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Kansas Series Part I

When the grass
turns darker
shades of green
and the sky looks
the watery colors
of violet splashed
against bronze.

When the fireflies
sparkle over
the pale light
the pale light
as the shadows
blacken the yard.

And the moon
is low
in the distance
just above
the milky fence.

At the place
where the mountain
parts the sky
and the weeping
willows caress
the wind
I will be waiting

waiting

waiting.

Kansas Series Part II

The moon
has grown
impatient
moving in
the sky
and the point
of blackness
has begun
to dissolve
to the orange
haze of dawn.
I am still
here.
My imprints
have deepened,
rooted to the
earth.

Heidi McIntyre
Mending Wall
He questions whether their walls make good neighbors or safe neighbors. They question whether your walls make any neighbors or no neighbors. You question whether my walls make your neighbor, my neighbor. I question whether these walls make us neighbors at all.
Debra Dursi

Revenge
There he sits
Alone
In the dark
Thinking
Thinking the thoughts of a lunatic
Depraved
Insane
Unwanted
Plotting his revenge
His evil revenge
On those people
Who made him
His world is not as brightly lit as others
He doesn’t care
He has no friends
No mortal friends
His friends are not really people at all
They are of the Spirit world
The real world
They will help him get his revenge
And he will be happy
When he conjures up his spirits
And all is said and done
His world will be perfect
The diabolical orgy has begun
Can you hear the dead calling from the grave.
If you can’t, run...and hide
If you can, don’t worry
You’re already dead
Johnny O
Emergence

It's a good morning. Yes, An extraordinary morning, a little brighter than most. The sun bursts into prisms at my kitchen window, celebrating potential company, today's company. A planned lunch. A smorgasbord of leftovers for two friends, both writers, one published, one procrastinating. There will be woolen socks and threadbare elbows, brown bread and soup gone cold with conversation at my table today. Buy milk later, don't forget. Meg is off to school, the soup's on, everything is under control. The house is clean, the work is finished, the painting progressing. A good start.

Run to town to drop a note on her windshield. Meet us at home, save time. No car there, I missed her. OK. Photo class to attend, twenty minutes to go. Shall I go left, and take my time, go straight, have coffee, and I:

look up
into cold headlights
two feet above my passenger window
moving fast---
glint of steel, and

And I'm pulling myself up can't get up, taste blood. NO! chunks of hair and scalp in my lap crunch of glass. hands don't respond and what is that noise? can't think, why am I here am I going to die? There must be more can't die now can't get up. WHAT IS THAT NOISE? That sodium pentothal. noise, CONTROL—THINK—MEGAN! NO! She's at school (is she at school?) GET UP. PULL UP, the dash is sideways, OK. It's gone, no matter, pull up! The eyes blur blood in them greasy blood and the scream begins (who's scream?) Ripping like a fish like a chicken like Frank Purdeus's quartered fryers wiggle the toes, they work, OK. Fingers work, good. Fingers on face, bleeding crunch glass, THAT SOUND! HELP ME! DON'T STAND SO STILL, DON'T MOVE SO SLOWLY, DON'T LET ME DIE HERE, too much to do! Art. Impermanent. There must be more. Megan. Where's Megan why am I here? The neck won't work, the shoulder screams can't sit up, insurance --- do I have insurance? Yes. No. Where was I going? Car insurance, health insurance I'll need it this time, it's bad. Voices. A man behind my right shoulder (where's the hatch?) doors opening, hands on me, warm. I'm alive. A woman's face, so close I feel her breath, eyes reach my own, holding me, binding me to a board. Check the hips. Check the eyes. Blood pressure. AM I GOING TO DIE? Can't think. Fragments. Pieces. Put it together, make it work. Close one eye, look at the spider-webbed glass. OK. Close the other, it's dim but there. OK. Ears in and out, clear and distant, and CONTROL!—STAY HERE,
and I do. A woman close to me, a man to my right. Numbers. They want numbers. I want to know more.

The spine. The arm. My eyes.

Art.

Mortality.

