

**WATERMARKS: DROPS, DRAWS, CREEKS, RIVERS, DROUGHTS
AND FLOODS IN THE LITERATURE OF KANSAS**

by
Thomas Fox Averill

--for Bruce Whaley

Straw, feathers, dust-
little things

but if they all go one way,
that's the way the wind goes.

-"Note," by William Stafford¹

Walking Ward-Martin

The creek I grew up next to, where I played for hours as a child, is named Ward Creek. It begins, like many Kansas creeks, with runoff from the rises all around it. That elevated land, once the soil is soaked through, shrugs off any accumulation of rain, any snow melt, any downpour, and, somewhere, that rush of water begins to wear down the grass, cut the soil, expose the roots of trees, create small banks, rest in pools among the rocks it has found deep in the earth. Ward Creek, as it happens, begins to cut the earth somewhere between Green Acres and Hope streets, just a few hundred yards northwest of where I grew up. From there, it meandered about a quarter of a mile or more, then met up with Martin Creek near what is now the corner of Huntoon and MacAlistar streets. Combined, and re-named Ward-Martin Creek, these two drainages cut a deeper swath as they moved down, north and east, to the Kansas River. In fact, Ward-Martin drained into the banks of the Kaw so effectively that, in the 1840s, it

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gave early travelers easy access, and the site was a river crossing on the Oregon Trail.

Now, of course, the Oregon Trail exists mostly on maps, mostly in the mind. The same can be said of Ward-Martin Creek, which is why I think of it mostly in the past tense. Most of what it "did" it does no longer, at least not in the same way.

I know, because one winter day my friend Bill Myers and I decided to start at the old Oregon Trail crossing on the Kansas River and trace Ward-Martin to the headwaters of both Ward and Martin. We walked and ran, mostly uphill and mostly north, into a bitter winter wind. But the day was sunny, the wind tamed by houses and trees; sometimes we could avoid its bite by walking in the creek bed.

Like me, Bill grew up in a west Topeka of open farm country and open creeks, in a time when young people and water were pretty much left unattended, free to roam, to create what we would on the land. Like me, Bill was two doors up the street from what people would later call an "undeveloped" field, and in that field was the very beginning of Martin Creek. Bill was less than a mile west of me, over a hill, spending much of his childhood playing in the next drainage, near water, catching tadpoles and frogs, crawdads, and small fish, slinging mud, cutting willow branches for switches, putting ropes in trees for Tarzan swings. Long before we knew each other, and in slightly different time periods, we had parallel experiences on the parallel drainages. So we re-explored the creeks of our boyhoods, and found them drastically altered.

In the time of spring rains, Ward-Martin Creek could turn wild, cutting new banks, flooding its banks, spilling onto streets and into the foundations of homes built along its course through Topeka. During the 1950s, that time of flood control in Kansas, the city decided to restrict Ward-Martin Creek. They bulldozed to deepen and widen the creek banks, then lined them with huge limestone rocks. They sometimes straightened the creek because meandering takes up valuable real estate. They built concrete walls and culverts to direct water into the creek from streets and low land nearby. They built new bridges over Ward-Martin, high and sturdy and concrete: eight bridges, all the same style, each within sight of the next. Farther up, they completely enclosed the creek in cement, bulldozed earth over the concrete top, and planted grass. The closer to the headwaters, the less work to control the smaller trailings of water, but the city continued to straighten to increase possible land use and to make the creek conform to the grid of streets that is the geometrical pattern of every

Midwestern town.

Walking the creek, I was struck by the amount of work expended to neutralize it (and the work has mostly been effective). I was also struck by the simple realization that the power of water is incredible if this is what it takes to control how it finds the creek, and where it goes in the creek, and how it gets to the river. Certainly, when I was a boy, there were times when the creek gushed, rushed away from the field where I played, all of that water urgently going somewhere. And I knew, even back then, how dangerous urgent water could be. But the millions of dollars spent to tame, to make the creek predictable, is a tribute to the power of water in the first place: it takes a flood of money and work to prevent the flood of water. And even with all the work, even when the creek seems erased, it is still there.

