

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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HOLDING UP SKY: AN ORIGINAL POETRY MANUSCRIPT AND ANALYSIS
OF PASTORAL AND FRONTIER TROPES IN SELECTED KANSAS POETRY

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The thesis “Holding Up Sky: An Original Poetry Manuscript and Analysis of Pastoral and Frontier Tropes in Selected Kansas Poetry” seeks to show Kansas through a pastoral lens, incorporating frontier rhetoric and perspectives: as an idealized landscape and also as a place where humans can pit themselves against a world that is not always conducive to human success. The critical foreword provides a brief history of the literary pastoral tradition, and analyzes selected narrative poems by William Stafford, Steven Hind, and Harley Elliott, asserting that these poems reveal a common fear or overwhelming awe of nature. The foreword also asserts that these poems reject urban encroachment on a self-sustaining rural landscape, instead emphasizing that landscape’s beauty and its ability to function without urban, human influence. “Holding Up Sky,” the original poetry manuscript, explores rural Kansas life and upbringing, incorporating pastoral and frontier tropes.

Keywords: Frontier, Kansas, Nature, Pastoral, Poetry, Prosody, Regionalism

HOLDING UP SKY:
AN ORIGINAL POETRY MANUSCRIPT AND ANALYSIS
OF PASTORAL AND FRONTIER TROPES
IN SELECTED KANSAS POETRY

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An Analysis of Pastoral and Frontier Tropes in Selected Kansas Poetry

The Evolution of the Pastoral

The pastoral tradition has been a subject of inspiration and debate for poets since the classical period. Defined by the Encyclopaedia of the Renaissance as a “type of literature concerned with idealized rustic life,” the pastoral as addressed in early poetry framed this literary perspective around a supposed “golden age” of sheer innocence, absent the myriad complications of our modern societies (*Renaissance*). Essential to the ecocritical definition of the pastoral tradition is its inherent spatial distinction: the town versus the country, with the former being metonymic for all the world’s frenetic, corrupt, and highly impersonal qualities. According to Greg Garrard, the contemporary pastoral view eschews locations where human-made constructions are the dominant feature, and it hides from view the labor that accompanies human presence. Country, the latter half of this binary, here emphasizes peace and abundance. The pastoral also focuses on temporal distinctions, harkening back to an idealized past that—like the spatial concept of “country”—remains free of complication and corruption (Garrard 39). Accompanying this notion of an idealized past is the concept of a corrupt or “fallen” future in which all idyllic “country” traits—such as rolling hills, shepherds, and America’s vaunted amber waves of grain—have been forsaken or compromised through cataclysmic human action.

This essay will first explore a brief history of pastoral-focused poetry, beginning with the tradition’s inception and basic tenets and progressing toward its more modern poetic usages. Contemporary conceptualizations highlight certain facets of the ecocritical pastoral tradition, as shown in selected poems by Kansas poets William Stafford, Steven Hind, and Harley Elliott. In the poetry of Stafford, Hind, and Elliott, Kansas becomes not only a pastoral landscape but also an ecocritical frontier: a place where humans can pit

themselves—and their will to thrive—against a natural world that is not always conducive to human success. This essay argues that selected poems by these three Kansans reveal a common fear or an overwhelming awe of nature cloaked in the idyllic façade of the Kansas pastoral. These poems also reject urban encroachment on a self-sustaining rural landscape, emphasizing that landscape’s beauty and its ability to function without urban, human influence. Finally, this analysis will include an examination of the original poetry manuscript “Holding Up Sky” in the context of these pastoral and frontier foci.

The earliest examples of the pastoral in poetry come from the Greek poet Hesiod, around 750 BCE. Hesiod’s famous oratory long poem *Works and Days* both explores the lives of farmers and serves as an analysis of human labor’s role in nature (Poetic Form). A poignant segment of *Works and Days* presents a warning through the fable of the nightingale and the hawk that man should accept nature for what it is. Here, a hawk catches a nightingale in its talons, and chides it for its loud attempts at freedom:

You fool, why do you scream? Someone much your better has you.

You go where I conduct you, songstress though you may be.

I shall make you my dinner, if I wish, or let you go.

Senseless is he who wishes to set himself against his betters:

he lacks victory and suffers grief upon grief. (*Works and Days* 207-11)

Here, these lines encourage humans (vis-à-vis the reader) to accept both nature itself and man’s place within it. Thus, Hesiod’s poem encourages acceptance of human labor within nature, given that obfuscating human labor would be a denial of reality—similarly to the nightingale’s denial that its fate is in the talons of the hawk. T. Bergin and J. Speake

assert that in writing, the pastoral is often done a disservice through depictions that are “often artificial, unrealistic, and frequently coloured [*sic*] by the nostalgia felt by the urbanized author and his audience” because of these progressively altered interpretations (*Renaissance*).