Pain is a white light that holds me from sleep, from motion, I'm still. I want to be still, but they pull my arms, contort me. X-Rays, and the scrape of a razor on my scalp, catching in shards of glass, glass in my ears, glass in my hands, and I almost relish the pain. Pain proves consciousness. Open the eyes. Take pleasure in the light. the forms, the color. Tell your baby you love her. Touch your friends. Then, three days in a blur, and things begin to improve as I wear myself from the codeine enough to stay awake and hold a thought.

As my daughter sleeps, the universe stops to watch her chest rise and fall, to listen for the flutter of her breath. Past and future come full circle in the child, celebrate the present in her immediacy. Pure emotional light etches the moment deep, to a place where the love is a physical presence that wrenches my gut when I think of leaving her, of her leaving me.

Fall colors vibrate, taking me by the bottom of my belly and shouting "Lovely!" clear through to my hands.

My hands.

Another day, less codeine, and I ache to paint, to draw, to write. The arm doesn't work yet, move it more, use the other one, wait a day, and try again. Everything changes, and I know I'll come around, and around, and around.

I have become aware of cycles. I dream of cycles. Visual images and vague philosophical concepts blend in my dreams, and I see a woman dancing, a bright pinwheel of a dancer. Take the side view, see the skirts swirl in primitive, undulating triangles, lines and cords-red and yellows and blues-primary colors and primary dance. She is far away. She twists and swirls the skirts, her naked belly a celebration of life and youth, the ripple of muscles in her back and shoulders giving sympathetic echo to my own. Rise slowly above her, she moves faster and faster, a ferris wheel, still primitive form and primary color, a Fantasia dancer, then faster still, and she is a wheel, her colors blurring to gray on gray, a wheel careening out of control, all steel and sun, and the coldness, the speed is frightening. Pull back, quickly, to her side, away from the wheel, and find the skirt. Calm down. Move in closer to watch, and surprise! The body isn't real, is rendered by my own hand, a drawing, dancing, alive. Graphite and time, a half-remembered evening drawing the dancing woman, and now, to watch her dance.

Freeze-frame. She strikes a pose, an Indian idol, all angles and geometry, and softened by female form. The pose is contorted, familiar; Steichen's portrait of Therese Duncan, and I am the camera. Her eyes seek mine, and at the moment of contact she shatters like glass on impact. Shards burst out and away, and she is replaced by white light.

I cook new soups, twist locks of soft brown hair between my fingers and paint symbols of cycles. I move more slowly, hold dry leaves in my hands and carry them home like a child. There is value in beauty, in saturation. Concentration brings release from the weight of mortality. Children are the carriers of ourselves through time. White light.

I am so filled with looking that I forget to draw, but the seeing is enough for now. A good start.

Yes. An extraordinary morning.

Sandy Eckert
Miranda

Sometimes she simply whistles,
when she's in the shower shaving her legs,
or pouring skim milk over cereal.

Her lips stay stern
as she brushes orange onto the moon,
or darkens the eyes of her self-portrait.
When she draws
the women behind trees, the men in caves
for her etchings her brows tighten.

Her conversation is not of bargains,
high collared wedding gowns, nor boys,
but of finding clamps for zinc plates,
tossing I Ching pennies,
or of black dogs in her dreams.

Chris Ruggiano
Death... Where, What, When

It comes as fast as wind through trees,
O'hee life how fast it flies.

A young child cries, a baby is born,
An old man dies, his loved ones mourn.

Into this world all wrinkled and gentle, we enter in a flash,
All wrinkled and gentle we exit this world, our time on earth has passed.

Oh my Lord why do we die?
Please tell me Lord I want to know.

Oh my Lord is it to Heaven we fly?
Please tell me Lord where do we go?

Is there a Heaven, a Purgatory, a Hell?
Oh mighty God how can I tell?

The living do not know death it's true,
For to experience death then life is through.

An abyss of mystery falling ever so deep,
We will all know death at our eternal sleep.

"Foot Dreams in Winter"

Michael Riegel

Ernie Mastria
Amen To All That

Everyone looked just like they were supposed to in Garretsville. Mayor balderdash was fat and middle-aged; Homer the borough maintenance supervisor was taller and swaggered amiably and had nicknames for all his buddies; the waitresses at Harry’s all looked like somebody’s mother with their beehive hairdos and tender lipstick-livid smiles, and the bartender at the town’s only tavern rolled up his sleeves and wore a white apron and closed his doors promptly at midnight. The crime rate was lower than the unemployment, which was lower than the high school football team’s final points in last Saturday’s game; in short, it was a town Norman Rockwell would have been proud of, with its picket fences and green lawns and milkmen clinking glass bottles at 4 a.m. and American flags waving in clean breezes. Garretsville was not much different from Heidtown down the road, or Orson across the county line, or any other small town in the entire state.

