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# FLYOVER COUNTRY: Images of Kansas

by Thomas Fox Averill

**K**ansas is in that great middle part of the United States that many people call “flyover country.” Flown over, or traversed at night by car—or however crossed against the will of a traveler—Kansas is rarely seen, except by its own inhabitants, as the place it actually is. Instead, Kansas, like so many other states at the heart of the country, is mostly an abstraction.

Abstractions, of course, invite and support stereotypes. It might be the humor of the *New Yorker* cartoon, where words on an overpass warn: “You are now entering Kansas or some state very much like it.”<sup>1</sup> In such a perception, *all* the states between Manhattan and Los Angeles become *some* or *any* state, become Mudville, “flyover country,” the Midwest, a great expanse of dirt, of agriculture, of cows and chickens and pigs, of mud. Here, nothing much happens except that Casey strikes out. The places we don’t know live only in story, joke, one-liner, phrase; they often come to represent anything but what they really are. Think of Timbuktu. Think of the constant misuse of geographical words like “prairie” and “plains” in media story after media story. (Prairie, not incidentally: tallgrass, generally east of the 100th meridian, more than twenty inches of rainfall; Plains: shortgrass, generally west of the 100th meridian, less than twenty inches of rainfall.) On any TV map of the United States, or any national news report, Kansas might be part of the “Midwest,” the “West,” the “Middle West,” or the “Western States.” In fact, Kansas contains both the geographic center of the United States (before the inclusion of Alaska and Hawaii) and the geodetic center of the United States. So surely its location shouldn’t be so hard to remember: as the center, it is central.

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1. For another mention of this cartoon, see James Nuechterlein, “Dixie U.S.A. (This Time),” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public* 125 (August/September 2002): 19–20. Available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/dixie-usa-33>.

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*Kansas is central: it contains both the geographic center of the United States, before the inclusion of Alaska and Hawaii, and the nation's geodetic center. Even those Kansas communities not at unique meetings of latitude and longitude see themselves as central, as this 1940s-era sign near Kinsley shows, marking as it does the equidistant routes to the coasts.*

But where Kansas finds itself on the map makes no difference when it comes to where it rests in the popular mind or the popular culture: Kansas is the Timbuktu of the United States, its farthest reach, its unlikely destination, its metaphor for obscurity. As such, Kansas is the place name of choice when Hollywood wants to make a point about “flyover country.” In the James Bond movie, *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), evil terrorists have stolen a weapon of mass destruction, and want to zap some part of the world with it, in order to show their power and capacity for violence. One of them points out to the group that the orbit of the space weapon will soon put it over Kansas. “Blow up Kansas,” a terrorist quips, “and the world will not know it for days.” Or in the vampire film *Once Bitten* (1985), an old vampiress needs virgin blood. Her two young captives, male and female, have just made sure they are no longer virgins, thus spoiling her plans. She laments that she’ll never find another virgin. The old woman’s servant takes her hand to comfort her: “Don’t worry,” she coos, “there are others. In places like . . . Kansas.”

The popular culture, in these images, leaps between two abstractions about Kansas. The first: it is an obscure, desolate, and forgotten place. Second: Kansas harkens back to a more innocent past, as though it were a land peopled by the stern and virginal, who read their Bibles, and who, as L. Frank Baum wrote of Dorothy’s Uncle Henry, do “not



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know what joy" is.<sup>2</sup> Baum further captured Kansas in the first instance—obscure, desolate, forgotten—with his introduction of the place:

Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, . . . When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and

the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike so many purveyors of popular culture today, Baum did, in fact, know the prairies and plains. But for a man who had been a boy on a rather wealthy estate near Syracuse, New York, *all* western places might have seemed strangely desolate. Baum experienced some of the Midwest while on tour with a theater troupe in the 1880s. By the end of that decade, he was already a failed pioneer in Aberdeen, South Dakota. He retreated to Chicago, where he lived and wrote until he had enough success, and money, to buy land in California. In response to the rather famous opening of *The Wizard of Oz*, many Kansans will insist that Baum is really writing about the plains of South Dakota. (Clearly his bleak description is more true of *that* God-forsaken place.) But no matter what or where Baum had in mind, he was not the first nor the last to describe Kansas in bleak, "Mudville" terms.