The first written examples of pastoral poetry are attributed to the Greek poet Theocritus, from the third century BCE. Theocritus, whose Idylls celebrate the aforementioned rustic life in Sicily, differed in form from Hesiod in that his poems were far more compact and consisted of an explicit narrative structure (Pastoral). Here, Theocritus celebrates nature for its vibrancy, and also anthropomorphizes it, granting nature the stewardship of its human inhabitants. Idyll VII, for instance, depicts the natural world as being in mourning for the character Aratus’s unrequited love: “the hills were troubled . . . and the oaks sang dirges above” (74). This attribution of human emotion to entities such as trees—and indeed, to the earth itself—is known as the pathetic fallacy, a hallmark of pastoral-focused poetry (Garrard 40). Additionally, Paul Alpers asserts that this granting of voice to nature allows for narratives in poetry that feature nature itself as the protagonist, with its human inhabitants being, at most, complementary roles (Alpers 450).

Another example of early pastoral poetry is the eclogue. First applied to Virgil’s *Bucolica*, a collection of ten poems that focus in part on an idealization of nature (concepts the poet adapted from Theocritus), the term “eclogue” would serve as a label for later Roman pastoral poetry written in imitation of Virgil (Fowler 1602).

Theocritus’s and Virgil’s ideas of nature’s idealization are carried further in the pastoral epic, a rare incarnation of pastoral poetry exemplified by the poet John Milton.

In Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes Satan's journey into paradise, presenting the reader with a view of the idyllic Garden of Eden through Satan's perspective. Adam and Eve are stewards of the garden, where all vegetation is eternally in bloom, especially certain fruit-bearing trees. However, all of this is seen through Satan's perspective, and Milton constructs Satan in such a way that readers eventually grow to identify with Satan, a character who struggles to attain the benefits of Eden's pastoral idyll (Fuller 59).

Transcendentalist poet Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) also revealed intense interest in the pastoral through his idealization of rural life, specifically in the simple pleasures of natural living and in self-sufficiency in nature. His book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* focuses on that quest for self-sufficiency, though Thoreau makes clear in the book that he was not in the wilderness—he was in fact only two miles from his family home when he wrote the book. When Thoreau witnesses a train passing by Walden Pond, he notes that the wholly “pastoral” life is impossible, given that mechanization of the world is inevitable (and so destruction of the pastoral is also inevitable). Thus, he relocates the pastoral from its dwindling place in history to literature, recording it in *Walden* (Meehan).

Much contemporary poetry focuses primarily on this concept of extolling the pastoral through literature. Such “nature poems” highlight and modernize key concepts of the pastoral tradition, such as the aforementioned spatial divide of the urban from the rural. Robert Archambeau asserts that the supposed zen-like ease of the rural holds a draw for all those who live outside it: “when we see the simplicity of a stone simply being a stone, or of water flowing downward to the sea in accordance with its nature, it has a strong effect on us . . . This urge to leave our own twisted, self-conscious way of

being, to ditch our convolutions and artifices is [called] sentimentality: an urge for the simplicity of nature” (Archambeau). In her poem “Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver emphasizes the beauty and the sense of wonder that nature conveys through the easy actions of sun, rain, and birds, all of which move in accordance with a simple but driving purpose:

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscape,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again. (14)

Here the sun and rain (made similar to the earth itself through the euphemism of pebbles) seem to travel with a clear intent to cover the land. Similarly, the geese “in the clean blue air” are “heading home again,” a notion which reinforces that draw toward the rural, and even that those who seek it belonged there before, and are merely returning.

In addition to this spatial notion of simplicity in nature as a form of magnetism, contemporary nature poetry also discusses human stewardship of nature as an attempt to protect the pastoral. Paul F. Starrs argues that the division of urban from rural serves not only to draw people toward the latter setting, but also to protect the rural by enabling safe stewardship of the landscape itself:

Environmental protection and quality are inescapable themes . . .
biodiversity and environmental quality are safeguarded far more by steady
and knowledgeable stewardship than by passing fancies of short-term

managers from a federal agency or corporate HQ [*sic*] or real estate office.

(136)

Stewardship is a key concept of the pastoral tradition, and the shepherd of classical pastoral poetry—a figure responsible for the care of sheep and their pastures—becomes modernized in contemporary pastoral work. In “The Peace of Wild Things,” Wendell Berry describes the supervision of nature as a means of both warding off potential disruptions of that middle-landscape and finding relief from personal strife. Here, Berry’s narrator finds communion with animals in the act of watching over them:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound . . .
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. (36)

In the line “I come into the peace of wild things” Berry posits a literal movement toward the rural, through which the narrator achieves simplicity of thought and a close proximity to animals from whom he learns to put aside the “forethought of grief.” Through this willful transition from urban to rural, human thought to animal, Berry’s narrator becomes a more active participant in and steward of nature, entering a frontier and thus making nature more familiar.