Bill and I walked along alley ways, through the backyards of suburban homes, over paved streets and parking lots, and we never lost sight of the creek, of where it had been, of where it still is. Always, we could sense the rising land on each side of us. Always, we could see the manholes, the gaping grates, the sewer drains: all the things built to help water go where it would go anyway. Sometimes, we could see the big old trees—cottonwood and sycamore—that like to drink at creek sides: they are still drinking, even though the creek sides are underground now. Like the trees, we could spot the small depression of earth that showed where the filled banks of the creek had slightly settled. Sometimes, in "undeveloped land" like the McFarland Ranch (the land south of Gage Park, between 10th and Huntoon and MacAlistar and Fairlawn), where the creek was left to be itself, we could not see it for the undergrowth of sapling, brush, wild grape and sumac, tall grass: we had to trust that it was there as much as when it was buried in cement. In fact, after walking the creek, we learned that water is always there, it always leaves its mark, no matter what humans try to do to control it.

Flying over water

I learned the same thing when I flew over Kansas in an attempt to know my home state from a different perspective. My reasoning: if Kansas is disparaged as "Flyover Country," maybe someone with a keen eye and a sense of place should actually fly over it. Looking down from around 700 feet at the draws, the creeks, the drainages, ponds, reservoirs, and rivers, I was struck, over and over again, by the ever-present evidence of water and how it shapes the

land. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by this observation; it matches my childhood fascination with Ward Creek, and my nostalgic walk along it. And I know, too, that though Kansas has a reputation as a dry place, it is well-watered, especially in its eastern half.

But, from the air, water seemed everywhere in Kansas. For one thing, we flew over Tuttle Creek, Wilson, Kanopolis, Clinton and Perry reservoirs, those huge flood control projects and recreational monstrosities mostly planned and built after the great 1951 flood. Reservoirs are obvious evidence of water. The less obvious fascinated me more. Just as my child's legs had once followed the meandering of a creek—not more than a foot wide in some places, banks never more than five feet tall, pond in one creek bend no bigger than the pit dug for the foundation of a new suburban house—so my adult legs followed the patterned water of the Ward-Martin drainage. And so, flying, I saw how water, each tiny molecule, each drop, each gathering, each trill, rivulet, spillage, seepage and drainage, marked every inch of the land, from the smallest swells to the deepest canyons, from the creeks fringed with cottonwoods and willows to the wide Kansas River, with its miles of flood plains, its bluffs and its sandbars, which barely show underneath, like a pentimento, like beasts waiting to rise from their drowning. Water, or the sign of it, is everywhere. The earth holds itself to the sky, and, from above, the marks of water—like a watermark in paper, slightly obscured by words, or like the lines in someone's huge palm—tell a story: water is the protagonist.

Or maybe I should say that water was the protagonist. Because of our changed human story in Kansas: water used to dictate where humans could live, where they congregated, how many might be sustained. Springs gave their names to those places where human beings might find the one element without which life was not possible. Wacondah Springs, a source of water, became a source of story and legend. The Oregon and Santa Fe trail stops spoke of water, or a sign of water: Big Springs, Diamond Springs, Council Grove, Lost Springs, Great Bend. Towns in Kansas, particularly western Kansas, welcomed people with the promise of water, even if they didn't live up to their reputations: I'm thinking here of Coldwater, or Garden City, of Crystal Springs and Sharon Springs. But in each case, water made a kind of promise to humans.