Ordway, a chronicler with the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804, wrote about the land that is now Kansas: "this country may with propriety be called the Deserts of North America for I do not concieve [*sic*] any part of it can ever be sitled [*sic*] as it is deficient of or in water."<sup>4</sup> Zebulon Montgomery Pike, an American explorer and army officer, saw the same area in his 1806 exploration of the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase and wrote: "On the rivers Kansas, La Platte, Arkansaw, and their various

2. L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (New York: Dover Edition, 1960), 13.

3. *Ibid.*, 12.

4. This and subsequent quotations about the land that later became Kansas are gleaned from Roy E. Gridley, "Images of an Older Kansas," in *The Kansas Art Reader*, ed. Jonathan Wesley Bell (Lawrence: University of Kansas, Independent Study, 1976), 25–49.

branches, it appears to me to be only possible to introduce a limited population on their banks. . . . These vast plains of the western hemisphere may become in time as celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa." Stephen H. Long traveled through what is now Kansas in 1819. He didn't put his name on anything in the state, as he did on a peak in the Colorado Rockies. His observations might indicate why: "this extensive section of the country . . . is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and . . . uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence. This region, however . . . may prove of infinite importance to the United States, inasmuch as it is calculated to serve as a barrier to prevent too great an extension of our population westward, and secure us against the machinations or incursions of an enemy." Long drew a map of the "country drained by the Mississippi," on which he labeled most of the land that is now Kansas with a title that echoes L. Frank Baum: "Great American Desert."

Of course, explorers and tourists can be expected to gather only first impressions. People came to truly know the land that is Kansas when they settled here. Take Frank Baker, a homesteader in Lane County in far western Kansas, who wrote what became a popular folk song about his experiences in the state around 1890, about ten years before the publication of *The Wizard of Oz*. To know Kansas, unfortunately, was not always to love it. After describing his leaky sod house, his lean diet of "common-sop sorghum, old bacon and grease," his encounters with rattlesnakes, centipedes, bedbugs, and "gay little fleas," he sings:

How happy am I on my Government claim,  
For I've nothing to lose nor I've nothing to gain.  
I've nothing to eat and I've nothing to wear,  
And nothing from nothing is honest and fair.  
Oh, it is here I am solid and here I will stay,  
For my money is all gone and I can't get away.  
There is nothing that makes a man hard and profane,  
Like starving to death on a Government claim.<sup>5</sup>

"I'll no longer remain/ And starve like a dog on a Government claim," he sang, and sometime around 1891 he indeed left Lane County.

He was not the last person to leave, either. Writer Earl Thompson, who departed Wichita in the 1940s, began his novel, *Garden of Sand*, with the dig:

Love a place like Kansas, and you can be content in a garden of raked sand. For ground it is the flattest. Big sky, wheat sea, William Inge, bottle clubs, road houses—Falstaff and High Life, chili and big juke road houses—John Brown, Wild Bill Hickok, Carry A. Nation, cockeyed Wyatt Earp, Pretty Boy Floyd, and shades of all those unspoken Indians. Out there on the flat, in a wheat sea,

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5. For complete song lyrics, and a discussion of this song, see Jan Harold Brunvand, "The Lane County Bachelor: Folksong or Not?" in *Readings in American Folklore*, ed. Jon Harold Brunvand (New York: Norton, 1979), 289–308.

on the spooky buffalo grasses where the ICBM's go down into the shale and salt of a prehistoric sea wherein the mighty mosasaurs once roamed and the skies were not cloudy all day.<sup>6</sup>

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Even more recently, Frank and Deborah Popper, sociologists from what Kansans call "back East," have studied population and land use and proposed that the Great Plains be encouraged in its trend towards depopulation. They have suggested that small population centers for service and industry be left on the Plains, surrounded by "Buffalo Commons," the environment that was Kansas before the land was settled by agriculture and ranching. They have made headlines from Syracuse, Kansas, to Syracuse, New York.

