



To Everything a Season

Janet Sunderland

These are the elders who fashioned me—a storyteller, a poet, a cook; our interwoven connections more complicated than I can begin to unravel.

I'M STANDING IN A SOGGY YARD, transfixed by a budding maple. Yesterday, tiny red knots, tight as clenched fists, marched down the branches. Now, red hairs sprout, fragile as baby fuzz. Saying I see God's work in a budding tree is a facile remark; saying God has much tinier fists than I imagined makes me grin and my shoulders soften.

My mother isn't actively dying, as in any-moment-now dying, but we both know that's why she's come home. I, on the other hand, came home to rebirth. So here I stand, staring at a maple tree's resurrection to give me hope. I'm caught between seasons and caught between lives—my mother's life and my own; my own and my children's; a see-saw of generations going somewhere while I am standing still, wondering where anything leaves off to become something else.

This was not the plan. But then I am so little given to plans in any sense of the word and so given to boggling along—one foot in front of the next, waiting for an open door through which I dash haphazardly—that I've never learned the valuable skill of measuring future consequences. I see what's now in front of me. At the moment, what I see is a sugar maple. This budding tree isn't the first sign of spring. Two weeks ago, snow on the ground, I stepped outside and found a robin in these branches.

"What are you doing here?" I asked aloud. "It's still winter!" I sounded like my mother. The robin cocked its head in a robin sort of way and looked at me, curious, perhaps, at finding

another migratory animal, albeit larger and dressed in sweater and jeans.

A migratory animal, a nomad if you will. The transplanted roots I've put down, time and again, remained shallow. I've fought with God more times than I care to remember. "What do you want with me?" I shouted as I moved from place to place in search of the Promised Land.

Now I find myself home in Kansas. My first winter, first spring in a very long time, turned all around to face an end while creating a beginning. It makes one dizzy just thinking about it. I never thought I'd do the ritual of mid-life-sandwich-crisis since my whole life has been crises of one sort or another, but here I am, ready to drive north on the Interstate to visit my mother, knowing the road, unsure of the way.

I slosh across grass to the car. Chill wet has seeped into my shoes, so I turn on the heater full blast. When I left Santa Fe—my previous abode and a doable jaunt to Kansas across desert and prairie—I was coming to the only place that remained home in a lifetime of wandering: a deserted farm hilltop. I couldn't live there—no one had for years—so I came to Kansas City. But home, I suppose, even as a concept, is never complete without family. After I'd made the decision to move back, I informed my children.

Nathan, Kyong, and grandson Michael lived in Hawaii. "Kansas," Nathan said. "I liked living in Kansas. And Kyong's not happy here. No Koreans. Are there Koreans in Kansas?" I said I didn't know but I'd find out. There were. So back they came across the ocean to follow me across the plains. I should have known an anchor in Kansas would drag others back, but I didn't.

In August, my eighty-four-year-old mother

phoned to say she wanted to visit. After Dad died, she went to live north of Seattle with my oldest sister. "I need to come home while I can still remember who people are!" she said.

Her wry humor masks a reality we both understand—our lives are built on memory's real, yet fluid foundation. Kansas remains a primary foundation. Nathan remembers his early teen years when he made friends with a cowboy. Mother's memories are longer and deeper. Born in Kansas, she lived most of her life here except for a few years in San Francisco, Arkansas, and most lately, Washington. I remember the farm and the creek down the hill. And the sky. We all remember the sky. But other memories grow from those scattered reflections until it feels like I've stepped into a pool of shadows. Everything is childhood familiar, yet I'm creeping past middle age.

For example, take hardware stores. A True Value is a reasonable sort of hardware store, not given to flights of fancy. I found one just two blocks from my apartment. An entire aisle is fitted with small wooden drawers like Dad's in the farm workshed. Those drawers were filled with an assortment of fittings, mixed together, scratched and caked with dusty oil, pulled from a torn-down building or removed from an implement, stored for later use in a recycling operation farmers knew long before it became popular. Dad would stick in an index finger, permanently curled from arthritis, and stir and poke, looking for what he needed. True Value's fittings are neatly divided and shiny clean: nails of every conceivable size, wood screws, metal screws, cup and door hooks, wooden drawer pulls, metal window handles, separated and stored according to type and size.

