

A high-contrast, black and white close-up photograph of an elderly man's face. He is wearing a dark, textured cap and has a full, white beard and mustache. His eyes are looking slightly to the right of the camera. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of his skin and the fabric of his cap.

KANSAS CITY

10 YRS

VOICES

a periodical of writing and art

volume 10

# KANSAS CITY VOICES

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# KANSAS CITY VOICES

VOLUME 10

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## THE HEROES OF WHISPERING PRAIRIE PRESS

Whispering Prairie Press was founded in 1991. Deborah Shouse and Carolyn Riddle, co-leaders of the Kansas City Writers Group (KCWG) at the time, wanted to publish an anthology of writing by group members. They asked Sally Whitney to be in charge of the project.

Several members of KCWG volunteered to be on the anthology planning committee, and they met for lunch following each KCWG session. The meetings evolved from lunch time meetings at PoPo's, a small café, to more formal meetings at the Plaza Library in Kansas City, Missouri.

Judith Bader Jones, currently a KCWG member and a former, long-time board member of Whispering Prairie Press, was part of that first planning group. She described Sally Whitney as "a soft-spoken woman from North Carolina with a degree from Duke University. We lost her to New Jersey in 1994 when she became director of *Best Review*, a magazine for the insurance industry."

When the production cost for the first anthology was determined, Sally Whitney applied for 501(c)(3) status for the fledgling publishing house. Chalise Miner, a KCWG and WPP member and volunteer until 2008 when she moved to Florida, suggested the name "Whispering Prairie Press."

The planning committee thought that, as a not-for-profit organization, Whispering Prairie Press would be able to raise seed money for the project through donations. As it turned out, the board raised most of the money through fundraisers. Judith said of these early fundraising efforts: "I suggested we clean houses to make money, but this was immediately voted down! What was I thinking? Money raised from a dinner reading at PoPo's, a writer's retreat at Cado Creek Cabin, two used book sales, a garage sale, and manuscript critiques paid for the first anthology. The used book sales alone raised more than \$750."

Judith laughed as she told a charming story about the garage sale. "Marian Godfrey, an early board member, brought a 1950s bathing suit to the garage sale at Phyllis Westover's house. I told her no one would want an old bathing suit! But it was the first thing to sell."

The early publications of Whispering Prairie Press were three anthologies of work by KCWG members. Earnings from each publication paid for publication of the subsequent issue.

The first anthology, *Beginning from the Middle*, was published in 1994. The blurb read, "Every piece in this book is a commitment from people who love words and love to write."

In 1997, the second anthology, *Handprint in the Woods*, was published under the editing leadership of Mary-Lane Kamberg and Terry Hoyland. "As these authors explored their environment, their work became unquestionably linked with people who live on the land." By then, Mary-Lane had also become co-leader of KCWG with Deborah Shouse.

In 2001, Larry and Suella Walsh edited *Season of Light*, a third anthology. Rex Rogers offered his expertise for the layout. According to the foreword in this volume, "This anthology lingers within the season framed by light: candles, hearth, moon, sun."

In the months between publication of the anthologies, Whispering Prairie Press offered programs in "Writing for Publication" at libraries all over the metropolitan area and as distant as Lone Jack, Missouri. People came out in large numbers for these classes and the Q&A sessions often continued until the libraries closed for the evening, according to Alberta James Daw, a long-time board member and historian of Whispering Prairie Press.

In 2003, the board, under the leadership of Larry and Suella Walsh, undertook a new challenge. Larry envisioned a high quality annual literary magazine dedicated to Kansas City and environs, and Suella suggested the name, *Kansas City Voices*.

As Managing Editor, Larry suggested and the board voted to approve a layout of 10 poems, 10 fiction, 10 nonfiction, and 10 art pieces. Variations on that format have continued throughout ten years of *Kansas City Voices* publication, which still publishes high quality poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and art.

