally or not, puts more emphasis on *you know*, as if he is the older and Ada the younger rather than the other way around. Then he adds, "all while you are hiding up here reading another book."

"Fine." Ada says brushing past her brother, book clutched tightly to her chest.

Hamrick doesn't say anything, but Ada knows he is rolling his eyes at her as she stomps down the stairs from the hayloft. He has been on the receiving end of Ada's tantrums about her place on the farm more than once.

The Rumley family farm was started by Ada's grandfather, James Rumley when he was only 19. At first the farm was only a few acres, some cows, and a modest home. As James and his family grew, so too did the farm. By the time, Peter, the eldest of James's children and Ada's pa inherited the farm, there was close to 100 acres, and a farmhouse and barn that were the envy of neighbors for miles.

Ada pulled furiously at the weeds in the garden. The hem of her dress trailing in the dirt. One of the family's cats strolled up to Ada and proceeded to rub itself against her ankles. It's tail swishing as it pushed its nose against Ada's hand as she reached for more weeds. She gave it an absent-minded scratch on the head. The cat mewed at the attention. Pausing, Ada looked at the cat, it was black and white with long white whiskers and yellow eyes. The friendliest of the farm cats. Ada sat down amongst the plants and weeds on the dark soil of the garden her dress tucked under her knees. She patted her lap, and the cat gingerly curled itself into a ball while she stroked it.

Later that evening, Ada slid into her chair at

the family dinner table. Laid out across the long wooden table was a roast with potatoes. There was fresh bread and a pitcher of tea. Sitting at the head of the table was Ada's father, Peter. His face tan and lined from so many hours in the Kansas sun. He studies Ada as she takes her seat. "Did you get that weeding done?" His voice is gruff, but there is a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Yes, Pa." She busies herself with scooping some potatoes onto her plate avoiding both her father and her brother's eyes.

"And are the chickens fed?"

"Yes, Pa," she says again. Her father doesn't say anything, but it is almost as if he knows she spent most of the afternoon hiding in the barn hayloft reading rather than doing her assigned chores.

Ma appears then carrying Imogene. She places her young daughter in the highchair that was used by all the Rumley children. It was made by James, Ada's grandfather, before Ada's birth. Silence falls over the room, as the dishes are passed around and each person takes a helping. Imogene babbles and squeals in her chair next to their mother.

"How do the fields look, Peter?" Their mother feeds Imogene some apple sauce from a jar, and she squirms with delight.

"Fine for now," Peter answers. "Some rain would do them all good. The ground is awful dry."

Ada looks over at her father. He has stopped eating while he talks, fork in midair. His brow is creased, and she can tell he is thinking. Her father is always thinking about the farm and worrying. Worrying if there will be rain? Or will there be drought? Worrying if the crops will survive? How will the family live if it all fails? The weight of the farm is always on her father's shoulders. Sometimes Ada forgets this fact until she sees her father with the creased brow and concerned expression on his face.

"Uncle Frank says it will rain soon," interjects Hamrick.

"Pahh!" says Pa waving his fork dismissively. "Don't believe anything Frank tells you. You know better than that, boy."

Hamrick just shrugs. Pa's brother, Uncle Frank, is known for his stretching of the truth. According to Pa, Frank likes to talk about many things, but doesn't really have anything to say. Personally, Ada likes Uncle Frank, because he always has a story to tell, and is always laughing. His face isn't always lined with worry like her father.

***

A couple days later, Ada is balancing a basket full of pies on her lap as they make their way to town. They have left little Imogene with a neighbor woman. Hamrick and Pa are out in the fields, so it is up to Ada to accompany her mother to town to sell pies. Ada doesn't mind, in fact, she is always excited to make the trip to town. There is always plenty of news and gossip to hear, and if the pies sell well, maybe ma will buy her a new book.

Walnut Valley is a small town on the plains for Kansas, taking its name from the Walnut Creek that runs along the southeast part of town. Ma stops the buggy outside of J.M. Dixon's grocery store, a two-story brick building with a sign in the window advertising the latest vegetables. Ada jumps down from the buggy still holding the basket of pies.

The store is crowded, and many customers appear agitated as they pass around copies of the *Walnut Valley Breeze* newspaper. "Now mind your manners and stay out of trouble, you hear!" her mother scolds.

Ada merely nods before wandering off into the crwds eager to find out what in the newspaper has stirred up the shoppers. She pretends to eye a selection of hard candy, while listening to a group of men, many with folded papers in their hands.

"Are we ever going to hear the end of this suffrage business?" Asks one. "Seems to me there are plenty of women who are perfectly fine with the way things are. Why must there always be a few stirring up trouble?" He swats at the air with his copy of the newspaper while those around him murmur and nod.

"It's that Johnston woman," says another mn. He removes his hat to scratch an almost bald pate. "She moved here with her husband from Ohio and has been causing trouble with this suffrage business ever since."

"Isn't her husband on the legislature?"

"Yes, that is all part of the problem. She has the ear of too many important folks."

"If they'll listen to her," replies the first man. With disgust, he tosses down a copy of the *Breeze* on the counter near where Ada is still pretending to look at the candy.