Now, it seems that humans want to be the protagonists. We plan what we'll do with water, how to find it, control it, shape it to our ends. We invent technology, from the windmill to the huge central pivot irrigation systems. We bulldoze the earth to create a dam and we flood one of our deep, pure sources

of water, the sacred site of Waeondah Springs. We plan reservoir after reservoir for flood control, which means simply that we do the flooding first: from Tuttle Creek to Clinton. We are the bosses, with our bulldozers and boats, our Corps of Engineers and our corps of bait shops. The power of water is sometimes forgotten, and where it flows is only a memory. Poet William Stafford begins his "Prairie Town" with the words: "There was a river under First and Main," and calls it a "River rolling in secret."² Sure the power of water reasserts itself, as in the 1993 flooding, when water rushed from the Tuttle Creek dam with such force as to eut earth to the quick, forcing it to cough up thousands of years of history: fossils, rock, all those other secrets unexposed to the human mind.

Part of our Kansas history with water is written not in rock, but in paper: remember, in the children's game, it's paper that covers rock. And Kansas literature is full of references, large and small, to this essential element: just as water runs through our lives, our bodies, our ground, our state, so language runs through our lives, defining who we are, where we are, making sense of the world.

Lawrence poet Denise Low, in her book *Starwater*, reasserts this almost mystic sense of water as protagonist. In doing so, she also shows how language can become a protagonist as we grapple with ancient mysteries. I'd like to ground my discussion of the Kansas Literature of water with her title poem:

STARWATER

Nursing my first baby
I drank eight glasses of water,
two quarts each day. He grew.

I felt like a carrier for water,
passing it on through to the child,
and some day his child, too,
will fatten, remarkable
like peaches and muskmelons
leaching juice from bare dirt.

Astronomers tell us star dust
once swirled together,

cooled into rocks and water
and still circulates,
the same matter pulled into stars
and Earth and into our flesh.

So water travels the skies
stretches into clouds,
and falls, moving ever East,
circling, the same ancient water
caught in the whirlwind
binding us all together,
gravity, or maybe, as we know it,
love, or water drawing
together all its kin.³

Obviously, the human relationship with water is ancient and vital. So vital, in fact, that the settlement of Kansas by Europeans was thought impossible in the Great American Desert, that part of Kansas west of the 100th meridian. The vast grasslands confronted and confused the European mind. As Kenneth Porter writes in his "Address to Kansans": "Here was no 'stem and rockbound coast,'/no 'forest primeval,'/no 'roeks and rills' nor 'woods and templed hills'/to love;/but an ocean of grass to the stirrups;/river 'half a mile wide and half an inch deep' -/at the time of spring rains...the horizon dragging outward at the heart-walls;/the land drought-crucified;/...the ocean of grass a stormy sea of flame."⁴

Once Europeans began to populate the region, after the territorial opening in 1854, people clung to beliefs that their very presenee would somehow change the dry landscape. In John Ise's *Sod and Stubble*, Henry and Rosie Ise

spent several days planting a big grove of cottonwoods along the north side of the claim. Then they planted some apple trees and grape vines that Rosie's father had sent, and a white rosebush that her mother had put in the package. Rosie conjured up splendid visions of shade and fruit and flowers as she dug in the soft, mellow ground, and poured buekets of water around the new plants. Every tree would help, too, to bring the change in climate which all of the settlers looked forward to.⁵

Whether in literature or legislation, Kansans have held onto the belief that water would follow humans onto the Great Plains. In our early history, folks believed rain would follow the plow. We plowed Kansas, released all that soil moisture, and looked to the sky for rain. Nothing.

But Kansans are optimists. Our next belief: The frenzy of railroad building would change the climate. All that metal lying exposed on the plains would attract lightning, and, of course, rain. Did it? No.

Then there was the 1873 Timber Culture Act. The U.S. government noticed it rained more in forested areas and thought Kansas should forest itself, thus bringing rain. Which did not come. The federal government went on to plant the Kansas National Forest in the Sand Hills along the Arkansas River, back in the early 1900s. That failed, too. As did the shooting of cannons (rain, it is said, follows a battle). So did prayer (whole congregations, towns, and weeks, dedicated to beseeching higher powers). As did the building of lakes and ponds (another myth: water attracts water). After all that failure, did Kansas get out of the hope business?