As other writers in this issue have discussed, the cycles of boom and bust seem always a part of any analysis of the image of Kansas. Busts and low points environmentally and culturally, reinforce the desolate, forgotten image, for we go full circle: from Long's estimate of Kansas as "uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence" to the Popper proposal of depopulation by attrition and design. No wonder that, outside of the three million or so who live in Kansas, most people would agree that Kansas is indeed "flyover country," a place to drive through or avoid altogether, a place that is flat, boring, and best returned to the Great American Desert of its early nomenclature.

**K**ansas: where have all the people gone? Demographers tell us that nearly 80 percent of all Americans live within an hour's drive of a coast.<sup>7</sup> I live about as far from any of the coasts as anyone in the United States. From my home in Topeka, Kansas, I must drive nearly sixteen hours to Galveston, Texas, roughly twenty to Washington, D.C., and almost thirty to San Francisco. The nearest ocean, then, has to be the "sea of grass" so often evoked in the poetry and prose of the Midwest.

Kenneth Porter, a poet whose parents homesteaded Kansas, and who grew up in Sterling, in central Kansas, has helped me understand this land that is *not* an hour's drive from a coast. He wrote much of his poetry during, and immediately following, the Dust Bowl, that seven-year period following the stock market crash of 1929, that time known to all as the Great Depression. The "Dirty Thirties," as they were called all over the Great Plains, were a twice-cursed time when the failed economy of the East (the center of finance) combined with the drought of the West (the center of agriculture) to deliver a double shock to Kansans: not only was our local livelihood struggling, so was the fundamental economic base of the nation.

As poet Porter writes, those who settled Kansas had already given up the familiar East—the rockbound coasts, the forests, the "templed hills."

6. Earl Thompson, *Garden of Sand* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 9.

7. This and other population/demographic insights come from Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

They had learned to love

rivers “half a mile wide and half an inch  
deep”—  
or five miles by twenty feet  
at the time of spring rains.

They had adjusted to

the horizon dragging outward at the  
heart-walls  
the land drought-crucified;  
the hosts of tiny vicious flying dragons;  
the screaming down-rush of the  
white-hooded three-day blizzard;  
the ocean of grass a stormy sea of flame.<sup>8</sup>

They had put their faith in survival, in the agricultural adaptations they made in places like Kansas—dryland farming, winter wheat, windmill, barbed wire—and in their own toughness. Then came the stock market crash of 1929, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and they had to admit some defeat—physically, culturally, and psychically.

The midwestern/rural/agricultural way of life had already become marginal by the 1920s, when the urban population overtook the rural. Urban images, urban politics, urban concerns, came to dominate the discourse of American life. By the end of the Dust Bowl, Kansas’s population had stopped growing through in-migration. And, of course, many had to leave their farms (though the population of Kansas was not as diminished as that of Oklahoma; as historian C. Robert Haywood pointed out, the Dust Bowl dispossessed were called “Okies,” not “Kansies”!). But, as Huber Self, author of *Environment and Man in Kansas*, wrote: “of the 105 counties in Kansas, seventy-one had reached maximum population forty years or more previous to 1970.”<sup>9</sup> In the first census conducted by the federal government, farmers made up 95 percent of the United States population. In the 2000 census, the number was around 2 percent, so low that in some future census farmers will have no special designation: they will be part of “OTHER,” along with alligator wrestlers, cement sculptors, and blacksmiths.

And culturally, right after the Dust Bowl, *The Wizard of Oz* visited Kansas again, this time from that source of popular image, Hollywood. By the time of the film’s release in 1939, Kansans and the rest of the nation could not only see, but finally believe, that Kansas actually *was* a flat, gray land of tight-fisted farmers and sky-loosed twisters. The farm implement was best used as a prop for the young Judy Garland to lean against while she sang about that place over the rainbow where “happy



*On the occasion of our 125th anniversary of statehood, Kansas promoted itself as “125 and Coming Alive,” which many criticized because it admitted to how moribund our state and our state image had become.*

8. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, “Address to Kansans,” in *The Kansas Poems* (Topeka: Washburn University, Center for Kansas Studies, 1992).