Implicit in the concept of stewardship, though, is the notion that those who assume responsibility in nature also assume dominion over it. Read ecocritically, this idea

becomes severely anthropocentric in its assumption that humans alone have the ability to govern nature, and to decide what is good or harmful within it. Greg Garrard asserts that though this conceptual linkage predates Berry's poetry (dating to older religious usages of the pastoral), the poet makes use of theological motivations in his definition of stewardship:

Berry has explicitly situated himself within a Christian georgic tradition, seeking a "practical harmony" inspired by both the long-term demands of a "beloved country" and a sense of sacred duty called "stewardship" . . . Man's divinely ordained dominion is not simply a dispensation of power, but a demand . . . that we take responsibility for the natural world.

(Garrard 123)

Thus, Berry's narrator finds solace not only through being *in* nature, but also through his supervision of it.

In addition to these spatial transitions toward the rural, much contemporary nature poetry focuses on nostalgia—the temporal distinction between the idealized past and the comparatively corrupt future (or even present). Joseph Acquisto argues that this "natural" poetic tendency is in fact an avenue toward poetic obsolescence, as focusing too heavily on an irretrievable past precludes deeper understanding of the present moment:

In the current critical climate, one's reaction to contemporary nature poets might be that they hark [*sic*] back to what some may feel are outdated modes . . . whereby an unquestioning beneficial relationship of nature to humanity is posited. Read in this light, contemporary nature poets risk seeming irrelevant or reactionary in the light of the development of poetry. (680)

Acquisto's assertion of potential perceived irrelevance, however, seems premature in light of the many contemporary poets who continue to write prominently about the pastoral past. For instance, *New York Times* writer Dwight Garner asserts that W.S. Merwin's view of nature's past—as connected to its present—makes him a “fierce critic of the ecological damage humans have wrought” upon what was once relatively unaltered land (Garner). This awareness of ecological damage also calls into question the idea of a “frontier,” where humans must find their own ideals within a landscape we have changed through our machinations. We must work to preserve nature so that it may thrive, and that we may continue our discoveries within it.

Analysis of the Primary Literature

The analysis of poems by William Stafford, Steven Hind, and Harley Elliott that follows will explore more fully these pastoral elements, and the interactions of humanity with those elements. Also integrated with these concepts of the temporal and spatial pastoral is an ecocritical rhetoric of the frontier, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as a region “at the edge of or just beyond a settled area”; this definition suggests a burgeoning wild in need of settling or exploration by humans, and also posits an accompanying sense of fear or awe of the unknown (“Frontier”). Similarly, Noel Sturgeon asserts that the frontier is a place that “assumes a boundary between something called ‘civilization’ and something called ‘wilderness . . . [a medial place to] prove a distinctly masculine character” that explores landscapes which are undiscovered in some way (Sturgeon 53).

The poems discussed here are somewhat thematically representative of each poet’s body of work. Additionally, these poems particularly among the poets’ body of work show the pastoral and the frontier at work in the construction of a world where humans are the outsiders: either awe-inspired “guests” in nature, or else individuals and groups made primitive by their circumstances within it.

Though similar in their message, the three poems examined in this essay hold disparate and unique perspectives on exposing the manipulation, fear, and awe of nature inherent in humankind’s attempts to succeed in the natural world. William Stafford’s “One Home” addresses the necessity of working to be closer to nature (and farther from urbanity), accepting nature’s power over humankind; it also suggests that human labor in Kansas should not be obscured, but should instead be celebrated for its benefits to both

the land and humankind itself. Steven Hind's "Night Fishing" examines human encroachment on the Kansas landscape (interruption of the pastoral), and how such intrusion can be a taint upon nature and can also serve to regress its inhabitants to a more primitive state. Finally, Harley Elliott's "After Picking Rosehips" explores the mystery that can be found in newly discovered pastoral imagery, and the frontier that presents itself in the form of initial encounters with unfamiliar landscapes.

Hutchinson-born William Stafford is certainly the most well-known of these three Kansas poets. An eventual Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Stafford maintained deep roots with the Sunflower State even after his later move to Oregon. This upheld connection to Kansas shows Stafford's personal draw toward the state as an object of exploration and edification, and it frames his desire for heightened experience: what he called an "always-arriving present" made possible by continued discoveries and character-building challenges to be surmounted (Stewart 164). A main focus of Stafford's Kansas poetry is his view of the state as "the edge of the frontier where people use the land but still have a sense of its mystery" (William E. Stafford). This attitude of exchange with Kansas—use and fair treatment of the land in return for the chance explore it and marvel at its mystery—evokes this notion of the state as a frontier, and influenced in particular his poem "One Home."

