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Wild Words

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PRAIRIE VIOLET

Prairie Violets are harbingers of spring, turning their purple faces to the sun as the soil warms. Fritillary butterflies depend on Viola pedatifida for survival, including the rare Regal Fritillary (Speyeria idalia). Violets are easiest to spot on freshly burned prairie, but can also be discovered close to the ground under native grasses or at the woods’ edge.

Gary Jackson
Morning

Bloom and cleft and cleft again into an open hand, not reaching up because you’re too proud to need help, but those hands get around—Illinois, Minnesota, Kansas. Like me, they mistake you for wild even when you are. You can be difficult and short-lived. Violet, you’re after my own Black heart full of crow’s feet and royal-threaded veins: rich blood that will kill us one year. But today, you keep company in prairies, climb up the scape, back home to Kansas: a place we rarely claim but claims us. I envy how you’re close to the ground, solitary yet never alone, you’ve got plenty feet to walk, to run, to drop seed and let go. A hundred plum-colored palms greeting me hello.
WILD STRAWBERRY

The diminutive Wild Strawberry has provided food and medicine for thousands of years. *Fragaria virginiana* thrives in the remnant prairies, backyards, and empty urban spaces of eastern Kansas where the soil is moist in spring. To find fresh strawberries, search below lush prairie grasses in June or add this lovely species to your home garden.

Gwendolyn Brooks

*a song in the front yard*

I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life.
I want a peek at the back
Where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
A girl gets sick of a rose.

I want to go in the back yard now
And maybe down the alley,
To where the charity children play.
I want a good time today.

They do some wonderful things.
They have some wonderful fun.
My mother sneers, but I say it’s fine
How they don’t have to go in at quarter to nine.
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George’ll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).

But I say it’s fine. Honest, I do.
And I’d like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face.
Aubrey Streit Krug

Road Cut

highway through the west hump
reveals green antelope horn
on a wash of bone

stop to see

creases, accretions,
limestone spring hues
that hint nowhere else will do

I carry a shard of memory, a lens

each carpenter bee perches
amid arcs of burgundy
stars on a globe

slow to sense

the footfalls
along the route of blade
and bloom, glory bound in relief

ANTELOPE HORN MILKWEED

The beautiful Antelope Horn Milkweed is impossible to miss when walking the dry summer prairies of central Kansas. Like the antlers of the pronghorn, the gnarly seed pods of *Asclepias asperula* peek out just above the shortgrasses. This species provides tender spring forage for Monarch caterpillars and attracts pollinator bees.
BIGFRUIT EVENING PRIMROSE

Nights during the peak of summer is when you will catch Bigfruit Evening Primrose in bloom. The large yellow flowers of Oenothera macrocarpa capture the light along gravel roads throughout most of Kansas, finding novel habitat in an altered prairie landscape. This tenacity makes it a vital resource for night pollinators and native bees.

Wyatt Townley

Centering the House

All night Kansas
the lungs of the continent
takes a sip of the galaxy

swirling stars and barbed wire
sofabeds and willows
books and doors banging open

signs disappear whole towns
ditch themselves in the countryside
I stir the coffee to center the house

the place our mothers and fathers
and theirs and theirs passed through
their aprons strung on telephone wires

this tunnel of wind this trial
makes trees throw back their heads
and hair on our arms stand up

we’re nothing but breath on its way through the woods
Ah, coneflower. Long petals like regrets, purple-tinted, droop from the big yellow core of it in my front yard. Alone, where I imagined multitudes of wildflowers and the industry of bees, where I dreamt myself tending all that I gathered with such difficulty — this house, this Kansas, this center I came to after three immigrations — this place, ever so slightly withered and tender like a heartstrings. What I found was my own exhaustion. Words and work hang limply off the nourishing sun-core of it: coneflower, with all its stories, its keepers, all its medicinal properties, promising that after it dries it will still care for what it touches — this flower, which is just like me, planted, unattended, tilted towards the sun, mangling meanings with its unconquerable tenderness.

The quintessential wildflowers of the prairie. Every part of the Pale Purple Coneflower is edible, medicinal, and of high value to wildlife. *Echinacea pallida* stands out among the other members of the *Echinacea* genus thanks to its long graceful stems, lilting corolla of soft pink and hairy, narrow leaves.
When you look upon the Plains Prickly Pear, do you see flower or thorn? Will you be the one who pushes ever elsewhere, seeking always blossoms around the next bend?

Or will you stop here, stop to mourn people and plants cast aside as trash? Here, you tremble in a shadowed past as you water contradictions of the heart.