9. Huber Self, *Environment and Man in Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1978).



*In yet another promotional campaign, the state tried to pretend that it was exactly what those an hour's drive from a coast might want, a huge park in the center of urban America. Hence the slogan: "America's Central Park."*

Twentieth-century Americans all hear her mantra: "There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home." But nobody, from 1939 on, really wanted to return to Kansas, or the Midwest, except as an exercise in nostalgia or inferiority. After World War II, for example, Eisenhower was elected, twice, to the presidency. At the beginning of his second term, *The Wizard of Oz* began its interminable run on television. By 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy wisely chose "The New Frontier" as his image, to distinguish himself from Ike's America, that last gasp of nostalgia for an older, agricultural, homogenized, pasteurized nation, as pure and healthy as the milk that was still delivered to American homes by dairies during the Eisenhower administration.

The change in the image of the Midwest and Kansas accelerated in the 1960s. Since then, when we've wanted to make others take notice of us—whether to read what we have to say, or to attract tourists—we have to evoke the stereotypes assigned to us. In one tourist promotion from the late 1970s and early 1980s we called our state "The Land of Ah's," a slogan that baffled the *Wall Street Journal*. One writer couldn't believe our willingness to promote ourselves with our worst stereotype. Wags immediately renamed the state "The Land of Blah's." In another promotion, on the occasion of our 125th anniversary of statehood, we tried "125 and Coming Alive," which many criticized because it admitted to how moribund our state and our state image had become. In yet another

little bluebirds fly." By 1939, everyone in the culture knew that Dorothy's "over the rainbow" was nothing more than every young person's desire to leave the farm and head for some city, Emerald or not. That same year, Dr. Karl Menninger analyzed the mental state of the state, and wrote that Kansans had "gone off the deep end with desperate seriousness, and in so doing earned for themselves the name of being a humorless, puritanical people, incapable of joy and grudging in their attitude toward those happier than themselves." He concluded: "I began by saying that we live in a beautiful state, a state settled by brave, intelligent and far-visioned people; then I had to add that our intelligence and our vision do not seem to have prevented us from developing a vast inferiority, not a real inferiority but a feeling of inferiority."<sup>10</sup> The publication of Menninger's piece, "Bleeding Kansans," was, ironically, perfectly timed with the release of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Sure, *The Wizard of Oz* purports to turn on Dorothy's desire to return home.

10. Karl A. Menninger, "Bleeding Kansans," *Kansas Magazine* (1939): 3-6.

promotional campaign, we tried to pretend that we were exactly what those an hour's drive from a coast might want, a huge park in the center of urban America. Hence the slogan: "America's Central Park." Similarly, Manhattan, Kansas, has nicknamed itself "The Little Apple." Another state slogan was "The Secret's Out," though I'm not sure who bent an ear to listen. More recently Kansas's Travel and Tourism folks came up with "Simply Wonderful," two words that hardly spark the imagination toward anything but the truth of the simplicity and the lie of the wonderful. The new "As Big As You Think" was followed immediately by bumper stickers that complained, "As Bigoted As You Think."

In criticizing Kansas's slogans, I am not criticizing the state, only wondering about our seeming inability to cut through the tangle of stereotypes, assumptions, and cultural images that tie up our own imaginations when we think about a place so many of us care deeply about. In other words, we seemed doomed to double entendre and self-ridicule. After all, Kansas has too often become not what it is, but what we try to project it to be, or what is projected on it from New York or Hollywood. When those places want to suggest a place is important, exciting, or interesting, they quote Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*: "Gee, Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." Advertising for the 1997 Broadway musical "The Life," about Times Square in 1980, shows a woman's calf, her foot arched into a red high-heeled shoe. Under the shoe we are reminded that "You're not in Kansas anymore."

So, Kansas is a blank slate on which all sorts of cultural ideas are written. It is the place where we came from, to which we really don't want to return. It is the past, best flown over and maligned (or abstractly admired) from a great distance.