In reminiscing about the first issues of *Kansas City Voices*, Larry said, “The best part was finding great writers. Tim Todd, Brian Daldorph, Phil Miller, and Lenore Carroll were all published in the early years.” Other recognized writers published in *Kansas City Voices* included Stanley Banks, Nancy Pickard, Steve Shapiro, Maril Crabtree, and, of course, Judith Bader Jones. All of these writers have published books.

Larry said that critiquing others’ writing also helped his own. “You can pick up things as an editor that helps you practice as a writer and bleeds over into your own creative process.” Larry and Suella, along with being successful writers, find teaching to be rewarding. “Everyone is creative, themselves, somehow,” Larry said. “But people don’t realize they are, whether they’re writing or tying fishing flies.”

After Larry and Suella Walsh stepped down, Rex Rogers held the job of Managing Editor until his death in 2010. At the time of his death, Volume 8 of *Kansas City Voices* was halfway completed and needed leadership to bring to fruition. Mary-Lane Kamberg stepped into the breach, led Volume 8 through to publication, and rebuilt the Board of Whispering Prairie Press. A tribute to Rex was included in the magazine. Following Mary-Lane, Theresa Hupp took over as Board President for Volume 9, and instituted a successful donation drive.

*Kansas City Voices* is now publishing its tenth volume under the leadership of Jessica Conoley, Board President and Managing Editor. The magazine solicits writers and artists worldwide. In recent years, twenty to thirty volunteers have selected material to publish from hundreds of submissions, edited the work and worked with local design professionals to lay out a professional magazine. Other volunteers have organized readings where artists read and/or show their work to audiences in Missouri and Kansas. Under Jessica Conoley’s leadership, WPP also developed a new web site with online ordering.

Each year, the Board raises money through magazine sales, a writing conference, a writing contest, and a donation drive, as well as through grants from the Missouri Arts Council. These funds have paid for professional layout of the magazine, printing the magazine at a long-time Missouri publisher (Walsworth Publishing in Marceline, Missouri), and for promotional events and media publicity.

Whispering Prairie Press is in its twenty-first year and has published a hard-copy edition of *Kansas City Voices* every year for the past ten years. In the current publishing environment, that alone is worth celebrating. But the real heroes are the literally hundreds of volunteers who have committed their time, resources, and talent to making *Kansas City Voices* a nationally recognized arts and literary magazine, and, in the process, developed their own skills and knowledge about the publishing side of writing. Recently, *Poets and Writers* added *Kansas City Voices* to their list of magazines worthy of professional recognition.

The board is looking at the possibilities for expanding publication into e-books and adding a contest for chapbooks. The work is never finished.

# SUCH A SOUND

Thomas Fox Averill

One summer, some nights, after a rain, the night still and soft, the windows open for what was always a cool breeze, if I awoke in pre-dawn light, I heard a sigh, a shudder, a soft moan just outside my bedroom window, coming, I thought, from my garden. Was it an animal, stretching itself after nocturnal prowling, readying itself for a daytime burrow?

Sometimes the sound was slick, like running a finger down a sweating glass, making me think of a cat, licking dew from the grass. When I sneaked to the windows, though, I saw no cat, dog, possum or raccoon. Was an earthworm turning in the newly wet soil? A caterpillar crawling on a cabbage leaf, soon to cocoon? A bird sharpening its beak on a fence post? Rain, sound, fruitless investigation, until the summer wore its way into fall, and I harvested the garden and, though rain continued, the sound stopped.

The next year, my grandfather came for a visit. An old farmer, he had to undergo some medical tests, so he stayed with me for a week. My garden was just coming along, tomatoes setting, beans forming at the ends of their vines, corn rising, young beets ready to boil. The rain came down hard one day, and that night I heard the sounds from the summer before.

I described what I was hearing to my grandfather, asked him to solve the mystery. He smiled. That day he drove a stake into the garden, and late afternoon we watered well. Same sounds that night.

“Go look at the stake,” he said in the morning.

The stake was just as he’d driven it in the day before.

“What do you notice?” he asked.

Nothing, I told him.