But here, you will grow to love the thorn, its fine decisive point defending air space, making way at last for the prickly pear’s burst of blooms, velvet yellow flags holding steady in the southwest Kansas wind—like you—staking their claim.
PRAIRIE CORDGRASS

Many North American Indigenous cultures have used Prairie Cordgrass to make beautiful baskets and traditional structures. *Spartina pectinata* also serves as food and shelter for red-winged blackbirds, Mallard ducks, muskrats, and grasshoppers, among other creatures. Its deep roots anchor soil along waterways, making it strong protection for topsoil.

Canese Jarboe

*belongings*

do I pierce my thigh with this hay hook just the once? cold combine, gelled diesel, mouse nest,

we are in the months that smell all like the same machine shed. my sister texts me a photo of a scoop of alfalfa hay ice cream

in a shallow bowl of lapsang souchong jelly, and i am suddenly mad at the chef, at the copper dinnerware.

the restaurant says that the dish is evocative, that diners feel transported to a childhood memory. why is it that what terrifies

is also nearly always a comfort? stand of prairie grass, warm oval where something bedded down. wonder how sweet,

how rough these stalks are (wonder if the something senses the root system, the rooting
CUP PLANT

The Cup Plant grows broad, toothy leaves that hug a square stem; together they form a small pool that holds water for wildlife—hence the name. In the heat of summer, the cluster of golden flowers of *Silphium perfoliatum* attracts pollinators, and its strong stem serves as a perch for goldfinches and other birds as they hunt for seeds and insects.

James Thomas Stevens

The mind is the hardest crop to tend. The simple design of the Cup Plant reminds me that reserves of cool water draw others to drink. But dry and jealous, I am often empty—with nothing but dust to offer. Maybe accepting what comes is the answer to growth, the acceptance of deaths, small and large. The acceptance of love is often hardest to learn, sympathetic with the wax leaf repelling the rain. But let me accept this random beauty, then unquestioningly give it away.
Megan Kaminski

By the teeth

Long walks do some good but stillness in the wind pushing north mid-August is how I root deep into waking, dream out the meanderings of everyone else's day. The past is slack and in it my hands spilled multitudinous, came and came flowering so many gifts a new currency pink-petaled. On hot nights wounds purchased by love and bug-filled backyards awaken anew; the ache we singed into each other still answering like prayer taken hymnal. I don’t know about patience but can hear the tallgrasses each evening holding the pose of the moon or you, a rupture I’m sore from mending.

BIG BLUESTEM

The iconic prairie tallgrass, Big Bluestem is found throughout Kansas. Also known as "turkey foot," it is a favorite of cattle ranchers and provides cover for bobwhite quail and other ground-nesting birds. Summers are lush and green. In the fall, Andropogon gerardii matures into shades of maroon and lavender, adding color against the golds and browns of the season.
Huascar Medina

*Per aspera ad astra*

We were lost in the plains, beautiful and ordinary. Sunflowers in the fields, seeds of fallen stars, standing tall; deeply rooted in this land.

I’ve admired how our flowers shine, grasping towards the sky, beyond the prairie grass, anchored down to earth; mimicking the sun.

When a gardener plants the seeds of Helianthus, they are performing magic. Raising stars out of the dust where buzzing planets circle, half red moons set, and swarming comets float in orange comas.

I’ve always felt that late at night, in the bed of a truck, in a Kansas field, we were at the center of this universe.

And I was exactly where I should be, amongst the flowers, not below.
Aromatic Aster begins its amazing show at the end of summer when the last native wildflowers have faded. Blooming often into December, *Symphyotrichum oblongifolium* is one of many prairie species that provides nectar for Monarch butterflies as they journey from Canada, through Kansas, and on to Mexico.

AROMATIC ASTER

when did you
begin to see
breathing
bodies as
targets
a wheel
torn from
the rod flying into
another chest
the aster asks
how is why
more important than how
touch the petals
suddenly release
shock of solids turning liquid
milk this ride all the way
sleep through farewells
burnt things held very still
the United States believes
Life is pliable but
it breaks keeps
breaking
Smaller
smaller
just wait till
you hear
the patriot’s
defense

holding some
freshly picked asters
thumbing through
calendars of the future
till touching
a year out
of reach
me a ghost
you a ghost
another poem
dedicated to the
great vanishing trick
we build
muscles
organs bones
at separate
tables
of our
favorite
restaurant
chewing to
motion
kept to
the tides

CAConrad
Early each spring tiny green stalks emerge from the ground, poking through last year’s detritus of dried grass and disintegrating leaf with signs of the re-awakening that is to come. In Kansas, prairie violet, phlox, hoary puccoon, and wild strawberry are some of the first wildflowers to appear, coaxing us outdoors with their delicate and fleeting blossoms. Whenever we take the time to look and listen to the plants and animals that share our world, we see that they are calling us into relation—providing us with beauty, sustenance, and inspiration and, in turn, calling us to care for our common home. This collection of poems is an invitation to listen to the call of native plants in Kansas, to the specific places where we make our homes and live in community with many human and other-than-human co-inhabitants. What kinds of relations are they calling us into? How can we help them to flourish?