Centered heavily on a working, reciprocal relationship with the Kansas landscape (rather than a domination of it), "One Home" is also keenly aware of the niche that humans must fill in order to maintain that relationship:

Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.

We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God. (Stafford 1-3)

These lines show a gratefulness and respect toward nature; the narrator tells the reader that his Midwest home is good enough, that he needs nothing else to satisfy him. The black hats represent human effort to work hard in nature: to harvest crops efficiently out of both necessity and respect for nature's bounty. The last line shows a reverence toward nature, both through traditional religious reverence (a pastoral trope) and where the narrator's Midwest world *is* a sort of personal God.

The light bulb that hung in the pantry made a wan light,
but we could read by it the names of preserves—
outside, the buffalo grass, the wind in the night. (4-6)

This stanza also shows a respect for nature; from a pastoral perspective, the preserves represent an attempt to keep nature alive during the winter months, and through that action, to keep its inhabitants alive. Through the "wan light," the narrator acknowledges that humans depend on nature (sunlight being more powerful than artificial light). This dependence on nature takes a more literal turn in the poem's second stanza:

A wildcat sprang at Grandpa on the Fourth of July
when he was cutting plum bushes for fuel,
before Indians pulled the West over the edge of the sky. (7-9)

Here, "One Home" presents foremost a frontier concept: man against nature, literalized in the wildcat and the grandfather. The notion of nature as a resource (via the plum bushes) also ties in with the frontier, as here the grandfather uses nature for sustenance, risking consequences at the hand of nature itself. Here, though, the grandfather is very much aware that "nature will always fight back against human [attempts] to control it . . . nature

is ‘miraculously tough and resilient, and capable of striking back in unexpected ways’” (Ashford 86). Perhaps aware of those possible ramifications, in the next stanza the narrator and his people endeavor to maintain focus on treating nature and each other with respect and courtesy:

To anyone who looked at us we said, “My friend”;
liking the cut of a thought, we could say “Hello.”
(But plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.) (10-12)

The sun was over our town; it was like a blade.
Kicking cottonwood leaves we ran toward storms.
Wherever we looked the land would hold us up. (13-15)

These last stanzas emphasize again that frontier conception of Kansas: the sun as a blade, and the narrator’s decision to run “toward storms,” both show humans testing themselves against nature and its inherent dangers. Additionally, the “plain black hats” which make the narrator’s code in the first and fourth stanzas, and the proximity of his house’s roof to “God,” establish a Puritan mentality that becomes perhaps the poem’s key trope. This idealized relationship to nature is underscored by a constant pressure on humanity to know its place; in other words, if the inhabitants of Stafford’s Kansas cause harm to the landscape, that aforementioned reciprocal relationship might result in a poor crop yield. Thus, in “One Home” Stafford highlights the pastoral by showing nature as an inherently peaceful place when left to its own devices—but one that poses potential threats to those who encroach upon it. This latter idea demonstrates Stafford’s attention to

frontier rhetoric, as the poem's sun, storms, and wan light represent human struggle to succeed in nature.

Similarly to Stafford, fellow Hutchinson poet Steven Hind discusses the intersection of the Kansas pastoral with the notion of the state as a frontier. Raised in Madison, Kansas, Hind developed a poetic focus that addresses Kansas landscape as a self-sustaining unit that is fully functional without human input—but one that is affected directly by humans who seek to thrive on nature's resources (German). In his poem "Night Fishing," Hind examines the relationship between humans and nature by treating the poem's setting as a pastoral middle-landscape—what Leo Marx defines as "nature's ideal . . . [a landscape] situated between nature's primitivism and civilization's authority" (Bryant 64). Here that middle-landscape—a pond accessible by truck—also becomes that edge of the frontier, where the poem's characters are made primitive through the depiction of their actions:

The rain turns brown
In the grass
in the gullies,
Turns the river dark. (Hind 1-4)

With these opening lines, Hind's poem begins as a depiction of a peaceful pastoral landscape where only the last line gives any hint of coming disquiet, or of any interruption of the pastoral. This disquiet amplifies in the poem's next lines, however:

Hooves knead the ground
And rain runs the dirt
Down the ruts

the fishermen cut
With their trucks to the ponds
Deep in these Flint Hills. (5-10)

These lines take an entirely different tone, introducing fisherman as both interruptions of the earlier pastoral scene and as potential frontier figures—men working to subsist in nature. The horses whose hooves knead the ground are literalizations of this interruption, showing anxiety located not only in the horses but in all of the men’s natural surroundings (Garrard 40). In the last lines of “Night Fishing,” the direct cause of that anxiety is revealed as the men proceed to use nature as a resource for sustenance:

By their fires
Men eat flesh in the dark,
throw bones to the wind. (Hind 11-13)

In these last three lines, the poem’s human characters are made primitive by the perfunctory nature of their actions. Here the fish are merely “flesh” for the men’s consumption, and the wind becomes a mysterious force that requires sustenance of its own. Hence, these final lines assert a frontier persona of Kansas where the men are level with nature in their attempts to provide for themselves; they treat the poem’s fish as little more than sustenance, effectively altering the poem from a depiction of pastoral landscape to a discussion of primitivism and the frontier.