“And the corn?” he asked.

The sweet corn, young and thriving, had outgrown the stake driven to its height, all in one night.

“Some nights,” said my grandfather, “out on the farm, next to a field of corn, I can hardly sleep for listening to it grow. Such a sound.”

# The Bad Seed

## Ron Pruitt

Granny died on a Thursday toward the end of January. I'm sorry to say I didn't mark the exact day in the panic that followed. Granny died alone, in her bed. Peacefully, I hope. I found her when I came home from school and checked on her. My first thought was to call an ambulance, but when I touched her, she was cold, the warmth of life long gone.

I was stunned, shocked, and scared. I should have felt sorrow and guilt, but what I felt was trapped, like a giant weight was pressing down, keeping me from breathing. I had to get out of that house. I went into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of matches and walked off up the road, lighting the kitchen matches one by one with my thumbnail and flicking them onto the roadside. Most of them just fizzled, but sometimes one would land among dry grasses and flame up. I walked until I ran out of matches, and then I turned back and stood and watched crescents of grassfires crawl across the fields. Somehow, the fires made me feel better, calmer, more in control.

I was too upset to eat supper. I wandered around Granny's old house until late that night, numb and dazed. Exhaustion finally brought sleep and the next morning I went off to school and tried not to think about it. I'm ashamed to say I left her lying there under a quilt for two days before I did anything, but then this whole story is filled up with regret.

After two days, I rolled Granny up in her quilt and put her out in the smokehouse. Winter's deep freeze would preserve her until spring, giving me time to figure things out. It sounds horrible and morbid, but I had my reasons. I was sixteen, a sophomore in high school, and if Granny was dead, I'd be going to live with Uncle Fred. I'd do just about anything to keep that from happening.

I put a padlock on the smokehouse door just in case anyone came snooping around. It was mostly precautionary because Granny and I never had visitors. She lived so far out in the country, at the dead end of a dirt road, just a little south of the back of beyond. The only people we ever saw were Jehovah's Witnesses who came and knocked on her door and when nobody answered, left copies of the Watchtower on the porch before they went away. Persistent people, those Witnesses.

Granny had been bedfast for years, so she didn't go anywhere. Dad took care of her until I was fourteen, but then he was sent off to the state pen for killing a man in a knife fight at a beer joint. He started doing a twenty-year stretch and I took over everything with Granny, her feeding, medicine, even bathing her. I took care of her as best I could, did the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning, saw to her animals. I paid the bills out of Granny's social security check, and we somehow scraped by on the little that was left. I knew if I reported Granny's death, those checks would stop coming.

I guess you could say things went along OK until spring came in. There was a warm spell in late March and I knew I had to get Granny out of the smokehouse. I gave her a nice burial out in the meadow under a sassafras tree, read some scripture over her and tried to think on her good points. Which was hard, because she was really a mean old woman who never thanked me once for helping her and continually threatened to whip my butt first chance she got. I guess meanness just runs in my family, and I guess I'm a bad seed too, but you can't choose your family so I don't see how I'm to blame.

Granny hadn't been in the ground a week when Uncle Fred showed up. It was a Saturday afternoon when I heard his big Cadillac crunch down the gravel drive. I rushed around locked the doors, turned out all the lights and went and hid in the bathroom. He pounded hard on the front door for a while and shouted our names, but he gave up after a while and left, just like the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I finished my sophomore year and school let out for the summer. A nice blanket of grass had grown up on Granny's grave. It sounds bad to admit it, but life was pretty good. I lazed around the farm and spent a lot of my free time reading or listening to music. I did whatever I felt like doing, sleeping late, eating what I liked, and going for long drives in Grandpa's old pick-up. I had more money to spend too, because I didn't have to buy food and meds for Granny. It was a solitary life, but I didn't mind that. The people I'd lived around all my life had pretty much soured me on humans entirely.

Most of the time I felt happy, but sometimes a feeling of doom crept in and ruined it. I'm not stupid. I knew my vacation couldn't last forever, but I was determined to make it last as long as I could.