By refusing to relegate plants to the role of background or setting for human activity, the poets in this collection challenge traditional Western notions that place humans outside and at the top of the natural world. Reflecting larger shifts in perspective within nature writing, they look to Kansas wildflowers and grasses as fellow inhabitants in our common home. As Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes of plants in her ground-breaking book Braiding Sweetgrass: “Their wisdom is apparent in the way they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been and have had time to figure things out.” Look to the poems for a glimpse into the lives of plants and the insights they share. In his poem about the cup plant, James Thomas Stevens writes of learning generosity from the plants’ capacity to nourish others through the stores of water gathered at the base of their leaves. In reflecting on his own struggles to receive care, Stevens writes of relationships of reciprocity via the inspiration of the cup plant: “let me accept this random beauty, then unquestioningly give it away.”

The poems in this book represent a wide range of Kansas poets: current residents, historic figures, and poets who were born or resided here before moving to other regions. What they all share, though, is a reverence for and attention to plants and an appreciation for the many ways in which we nurture and sustain each other. From the prickly pear cactus of southwest Kansas, to the big bluestem in the Flint Hills, to the cordgrass near
Crawford County, to the hungry weed in Gwendolyn Brooks’ backyard, the plants in these poems have lessons to teach us: how to grow deep roots, the beauty of fleeting blossoms, how to heal from loss, and to make a home, how to share our gifts, among others. As Gary Jackson writes in “Morning,” the prairie violet shares with him lessons on how to “keep company,” to be “solitary yet never alone.”

Poets have long reflected on the wild beauty of plants to give meaning to self and home. In what ways do these poems look to root systems, stem and leaf structures, or habitat to define our place in the world?

I invite you to spend time with the poems and, when it’s their season, to seek out the plants that they speak to in your own place. You can look towards them and other plants all around you for wisdom for living through the many seasons of your own life.

In “How to Fall in Love,” the poet mourns that people and plants are sometimes deemed undesirable, and therefore she admires the prickly pear’s ability to protect its space. In what way is the poet comparing herself to the cactus? Can plants show us how to live with others within community?

Many of these poems explore wildflowers in relation to the moon and stars. This is a Kansas attribute—we live close to the land, and yet our state motto, *Ad astra per aspera*, has us looking “to the stars through difficulty.” In what ways do these poems reflect on earth and sky? How does this relationship define us as Kansans?

In her reflection essay, editor and poet Megan Kaminski asks us to consider the native plants in this book as “fellow inhabitants in our common home.” What Kansas plants are you most drawn to? Why?

Most native wildflowers emerge after a winter’s sleep, and each plant follows a cycle of growth, bloom, and dormancy. In what ways do we follow cycles in our own lives? What can we learn from these plants when it comes to rest and vitality?

— Megan Kaminski
Professor of English and Environmental Studies
University of Kansas
Gwendolyn Brooks was a poet, author, and teacher. Her work often dealt with the personal celebrations and struggles of ordinary people in her community. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950, the first African American to receive the honor. Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, but lived in Chicago since she was a few weeks old. In 1985, she became the 29th and final appointment as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, the year before the position was renamed the United States Poet Laureate.

CAConrad has worked with the ancient technologies of poetry and ritual since 1975. Their latest book, AMANDA PARADISE: Resurrect Extinct Vibration (Wave Books, 2021), won the 2022 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and the 2022 PEN Josephine Miles Award. They exhibit poems as art objects with recent solo exhibitions in Spain and Portugal, and their play The Obituary Show was made into a film in 2022 by Augusto Cascales. They were born in Topeka, Kansas, and now live in Massachusetts.

Gary Jackson was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. He is the author of origin story (University of New Mexico, 2021) and Missing You, Metropolis (Graywolf, 2010), which received the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. He is also co-editor of The Future of Black: Afrofuturism, Black Comics, and Superhero Poetry (Blair, 2021). His poems have appeared in Callaloo, The Sun, Los Angeles Review of Books, Copper Nickel, and elsewhere. He teaches creative writing at the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

Canese Jarboe is from rural southeastern Kansas and is the author of the chapbook dark acre (Willow Springs Books, 2018). Find out more about them at www.canesejarboe.com.