No, we passed a Water Modification Act that has given state monies for cloud seeding in western Kansas. And in the legislative session of 1995, we finally admitted that cloud seeding brings no more rain than plows, railroad tracks, trees, or prayers. But though the act rightly admits we can't make rain, it says cloud seeding does suppress hail. I guess if we can't be the protagonists in one drama, we have to change the drama, and be the protagonists of another.⁶

Of course the beliefs about water gave way to realities, and by the 1890s, Frank Baker of Lane County wrote "The Lane County Bachelor." The first verse sets the Kansas scene:

Frank Baker's my name, a bachelor I am,
I'm keeping old batch on an elegant plan;
You'll find me out west in the county of Lane
Where I'm starving to death on my Government claim.
My house it is built of the natural soil,
The walls are erected according to Hoyle;
The roof has no pitch, but is level and plain
And I always get wet when it happens to rain.⁷

The message, of course: It doesn't rain.

The best short story on this subject that I've encountered is in William

Allen White's *The Real Issue*. "The Story of Aqua Pura" is a sad tale, published in 1896, of water and western Kansas. White begins his story by explaining that: "Eastern Kansas is a finished community like New York or Pennsylvania. Central Kansas is finished, but not quite paid for; and Western Kansas, the only place where there is any suffering from drouth or crop failures, is a new country—old only in a pluck which is slowly conquering the desert."⁸

By the end of the story, though, the speculators, settlers, hopeful pioneers of Aqua Pura, all of them once infected by what White calls "an epidemic of hope in the air,"⁹ have been disappointed, and have left for the settled East (like the Lane County Bachelor). One man, Barringer, stays, "summer and winter, looking out across the burned horizon, peering at the long, low, black line of clouds in the southwest, longing for the never-coming rain."¹⁰ In an ironic twist, the old man dies during a five-day rainstorm. White writes that his rescuers found that "Beside his bed were his balanced books and his legal papers. In his dead eyes were a thousand dreams."¹¹

Others in the pioneering literature are more fortunate, but still face difficulties with water. In Charlotte Hinger's novel *Come Spring*, the main character, Aura Lee, a woman from the settled East, is not used to the work that comes with water in the west, and water work is mostly woman's work. Early in the novel, when her husband says, "Nothing like a hot meal to set everything right," she thinks: "*Oh yes, Daniel, nothing like a hot meal, and hours of cooking, then dishes, heating water, carrying in buckets that leave white marks on my hands. There's nothing quite like it.*"¹²

Later in the novel, when Aura Lee finds herself pregnant, and does not particularly want to be, she remembers a task that used to be her most tedious with water, one that she now actually wishes she were forced to do:

Out here on the prairie, even the monthly ritual of washing the rags seemed overwhelming and somehow shameful. First came the cold water soaking, then heating the water to boiling and the scrubbing with the caustic lye-based soap suds that had ruined her hands months ago. Then came two rinses to rid the rags of the irritating residue that could chafe her skin if every trace was not removed.

She had thought it would be easier when they had the well. When water was available on their own property. But now she had to lower a twenty-pound, iron-rimmed bucket to an enormous depth

and it took all her strength, even with a pulley, to raise it to the top.

Each step involved lugging in, then lugging out, masses of water. Even this, she thought with dismay, this most natural function of women, takes physical strength. Her shoulders ached with the memory of the bucket's weight and the tiresome rhythm of scrubbing, scrubbing. Then the drying for all the world to see. Would there never be any privacy in this godforsaken place?