Additionally, the poem’s opening line establishes anxiety while also granting agency to nature: the rain *turns* in this line, but is not *turned by* anything. The next two locative lines, “In the grass / in the gullies,” (2-3) give a bit more clarity to that coloring of the rain, showing the responsible agent to be nature once again. The poem’s focus

remains on the traditional pastoral, foisting emotion and color upon the river with the line “Turns the river dark” (4)— known as the pathetic fallacy, this pastoral trope shifts the poem to a more somber tone (Garrard 40). The real action first begins, however, when horses are introduced to the poem. The lines “Hooves knead the ground / And rain runs down the dirt” (Hind 5-6) introduce a correlation between animal and nature—and here the rain is given a purposeful quality, is equated to horses in that the rain is moving *toward* somewhere.

The poem also reveals an incursive tendency with two aforementioned lines: “the fishermen cut / With their trucks to the ponds” (8-9). In other words, these lines introduce human manipulation of nature as an interruption of the pastoral in the form of those “trucks.” In discussing the pastoral, Garrard asserts that such vehicles comprise the “machine” that destroys the illusory peace and removed quality of the middle-landscape (rural Kansas), replacing it with a mobile urbanity (Garrard 55).

Similarly, Harley Elliott of Salina, Kansas, looks at Kansas as a place of beauty, wonder, and mystery that is independent from human action—though individuals and groups may leave records of their presence in the state. Elliott’s poems are highly invested in landscape—especially what he terms “the landscape of the sky,” and this focus on the state’s elemental, mysterious, and at times primitive side informs a large amount of his poetry (Elliott). In “After Picking Rosehips,” Elliott follows traditional notions of the pastoral—such as the idealization of nature and the separation of the present from an idealized past—by evoking a mysterious, awe-inspiring nature that is both a peaceful “middle-landscape” and a mysterious landscape made new and wild by

that pastoral imagery. Here, this landscape becomes an almost ominous type of frontier for the poem's narrator:

With every soft gush of my feet
walking in tall pasture grass
the rosehips at my belt rub together
an old rosebush song. ("Rosehips" 1-4)

These first four lines evoke pastoral imagery: the "tall pasture grass" and the "rosehips at [the narrator's] belt" are certainly pastoral in their idealization of nature ("Pastoral"). However, the "old rosebush song" here implies the age and mysterious nature of the poem's landscape, and also the idea that the land has not been touched by humans—and thus it creates an unexplored frontier to which the narrator is a comparatively new figure. In other words, here the temporal pastoral hearkens back to a past that is greater than and foreign to the narrator. The next lines heighten that sense of newness, and lace it with anticipation:

The moon rings. The clouds
are frozen full of geese
and I can feel the darkness
growing on my skin.
The world ends tonight ("Rosehips" 5-9)

Here, the descriptions of moon, clouds, and geese are vividly pastoral given their romantic depiction. Additionally, the narrator's assertion of darkness and the idea that "the world ends tonight" evoke unfamiliarity and even a sense of foreboding; here, the darkness could be seen to represent the unknown frontier itself; as the narrator delves

further into this seemingly unknown landscape, the frontier becomes closer. Indeed, in the next lines the narrator minimizes his own role in the poem, asserting that the landscape is far more important than he, and that he wishes only to participate in it:

It is so
beautiful this time
I have decided to move here forever. Even after
reaching that yellow square of light
drinking soup
and going to bed
I am only another man there (10-16)

Here, the yellow square of light represents the narrator's place in nature (the light being emanated through the window of the narrator's home). The narrator asserts that even after returning home, he is still a mere inhabitant of nature—and that last line conveys the awe that he feels for the landscape in which he resides. This idea brings to light the spatial pastoral, as here the narrator views the landscape as greater than himself and as a place to seek sanctuary. The poem's last lines also reinforce this idealization of nature:

lost in the covers and quilts.
I am only dreaming
moving still in that space
of grass and goldenrod
a man with rosehips
walking in the speechless night. (17-22)

By equating his experience in the landscape to a dream, the narrator again depicts nature as a frontier where all is virginal, untouched, and greater than himself. Here, nature is also shown as pastoral in its specific depiction of the “grass and goldenrod.”

Additionally, the greater amount of spacing between the last three lines further suggests that sense of wonder, as this structure implies a sense of isolation from all but nature (via the rosehips).