Next to the cash register, a small bucket, recycled and cleaned from its previous job of plaster container, holds oval, rubber change holders—the kind with a slit down the middle. On my first visit, I picked one up and squeezed it open. Through a wellspring of memories, I saw Dad, pinching open his change holder and carefully remove a penny, just to tease me when I asked for a quarter. I'd looked at the old man behind the cash register and did a quick chin point, a Kansas-grown habit I carried with me around the world. "My dad carried one of these," I said.

Coming back to live is different from the times I'd come home to visit, between addresses, on my way to somewhere else. I'd leave belongings and lighten the load for places like New York or Mexico City. But I didn't stay in those places. I always came home, picked up some things, left others, and traveled on. At the new places, people would ask me where I was from.

"Tell me a year and I'll tell you where I was," I'd say. Like my mother, I hide the grit of life with humor and hang my memories on the ladder rungs of years.

But what do I tell people now? That I'm from "here" although I'm not? That I came home so my mother could die? Only she hasn't and I didn't, really. I came home because one morning in my little adobe house outside Santa Fe, I woke from a dream that told me about a job at Kansas State. I went to school at K-State. So I booted up the computer and sure enough, there was a vacancy in the department where I knew people and had done graduate work—drama therapy—and I'm a counselor and a professional actor. Perfect. So I applied. I didn't get the job but the dream started me looking east. I visited my brother in Topeka and we drove over to

Kansas City. Driving past the newly restored train station and up the hill past trees I used to sit under as a kid when my sister and I changed trains going to an aunt and uncle's in St. Louis, my heart opened like a flower. And that sudden feeling, which I'd only felt once before and which propelled me into moving to Hawaii where my life changed, pushed me again.

I looked at my chest then at my brother. "I guess I'm moving to Kansas City," I said.

When did I fall in love with the road? I wonder. It seems most of my life has been lived watching a double yellow line. When I was less than a year old, my mother, my sister, and I moved from San Francisco to Kansas while my father went to sea; a year or so later we moved back to California; then to Arkansas; then to Barnes, Kansas—all before I reached five. I remember a roadside neon sign on the highway going to Grandma and Grandpa Sunderland's—maybe in Marysville since that's the only town between Barnes and where they lived. EAT GAS it said—the red neon EAT in vertical letters while the horizontal red neon GAS met at the middle A. And I remember a winter's night drive from Grandma and Grandpa's, snow billowing from every direction as it does so well in a Kansas blizzard. My father hit a patch of ice and the truck flipped over to land on four wheels in a snow bank. At least that's what I remember. We might have just spun off the road. There had to be at least five of us in the cab since three sisters and two parents had moved from Arkansas, but I don't remember anyone hurt. And I don't remember a baby, so I don't think Julia had been born yet. And Jack wasn't born until five days after my father died. And then, a year after my father died, Mother married Dad and we moved to the farm. At seventeen,

I married a soldier and went off to see the world. When I divorced, I kept on moving: Kansas, Texas, California, Louisiana, New York, Old Mexico, Washington, D.C., Hawaii, Georgia, New Mexico, and back to Kansas. I’m still traveling—following the yellow line on the three-hour stretch to visit my mother in the small-town nursing home where she now lives.