Today, however, she knew she would give her soul to get to perform that particular washday chore this month. She slowly closed the drawer and like a sleepwalker found her chair and sat down.¹³

Given that review of the awesome work water often meant, imagine the welcome relief of technology that lightens the burden. But technology is expensive, whereas woman's work is not. Here is a woman drawing water for the cattle: "Rosie was almost in despair. Pull as she would, she could only keep the bottom of the trough wet."¹⁴ In *Sod and Stubble* three pages are devoted to Rosie's calculations and arguments and reasoning about whether or not a windmill would be a financial extravagance. Fourteen words describe its actuality: "soon afterward a new wooden windmill wheel was whirling in the hot south wind."¹⁵ But those fourteen words make a very big difference in the lives of the Ises and the lives of Kansans.

Once Kansas is "finished and paid for," to use White's phrase, the literature of the small town gives us more variety in the relationship between Kansans and water. William Allen White's Syeamore Ridge in *A Certain Rich Man* is in the well-watered eastern Kansas—it is a cross between El Dorado and Emporia. There, young John Barclay swims the Neosho River and its tributary creeks. There, the city grows until a corporation, headed by the adult John Barclay, dams a portion of the river for urban water supply. There, John Barclay ignores a public health crisis, and his own wife dies from an infected water supply. There, at the novel's end, in a dramatic gesture full of White's best irony, John Barclay dies in the water, drowned after saving the life of a prostitute.¹⁶

In *The Learning Tree*, by Gordon Parks, river and water—this time the Marmaton—serve a similar dual function. Recreation comes first:

During the next two hours, the slow-moving river cooled their naked bodies, and the impassioned tempers gradually drifted away

with the gentle current. Meanwhile, they performed their specialities. Beansy comically portrayed a whale. ...Earl and Skunk sank out of sight together. Earl's feet went on Skunk's shoulders and the two shot upward. Near the surface, Earl catapulted from Skunk's shoulders and leaped out of the water like a flying fish. Jappy, swinging out high over the river on a rope knotted to an oak, let go and double-somersaulted...into the water.

Marcus climbed to the top of Rock Ledge and ...sprang his mighty body into space...and spiraled beautifully into the river. Then, adding to the drama, he stayed beneath the water, emerging far downstream. Newt, encouraged by the rest, portrayed a submarine—swimming submerged on his back, a string tied to his pecker, which he sometimes managed to stiffen and pull taut like a periscope skimming the water. When his pecker didn't stand, he substituted his arm, his hand curled into an eye that turned on his wrist, scanning the waterbanks for enemy ships.

When Newt went to dress, his overalls, shirt and socks were expertly tightened into one wet knot. Then he understood, quite clearly, why Marcus had departed earlier than the rest.¹⁷

But recreation turns to horror when the redneck sheriff, Kirky, kills a man for the sin of playing craps at the riverside, and then running away. Doc gets only as far as the river before Kirky shoots him in the back, and Newt and his friends go into the Marmaton once more, this time to find not life, but death:

Newt got a good look at Doc as the pole drew him up through the murkiness. The skin on his face, like bubbly clay, strained against the current. His eyelids, pushed back by the same pressure, left the dead white balls staring blankly in the slow-moving water.¹⁸

This small town literature, then, does with water the same thing the early western Kansas pioneer literature does: shows graphically how it is literally a matter of life and death.

Water, of course, can be death in another sense, and death by drowning for humans has its counterpart in the Kansas literature of flooding, where land is flooded to a kind of dying during times of too much rain. Occasionally writers enjoy reminding us that the old tried and true image of prairie as a "sea of

grass" was once very true: Kansas was covered by a "sea of sea." A science-fiction novel by Robert Chilson takes us backwards in time to *The Shores of Kansas*.¹⁹ Poet Kathryn White Ryun tells us that "Here once a cool sea-darkness spanned/ Distance to distance earth's virginity;/ Here once, subsiding, ...rising, ...pliant sand/ commingled softly with the under-sea-/ Until betrayal made it land."²⁰

W.R. Moses speaks of another betrayal in the Corps of Engineers projects that created the Kansas reservoir system. Here are the first two stanzas of his poem, obviously concerning Tuttle Creek Reservoir, as Moses taught English at Kansas State University:

Big Dam

Muddy meek river, oh, it was splendid sport
 Those times you tore apart tranquility
 And swam the gar through frightened village streets
 (And sent the villagers to live in tents)
 And spread your silted bed on every sort
 Of floor, and rammed prairie at the sea—
 But where, do you think, is the end of suchlike feats?
 Good Lord, did you never hear of consequence?