**D**orothy's most famous line is used in many situations. It describes a contrast in place: travel from the mundane to the exotic. It describes an innocent person: someone baffled by the exotica. And it describes the secret wish of many midwesterners: to be entirely free of a place. In his novel, *Was*, Geoff Ryman points out how many people traveled from the East to the Midwest, to Kansas, with a variation of Dorothy's line in their hearts. They wanted to leave something behind.

The people of the camp groaned and stood up. The leather harnesses creaked and stretched. The adults were hauling their houses behind them. They were moving West, to escape the past, escape the East. Why didn't they ever look behind them? Did they never wonder why they were so weary and mean? Dorothy knew and despised them. They were all pulling the East with them.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, at some point people have to face the fact that nothing can be left behind, that they have pulled the East, or the past, behind them.

11. Geoff Ryman, *Was* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

Kansas cannot be left behind, either, try as the culture might. . . . We want it to be the Heartland at a time when the heart seems to have gone out of so much of the country.

If Kansas is the Heartland, the land of our hearts, the center, the core of the United States, then it follows that as Kansas is, so is everywhere.

Kansas cannot be left behind, either, try as the culture might. Kansas is dragged along behind, like some vestigial tail. We remember its wag long after we remember its vitality, or what it meant to the United States. We want it to be the Heartland at a time when the heart seems to have gone out of so much of the country. We want to believe that somewhere there are people who are innocent, who are agricultural, who are close to God, who live out the values of an older America, the “family values” so hypocritically invoked in political rhetoric. Kansas is a quintessentially Republican state, and those roots are explored well in this issue. But that does not mean it is a quintessentially Red State—that political designation is about voting, and not about our culture, which has deep roots in the Republican Party.

**M**idwestern businesses include “Heartland” in their names in order to establish trust, evoke sound business practices, simpler times, when people kept their word with only a handshake to cement the deal. We may want and need a Heartland because for so long the rural values of the United States were so completely maligned and attacked. As the population shifted to the urban, there was a “culture war,” which Kansas, and places very much like it, lost. Think of the novels of Sinclair Lewis, most of them fueled by contempt for the maudlin Midwest. Lewis took apart the smug, isolated, insulated small town in *Main Street* (1920), his first successful novel. That book opens:

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called “Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.” But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters.<sup>12</sup>

Lewis’s point is well enough taken, though his smugness betrays him. The fact is: *Main Street* is a continuation of New York City, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and to be cynical about it as the “climax of civilization” is to be cynical about all of the main streets of the United States, which were pulled along behind, to every Main Street in the country. Doesn’t every place in the United States have its share of pious morality, smug comfort, envious consumerism? Kansas writers have admitted that Kansas certainly does. Joseph Stanley Pennell, in *The History of Rome Hanks*, wrote: “But what sort of people squatted in Fork City anyway? They all sold each other wheat and bacon and corn and beef and farm machinery and squeaky shoes; they all talked in the same Goddamned flat nasal voice about the

12. Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920).

same Goddamned trivial things day-in-day-out year-after-year—eating, sleeping and growing more rustic and pompous and proverbial.”<sup>13</sup>

In American and Kansas literature of the first half of the twentieth century, a writer could never go wrong criticizing the small town. Or religion, as Sinclair Lewis did in his 1927 *Elmer Gantry*, part of which he both researched and set in Kansas. Or business, as Lewis did in his 1922 *Babbitt*. Nobody can go wrong exposing the hypocrisies in these things, especially if they exist somewhere else, say, in “flyover country.”

And nobody can go wrong evoking Heartland, as Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s essay in this issue, on the relationship between Kansas and wheat, makes abundantly clear. I own a pillow, made from what was once a feed sack, given to my family by a friend. It shows Kansas as a heart, in the center of the United States, and out of that heart, lines reach to all the other states. That heart unites the states. And if Kansas is the Heartland, the land of our hearts, the center, the core of the United States, then it follows that as Kansas is, so is everywhere.

**W**hen the Clutter family was murdered in Holcomb, Kansas, in 1959, the subject of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, all the country said, “If it can happen in Kansas, it can happen anywhere!” The exclamation was exploited more fully when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, having planned the crime and built the bomb in Kansas, allegedly with Terry Nichols, who owned a home in Herrington. Terrorism in the Heartland became the story: if it can be planned in Kansas and committed in Oklahoma, is no place safe?