The pastoral tradition has been a subject of inspiration and debate for poets since the classical period. Poets William Stafford, Steven Hind, and Harley Elliott, however interpret the pastoral view of Kansas as being in concert with the landscape as a frontier, an area wherein humans must pit themselves against nature in order to prove themselves successful and worthy of the benefits they might glean from it. Through their poetry and these complementary perspectives, Stafford, Hind, and Elliott reject urban encroachment on a self-sustaining rural landscape, emphasizing that landscape’s beauty and its ability to function without urban, human influence.

Preface to the Original Poems

The manuscript *Holding Up Sky* is a reflective collection of poems that also provides the foundation for a chapbook of poetry. The poems in this manuscript examine and incorporate the pastoral and frontier tropes discussed in the previous section. These include idealizing nature and the conveying awe and fear of nature, couched in short personal narratives of childhood and youth in Kansas.

The manuscript examines numerous subjects and pastoral and frontier tropes, including wonderment at the roles of animals in nature, as well as discovery of potential dangers posed by those creatures and by nature itself. Interspersed with these idealistic moments and revelations are personal frontier moments, including early glimpses of an adult world. Crucial to these views of adulthood is the frontier of masculinity present within many poems, where through a neighbor's insanity, premature attempts to shave, and discovering boxing under the tutelage of an assisted living center resident, the narrator encounters "the traditional masculine frontier values of taciturn toughness" as a rite of passage (Kerridge 374). Throughout many of these poems the writer asserts a yearning for knowledge. This desire links this manuscript's personal, often nature-centered poems, revealing the edifying qualities of nature and its frontiers, as well as the frontiers presented throughout various stages of the poet's youth.

Several of the poems in *Holding Up Sky* deal primarily with the temporal pastoral concept, discussing the poet's past as an idyllic time within an idealized landscape. "My Father Teaches Me to Shave" and "Driveway Olympics" show the narrator striving toward the temporal frontiers of perceived adulthood and masculinity while still safe within the comfort of childhood. The other extreme of the temporal pastoral—the fallen

future—is brought into focus alongside this idealism in “Lemons,” where the narrator becomes aware of a neighbor’s insanity, a more jarring and less idyllic possible facet of adulthood. These poems bridge the gap between younger and more mature life, as does “The Boxer.” Here, as in “My Father Teaches Me to Shave,” the frontier concept of masculinity surfaces as the narrator discovers classic masculine rites of passage such as shaving and discovering pugilism.

Like the poems of Stafford, Hind, and Elliott, several poems in this manuscript evoke the spatial pastoral, where the idealization of the rural is key to their overall message. “In Kansas” and “Red-Tails” extoll the virtues of nature. The former poem, like William Stafford’s “One Home,” aims to reconcile outsider expectations and criticisms with various positive personal experiences and triumphs. “Discovering” also focuses on this observation of nature, particularly on animals that inhabit the frontier territory of the sky.

Finally a number of poems in *Holding Up Sky* deal directly with Kansas’s history and mythos, once again incorporating the temporal pastoral in order to describe the state’s past—an often awe-inspiring frontier landscape that is accessible only indirectly, via fossils and sediment throughout the state. “Sea Ghosts of Kansas” discusses how Kansas’s geography resulted from a great ocean that once covered the land, leaving clues to the past such as ancient calcified shellfish in the prairie’s long grass. Essential to this poem is the recognition that today’s Kansans must be respectful participants in and stewards of the land—not owners or abusers. We must also revere the history of the state, with its countless ancient peoples and creatures, so that Kansas may thrive.

Holding Up Sky: An Original Poetry Manuscript

Red-Tails

Eastern Kansas. Red-tails
perch on posts, like mobsters:

“one boid, two boid.”

From the road,
we marvel at the fat
who have earned it,
who lease sky
to leaner chests, sharper
wings. Hawks know
who’s boss.

In Kansas

if you're not impressed,
don't sweat it. Our best scenery
is not on the ground.

Start slow. Go drag Main
in a rusted-out car.
Eat fish sandwiches from soggy wrappers
with no-good tartar sauce;
throw clove cigarette butts into the street.

Walk dirt roads because you can;
search for ruby slippers.
Take in the wagon-wheel mailboxes,
the six-hundred-foot salt mines.

Throw lines into the air.
Fish kites from the paling sky.

Discovering

the way a hummingbird
alters its dizzying flight by degrees,
flits up, back and away,
undoes itself.

How cicadas, like teens,
oversleep, never ask
to borrow the car
or stay out late,
then wake up,
break the rules,
drone into sky.

And the bracket of geese
which wings itself across clouds
each evening, changes leads,
a great self-winding watch
which ticks and shifts its way
through a band of stars.

Code

In the Flint Hills
when walking, touch
the bluestem half-
way down the blade
to feel an unfinished thought.

Wait for squirrels
to make it halfway
up the cottonwoods
before approaching, and
don't look for redemption.

In these hills,
you make your own.