Look, do you see your wedge of tumult spread?
 Words rage like water, and all Congress frowns,
 And tit for tat, and the world witnesses
 You shall be damned and dammed for tumult's sake—
 And swim the carp above the milking shed
 (And send the farmers off to live in towns)
 And try if cedars can be cypresses
 And lose the arid prairie in a lake.²¹

At the end of Carol Ascher's *The Flood*, the main character, Eva, who is growing up in the early 1950s of Topeka, goes to the river to see the damage caused by the 1951 flood. There, she finds an old man scavenging the debris. Her own life has been full of the debris of growing up, of understanding for the first time the racism that will result in Brown vs. Board, of coming to grips with her own Jewishness, of trying to define herself against the immigrant

experience of her parents and the experiences of the patients her psychiatrist father treats at Menninger. The flood has brought fear of disease, particularly polio, has brought new people to live in Eva's home, in her room, making her a refugee living in a hot attic, has created tensions in Topeka, in her parents, in herself. So, by novel's end, she confronts all the destruction, all the debris, all the metaphor of what the flood has come to mean in her own life. And she does what we all do: she begins to help the old man scavenge in the debris, trying to save what is valuable or useful. In so doing, she makes some metaphorical sense of her life.²²

Water has always been that grand metaphor in both literature and life: we are washed or unwashed; we are going with the flow or we are dammed; we are swimming or drowning; our cups runneth over, or we are parched; we can go to the water from a deep well, or we can be shallow. We ride a tide of water into life and we cross the Styx into death.

Many moments in Kansas literature use water in this symbolic way. Henry and Rosie Ise risk all their possessions, floating their wagon across the swollen creek after their long journey to their homestead. Edythe Squier Draper's characters in "Quinine and Honey" put up with malaria and flood because they need the sound of life, of the frogs, of tress soughing in the wind along the river bottom.²³ Water takes us to ourselves. Water takes us into that deeper world where we find connection. John Steuart Curry's first critically successful work was called "Baptism in Kansas" and showed a group of farm people gathered around a stock tank waiting for the rapture of being dunked and coming out of the water a different person.²⁴ That act of baptism echoes all through Kansas literature, whether in Gordon Park's *The Learning Tree*, where Newt goes under and comes up a different person or in Carol Ascher's *The Flood*, which I've just discussed.

Contemporary poet Harley Elliott shows the two worlds, too, and the interplay between them in:

TWO MEN SEE INTO THE WORLD

Having swum the pond
 climbing naked on the bank
 standing in our watery skins
 drawing the sun deep inside
 and myself as one who names things

saying -here's a Pearl Crescent-
of a simple butterfly just
landed at our feet
Having done all that
and looking away
we are not prepared for the
giant water spider jumping
through a hole in the day
to embrace those wings

or for eyes and coiled tongue
that clear exquisite
death on the butterfly's face
saying -this is what I came for!-

No we are leaping for the shelter of our skins
plunging into the water
swimming back in a hurry
to the land of people.²⁵

Harley's poem not only combines the images I've been analyzing: baptism, the dual world of air and water, the life and death in water, but the interplay between worlds that is so important in Kansas literature. After all, for an agricultural people—for any people, really—the interplay between water and the Kansas earth is vital, is life.