Megan Kaminski is a poet and essayist—and the author of three books of poetry, most recently Gentlewomen (Noemi Press, 2020). She's also the author of Prairie Divination (Sunseen Books, 2022), a book of illustrated essays and oracle deck in collaboration with artist L. Ann Wheeler, and Quietly Between (A Viewing Space, 2022), a co-authored collection of poetry and photography. Her writing and teaching focus on helping people connect to their own ecosystems as a source of knowledge and inspiration for strategies to live in their world, to grieve and heal after loss, and to re-align their thinking towards kinship, community, and sustainability. She is Professor of English and Environmental Studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

Aubrey Streit Krug is a writer, teacher, and agricultural researcher who studies relationships between humans and plants. She grew up in a small town in rural Kansas and loves rocky prairie hillsides. Her recent creative and scholarly writing has been published in ASAP/J, The New Territory, The New Farmer’s Almanac, and Plants, People, Planet. She works at The Land Institute in Salina and lives with her family in Lindsborg, Kansas.

R.B. Lemberg is a queer, neurodivergent immigrant from Ukraine to the United States and has lived in Lawrence, Kansas, since 2008. They are the author of two books of poetry—most recently Everything Thaws (Ben Yehuda Press, 2023)—and three books of speculative fiction. R.B.’s work has been a finalist for the Nebula, World Fantasy, Locus, Crawford, and other awards. They are a sociolinguist and a professor of Jewish Studies and Slavic, Eastern, European, and Eurasian Studies at the University of Kansas (as R.B. Perelmutter).
Huascar Medina was the Poet Laureate of Kansas from 2019 to 2022. *Un Mango Grows in Kansas* (Spartan Press, 2020) was a 2021 Kansas Notable Book that explores the boundaries between identity and location as a second-generation immigrant living in the United States. His poems have appeared in the *New York Times, Latino Book Review, Flint Hills Review, KANSAS! Magazine*, and *Green Mountains Review*. Medina is a current member of the NEA National Council on the Arts.

Janice Northerns is the author of *Some Electric Hum* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2020), winner of the Byron Caldwell Smith Book Award from the University of Kansas, the Nelson Poetry Book Award, and a WILLA Literary Award Finalist in Poetry. Originally from Texas, Northerns has lived in Liberal, Kansas, since 1998. She is currently working on her second book, a hybrid collection of poetry and essays inspired by the life of Cynthia Ann Parker.

James Thomas Stevens, Aronhi:ta’s (Akwesasne Mohawk) is the author of eight books of poetry, including *The Golden Book, Combing the Snakes from His Hair, Mohawk/Samoa: Transmigrations*, and *A Bridge Dead in the Water*. His awards include a 2000 Whiting Writers Award and a Witter Bynner Foundation poetry grant. Stevens previously taught at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, and currently teaches creative writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Wyatt Townley is Poet Laureate of Kansas Emerita. She has published six books, most recently *Rewriting the Body* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2018). Her work has been read on NPR, featured in *American Life in Poetry*, and published in journals ranging from *New Letters* to *Newsweek, North American Review* to *Paris Review, Yoga Journal* to *Scientific American*. Commissioned poems hang on the walls of the Johnson County Library and the Space Telescope Science Institute Library, home of the Hubble.

Melissa Dehner discovered her love for art and nature as a child growing up in Colorado, and later Kansas. She still spends tons of time outdoors, walking with her dog, watching and listening to birds, and taking note of the endless details in trees and plants, insects, and animals. Her art and exhibit design work have appeared in *Scientific American*, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Linda Hall Library, and most recently a permanent Ice Age mammals exhibit in UMKC’s Department of Geosciences. Melissa has taught design and illustration courses at the high school and college levels, and she has owned HoneyBee Creative, LLC, in Fairway, Kansas, since 2003. Her wide variety of creative work can be viewed at honeybeecreative.net.

Courtney Masterson is Executive Director and Ecologist of Native Lands Restoration Collaborative, based out of Lawrence, Kansas. Their work focuses on ecosystem restoration driven by community partnerships and education. Courtney believes an intimate connection to our native landscapes will empower land stewards (that’s you!) to preserve and restore ecosystems that protect our water, soil, homes, and cultures. Befriending the plants in this book will strengthen the reader’s connection to home in the prairies of Kansas.
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James Thomas Stevens’ untitled poem is from Combing the Snakes from His Hair (Michigan State University Press, 2002). Copyright © 2002 by James Thomas Stevens. Reprinted with the permission of the poet.