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“I’m Going to Live in Kansas One Day”

When I was five, according to Papa—my maternal grandfather—I put my hands on my hips, stuck out my right foot, and announced, “I’m going to live in Kansas one day.”

Maybe it came from watching *The Wizard of Oz*, but even then, you’d think I would choose technicolor Oz, replete with Lollipop Boys and flying monkeys. Years later, in the short span that overlapped my actually living in Kansas and Papa’s last years, he saw his memory of me come true.

As a Brooklyn and Jersey girl (half my childhood in each) who spent over two-thirds of her life in the Midwest, I not only live in Kansas but consider myself from here. Having served as the Kansas Poet Laureate for four years, I was surprised that few people made much note of my origins or, in a state so predominantly Christian, of my Jewishness.

Yet I’ve struggled against the mythology of what it means to be a Kansas writer often translates into writing that wakes up an author up early each morning to unfurl its understated, quiet, even stoic at times, lines and stanzas. People here often introduce themselves by saying what generation Kansas they are, including my fifth-generation Kansan husband, something that messages that the longer you’ve been here, the more you are of this place. Our children are, from his side of the family, sixth-generation Kansans, and from my side, only second-generation Americans.

All of this leads to questions of what makes a person a Midwesterner, and in my more specific circumstances, a Kansan. I love Kansas, call it my forever home, track the parade of cicadas and katydids in summer and arrival of bluebirds in winter. I’ve slept outside in fields with my husband at the height of summer, waking with only a sheet over our naked bodies, to a circle of cows regarding us. I’ve hiked Horsethief Canyon, camped at Castle Rock, wandered through short-grass prairie trails in the west, and driven thousands of miles on blue highlights while tracking Great Blue Herons and where to get the best pie. I’ve been up at 2 a.m. in the basement on my phone with friends in their basement while tracking tornadic storms.

At the same time, I love many Kansas writers who speak from generational tethers to the land, such as Denise Low, the Kansas poet laureate before me, and of course our patron saint of many Midwestern poets: William Stafford. I've felt at home with fellow Midwestern writers at crowded readings in bars or cafes, outdoor festivals or indoor auditoriums.

I claim myself as a Kansan as well as being from other places. My descendants—as well as so many others across this area—are an emerging hybrid of new and old Midwesterners, one foot in the time of wagon trains across open prairies, and one foot only recently stepping onto Ellis Island from the old country, and all of us looking for home.