Ada waits until the men move away before snatching up the newspaper. She flips through it quickly, until her eyes settle on the brief paragraph that has gotten so many in the store worked up. The paragraph is short mentioning only that if anyone desires literature or information on the subject of women's suffrage they should send to the following address. Ada makes a mental note of the address before setting the paper back down on the counter.

Her mother has sold out of pies and is motioning for Ada so they can leave.

As she helps her mother collect the last of their things, she asks, "would it be alright if I got a new book?"

Her mother sighs. "I suppose." She hands Ada a few bills. "Here. Run along. Meet me at the buggy."

"Thanks, Ma!" Ada shouts as she darts for the door. Up the dirt street a couple blocks is the small wood building where Fred Kruger sells books and paper goods. The bell rings as Ada pushes open the door.

"Well, if it isn't Ada Rumley," exclaims Fred from his place behind the counter. Fred's wife, Lena is shuffling through a stack of books on a side table.

"Nice to see you, Ada. Are you looking for anything particular?"

"Well, not really. Maybe another Dickens?" Ada queries.

Lena nods. "Remind me which ones you have read."

Ada lists them off on her fingers, while following Lena to the shelf containing novels of Charles Dickens.

Lena pulls a book from the shelf and hands it to Ada. "How about *Little Dorritt*?"

Ada thumbs quickly through the book. "This looks perfect!"

"Great! Fred will take care of you at the front counter as usual. It was good to see you, Ada."

"Good to see you, too!" Ada heads for the counter clutching the book to her chest.

As she is paying for her book, she notices today's newspaper on the counter, and remembers the address she saw earlier.

"Hey, Fred." She calls, "would you be willing to mail a letter for me?"

***

In the buggy on the way home from town, empty basket balanced on her lap, Ada asks her mother, "what do you think about women's suffrage?"

Her mother doesn't turn to look at Ada, instead she focuses on the road and the horses. "Where did you hear about that?"

"At the store this morning. A group of men were discussing a newspaper article in the *Breeze* today."

It is a few minutes before her mother responds. For a bit Ada isn't sure her mother is going to say anything.

"It will never pass," she says tight lipped.

"But what if it does?" Ada argues. "Wouldn't it be nice if women were able to vote?"

"We already can in local elections like the school board," responds her mother.

Ada sighs in response. She can tell there is no point in continuing this conversation.

Antonio Sanchez-Day

Brian Daldorph

Memoir, 2022

Antonio Sanchez-Day
(July 21, 1974-March 5, 2021)

Before leaving the Dance Ground Cemetery on the Potawatomi reservation in Mayetta, Kansas, I put the flowers my daughter had given me for Antonio Sanchez-Day on his grave and said goodbye to my friend. As I walked back to my car, I looked around at the Kansas prairie in early spring, glad that Antonio was in a peaceful place at last. He'd been taking on life, as he'd say, for 46 years. He was tired of fighting all those demons within and without. March 2021: time for him to sleep.

I first met Antonio in 2013 at Douglas County Jail in Lawrence, Kansas, when he filed into the classroom at the tail end of a procession of orange jump-suited inmates. By that point, I'd been teaching my Creative Writing class at the jail for over a decade. Every Thursday afternoon, I'd watch as the classroom filled with inmates who took their places in the class circle. For some, writing class meant a welcome couple of hours out of their cells. However, a lot of inmates who joined the class came to like their two hours together in the classroom, writing, telling stories, sharing jokes. Hey, if it lifted weary spirits who were in a bad place, then that was a good thing, right? Might even be an opportunity to get some serious writing done.

At first, I didn't pick out Antonio from the rest of the guys in the class. Some of them come to class and make a big splash: they arrive with a poem or rap ready for us, happy to have an audience. They do their thing, and if it's good, they hear, Hey, that's what's up, and, There it is. You got that, brother.

But Antonio wasn't like that. Antonio--owl-faced and shaven-headed, with a distinctive tattoo, Delores, on his neck--was watchful. He'd sit back and listen to what everybody else had to say before sharing his work, most often a neatly-written page that he'd later tell me was written and rewritten in his cell until it was exactly right.

One of the first poems he read in class was "Penitentiary Protocol," written, he said, for this cocky young guy he'd met who was going to prison for the first time claiming that doing time was nothing much. Antonio wanted him to know that prison was menace and blood:

When you arrive, read the sign: "Leave all hopes

And dreams behind." Forget all you have or had

In the free world, it no longer matters . . . Learn to like the sight

And smell of blood, it surrounds you. Prepare to witness

The evil men do.

In 2013, when he first read that poem to us, Antonio was in Douglas County Jail waiting for his case to be heard. He knew that he'd have to go back to prison, and he began telling the class that he was going to do his prison time differently. He'd had enough time behind the walls.

Back in prison for two more years, he made monumental changes to his life, just as he'd told us he would. "Inactive" in gang business, he served his time working on his poetry, getting in touch with his Native American roots and religion, exploring the rich literature of Hispanic writers, and following the example of his main man, Jimmy Santiago Baca, himself a former convict, but now one of the major voices in American poetry. During this prison "bid" (as he'd call it), he had to deal with temporary blindness, a condition caused by his diabetes. If you want to know

about fear, then try thinking of being blind in prison with how many enemies lurking? Fortunately, two emergency operations restored his sight.