Considering the area’s distinctive culture, it was no great surprise to Homer that the town’s First Annual Hog-Tying Contest generated such anticipation. All week long, politicians bided their time; the mayor stood on a barber shop stoop, talking about it between spits of orange tobacco; the local women who gingerly avoided the phlegmy puddles on the sidewalk called it a disgrace, but they all banded together to sell raffle tickets under the auspices of the Historical Society, so everyone benefited from it. Not that the town needed any more cultural events, of course. In the previous year alone, it had played host to three professional wrestling tournaments, monthly tractor pulls, and a fiddle festival. The mayor was hoping to promote it as an artisan mecca.

The hog-tying contest was a modest success, but it failed to make the huge amounts of money the Jaycees had expected, and the farmers were a little disgruntled with their livestock and sorry harm for Thanksgiving dinner instead of turkey. But the failed event was just part of a larger picture that Homer related to Elmer, the borough council president, one day over late-morning coffee at Har- ry’s, where all the council met and refilled their cups every couple of minutes.

“I tell yuh, Elmer, I just don’t know what’s going on.” Homer said, shaking his head and rubbing his hand across an unshaven chin. “This town just ain’t what it used to be.”

Elmer wagged his head and stared into his coffee. He may have been about to say something, but then Slim came in and the conversation quickly turned to golf.

But, in fact, more than Elmer and Homer had noticed it, things just started to go wrong in Garretsville. Old Sam the town drunk was found frozen to death in front of the VFW one icy January morning. Mildred, the cleaning lady at the bank, fell and broke her ankle, and Chester the librarian rammed his car into a telephone pole along Fossen Road, injuring himself only a little but making everybody say how lucky he was. A lot of what happened wasn’t any thing out of the ordinary, but things like that had never seemed to happen in Garretsville before.

No one could explain why it was happening, either. Old Farmer Hennesy talked around his chaw about the hard winter, and Abe the insurance man said that rates were sure to go up come the New Year. Tom, the town barber, said everybody whose hair he cut seemed to complain about taxes and grocery prices and world affairs and other things that before they never seemed to care a whole lot about. (Garretsville had always sort of prided itself, even if it was in a quiet and maybe even unrealized way, on its ignorance of all that went on outside the small and comfortable perimeter of Fayette County.) The townspeople all knew that maybe they should pay more attention to front pages and television news, but charity bazaars and church suppers and Grange meetings and the neighbors’ business seemed so much more important—and necessary.

Now that foreign places and economic indica tors and summit conferences cropped up more and more over countertop coffee and over draft beer at the tavern and over Christmas fruitcake at the American Legion socials every December, the townsfolk felt more informed, more a part of the real world and less inclined to gossip, which the Rev- erend Holmstead had always said was sinful, any way. Of course, they were all pretty unhappy about the state of affairs, too. They knew that the President was talking about Contra-Aid, but none of them really knew what it meant, nor one except maybe Kurt Tully, the progressive wipersnap on the town council who was always reading out-of-town papers and coming up with new ideas for the borough solicitors to think about. (They did think about them, too, but they seldom did anything about them.) But then, he was stirring up trouble wherever he went, and something should be done about him, but you have to take the good with the bad, and he did do a lot for the community and needy kids and all those things he never got credit for.

But, unlike many towns that get locked into a similar awakening to the world-at-large and lose forever that comfortable sense of isolation that has been disappearing for the past fifty years along with
or weren’t around anymore. Homer had been only nineteen then and had a job pumping gas out along the highway and hadn’t thought about it all that much at the time.