With the radio off, the only sound in my old Pontiac is the wind whistling around a gap I can never find at the inside edge of the passenger-side window. It’s Dad’s old car, his last car, which I’ve been driving for years. I inherited it from my brother when I moved to Santa Fe. A car wasn’t necessary on the east coast or old Mexico, but New Mexico demanded wheels. Having Dad’s makes me feel safe, and it makes Mom happy when she rides with me. She paid to repaint it and to add new tires, and now it proudly hums down the highway, the finest tiger in the jungle. Well. No. That metaphor won’t work with a blue Pontiac the color of Kansas sky. But we are certainly fine: old, but fine. The Mexicans at the carwash call it *La Vieja Azuel*: The Old Blue Lady. In Spanish, it does have a fine ring to it.

I’ve reached the St. Joseph loop. This is my route: north from Kansas City on I29 to the I229 loop around St Joe, exit at Highway 36, going west over an even older highway, the legendary Pony Express, which lies over older Indian routes. Or rather, Highway 36 more or less goes over them—ponies went around hills rather than bulldoze a way through.

As legendary as the Pony Express remains, and as many books and movies detailing the young men braving bone-pounding rides, unfriendly Indians, blizzards and dust storms to carry mail across the country from St.

Joseph, Missouri to San Francisco, California, only nineteen months elapsed between their first ride in late March of 1860 and the final ride in November of 1861. The completion of the transcontinental telegraph made the ride obsolete, and technology replaced ponies. But those nineteen months created history. At the Wagon Wheel Restaurant in Marysville, the last major Pony Express stop in Kansas before the trail lifts into western Nebraska and Denver, along with chicken fried steak and hamburgers, the menu gives a short history of the town’s claim to glory, reprinting the ad that once ran in California papers:

Wanted. Young, skinny, wiry fellows. Not over 18. Must be expert riders. Willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. \$100 a month.

Alas, I am neither wiry nor an orphan, as much as I love to roam. In fact, my mother proudly told a delivery nurse that I “looked like Grandpa Sunderland.” Oh, no, she doesn’t, the nurse reportedly said, patting my little square jaw, not knowing Grandpa Sunderland was a favorite father-in-law. I guess I’ve progressed. Now that I’ve come home, my older cousins tell me it’s remarkable how much I look like Grandma Sunderland.

Leaving the Interstate for Highway 36, I’m caught in the timelessness of no-season. Sometimes in early spring, Kansas gets warm days and hints of summer skies filled with soft, unmoored clouds, a white battalion floating eastward. But it’s early, too much winter, not enough spring to shred the slate-gray covering into blue. Three northward drifting smoke towers twist against the horizon where farmers work spring burns.

The waterways alongside this stretch of road are already blackened into ash. It’s neither spring nor winter, but the time between, as I am the fulcrum between this time and the next, between the road in the rearview mirror and the road in front of me.

My stories of Highway 36 are rooted in family—the road to Grandma and Grandpa’s, or the road up to the farm, both lined with trees all slanting toward the polestar, pushed by a southwest wind “blowing steadily as if out of the lungs of the universe,” as William Least Heat-Moon writes. When I was young, we’d drive the highway east, going to Grandma’s house. And that first summer I got my license, I took the road west into Marysville for a job as a carhop at the A&W Root Beer stand. Boy dreams bloomed on that road and dreams about marriage. I guess you could say it was the road I took in learning to grow up. And now I drive it to learn about dying. That’s a lot of responsibility for one stretch of highway.

The first time I drove this particular route into the eastern corner of Kansas, I drove with Mom. She’d come to see me and wanted to visit her home church. Our road drifted through September’s ripe sunshine under a cloudless blue sky. Mom looked out the side window and watched the unwavering fields of ripening, blood-red milo. “I don’t hear the wind at Judy’s,” she said, apropos of nothing except her own memories uncurling in front of her eyes.

“When did Dad become a dealer for NC+?” I ask, seeing the yellow circle stamped with NC+ on a fence post.

“We were in a drought, mid-fifties I think. In there sometime. Too dry for corn, so he began planting sorghum.”

“Sorghum? Milo’s the same as sorghum?” Mother glanced at me, somehow managing

to both look over the top of her glasses and raise an eyebrow. “Well, I didn’t know!” I said. “I thought you read,” Mom said. I rolled my eyes. “I flunked Ag history. Okay?” She laughed.