Catharsis

A taxi driver clears his meter
on a Kansas street.

A honeybee cleans
its legs of pollen.

Small fish float, frozen,
in a thousand shallow ponds.

A preacher collects his sermon
from the lecturn.

Somewhere in the Flint Hills,
a coyote howls,

his ears alert, his eyes
full of wind and moon.

Recipe, Condensed

How many tons of rain
we'll need for the perfect pillar
of hackle-tightening super-
cumulus night terror: take
that amount, eyeball
and pour, lifting
the bucket carefully
with your knees. Whip all this
into a pillar (see above), and
wait. The moment has come
to break a few eggs.

Watching Sky

for Thomas Fox Averill

Mornings, this farmhouse
echoes dusty silence
up to where the air
is papery as onion skin,
and every cloud
shudders like a gong.

We wait
for our myths to subside:
ancient prairie bruin,
Fenris, the goat chariots
no one rides. We hold
our breath. The world
starts to turn.

Bruin: *Arctodus simus*, a species of bear appearing in North America during the middle Pleistocene, some 800,000 years ago.

Fenris: A monstrous wolf in Norse mythology. Foretold to cause the death of Odin upon the occurrence of Ragnarök.

Goat chariots: In Norse mythology, two goats—Tanngrisnir and Tanngrjóstr—pulled the god Thor's chariot.

Ablution

The black walnut by the porch
holds no robins today.
The usual jays fight in other branches.
Blue-gray cirrus hold back the sun
from its warming of the gravel,
and heavy in that craw squats the Ford.
Dawn beads watery eyes
on the windshield.

We read these omens over,
wind down wooden steps
headlong into the clean tang
of retreating rain.

Sea Ghosts of Kansas

Out here
on the plains none of us
really know all that much
about what we're doing, and
in this sea ghost of tall grass
we call home,
the smallest rocks and
calcified shellfish which
come into our sandals and homes
are comforting and disarming.
We are the dubiously welcome
newcomers here, and not just
to any ancient people.
It's worth remembering
out here
no one's all that ancient. Once
if you didn't have gills
then what the hell
after all
were you doing
out here?

Replay

When my time spins around,
I will return as a record store clerk
and customers will come and ask,
“Hey, man, what do you recommend?”
I’ll say try this one.

I’ll put on the album I’ve picked
and drop the needle-arm down.
The record will spin like the passing world.
When it reaches the end I’ll flip the LP over,
and we’ll listen again—
as many times as we need.

Boots

Lift with reverence
from bed of truck
and cradle gingerly up
the steps to your door.
Remove cardboard supports
from toes. Trim
plastic tags. The better
for your leather
to feel at home.

Apply one part mink oil,
one part experience,
one part patience
in a thin coat
with a soft cloth.

Wait until waiting
is no longer possible.
Thread symmetrically
with bright-colored laces,
or lace darkly
if it better suits your mood.
Thread all eyelets. Pull
taught after each row
to make ends meet
over the tongue.

Wear long enough
to scuff the earth
before it scuffs first.

Elmer has the perfect truck

to sell me, just what I've been
looking for, and he says, don't
sweat it, you can trust me.

This truck, Elmer tells me,
still has its own original
cigarette lighter, and so what
that you don't smoke.

This truck has power windows,
and AC so cold
you'll never feel passion again.
This truck's tires are bold
enough to trample into dirt
any regrets.

Elmer tells me the price, and I
wake to pedestrian morning,
yearning for a better deal.

Rimbaud and I

sit in the café of early death
of dreams and important ideas;
I sit and wait for the bitters to take me,
and Arthur tells me he will never write again.

The whole place, he tells me,
stinks of burning, and I don't dare
counter, for fear my poems
will dry up.

In two hours, he tells me
he will be shot,
and I will be drinking alone,
lifting my pen,
contemplating a life gone dry
like a bar room glass.

Negotiations

Back door open, the black Lab
gallops toward a squirrel, whose dark
red fur blurs in evening static.
He trees him, paw on trunk, barks,
gives up, saunters to yard's edge.
Squirrel shakes red fist, waits.

The Lab, coiled at corner fence,
says with eyes, what if
I sailed over these thin links?
Then jumps, clears links,
looks back, knows.

Squirrel shuffles down, safe,
as the black dog barrels
down street to tree others.

August

My father walks, leaden
pipe in hand (dog insurance).
Down street
the Akita runs a length
of iron chain.

Seeds explode like fire
against the neighbor's garage.

I am barefoot and fifteen
on hot concrete.
The mail truck pulls away
into the hallucinatory shimmer
of street.

I breathe
once, and run
for the box
with all I have.

Lemons

As a baby I'm told I ate lemons,
grinding pulp between nubby teeth,
spitting seeds to the wind
or the garden overgrown
with yellow marigolds.