I met Antonio again in 2015 when he was released and moved back to Lawrence. He was determined to carry on changing his life for the better. He wanted to work, if possible, though he had serious health issues, including diabetes and kidney and heart troubles. But mostly he wanted to write, and that's what he did. He wrote and wrote, working on a first book.

He also returned to the writing class circle in Douglas County Jail where he'd started his odyssey of self-recovery, but this time as an instructor, the only former inmate allowed back into the class. He'd sit in the circle again and tell inmates his story. How he'd been bullied at school as the only Native/Hispanic kid in his class. How he'd joined a gang which had seemed like family. How he'd gotten involved in a street fight and hurt someone "real bad": the judge had sentenced him to ten years, a tough sentence meant to show other gang members that they'd be harshly dealt with in Lawrence, Kansas.

I'd been teaching the class for almost 15 years when Antonio joined me as a co-instructor, but I couldn't reach the inmates in the same way Antonio could. "I've sat where you're sitting," he'd tell them. "If I can do it then anyone can. I'm just one bad decision away from being right back in trouble again." We listened to his poems and were drawn into the worlds he created, like the one about the man in the library who meets a former version of himself, or the one about how he and his friend stood back to back and fought against enemies gathered around like wolves, or the one about the best little dog ever, Chuey the chihuahua, Antonio's "wing-man."

In October 2019, I drove with Antonio down to Wichita where he was giving a presentation at the Kansas Authors Club convention. He stood in front of the audience looking like a million dollars in his smart blue suit and Paris Left Bank beret and told us about his writing, how it had saved him and how he woke every morning thanking his gods for this gift. After his presentation, a tall guy--upright, ex-military, it seemed--came up to talk to him, said he'd been a cop for thirty years and that what Antonio had been talking about—the trauma of violence--was happening on the other side of the line too, for ex-cops. Though they'd been on opposite sides of the law, they could respect each other.

In 2017, I interviewed Antonio for a book about the jail class. I asked him what he'd be doing in 10 years' time, would he still be writing? He said he definitely would be, he had so much more to write. He told me that he wanted to write more about his mother, Delores, who had been a huge influence on his life.

But what we didn't know then, but maybe should have seen, was that his time was running short. By that point, he was going in for dialysis three times a week, which deeply tired him each time. Then, there was the triple bypass surgery. In early 2021, Antonio had just gotten himself a dog called Scooby to love, when there was more bad news from the hospital: he was on the verge of total liver failure and, if that happened, he'd only have weeks left to live. When I heard this, I couldn't help thinking that this fighter would come through. He'd been fighting demons all his life: surely he'd fight them off one more time.

On a Sunday morning in early March 2021, I saw a Facebook post, written by his aunt, that Anthony Sanchez-Day had died at KU Med in Kansas City. I checked around, willing it not to be true. But it was. Antonio Sanchez-Day RIP.

I drove to his funeral in Hoyt, Kansas, north of Topeka, at the Chapel Oaks Funeral Home, with two other jail class teachers; all of us had loved and respected our colleague and friend, Antonio Sanchez-Day. We met his family for the first time and saw how much he was loved, how much we were all grieving. After a short Catholic service, we formed a procession in our cars and drove on backroads through Indian Country to the cemetery. Antonio's ashes were buried next to his father's grave.

I think of Antonio during those last five or six years--out of prison, a free man, a respected man, a man who sat with judges and police chiefs on the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council and gave his advice, from the inside, about improving the criminal justice system. I think of the brilliant poems that illuminated experiences that most of

us would never have, and yet they reached us all. I think of his magnificent first book of poetry, Taking on Life.

I grieve for my friend because there should have been so much more. I think of his spirit in that peaceful cemetery, and recall a few of the words he left behind for us:

Raindrops of sadness wash away the painhelp me forget as I dance in the rain...

Henry & Heinz

Nancy Julien Kopp

Stories for Children, 2022

Henry slammed the screen door and stomped into the barnyard. He clenched his hands and kicked the dust.

The door slammed again. In seconds, Pa stood in front of Henry. "Be as angry as you like, Henry, but that isn't going to change things. We've asked for a German prisoner to help out on the farm, and that's final. The man will only be here during the day. He'll go back to the prison camp nights."

Henry took a deep breath. "But Pa, we're at war with his country. He shouldn't be on our farm when Uncle Rudy is fighting Hitler's army. It's not right."

"Right or wrong, we need the help. We're not the only ones using prisoners. There are six German Prisoner of War camps here in Kansas. Lots of farms need the help. You're 14, too old for this kind of nonsense. Start the cows up to the barn for milking."

There was nothing Henry could do about the German man working on the farm, but he didn't have to like him, and he didn't have to talk to him.

Early the next morning, an old red truck stopped in the barnyard. Henry pushed aside Ma's starched white curtains from the kitchen window and watched as Pa went out to meet the prison guard. They shook hands as a third man stepped down from the truck. Henry tensed as he watched. The guard left and Pa walked out to the barn with the German, whatever his name was.