Curious, he crept up on the boxes, boosted himself up, and opened the stiff flaps of the top one. The smell of leather greeted him immediately, and he spotted a bright red, dull green combination that he couldn’t figure. Reaching inside, he felt a firm rubber something, gave a tug, and found himself holding a bowling shoe of the hideous kind rented out at bowling alleys from Belwood to Berkeley Square. They were always made from cheap materials, they were always stiff and pointy-toed, they always had shoeboxes that tore after the third time they were tied, and they were always manufactured by companies with names like Fleet-O-Heel or Arch-in-Step. Homer, in fact, felt so self-conscious about bowling in those ghastly rented shoes, that he had bought a pair of simple black ones for himself, even though he bowled only once a month with the gang from the P.O.E. club uptown. He returned the ugly shoe to its mate and closed the box lid, then opened another and found, of course, an identical pair. Likewise on the third attempt. Then he saw the carton sides marked “CONTENTS: 24 PAIRS BOWLING SHOES” and did a quick multiplication in his head, since he had always been good at math. In a minute, he realized that he was sitting on top of 6,960 pairs of bowling shoes-rentable, no less— and was motoring in a fortune under. He left the attic for a cheese and beef and thought about things.

That afternoon, Homer called Mayor Balderdash, and together they climbed the rickety stairs and the mayor gazed with the same unbelieving eyes and mouthed the same silent words and chuckled a bit because he had no idea what to do with 6,960 pairs of bowling shoes-rentable, no less. Later they sat in his office and drank Cokes and wiped sweat since Homer had forgotten to tell his men to fix the borough hall’s air conditioner.

“Homer, what are we going to do with 6,960 pairs of bowling shoes-rentable, no less?” was the mayor’s first question, and it was a good one. Homer shrugged and said that maybe the town could sell them, but that first the owners, if any, of the former company that had occupied the building should be contacted to see whether the shoes would be claimed, since the borough had bought only the building, not its contents. The mayor agreed, even though he muttered something about when you buy the white of an egg, you buy the yolk, too. In any case, the matter was dismissed as the secretary drew up a formal letter and posted it just before lunch. Mrs. Maxwell closed the post office window at 4:30.

Mayor Balderdash almost choked on his cheese danish when he read the reply that he received several months later indicating that the shoes were the property of the High-Heel Corporation, which was currently on bankruptcy court in the state it had relocated to in 1948. Until the legal proceedings were finalized, the Garretsville borough was prohibited from selling or otherwise distributing the shoes to any agency, firm, seller and/or lessor, public or private, in any manner inconsistent with the intended purpose of said footwear without the permission of applicable legal agencies.” In other words, Garretsville was stuck with 6,960 pairs of bowling shoes -- rentable, no less. Mayor Balderdash was angry and drowned his sorrows in a plate of apple fritters and saw no one for several days. Homer, too, was disturbed, since the new manure recycling system that the borough had finally given him authorization to order would soon arrive and was to be placed in the building now holding the shoes.

However, American ingenuity is a curious thing, and Kurt Tully, the apple-pie-faced go-getter on the town council, stormed into the mayor’s office one Monday morning with a sure-fire scheme certain to solve not only the borough’s shoe problem but also its sagging morals. The question he raised, which would surely entail much legal jargon if it ever went to court, was what the phrase “inconsistent with the intended purpose” meant. Since shoes, after all, were meant to be worn, Mayor Balderdash beamed as Kurt Tully explained his plan.

The first indication that something was amiss was when Hector Jacobson, the editor of the local weekly newspaper, spotted Emama Leekman, one of the town’s resident funny old ladies who walked around in fishing hats and frayed sweaters and called everyone “Youngster” no matter how old they were, walking down Main Street sporting rather odd footwear. He, of course, thought nothing of it at the time, since Emma had, the previous year, arrived at the Senior Citizens’ weekly lunch in a miniskirt and halter top. However, he then saw similar shoes on the feet of a denim-clad junior high kid at the convenience store, and, later, a pair dangling form the rear-view mirror of a pickup truck. In the next several days, more and more of the shoes found their way into the most unusual places, until even Mrs. Rigby, the wife of the town’s wealthy banker, had donned a pair - narrow widths, of course - for her county club’s annual benefit dinner dance. Hector stopped the presses the next morning and inserted a column on the front page of The Guardian about the shoe phenomenon.