Reaching the church, Mom took my arm as we walked across the gravel parking lot. “When someone comes up to us, you say hello first and say their name in case I can’t see who it is.” Macular degeneration had crept into her eyesight. “Sure,” I said. “But what if I don’t know them?” Mom gave me one of her what-are-you-six-years-old looks. “Just ask them to remind you of their name,” she said.

Friends swarmed us from the minute we walked in. Kids and teenagers came up to hug her and remind her of the times they measured their growing heights against her four-foot-eleven-inch frame. Adults bent down to say hello, to hug, and to say how happy they were to see her. Between us, we remembered names, but her smile strained at the noise and confusion. I took her elbow and guided her toward the pews. With an unerring sense of direction, she went to her usual place as if her absence of five years had been a week. She lifted the hymn book out of the rack and with her other hand, reached up to comb fingers through her rumpled bangs, concealing and comforting the deep dent on her forehead, a dent of forgetting and memory, of fear and acceptance; the dent that remained after a fateful car accident killed her firstborn child and put her into a coma.

As I heard her clear alto rise to meet the organ, I relaxed my vigilance and allowed my own memories to unroll. I’d grown up in this church, although in the old building a few blocks across town. My words and truth

were shaped by the words and the truths of a series of preachers. This is where my spiritual journey began, I thought as I sat fuming at St. Paul's directive to keep my head covered and my mouth shut. I never became adept at keeping my mouth shut. My rebellion and my precocious reading prepared me for years of rocky confrontations. "Jesus got angry," I'd

say; but the preachers said that was different. "David danced before the Lord," I'd say. But that didn't condone dancing cheek to cheek with a boy. David, dancing naked and causing no small amount of anguish to his wife, was exempt. I was only a mouthy kid. It took years before I could admit how much my own style, my own voice—and

my theology in reverse—shaped itself from those eloquent, thundering Pauline ministers. We are all shaped by the forces we run from, sparks streaming behind us as if from some chafed piece of metal.

The current preacher didn't thunder, rather he expressed a quiet gentleness. I remembered suddenly I'd been on and off

listening to him for years, which meant he's not as young as he once was—what? Ten or fifteen years ago? Way before Dad died when I'd come to visit.

After church, we lunched at the truck stop. Mom wanted to go down to the "Good Sam" and visit a friend. The Good Samaritan has been the town's nursing home for longer



than I can remember and the home where three of my grandparents lived out their lives: Grandpa Albert, Dad's father who told us stories of the old country; Grandpa Joe, Mother's father who read poetry; and Grandma Sunderland, my father's mother who made the best sugar cookies in the world. These are the elders who fashioned me—a storyteller, a poet, a cook; our interwoven connections more complicated than I can begin to unravel.

And I wonder, when I have time to wonder, like in these long drives under a never-ending sky, if this is why I've come back to Kansas, back to Highway 36, back to clean up the farm—if cleaning up the farm is even possible. Back to live around people whose humor and grit is like unto mine and to unravel the ball of memories in which my life is bound.

The last time I saw my grandmother, she was living in the old, two-story, red-brick building and my sons were young enough to roll over each other on the floor as they played. "They look like their father," Grandma said, then smiled, catching her error. "Oh, no. I mean their grandfather." Her son John, my father, her memories as tangled as mine.

Memories of the Good Sam felt part of a Neverland where dreams died, but we'd parked in front of a new one-story, white, winged building, gleaming in the middle of a well-kept lawn. Behind us, across the street, the Good Sam I remembered sagged in empty isolation.

"Do you want me to ask for her room number?" I said as we walked toward the nurses' station. "I know where her room is," Mom said. I am confused by her memory, confused by what she knows and what and when she doesn't remember. "I used to volunteer," she added. Her voice sounded

steady, but she held my hand as tightly as a child might who's afraid of the first day at school.