Henry finished breakfast and told Ma he'd be out in the bean field. Maybe he could avoid the man out there.

When the sun was high in the cloudless sky, Henry's stomach rumbled, and he headed home, stopping at the pump in the barnyard to wash up before lunch. He heard men's voices as he entered the kitchen.

Pa noticed Henry and said, "Henry, this is Heinz. I want you to help him this afternoon. After we eat."

Henry pulled out a chair but gave no word of welcome to the tall, muscular man at their table.

Heinz smiled. "Hello, Henry. Our name is the same but in English and German." He stood up and extended his hand but sat down quickly when Henry ignored him.

Henry ate silently, but stole quick glances at the German. He wanted to laugh at the man's accented English but why anger Pa?

The summer weeks went on. Heinz arrived early each morning, and Pa drove him to the prison camp each night. Ma and Pa said they liked Heinz, said he was a good worker and they were glad to have him. Henry spoke to Heinz only if necessary and then with a sneer.

One hot day, Henry walked to the river, fishing pole over his shoulder. Pa had said he could have some time for himself. He passed Heinz working in the field closest to the river. The man waved. "Good day for fishing." Henry walked on.

The bank was slippery, and Henry's bare feet slid through the mud. He lost his balance and toppled into the rushing river. His bait pail and fishing pole flew out of his hands, hit the water, and sank. He tried to swim, but the strong current held him.

He coughed and sputtered. He shouted, then flailed and went under, his heart beating so fast he feared it would explode.

Heinz came running and jumped into the river with no hesitation. He grabbed hold of Henry's overall straps, then swam to the riverbank and pulled Henry onto the grass, panting. "I'm glad I came by or you might have been in big trouble."

Henry coughed, then yelled. "Why did you save me? Don't you hate me? I'm an American and you're our enemy. Why don't you try to escape?"

Heinz laughed. "Why so many questions? Maybe we should have spent some time talking before this."

Henry didn't say a word. He drew his knees up, put his arms around them, and ducked his head.

Heinz sighed. Henry, I have a son close to your age. His name is Manfred. Do you think your father would have helped my boy if he saw him in danger?"

Henry nodded. "He would. My pa cares about other people."

"I do, too. You asked if I hate you. Nein, I mean, no. Countries are at war, but people shouldn't carry those problems and the hate to each other. I don't hate you, not even a little bit. When I first came here, it made me happy to see a boy like my son. I wanted to be a friend. Your parents have treated me well."

Henry bit his lip, picked up a stick, and tapped the ground with it. "Then why don't you try to escape and go back to Germany to your family?"

Heinz laughed. "Let me tell you what the soldier in charge told us when we arrived in Kansas. He had a big map of the United States. He pointed to Kansas, then his finger moved to New York City on the east coast. Next, he showed us the west coast in California. He looked at all of us and said it would not be easy to get to either place, so don't bother to try and escape. I could see why the Army put the prisoners of war so far away from a ship going to Europe. No escaping, so I will wait until the war is over and then go home."

Henry raised his head. "Maybe you can tell me about your son and your country."

Heinz put his hand out, and this time, Henry accepted it.

The German smiled. "I'd like that. Here on this farm, we are not enemies. We might even become friends a little at a time. Now, let's go up to the house and get ready for one of your mutti's good suppers."

The Story Keeper

Tracy Million Simmons

First Chapter of a Book, 2021

As the sun was reaching its high point in the sky, my sister caught me napping on a flat rock above the new creek that will grow into a river and divide our valley.

"Ava!" Her voice shook me from my sleepiness. The rock was hard, but its warmth had crept into my bones and allowed my mind to slip to the place where dreams and memories become one.

"Toddy's wife is in the beginning stages of labor, and our cousin Lily is birthing her third as we speak. Grandmother is with Lily, but you must hurry. She may need your help."

"You are the great apprentice of midwifery and healing," I grumbled. "You attend."

I knew these words would get back to Mother. I flinched, imagining her anger.

"Mother believes Toddy's wife will birth with difficulty. I will attend with Mother. This birth will be an important experience for me."

I sighed, lifting myself from the rock, and collected the trinkets I found that morning. My sister watched me drop a small, shiny round portrait into my pocket and snorted in disgust before disappearing up the path. I had a growing collection of the tiny portraits, most of them a dull brown color, but this one was the largest and brightest I'd ever found. It sparkled like a pool of water in the light of early morn. It was worn thoroughly, but I could still make out the face of a man and the special markings from the Time before Nature's Reckoning. I'd give anything to understand the message in those markings.

My sister, Adele, will be the next Great Midwife for our people. Though it is tradition to choose a path at the age of thirteen, my sister shared her intentions in a formal ceremony at the age of eleven. She follows in the footsteps of our mother, our grandmother, and their mothers and grandmothers before them, as many generations back as the memory of our people reaches.