When I flew over Kansas, I was looking for this story, and its mark on the land. The story I saw was not always a big story: not of floods and reservoirs to stop floods; not of human attempts to control water with pond, drainage or irrigation ditch, with culvert, with concrete sewer system, with the huge bulb on stilts of a metal water tower, or the long, thin storage tubes of towns like Bogue and Damar; nor is it the big story of a center-pivot irrigation sprinkler able to water a section of wheat or corn or beans by sucking out the Arkansas River near Sterling or the Ogallala Aquifer near Colby. True, there is drama and significance in those big stories, and anyone who flies over Kansas is immediately aware of its details.

But, more, it is the small stories, and their accumulation—as when I read Kansas Literature—that add up to the meaning of water in Kansas. Because the

story of the pervasiveness of water is really told drop by drop, told even where water doesn't seem to be there to sing its name. In the literature of Kansas, pervaded by water or the lack of it, few works treat water exclusively, though it may seem like it, because I've been sharing such big gulps. In William Stafford's "Note," the poem I started with, it is not wind who details the story, because wind is invisible. Only by looking at the little things can we see the largeness of what surrounds us. Water, of course, is visible, but, like wind, a big part of its story is in the smallest details, the equivalent in the land to "straw, feathers, dust." I know how small my life is, how my child's universe could be a rivulet of water, a creek bank, a tiny pool (extravagantly called a pond). But when I add up smallness, I am sometimes overwhelmed by how huge life is.

I remember the first time I looked through a microscope (like flying over a place, this is another "distortion" of perspective). Suddenly, that which had been unknown—because too small to see—met my eyes, an entire world of matter, structured and shaped, as completely real as I was. Of course, I had known that amoebas existed, but to see them, spread on a lab slide, was a kind of revelation, akin to seeing pictures of dead relatives only spoken of before. How odd, really: to think of a human being, looking through a microscope, studying cells like those which make up every part of the body; or to think of someone in the present looking in a photograph album at the dead, but the dead that live on, genetically, in the body that holds the photographs in hand.

From the air, a section of land might be a cell on a glass slide, seen through a microscope. That which is obscured from the ground is revealed. A section line might be defined by a road, by tree lines, by fence, by the way one crop gives way to another. But inside that usually rigid square, water lives, and its life creates all kinds of shapes inside the boundaries, no two the same, each one alive with the story of how little things shape what we think of as big.

William Stafford's poem, "Note," is about how little things are not only the signs of what is larger, but maybe more. After all, it's when the "little things" like "straw, feathers, dust" decide to move that the wind goes, too. So, too, with water. It's the decision of each small drop that makes the cutaway, the creek bank, the creek itself, the draw, the pond, the river and the reservoir. And these decisions are dramatically apparent from the air. For example, a field might be planted over in wheat, grown eighteen inches tall. From the air, where distance should flatten the land below, every contour is revealed, in the slight changes of color, in the way wind ripples across the wheat heads differently

according to what the wheat stands on. Where water has accumulated, and encouraged more than the monoculture of crop, weeds rise up to show the drainage pattern of each section (no matter how much herbicide farmers use).

These small decisions of water, written in each section, become bigger decisions the higher one gets. Watch a raindrop in the palm of hand, or watch six inches of rain come down in three hours in the Kansas River valley. The only difference is in scale. So, too, when there is no rain at all, no water apparent: like an ancestor, water doesn't have to be there to have left its mark.

In the western Kansas of around fourteen inches of rainfall per year, we flew over Lost Creek, which still shows blue on maps, a wavery line running from central to southeast Gove County, and into the Smoky Hill River. Lost Creek is so named because the water runs underground, and yet the tracing of water is not lost, nor invisible: it has formed a beautiful old river valley, farmhouses (most as lost now to those original settlers as the water is to the valley) dotting the first ridges above the creek bottom.