I was out mowing the lawn the next time Uncle Fred came over. He looked really small when he climbed out of that giant Cadillac of his. I swear he'd shrunk some since the last time I saw him. He walked kind of bent over, and to see him shuffle along, you wouldn't think he was much of anything. But if you knew him, you kept your distance, because Uncle Fred would slap you across the face quicker than a scalded cat if you so much as held your mouth wrong.

He headed for the porch, ignoring me. I shut off the mower and hustled over and put myself in his path.

"What do you want, you little pissant?" he spat out at me, which was kind of funny because he never came over unless he wanted something himself.

"Granny's asleep. Just leave her alone."

"Get out of my way boy," he said, and reared back and socked me in the mouth. I stumbled back and tasted coppery blood filling my mouth.

He walked slowly by me before I could recover and started climbing the porch steps. I grabbed up an old shovel and ran over and caught up to him on the porch. He heard me coming and turned his head around to look at me. I saw fear in his eyes just before the shovel hit him hard, full in the face. He fell like a stalk of grain being scythed and lay there on the porch knocked out. I don't how many times I hit him after that. I lost count. But it was more than enough to kill him.

I threw my uncle over my shoulder and carried him down to the meadow and dug a big hole with the same shovel. I put him a good distance from Granny. I didn't think she'd want him very close, even in death.

By the time I had Uncle Fred under ground, I was dirty and tired. I also felt shaken, all quivery inside. I'd killed animals, chickens, squirrels, rabbits, deer, a hog, and even though the world was a better place without my uncle, I didn't feel right about it. I took a long, hot bath with lots of soap, but I still didn't feel clean. After dark, I drove Uncle Fred's Cadillac over to his place. My uncle was too ornery to keep a woman or kids, so he lived alone in a nice, new trailer-house that perched on the rim of a draw.

I torched his place. I squirted out a can of lighter fluid on his couch and set it afire. Then I went out and stood in the yard and watched the windows light up with yellow flames licking at the walls and ceiling. I watched it burn until I could hear the distant sirens of the fire trucks. It was easy enough to slip off into the darkness and by the time I walked back to Granny's house, I was feeling all right again. I slept in the next morning and I was still drinking coffee when the sheriff came with a big burly deputy. They arrested me and cuffed my hands behind my back and hauled me off to jail. The danged Jehovah's Witnesses had seen me putting Uncle Fred in the ground and called the law. They had me cold, so I confessed, but that wasn't enough for them. They'd realized by then that Granny was missing, so I told them what had happened and helped them find her body, but that just made them believe I'd killed her too.

They grilled me hard, but I held out and stuck to my story. The big deputy got mad and backhanded me across the face. He put a gun to my head and said he was going to kill me. Sometime in the early hours of the next morning, I broke and told them what they wanted to hear. They wrote it up, I signed it, and they put me in a cell and left me alone after that.

The public defender got me a deal, a life sentence for saying I was guilty of both killings, and they stuck me in the same prison as Dad. Sometimes I see him in the chow hall, or he'll walk shackled past my cell, and he always grins real wide like it's all a big joke.

The pen is a stinky, noisy and dangerous hole, but you have a lot of time to think things over. I started writing to pass the time. I'm working on my GED. I'll say one thing about being in jail, there's no place left to go but up. I'll be out when I'm in my thirties and when they finally turn me loose, I'm going to go out and set the whole world on fire.

## MAP READING

"This is where we started from," you say.  
A feeble line, on uncertain ground,  
Wispy as your hair once on my coat.  
"This is where we think we went," you say.  
A wavering contour took us round  
And back – though no higher, yet so close.  
"This is where we meet again," you say.  
Looking for pointers is how we found  
Each other when thinking we were lost.

Stuart Larner

## NOTHING MISSING NOTHING BROKEN

What words soothe and what words shatter?  
What words nourish, reconcile?  
What do damage? What that matter?  
What are left to rot, revile?