Mother would like to see me share my intentions, as well. My fourteenth year arrives in thirty of earth's rotations. I have already started my cycles, and my body is changing shape as rapidly as this land upon which we make our home. I believe, as Mother says, that becoming a great mother to our people is a valuable and worthy path, but the thought of declaring my intentions as a midwife's apprentice makes my heart feel hollow and empty.

By the time I reach our home in the center of our village, Adele is nowhere to be seen, and I can assume that my sister is with Mother and Toddy's wife, using her soothing voice to calm the woman while Mother mumbles instructions that will assist my sister in helping the woman through a difficult labor.

Grandmother says Adele is the most gifted midwife our family has seen in many generations. At nearly sixteen, she can already read a baby's position in the womb and knows the methods of turning a breech. Adele has never shown fear for surgical procedures; this is where my weakness lies. I love to look at and hold the newborn babies, but the blood that accompanies them on even the easiest journeys into our world makes me queasy and weak.

The first birth I attended, at the age of nine, was a fairly peaceful event. The baby was beautiful and screamed heartily. But after, the mother bled and bled. I could tell Grandmother was worried as she applied many techniques known to

stop the bleeding. Grandmother insisted that the baby's suckling would encourage the body to stop the flow of blood, so the mother died peacefully, as if falling asleep, with her baby at her breast.

As I neared our home I could see my little brother, Allen, sitting in the dirt in front of our door. The bag for a midwife's apprentice was beside him. He looked up at me and grinned.

"Hurry, Ava. Grandmother wants you for Lily's baby. Run and I won't tell Mother how late you were."

I rumpled his soft hair with my hand as I picked up the bag.

"You won't tell Mother either way," I said. "And I won't tell Mother that it was you who used the cord from her medicine kit to rig the pulley for your little barn."

My brother's path, though he is only seven, has been obvious for quite some time. He has not formally declared himself, of course, but we all know that he will eventually apprentice the Master Builder.

When Allen was a baby, he would stack his toys and blocks into striking towers. He began constructing miniature houses and models of the vehicles and other contraptions from the time of the Final War as Grandfather told us stories of them. He has a gift for building, of picturing things in his mind and then making those things a reality. He already talks of bridges that will withstand the great shifting that takes place in our earth's crust. He spends countless hours on his models and has constructed plates to simulate the quakes that continually plague us. Mother says his services will be of great value to our people someday.

I pick up the bag and point my feet in the direction of Lily and Pendleton's house. I try to make my feet hurry, but my eyes can't stop noticing the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, and the many delights of color tucked here and there between the two.

Lucky for me, Lily and Pendleton's home is very near our own. She is a cousin on our father's side, a Great Cook and Mistress of the Garden. Her husband, Pendleton, is not of our people. He's from the far side of the hills, an area of ruined cities and mysteries of the past. Generally, our people treat those from the ruined cities as dirty and unclean. Pendleton, however, arrived in our village as a kind and eager teenager. He proved himself a hard worker and showed great interest in learning our ways and our values. It was an immediate love-match between Pendleton and my cousin Lily. His efforts beside her in the gardens more than multiplied her results. He is an advanced apprentice of crops and has hopes of being a master someday, though many say he is more truly Lily's apprentice, and that it will always be she who wields the spade in their marriage.

When I arrived, Pendleton sat on pile of hay in front of the house. He was watching his two sons with a broad grin on his face. They were making mudpies and caking themselves, as well.

Pendleton looked up as I approached. "It's Miss Ava, boys. Come to attend your mother."

He winked at me and scuffed a boot in the dirt.

"She doing well?" I queried.

"Ah, you know Lily. She's a champ. She told me to watch the boys. She's still planning to bake the bread for supper tonight." He chuckled and lifted a mud patty in my direction. "I told her the boys and I would give her the rest of the day off. She deserves a break for delivering their little sister."

"You are sure it's a girl, then?"

"That's what your sister told us when she last visited. They say Adele is never wrong."

I resist rolling my eyes.

"I'd better get in there. Grandmother might need me."

"Ah, I'd say your grandmother is more than enough attendance for my Lily. She wasn't even breaking a sweat when she kicked me out."

"I suppose, but if I don't show my face, I'm going to get a preaching later on. Sis caught me down by the new creek, again. She's going to give Mother an earful, I'm sure. Adele is positive I'm destined to be the town's baggy lady."

Pendleton snorted at this. A baggy lady is an element from his homeland, a symbol of sloth and laziness that our people say infests those especially from the ruined cities.

"You may be a dreamer and one who collects stories, dear Ava. But you are far, far, far from any baggy lady I've ever known."

Inside, Grandmother was stoking the fire and Lily was perched on a stool looking resigned to the task ahead of her. She flashed me a smile, and then immediately her brow furrowed, and she sucked air sharply in through her nose and blew it

slowly out her mouth. When the contraction had passed, she smiled again. I dropped the bag on the floor and went to her side.

"Every woman in the village should watch you give birth," I said. "If they all handled delivering babies the way you do, Lily, I'd commit to being a midwife's apprentice."

Lily laughed, then grimaced and began her breathing routine again. When this one was over she said, "It's these wide hips, Ava. Small children from a broad body; much easier than large children from a narrow one. I consider myself blessed."