The chalk formations of western Kansas are as white and dry-seeming as bones. Yet, when examined closely, they reveal literal, not metaphorical, bones: the bones of sea creatures. In my home in Topeka, I have a piece of the ocean floor, a rock from an ancient Kansas when the land was part of the bottom of a great inland sea. The surface of the rock has waves, exactly as though water were lapping across it still. My rock looks like some of the many ponds we flew over, when a slight breeze rippled the water. (Wind "wrinkles" the water, said a fellow passenger.) Like my rock, Castle Rock and the Monument Rocks of Gove County, and the Chalk Bluffs of Logan County, all testify to water: from oceanic origins to fresh water erosions. Their shapes, too, from the air, are no different from the dragon fingers of reservoirs, no different from the amoeba-like patterns of sand just below the surfaces of the Arkansas or Kansas rivers, no different from the pattern of flint along the ridges of the Flint Hills, no different from the patterns of trees along the meandering waters of the Marais des Cygnes River near Osawatomie.

The landscapes of Kansas are radically different, and yet the shapes below are almost all alike. They are all the shapes of water. Are all watermarks. Looking at land, we are really looking at what water has done to the land.

I think back to my boyhood, when my biggest pleasure was the creek: I followed the mark of the water as it wound through a tiny patch of prairie yet unclaimed by houses. Later, my friends and I became bold, and entered the sewers where our creek disappeared. We would follow the narrow rivulet

underground, crouching and crawling through concrete pipe, letting our tennis shoes soak through, carrying small sticks in our fists to wave away the spider webs. The air, dank, moldy, sometimes with the slight tinge of gas, was almost as dense as water. We headed for the small creases of light in front of us, and, when we reached one of them—they were manholes—we would pop them up, look around, get our bearings and disappear below again. We were no more lost than Lost Creek is in western Kansas. The water we followed, though, was becoming lost to sight. It was no longer making the decisions it had been capable of in the prairie west of my house. It was becoming controlled, and that process has continued into today.

But the need to control is also the acknowledgment of power. And nobody, flying over the state of Kansas with a sensitive eye, or reading the literature of Kansas with a nose bent on the smell of water, can doubt the power of water, whether on the land, or underground, or pulsing in veins, or singing in the river of words we use to tell each other about this world: water, blood and language carry all that makes our lives possible.

NOTES

1. William Stafford, *Stories That Could Be True* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 181.
2. *Ibid.*, 70.
3. Denise Low, *Starwater* (Lawrence, KS: Cottonwood Press, 1988), 14.
4. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Kansas Poems* (Topeka, KS: Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1991), 1.
5. John Ise, *Sod and Stubble*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 40.
6. Kansas House of Representatives, *House Bill No. 2040: An Act to Modify the Water Modification Act*, 1995 Session, Topeka.
7. Sackett and Koeh, eds. *Kansas Folklore* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 146.
8. William Allen White, "The Story of Aqua Pura," in *The Real Issue* (Chicago: Williams and Way, 1896), 22.
9. *Ibid.*, 24
10. *Ibid.*, 35-36.
11. *Ibid.*, 38.
12. Charlotte Hinger, *Come Spring* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 55.
13. *Ibid.*, 279.
14. Ise, 195.
15. *Ibid.*, 197.

16. William Allen White, *A Certain Rich Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).
17. Gordon Parks, *The Learning Tree* (New York: Fawcett-Cress, 1963), 47-48.
18. *Ibid.*, 57.
19. Robert Chilson, *The Shores of Kansas* (New York: Popular Library, 1976).
20. Kathryn White Ryun, "The Prairie" in *the Kansas Experience in Poetry*, ed. Lorrin Leland (Lawrence, KS: Division of Continuing Education, University of Kansas, 1978), 78.
21. W.R. Moses, *Identities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 62.
22. Carol Ascher, *The Flood* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997).
23. Edythe Squier Draper, *As Grass* (Topeka, KS: Washburn University Center for Kansas Studies, 1994), 92-108.
24. See discussion in Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 64-67.
25. Harley Elliott, *Darkness at Each Elbow* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1981), 37.