Words we didn't know we needed.  
Words when voiced with balm descend,  
smoothing edges and when seeded,  
empty hollows sprout, amend.

Nothing missing, nothing broken.  
Say it, tell me yet again.  
Every time these words are spoken—  
heal the hurt, remove the stain.

Rita Roth

## CRAIGSLIST

For sale:

Red ribbons of various sizes,  
satin edges frayed. Two metal  
ribbon pins, paint flecked,  
backs missing.

Twenty years  
of AIDS walk t-shirts,  
rolled, stuffed  
in a dresser drawer.

The Color of Light, tattered,  
precise triangles creased at page tops,  
highlighting, back cover ripped.

Thirty-seven folded, faded  
memorial programs, some with pictures.  
One copy of advance directives, never  
completed.

Nina Bennett

## BLOOD OF MY KIN

Jack Kline

To understand why I done what I done, I guess you need to know about Ma and Pa. Now I ain't saying it's their fault, not at all. It all bears laying on me. I want that clear. But I come from them and their blood runs through me and makes me what I am as much as anything else. It's like Hickory Grove Elementary art class back in '02. Miss Parmenter give me these colors and some water and she says "Okay Henry, now mix a glob of that red with a glob of blue." Out came purple.

That's me, purple. Pa's always been like that blue color and Ma is as red as a Washington apple. My Pa's the calm one. He don't get riled, he don't ever cry and he don't hardly laugh nor smile. Folks can't tell much of what he's thinking, not even Ma. He's so quiet you could follow him around of a day and not count a hundred words. I never got much praise from him – Lord knows I wanted it – but I never got much yelling neither. I learned to read his eyes, and in them I could often see when he was pissed or proud.

Somehow Pa found a woman as far different from him as God is to the Devil. Fiery. That's what Ma is. You always know what she thinks and feels because she wears it on the outside. I got more hugs and swats and ears cuffed in any one week from Ma than in the whole run of my life from Pa. Ma's mostly a happy chatterbox, but when she gets mad, folks get out of her way. She comes on like a Flint Hills thunderstorm, blows in quick and furious, and just as quick she blows on, chatting along like nothing ever happened. While her fury's blowing though, things get throwed and broken and people in her path get hurt. But most of the time she's the lovinest person I know.

So that's the red and the blue of my upbringing, and like many folks I mixed them colors up inside me and came out a little of both. Growing up I favored Pa. I guess that's only natural. I hid everything inside, anger, pain, love, all of it buried like our old dog

Shadow buries his steer bones. Pa is a hard man really, and I tried to be that way. Sometimes it was tough because the Ma in me fought to come out. Like when Pa and I hunted, and I shot me a deer, I felt more sorrow than pride. I kept silent though, wanting to be just like Pa and all.

I might have growed up to become my Pa, squeezed that redness down until it would never poke itself out, had it not been for Becky Consolo. My second year in high school she blew a love hole in me the size of a cannon ball. Sure I'd felt stirrings before, and I'd thought about girls in school and also at night as I lay in bed. But I'd never before felt horse-hind-legs-kick-in-the-gut love before.

I don't know if Pa ever felt that way about Ma, and if he did how he dealt with it, but love must give blue folks fits. I'd noticed Becky since sixth grade, but she never paid much mind to me. She was every boy's cheerleader dream. I'd just figured she was something I could never have, like me wanting a green Camaro. I was a rusty pickup and she was like a shiny, forest green Camaro with dual chrome tailpipes. Yep, those tailpipes were mighty fine.

Maybe it was because I'd made a flash on the varsity football team that fall, but come spring Becky set her sights on me. I made for an easy catch. She was everything good I thought about since I started thinking about them things.

But I didn't know how to feel those feelings, love and all. And I didn't know how to show her how and what I felt, even though the feeling part was there. I couldn't play that lovey-dovey game so well and she began to carp at me about the not telling and not showing enough. I tried to put the feelings in the kiss and in the roaming hands that we did in the pickup, but that wasn't enough for her. She needed more, she said. But we was mostly happy and went

everywhere together and were boyfriend and girlfriend until right after the prom.