I considered my own hips, which showed promise of growing wide and full like Mother's, as did my breasts. Perhaps I would birth babies easily one day as well.

"Grandfather says there was a time when narrow women were highly prized. Girls were paid large quantities of coin to pose for sketches that were copied and distributed around this entire earth making women wish to be sickly and thin. He says it was so bad that some women would cease eating. Or they would pretend to eat and purge their meals later."

"Oh, your Grandfather!" Grandmother had seated herself on a chair near Lily's birth stool. "He fills your head with rubbish, all these stories."

"You don't think it's true, Grandmother?" I asked.

"Perhaps there is an element of truth from those who occupied the ruined cities. But I can't imagine a past where women were so senseless as to cease eating. It's against nature. People have to eat."

Lily's face tightened again. Her intake of breath was sharper this time and her exhale longer and more deliberate.

"She's very near," Grandmother murmured softly. "Would you like me to check you?" she asked when Lily's face relaxed again.

"No. It's not necessary. A couple more and I'll be ready to push. The urge is almost more than I can handle now. Would you watch the boys, Ava? I'd like Pendleton to be here for this one."

I traded posts with Pendleton and watched my two young cousins giggle and roll in the dirt. They were so covered in filth they were hardly recognizable.

"Come boys," I said with a voice that sounded surprisingly like Mother's. "Let's clean you up so you'll be ready to greet your baby sister." I bit my tongue after speaking these words. I did not want to admit that my sister's gifts extended to the point of prophecy. "Or baby brother," I added.

The oldest looked at me with solemn eyes. "It is a baby sister, and she's already got a name. You can call her Mari."

I sighed and took each boy by the hand. "Well let's get cleaned up then. You don't want to be so dirty when you greet baby Mari."

###

About The Story Keeper

The words of my Grandfather:

"The World's Final War was being handed down to a third generation from their fathers when the Great Volcano of Rainier began to rumble in the west. It shook the ground for days, obscuring the sky, and eventually time itself. From the mountain's belly flew hot rocks and steam until finally it vomited great fire over the earth. Entire cities, unlike anything you or I have ever seen or imagined, were covered over, buried beneath that which was belched from the Great Volcano.

"In the time of the World's Final War, from seashore to seashore, our people considered themselves one nation. So great were our numbers that we blanketed the land as thickly as the dandy lion flowers. Imagine looking across our valley and seeing nothing but people and the great structures and inventions of those people. Like so many ants on a hill, our people once swarmed. We were mighty, though we did our best to destroy our own kind. We were populous, though we contaminated the earth and cared not for its well-being.

"The World's Final War reduced our numbers. Generations of our people's children were lost in great battles on desert lands far beyond the seas, and the people of those desert lands brought the wars here, as well. It was a time of great turmoil and sorrow. Apocalyptic

"The fires from the Great Volcano of Rainier were the first of many. Mountains that had

slept for centuries and more joined new ones that quickly swelled and buckled our earth beyond recognition. Quakes rocked the land in decades following. Rapidly rising waters, the likes of which you have never seen, took entire cities by surprise, erasing people, homes, and the great structures of man without apology. The rapid decimation of the human race, already scarred by years of war, followed.

"Yet, our people are a hardly lot; fragile, perhaps, but hard to eradicate entirely. Those who survived gathered where the earth remained stable. It was the beginning of life as we know it.

"We live in the Time of Nature's Reckoning."

###

The Flying Dutchman and Gettysburg Eddie

Keith Schlaegel

First Chapter of a Book, 2020

I winked at the queen and she stared back, a smirk floating on her face.

The drama had been building and the queen and I looked at each other awaiting the conclusion.

"You are one goddamn lucky fat man", said Slats Welborn."

The man across from him said nothing, staring at his cards.

"Hey, you listening to me pal? You're a piece of shit, Mexican weasel," said Slats Welborn.

The Whale lifted his head, quit staring at his cards and peered at Slats, his heavy eyelids blinking once.

I winced. The Whale, whose mother was Panamanian and father was from Ireland, didn't talk much, but I knew from past experience he had a sensitive spot when it came to his heritage. In all likelihood, he didn't mind being called fat and a weasel as much as he disliked someone making a mistake about his genetic makeup.

"Piss on ya," The Whale wheezed between short breaths.

"Whaddya say?" Slats said, raising his voice and tapping his cards on the table.

"Come on guys," the man sitting on the stool by the door said, "We're all getting tired, been here a long time. Let's just play and get this damn game over. Then we can go home and get some sleep."

"Whaddya say, fat man?" Slats asked again, ignoring Jerry's plea for peace and good will among men.

The Whale blinked, then raised the hand not holding cards and slowly extended his middle finger wagging it back and forth.

"Come on Whale, just ignore Slats," Jerry pleaded. "You know he likes to rile people up, he thinks it gets them off their game. Isn't that right, Slats?"

"Put that finger back and apologize or I might break it off," Slats said, his voice getting louder.

The Whale withdrew his finger and laid his hand on the table. Jerry sighed in relief and chuckled. "That's it guys. Let's just finish the game."