By some fluke that only a cynical wrangler could adequately explain, the story was picked up by the Associated Press and distributed nationally, within a week, The New York Times had reprinted it, and reporters, artists, and gawkers were flocking to Garretsville, the little town on the other side of nowhere, to find out firsthand about the newest trend in casualwear. By now, virtually every citizen spotted a pair of the red-and-green loafers; lawyers wore them with gray pinstripes, firemen with yellow slickers, cheerleaders with Bobby socks and tight sweaters, even mailmen, who were technically dis- obeying federal regulations. Photographers snapped frantically and all the townsfolk smiled wide, toothy smiles as if they knew something that no one else did.

When the pictures found their way into special features in the national magazines, bowling shoes were suddenly as essential to the self-respecting fashion plate as belt-bottom jeans and Nehru jackets have been in trends of style best left forgot- ten. Penny-loafers and Dockside and leather
boots were discarded in huge heaps as bowling shoe sales escalated at an unprecedented rate, sending Wall Street financiers into a titter and making economic forecasters only shake their heads in wonder.

With the sudden prosperity, the High-heel Corporation went back into business and paid all of its bills within six months. Eventually they claimed all 6,960 pairs of shoes from Garrettyville, since the original editions were already collectors' items, and patrons at Gandolph's, the exclusive auction house in the city, had bid one pair into the five-figure range. Bargainhouse shoe companies bought out full lines of bowling shoes in pastel colors with 32 varieties of traction design on the soles. Eventually the fad died out and bowling shoes could be found on surplus piles at K-Mart nationwide, along with mood rings, pet rocks, Farrah wigs, hand-held electronic games, Elvis statues, and Cabbage Patch Kids. The new rage was, after all, a revival of the leopard-skin pillbox hat, and no one could afford to be without one.

More importantly, however, Garrettyville was happy again. After all the hullabaloo of tourists from Hoboken in Winnebagos and crisis city reporters and all the other undesirable sorts that seem to thrive on mania finally left town, it once again gossiped in exaggerated whispers, just like small towns are supposed to. Community spirit is never depleted as long as there is someone to talk about, and Mayor Balderdash used that exact slogan to get re-elected the following month. One morning, he sat with Kurt Tully and Elmer at Harry's, watching sidewalk strollers side by side, each head tucked smuggly under a huge spotted orange monstrosity that all the gossips assured was the "in" thing. The mayor helped himself to a third plateful of buttermilk biscuits from the buffet and smiled helplessly.

"I'll never understand people," he said, as much to himself as to his companions. And Garrettyville again forgot about the world for awhile.

Brendan Strasser

the last
walking through the glen he saw her gently sleeping on the moss.
her arms filled with flowers,
picked quietly as she walked.
each petal still wet with
the kiss of morning dew.
brilliant reds, soft pinks, golden yellows
and deep, rich violets.
the sun played softly, dancing
on her auburn tresses.
the hours drifted slowly by,
and still she slept.
he stood there quietly watching,
entranced by her innocence.
he went to her and carefully
lied his head upon her lap
she woke and saw him, trapped
by her beauty.
go, run free, she said.
i cannot keep you.
he left her there, both gently weeping
in the glen.
the tears streamed down her face,
he was the last.
good bye, she whispered to herself,
and him.
good bye, he was the last.
he was the unicorn.

Helena Brodsky

Return of the Robin
Tiny wings strong enough for flight into shade sky clouded only by fate above, beyond sight.
Soft wings pained easily by flight into storm sky lined only by hate steep, far might.
True wings brave after the flight into clear sky caressed only by sun seen so bright.
Bold wings love for the flight into one sky filled only by one true, fair plight.

Debra Dursi
Zenith
Let me go back to my room
mommy
take me back
into the womb
Fold me back up
into fetal tradition
seal off
all impending doom
I don’t want
another life I
don’t need
another wife I can’t
weather
one more
hour
mommy
boil me clean
in a blood
cold
shower
Wrap me up tight
as a loom
mommy
tuck me back
into your womb
Pull up the sheet
remove all my volition
promise
you will join me soon
Mark Harris

one and one and three
one lays right beside me
one lays away from me
both are mine forever
though one will leave me
soon
one laughs
and
my soul explodes with joy
one cries
and
my body weakens
one touches my breast tenderly
one touches me
and
my body is aware
of the love
we share
we
one and one and three.
Rebecca Spradlin

Letter to a Friend
Do you remember both of us that day? You in
a rough brown scarf, and me in a faded blue
one. We rocked there on our sleds, while the
snow kept spinning down on us.
You shouted to me through the storm and the
whole hill echoed, “It’ll never stop snowing...”
Even now I can picture you there, still sitting,
crossed legged, dark against white, wiping
snow off an eyelash with one wet mitten.
It dusted over everything that morning. There
was something magical about that; something
connecting I think.
It’s been a long time since that day, sledding
together. I think you were right though. If you
look hard enough it always will be snowing.