It was a Friday night at the Sonic when she told me that she wanted to date other boys.

“I still love you Henry, but I want to be sure that you’re the one true one. I want to see what other boys are like,” Becky said.

I couldn’t say nothing. I was consternated.

“If you do love me like you say, why would you do this to me?” I finally sputtered.

Then she said things about how she still wanted to date with me, even to the city for our movie date the next weekend. But she wanted to be sure that I was the true one for her.

That’s when the Ma inside me started pouring out. I told her for the first time, and the best time, how much I loved her and what she meant to me, and she cried and I cried my Ma’s tears right there at the Sonic. All Pa’s blueness disappeared. Becky touched the tears on my face and she took my hand and put it in her lap. I’m not the brightest kid in school, but I figured that was a signal.

I fired up my old F-150 and we fish-tailed out of there and down to Crooked Creek Lake where I pulled out the horse blanket from behind the seat and right there on the pickup bed we made love. It was just like I’d imagined, only in real life it all went too fast. The second time was better, slower.

Things went good for a month or so. Crooked Creek became a regular nighttime stop. And I tried to be more like she wanted me, to do the telling and the showing of love, but it came hard.

Sometimes Becky seemed different, but I thought it was because we’d moved to a higher place, a place of love and sex. I figured the next higher place we’d move to would be the marrying after graduation place. I guess she figured different.

My pickup was nestled in the edge of the woods at Crooked Creek Saturday night, and we had just made love. I had even blurted out that I loved her, hard as that was. We stuck some clothes on and were lying on the truck bed. Stars were everywhere and crickets croaked and the wind rustled oak and maple leaves, making music better than anything you can get from the radio. I don’t remember what I was thinking at that very moment, but it was something good. I know I wore a smile.

“Henry?”

“Yeah?”

“I have a date with Randy next Friday. I wanted to be up front about it”

My smile ended right there, and my life.

“Say something, Henry.” But I couldn’t say nothing. Things flew around inside my brain but they wouldn’t sort out. Pressure built up and I felt like steam would come out my nose and ears.

“We’ve talked about this before,” she said. “I need to know if you’re the one. And how can I tell if I don’t look around some?” By then we were both sitting up.

“But you said that you loved me.” At that point I think I was whining some, but she was as calm as Pa’s fishing pond on a windless morning.

“I do love you, Henry. Listen, every boy I’ve dated for very long has come closer to being the perfect one than the last, closer to the one that I know I’ll love forever.” Her eyes glowed fierce in the moonlight. “You’re the closest yet. I mean it. Maybe you’re as close as I’ll ever get, but I’ve got to find out. And I do still want to go out with you.”

I had never really dated any other girls. But I knew she was that one true one for me. And she said that maybe I’m as close as she’ll ever get? Anger grew in me, hot and red. I’d been in scrapes

with other boys before and won most all of them, but I hadn’t never hit a girl. I tried to think it out. I figured me dating her while she gallivanted with other boys would be like being her old pickup truck and driving her around as she shopped for a new car. I folded my arms and told her so, and I told her that things don’t work that way.

She looked at me, pleading, and said “I’ve got to do this.” And then she shook her head. “You don’t understand, do you? It’s not that I don’t love you, it’s just that ...”

I had stopped listening, every muscle was taut, taut like they get when I’m about to lay out a running back. But at the end of all her speeching I did hear her say “I have to do this, Henry, and I guess you must do what you must do.”

I punched her in the face – hard.

I was all set to tell her what was what, but seeing the blood drip from her nose and her mouth fill with wet redness, red as her lipstick, red as my fury, it disarmed me. What had I done? I moved to help her.

Becky swatted my hand away and began screaming at me. She was crying and blubbering, red spittle flying. Her voice sounded like she nursed a cold, but I knew it was because I stove in her nose. She spit a glob of blood on me and yelled for me to take her home. I didn’t know what to do. She called me a bastard and said her Pa would call the cops.