"Kiss a fat man's ass," The Whale said, then pursed his lips and blew a kiss in Slat's direction.

"Crap," I said to the queen. She stared back, her expression unchanged.

Slats stood up, threw his cards at The Whale and dove across the table. They crashed backwards and the two men disappeared from my sight onto the floor. Jerry stood up, looked at the melee going on beneath him and then ran out the door yelling, "Wolf, Wolf, get in here!"

Sitting on a worn out couch along the wall behind me was Jeff Smelt, who had been out of the game for an hour. "Better do something Harlan," he shouted. "I think Whale's going to kill him."

"I'm just the dealer, not my job to be the muscle," I shouted back at Jeff above the racket of the two men rolling on the floor. "You do something."

"He's going to kill him," Jeff said again and ran for the door, also calling for Wolf.

I looked at the queen one last time, pushed her back into the deck with her other friends, then stood up and walked around the table. The Whale, who was about 5'8" and tipped the scales around 400 had managed to roll Slats over and was straddling him with both hands wrapped around his throat. Slats was letting out a steady stream of curse words that were slowly being choked off as The Whale tightened his grip.

I heard a voice in the hallway. Another stream of curse words were being released from that direction. Wolf ran into the room. In his hand was a Louisville Slugger with about a foot of the handle cut off. As he entered, he tripped over a chair which had been flung to the side during the tussle on the floor. He pitched forward, the bat flying through the air and banging off the wall next to

me. Falling, his forehead caught the edge of the oak poker table and then he crashed to the floor, another stream of curses coming to an end as he lay still.

I sighed, picked up the bat and stepped towards the two fighters. "Okay Charlie," I shouted. "Let go of him. You don't really want to kill him."

The Whale looked up at me, probably surprised that anyone was calling him by his given name, Charlie, instead of Whale.

"Come on. Let him go. He's had enough," I said.

The Whale looked back down at Slats and resumed his choking. His thumbs started pressing into his windpipe and Slats' face was turning purple. I swung the Louisville Slugger, catching The Whale on his left elbow. There was an odd crunching sound and The Whale let out an "ugh".

He let go with his left hand but kept choking with his right.

"Dammit," I said. I swung the bat again, aiming for his right elbow, but the barrel of the bat came in lower and caught him in the middle of his forearm. There was another crunching sound and The Whale looked up at me and let go of Slats' windpipe with his right hand. He stood up slowly, looked down at both his arms and then again at me. I brandished the bat at him and The Whale turned, walked to the couch and sat down, both arms hanging from his shoulder sockets like two wet towels.

I heard a gasp from Slats and looked down at him. His face was turning from purple to a shade of red as oxygen returned to his body. Wolf had pushed himself up to a sitting position on the floor and was rubbing the knot on his forehead which was the size of a golf ball.

I walked over to the stool and sat down watching the actors in the little drama slowly come back to life. Slats sat up and was feeling his throat where The Whale's hands had been just a minute before. The Whale was still looking at his arms, wiggling his fingers and shaking his head as though he was confused. Then he looked at me. "Ya hit me pretty damn hard, McKee," he said.

"You wouldn't let go, Charlie. You were killing him. I told you to let go."

The Wolf pushed himself to his feet and walked over to a Budweiser mirror hanging on the wall. He studied his face for a moment. "That's going to hurt like hell tomorrow," he said, then laughed. He turned back to the other two men, staring at each for a moment.

"Okay, ready to finish the game?" he asked.

The Whale shrugged. "Somebody might have to hold my cards for me. Not sure how well my hands are working…why not?"

Wolf shifted his gaze to Slats, who was now on his knees. "I suppose," he said. "New hands though, new hands and a new deck."

Wolf looked at me. "See if you can find a new deck Harlan, looks like we got a couple of players here. I got a bunch in my office."

I shook my head, looked again at the men in the room, then walked towards the hallway. When I came back, Slats and The Whale were sitting on the couch comparing each other's battle wounds as Wolf was picking up the cards laying on the floor.

"Okay," I said. "Let's play. Group hug before we start?"

***

The call had come a few weeks before.

I could just see The Wolf. Sitting in a broken down, 20 year old arm chair. Rubbing his hand across his scalp, checking for any stray nubs of hair that had escaped the razor, frowning at the computer screen in front of him, taking a drag from a cigarette, the smoke escaping as he spoke, letting it drift out of his mouth, envelop his head and rise slowly towards the ceiling.

"So whatcha think?" Wolf rasped into the phone. "You up for it?"

"Maybe the word hasn't gotten to you yet…I don't play anymore," I answered.

Wolf either laughed or coughed into the phone. "Yeah, I heard that. Isn't that sweet, you took the cure and all. But that don't matter to me one way or the other. I could care less if you played, I need a dealer. Biggest game played for…I don't know… hell of a long time I guess."

"And you want me to deal. Where's the game?"

"Kansas."

"Kansas?"

"Yeah, Kansas. You got something against Kansas? Amelia Earhart was from there. You have a problem with Amelia Earhart?"

"Nah, I'm good with Amelia Earhart," I said. "What do you need me to deal for?"