Keith Schneider
The blond girl sitting on crushed comics
Watches dust floating in weekend sun.
Bells chime to her through a moth specked screen.
Humming she keeps time.

On the driveway father washes away
Earthworms dried in odd circles
Reminding him of the lips of thin men
Drowned in deep water.

Turning off the hose
His hands shake.
And his handkerchief flutters white
When he wipes his mouth.

Near sunset
The girl shifts her weight
And with one bandaged finger
Draws cats in the dust.

Keith Schneider

The Weaving

White string over next pulling through
forming knot. Water rushing over mossy stones slush ripple fallen leaves
trapped in weeds. One knot then two
weaving by cool water splashing.
no summer sun shines breeze blows crisp.
Yellow flowers wild pull easily
from dry earth wilting. Daylight shortens shadows lengthen earlier. Faster wind
rustles above strings getting shorter
adding more cotton under next cord
next knot new row.

Chris Ruggiano
I Am Nothing

Let me tell you what I once was
But am no more...

I was a bell once
How I would ring!
People would listen to me
I could make people smile
But things change...

I was the sun once
In the day I would shine my light on all creation
I made things grow
I made everything seem more real
More beautiful
The people worshipped me
But things change...

I was the moon once
I lit up the sky at night
From my position in the sky I watched the lovers
Holding hands, kissing, and the like
I provided many a scene for romance
But things change...

I was a king once
I ruled the land with power!
I made rules and people obeyed them
And they loved me
I was a good king
But things change...

I was a lion once
I ruled the jungle!
Animals feared me
I walked, they stepped aside
I was king of the beasts!
But things change...

I was a bird once
I soared the skies and was free
All was very peaceful
People would watch me
and love me
But things change...

I was alive once
But things change
Now...
Now I am nothing

Johnny O

Van Gogh's Flowering Garden

It was only a year before your death
that you created your
Flower Garden.
How could I forget a lime-green sky?
or bright white houses
with orange roofs?
I have never seen
splashes of color so happy
so orange
so red
so blue...
They could have been daisies
chrysanthemums
roses
or daffodils
For all I knew.
How could you leave me wondering like that?
I felt the rush of spring.
There is nothing more beautiful than the flowers of your eyes.

Heidi McIntyre
the rushes
of my woman
are so misunderstood

I want the waves
if they would
to rock me back and forth
until
I crash upon the rocks
and there soak in the salt and the sun
beating on my body.

still the waves only foam at the mouth
and the salt
only splashes on my face,
it fills my ears
while the sun
beats between my legs
and burns
a hole
in my brain
and it stings
when the rushes begin

beating

the rushes
of my woman
are so misunderstood.

Rebecca Spradlin
Before You Go

Before you go
I'd like to know
Would you dance a little while with me?
Nothing is the same
No one is to blame
Will you share just one smile with me?
Before you go, remember this
I have only one small wish
That you and I will meet again
Maybe things will be different then
Maybe you and I
Can get together one more time
Just for old time's sake
Singing under a golden moon
Dancing by the lake
Before you go, turn off the lights
Don't look back, look into the night
Ahead of you, where your future lies
Do not weep, do not cry
Everything's not as bad as it seems
And what exactly is a dream?

Johnny O
es·sence (es´əns). n. 1. The quality or qualities of a thing that give it its identity; the intrinsic or indispensable properties of a thing. 2. The most important or effectual ingredient; crucial element. 3. Philosophy. The inherent, unchanging nature of a thing or class of things, as distinguished from its attributes or its existence. 4. An extract of a substance that retains its fundamental or most desirable properties in concentrated form. 5. An existing thing; especially, a spiritual or incorporeal entity.