I watched her bloody lips quiver and her tears stream, and I said “I’m so sorry, Becky.” I reached out to her, saying “Let me help you.” She smacked me in the face.

“I hate you. I never want to see you again!” She screamed some other bad things too and before I knew it I hit her again, and again. I don’t know how many times. When I was done with the hitting she was quiet, lying on the truck bed.

Turns out she was dead.

I cried and cried. I cried about what I had done and about not having Becky as my girl ever again. I had my twelve-gauge pump in the truck window and thought about sticking it into my mouth and ending it. That’s what I should’ve done. It’s what I deserved. But the stars still shone up there, and the crickets still croaked and leaves still rustled. I didn’t want to die even though I deserved dying.

I sat next to her for a long time, brushing her blood-caked blond hair with my fingertips. I wasn’t worried about what if somebody showed up. Maybe I wanted to be caught.

Becky’s at the bottom of Crooked Creek Lake now, held there for a time with an old quarter horse lead line and some rocks. I headed south on 69 highway and crossed over into Missouri. At Carthage I used my debit to get \$240. I figured they could trace me by the use of the card so I got all I could and then pitched it.

I’m holed up here in Mark Twain National Forest somewhere near Mountain Home. For a time, folks at home will figure Becky and I run off together. But not for long. I sit here on the bed of my truck; her blood washed clean days ago. The sky darkens and it will rain soon. My twelve-gauge rests in my lap and the blood of my kin cries out to me to set things right.

For a second I think that maybe I will just up and fill my skull with buckshot. You can’t get righter than that. But Ma’s out of my system now. I’m sorry and all about Becky, but that wasn’t me. I’m as blue as a cold Kansas sky in January, and I’m going to stay that way.

There are folks here in these Ozark hills who know how to disappear somebody, and I’m going to find one to help me ditch the truck and change my name. And then I’ll find me another girl like Becky, someone to love and to love me. And this time I’ll be her one true one and she’ll be mine.

# A GIFT FROM GOD

Marilee Aufdenkamp

The day I met Mrs. Archer was when she walked over to me while I was sitting on my porch step and asked me how I liked my new country. She wore lipstick the color of dark red chilies and a big yellow hat that looked like an upside-down flower. I lied and told her that I like it very much. She said she wasn't sure because I looked so sad. I felt nervous, at first, talking so openly with a stranger, but when Mrs. Archer sat down beside me, and looked so completely at my face, I could feel the warmth and goodness coming right off of her. My sister Kiran said I should pretend to be happy for Mataji and Pitaji.

"At school no one eats lunch with me," I tell my new neighbor. "I sit at a table in the cafeteria with three Asian girls who are also ignored. They speak their own language. No one even looks at me." I tell her about the time I lost my pencil and I asked one of my classmates if she had an extra one. "I don't think that I do," she said, and then she went into our classroom and asked all of the other students if they wanted to borrow one of her extra pencils.

I was glad we didn't come to this foreign place until April. It was hard starting school so late in the year, but I was happy we had missed the snow, and that summer was coming soon. I did not want to see snow, or feel cold, along with feeling lonely and homesick. Mrs. A. said she felt lonely and misplaced too when she first arrived; I can't believe it though, she is so friendly. She told me she moved here from Tennessee and, just like me, she thought Nebraska was the farthest place from home that she could imagine. She had the prettiest white skin and the gentlest way of speaking, not quiet really, just soft and comfortable.

Before long I was sitting on Mrs. A's porch nearly every day after school. I was still sad a lot, but whenever we were together, Mrs. A. made me laugh. She had a big jar with a wide mouth that she filled with water and tea bags and put out in the sun. She told me that in Tennessee everyone drinks sweet tea, and I stood in her white kitchen while she boiled water and made sugar syrup for our tea. Mrs. A's first name was Thea. Thea Eleanor Archer. She told me that her name, before she was married, was Thea Eleanor Ainslie. "T.E.A.," she said. Just like the afternoon drink we shared on her porch each day. She said that she loved sweet tea so much that when she was ready to find a husband she made sure to catch one whose last name started with an A so she would always remind herself of her favorite drink.