"Cause you owe me a couple grand and that way I don't have to pay no one else. And you know the games and how the guys like to play. That a good enough reason for you?"

I actually owed Wolf about $1,200, but who was really counting? I wasn't all that excited about going to Kansas to deal cards, but I did owe Wolf the money and he had been pretty good about not bothering me too much about my debt.

"When?" I asked.

"It's set up in two weeks. July 22nd I think."

"I'll have to check my calendar," I said.

"Ffffsssh," Wolf said, which was his version of a laugh laced with cigarette smoke. "You even have a calendar?"

"Okay, how many players?"

"Don't know for sure yet. You'll have fun. Some of your old buddies…Slats, Joe Jobe, some other guys you know."

"Slats is a dumb ass," I said. "Why are you even letting him play?"

"He's got money, so I don't care."

"It's your game," I said. "Where is it.?"

"Farmhouse outside Kansas City. By Garnett, a little town out in the sticks."

"Sounds lovely," I said, "July 22nd?"

"Yep," Wolf answered. "You know how to get to Kansas? You got a car that runs?"

"Actually my truck is down at the moment, but I have a friend who will probably let me borrow his. He kind of owes me."

"That's sweet," Wolf said, "See ya in Kansas in a couple of weeks."

In My Room

Sandee Lee

Theme Contest, 2022

Sometimes you have to hit me up the side of the head with a two-by-four—figuratively speaking, of course. Why it took me so many years to discover how to express true love is anyone's guess. Understanding began when my husband looked me in the eyes and said, "Thank you for spending time in my room."

I smiled and gave him a quick kiss. I'd like to say it was instant insight, but it wasn't.

The next day he repeated similar words. "I enjoy having you in the same room as me."

How weird. We're on the east porch.

I smiled and rocked as I watched the dogs frolic in the yard. When had Ray started making such comments? Had I been deaf to similar words for a long time? Had I grown callous to his remarks because of familiarity? After all, we celebrated our fifty-third wedding anniversary last month.

I started a quest. How often did he thank me for being "in his room?"

The next evening, instead of working on my computer in the office, I adjusted my laptop on my legs in the chair beside his recliner in the living room.

Ray smiled and asked if he could bring me a glass of tea. Usually, I prepared our beverages. He said, "I enjoy sipping tea with you in my room."

That evening, Ray invited me to join him on the east porch. Generally, I'm busy with a project and decline even though I love sitting in the rocker watching the cattle graze in the pasture just beyond the barbed-wire fence. However, this time, I accepted his invitation.

"I'd love to join you on the front porch." I'd changed the location from the east porch to the front porch to test his reaction. Ray smiled and opened the front door for me.

As we watched the glorious Kansas sunset, he said, "Thank you for joining me in my room."

After that, it became commonplace for me to say, "May I join you in your room?" It mattered not whether he sat on the porch, lounged in the living room, or stood in the shop.

He'd respond with a smile. "Thank you for spending time in my room."

The genuine test of "sharing the same room" came when I asked him to join me in my room. What I actually requested was that he assist me in cutting down weedy trees and bushes around my favorite pond.

He smiled and said he'd love to be with me in my room. It was four hours of satisfying physical labor.

When we had hauled the limbs to the brush pile and returned tools to their homes, Ray lifted his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked at me and said, "Honey, I enjoyed being in your room."

That's true love.

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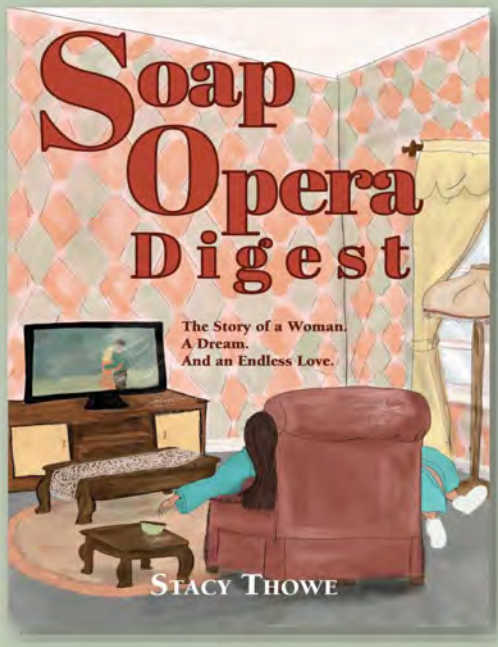
It's a read-aloud book for all ages!

Author Ann Vigola Anderson takes us back in time to her grandparents' farm where Bottle Calf was born during an early spring blizzard. With illustrations by the talented Sara Long, this gorgeous book will be your go-to for holiday gift giving and beyond. Grab a copy to reminisce or to share the stories and gorgeous art with your kids and grandkids. You are going to love Bottle Calf!



Available on Amazon
December 2023

Julia starts to hear a voice from the past calling out to her to live the life she was always meant to live. Will she listen? Or will she choose the road most traveled? Only Julia and her heart know.

Soap Opera Digest will leave you laughing, crying, and cheering the main character, Julia, on as she stumbles through her soap opera life that everyone of us can relate to.