Such a story is based on the abstraction of the Heartland. But anyone who knows Kansas history can point to Bleeding Kansas, the period from 1854 to 1861 when John Brown and the free-state radicals traded murders and crimes with proslavery forces. A Confederate guerilla, William Quantrill, burned and looted Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863, killing almost as many people as Timothy McVeigh. Whether the free-state narrative or the idea of Bleeding Kansas still operate as a defining myth for Kansas, a question treated in an essay in this issue, such notions are still invoked, even as recently as former Governor Mark Parkinson’s welcome speech to the Symphony in the Flint Hills in June 2010. And the fact remains that beyond territorial Kansas violence, frontier violence in general—whether



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13. Joseph Stanley Pennell, *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters* (New York: Scribner’s, 1944).



*Flown over, as Topeka and Shawnee County were here in 1961, Kansas is rarely seen as the place it actually is, except by its own inhabitants. Instead, Kansas, like so many other states at the heart of the country, is mostly an abstraction. Only by locating "ourselves by the real things," in the words of Kansas poet William Stafford, can Kansans truly be grounded where they live and become experts on themselves.*

committed by federal troops against Native Americans, or by posses taking justice into their own hands—was common in Kansas and the West. The Great Plains has a richer tradition for fringe groups like the *posse comitatus* than the coastal states. But such history and tradition were not explored deeply during the Murrah Building media blitz. Oklahoma and Kansas are the heart, and the media saw only the tragic poignancy in the innocent deaths of good heartlanders.

Neither image is grounded in reality. And in each image, Kansas is avoided in the concrete: let it be flown over, driven through at night, or ignored altogether.

To say that Kansas is "flyover country" is to say that it is insignificant, it is nowhere special, it contains nothing of interest. To say that Kansas is the Heartland, a repository of fundamental American values—religious, agricultural, familial—is to say that it is extremely significant, everywhere, that it should be of interest to the nation. Neither image is grounded in reality. And in each image, Kansas is avoided in the concrete: let it be flown over, driven through at night, or ignored altogether.

We in the United States avoid forming deep relationships with particular places at our own peril. I know how much meaning and richness has come through my own relationship with a particular Kansas. To know one place intimately is to have a *way* of knowing. To learn respect for a single place is to learn to transfer respect to all places close to people's hearts. William Stafford, one of Kansas's very best and most prolific poets, knew this. In "Allegiances" he wrote:

It is time for all the heroes to go home  
if they have any, time for all of us common ones  
to locate ourselves by the real things  
we live by. . . .

Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills  
while strange beliefs whine at the traveler's ears,  
we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love  
where we are, sturdy for common things.<sup>14</sup>

14. William Stafford, "Allegiances," in *The Way It Is, New & Selected Poems* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1998).

Sadly, this loving “where we are” is something Americans have had a hard time doing.

But we need to try, because when the landscape, *all* the landscapes of our lives, becomes spiritual, becomes held within the self, becomes felt, becomes loved, we can find the sturdiness in common things that we want in a Heartland, a place like Kansas. Only then can we turn our property into our homes. We can turn the anyplace where we live into the someplace that matters to us. I am tired of the false argument about whether Kansas is “Mudville” or “Heartland.” These are convenient abstractions, and I prefer to live a life that is not ruled by the abstract. Like William Stafford, I want to live by “real things.” Unfortunately, our lives, our imaginations, are pinched into the narrow thinking of cultural image generated by our weakened self-perception and the ignorant expectations of the vast majority of Americans, who only fly over Kansas.

Such images are deadly for those of us who live here, who are grounded here. In the face of the bewildering belittlement we live with every day, we must negotiate a new way of thinking about ourselves and our country. We must let them fly over while we stand with our feet in the mud and our hearts in the land, sturdy and ordinary, experts on ourselves. If we can do that, maybe other Americans can learn to do it, too, and find themselves grounded in the places where they live. KH

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