Our Schnauzer ate
gummy Payday candy bars,
peanuts in his sharp doggy teeth
while my parents painted
the kitchen yellow.

The neighbors' fence became my spot
for cold, cold ice cream or small padded books,
and led to the faded yellow tetherball
out back before I knew about the owner's
cheating, his wife's insanity. Even then
I was across the street anyway,
in the middle of Oz,
so I was safe.

The street corner's giant wooden bear
kept me safe on walks
through our neighborhood.
I would sail yellow paper ships
in the backyard pool,
make vinegar volcanoes,
be a kid because I was good at it,
and liked it that way.

Driveway Olympics

*In 1988, Jamaica took part in the Calgary, Canada
Winter Olympics. They competed in only one sport: bobsledding.
-The Jamaican Bobsleigh Federation, 2008*

The sled hits
the end of our concrete
gauntlet, clacking on ice,
the crispness of December,
the orange burst of childhood.

*Feel the rhythm,
Hear the rhyme.
Dad's behind me
as we schlep the sled
to the top of the driveway,
our starting line.*

He pushes the sled.
I fall to the street.
My fingers tighten
on rope, waiting
for gravel, impact,
my father's words:

*Come on, Jamaica.
It's bobsled time.*

My Father Teaches Me to Shave

Near bedtime, I sit
on the high lip of the tub.
You stand shirtless at the mirror
trimming split ends from a beard
going gray.

I am not yet five.
My feet don't reach the floor
but I ask to shave, to be a man,
so you hand me
 the can of foam, and tell me,
"Rub some on your face."

You see the razor has no blade,
and focus sharply as we guide it
through the foam. Afterward,
we marvel at the smoothness
of my cheeks, the astringent tingle.

You say I'm a man now.
I feel tall enough for the counter,
where we both reflect
in that big mirror.

The Boxer

for Frank Williams

At the old folks' home, I
ask Frank what it is he does,
and hands streak the air black.
I back away. We laugh. Would he
train me? He stands,
leads me to the heavy bag.

Frank tells me, keep those hands
up. Tighten those elbows. Peek
across your fingertips and jab.
He shows me how old men
can throw hands quicker.
"Keep 'em tighter," he says.
"Keep 'em up, 'cause I'll
hit you if you let 'em down."
I take a hit, another.
I keep 'em up. "Move,"
Frank says. "Move."

Nobody messes
with Frank. He leads me
to the door. "Come back
tomorrow, kid, and maybe
if you've practiced you'll
get a hit in."

Weather Photographer Visits Class

for Stephen Locke

and we all flash, released static,
while he unpacks,
sets his camera on the long table
with its wide lens staring.

“Photographs are just piles
of electric mush the shade
of this carpet,” Stephen says, “until
developed.” He brushes fingertips
through beige, cocks a brow
like he’s saying *ya dig?*
Stephen rides this talk
easy in the harness.

He shows still shots
stitched into video vivid as rain.
The biggest twisters
have sidekick vortices
which whip into that helix
that shotgunned Dorothy to Oz.
Stephen shows the cyclone
he’s captured, a fish story
on his screen.

We all breathe,
glad to be anywhere
but Kansas plains made dark
with coming storms.

Being American

Ours were years that we all lived through,
or tried to; years where it was common
to spend more on floor tile than family;
to have a realtor and a bottle
there by the phone.
Such was the way of things.

I remember a woman down our street
in Kansas moved seven times
in three years before deciding
it was enough,
then blew her own mind
at the end of the drive.
The upholstery in her new Mustang
looked the other way.

Somewhere then, French parlor music
came from a newly furnished living room,
and the musicians argued
over whose solo sounded more expensive.
Notes tripped over themselves
to get to their new owners who,
now bloated with capitalism, would collapse
into chintzy chairs and floral couches,
their lilies gilded to bursting.

Because these were *our* years,
and that's how you did things.

Power Out

for Dan Kirchhefer

Our printmaking prof, Dan,
mock calls for help; throws
bones, croquet balls,
from open third-floor art hall
windows. We all dodge,
make for walls. Next
he throws bowling balls.

A horse skull smashes
hard outside, drawn down
by old gravity;
two teeth fly free.
Downstairs, Dan
holds skull to face,
a mask. We laugh,
pick horse teeth
from bleached concrete.

Jazz Poem

Tonight I will listen to swing,
contemplate wastes of time,
watch a woman in a gray sweater
who smokes and sways to saxophone.
I'll say the music is coy, a caress
or a new lover's lick.
We'll slow down, abound.

Tonight we will dance to bebop
staccato on the floor like saxophone,
my arm around her gray sweater.
She'll tease me with a laugh
as the band's smoky notes lick through us.

Tonight we'll be the keepers of jazz,
sway to rhythms of our own,
grow golden and sweet to the saxophone,
the floor smoky from our feet,
and the band will play on all night long.

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