We sat like that, on Mrs. A's porch, nearly each afternoon,

all through that first summer. In May the lilac bushes released their beautiful fragrance, and in June the linden trees made perfume in the air. "It's possible to make perfume from the flowers of a linden tree," Mrs. A. said, "and it's also said that prayers offered under the linden have a good chance of being answered." She knew so many things about nature, and about people and what they need. She said that her favorite trees were dogwoods and magnolias but that linden trees and lilac bushes were pretty good substitutes.

We drank our sweet tea out of jewel-toned glasses. Their rich colors reminded me of India. Mrs. A. said that she didn't need a thermometer to tell her how hot it was, she could guess within two degrees by how quickly the little streams of water formed on the sides of our metal glasses. We didn't sip our tea, we drank it, and when the ice was halfway melted Mrs. A. threw the rest of it into the grass. "So the ants and little crawly creatures can enjoy their afternoon too," she said. Then she went into the house and filled our glasses with big, clear, crescent-shaped ice cubes, and we drank some more.

Before school started in the fall, Mrs. A. and I sat on her porch so late one day that the fireflies came out. I told Mrs. A. that when the weather got cooler she would have to come indoors with me and drink black tea with cardamom pods and cinnamon stick and with milk and honey like we do in India. She said she would love that. I was feeling so much better by then. Mrs. A. was kind enough, in her usual way, to introduce me to a few girls from school. She said that she played a game called Bunko with their mothers. "Bunko will do in a pinch," Mrs. A. said, "but I'd much rather be playing Mahjong or Canasta." And she told me that she would have to teach me how to play those games some day.

Long before I was ready for it to, summer ended. I hated the idea of going back to school, but Mrs. A. told me that she knew I would be fine, and I knew that she was right. She told me that I had been a gift to her that summer because she'd never been able to have any children of her own. If I am lucky enough to have a daughter of my own, someday, I know that I will sit on the porch with her and drink sweet tea in the summer and Indian tea in the winter. I know, too, that I'll name her Thea. Mrs. A. told me that Thea means gift from God, and I know that in my new country, Mrs. Thea Eleanor Archer was a gift from God to me.

# A LEVEE ROAD

runs penciled-in on high ground,  
closer to the Almighty, above  
ruler rows of soybeans planted  
on one levee side. The river resides  
on the other side, hounds the shore,

ready to rock forth a force  
that can shake the heart of the hold  
and yet, on a calm night in bare light,  
water's easy ride sings a choir's song,  
leaves a farmer's crop-side dry and safe.

A car parks on the levee road.  
Windows roll down. The motor shudders  
and settles. A boy and a girl  
find each other in church-like light,  
in the bold, black night heat.

His arms look field-work-brown.  
Her hair stays bleached from a fired-up sun,  
and the soybeans grow tall in the night  
and the river rides by without flooding survival  
and the heart holds onto journeys like these.

Judith Bader Jones

# PRAIRIE RUMORS

When Aurora Borealis  
crept into the northern plains  
of Kansas like a tire-shattering  
arctic front, sheriffs  
of sparsely populated counties  
received reports of fire  
and aliens. Second-coming  
predictions echoed within the walls  
of steepled buildings.

Hearing the clash of atoms,  
one young woman, a farmer's  
wife, could not find sleep beneath  
magnetized particles,  
and rose from her bed.

Leaving the house where  
her children slept, she passed  
the chicken coop, the pigsty,  
the barn of cattle and hay,  
and found herself upon the prairie.

Here the pulsing arch of reds and greens  
synchronized her heart's rhythm  
and she was moved  
to remove her clothes,  
lay against the cold damp earth of spring,  
press her ear close against the soil,  
and listen as one does  
for the breath of a sleeping child.

Lisa Hase-Jackson