That evening on the long drive back to Kansas City, Mother sat quietly staring out the window. Finally, I heard her sigh. She turned to look at me. "It's time for me to move into the Good Sam," she said. And just that quickly, a two-week visit turned into forever.

I'm in No Man's Land—both figuratively and literally. Figuratively because the months after Mother decided to go into the Good Sam are a blur: I researched nursing home life, put farm papers in order, moved the financial papers and her address from my sister's to here, moved her from my apartment into the Good Sam, and then—for months now—I've driven this route, now literally past Wathena and Troy, the first two towns along Highway 36 heading west, to enter the wide stretch of land between here and Hiawatha where my radio signal to NPR fades. I can feel the curve of the earth's horizon rolling toward me. In the car, in my head, I carry what is behind and what is in front of me: the cycle of seasons, the cycle of family and elders, my own cycle which has somehow carried me out of my past into a future containing my far past like a revolving door, spinning in the wind.

Hawks circle a tower of smoke off to my left. When I lived in the Hawaiian jungle retreat center, a hawk came to me. "Take the healing you have experienced out to heal the world," it said. Or more precisely, those are the words I heard as it circled my head. These Kansas hawks don't come to circle me, pay no attention as I pass. Would they come if I called, tell me which direction to take, how to weave my life? They're busy, hunting prey flushed from the burn. Not much help. I don't

often hear those guiding messages now—unless Mom saying it was time to move into the Good Sam could be considered one. I guess it is: it's kept me traveling east to west, turning around, and traveling back, giving me time to stop everything except thinking as the wheels turn beneath me.

Once Mom entered the nursing home and I started driving, Kansas became a vision, an idea, a drama of sky and land. I watched the fall harvest and I watched winter creep into the ditches. I watched the light as shadows deepened. And I discovered that seasons change when you're not looking, almost in secret, as if only in the silence of not looking can something so nebulous come into being. Three hours of driving is a lot of landscape when there's not much to break the roll of highway—a change of green where winter wheat shifts to alfalfa, a solitary farmhouse nestling among a clump of trees as if fearful and needing protection from the sweep of land and the repetition of wheat field, pond, lane, pasture, alfalfa, pond, wheat . . . and sky. Forever the sky.

From the cache of family stories, I recall one about Dad's grandfather, the one who came to Kansas, first in his family in 1869, and how he'd walk to St. Joseph for salt and sugar. And walk back. I couldn't imagine it, wondered if he had a pack horse. Dad said he carried the sacks slung across his shoulders. But that had to be a week of walking, maybe ten days, each way, while his wife, I presume, and maybe young children waited at home under a sky so big they were invisible. How did he find his way home again? Did he use some kind of bread crumbs the birds wouldn't eat? Stakes in the ground? I remember Grandpa Albert telling the story of the James Gang staying overnight once when his father was away. And another story

about Indians who took cattle, sick with anthrax even though his father said not to, and who didn't get sick. Why didn't I take notes on these stories or record them like we always said we were going to? I'm left with shreds, pieces of imprecise Kansas history—although Fred Brucker, Grandpa Albert's father, made enough of a name for himself that some details are recorded in *Portrait And Biographical Album of Marshall County, Kansas, containing Full Page Portraits and Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens of the County*, published out of Chapman Bros. in Chicago in 1889.

Born in Alsace, France on November 6, 1838, Fred served in the French Foreign Legion in Algeria, immigrating to America in 1866—first to Illinois and then in 1869 to Marshall County. He owned 240 acres of land, of which we, meaning Grandpa Albert, Dad, and now we children, own 120 acres. Maybe the older brother got the other 120 and sold it—maybe something else. I never heard that part of the story. That's the land: 120 acres of original homesteaded land, the family home place. The place Dad never sold although he swore he would from time to time.

The towns along this route from St. Joe testify to the old and new making an uneasy alliance: Wathena, an Indian name, is followed by Troy; St. Benedict by Seneca. I've had time on these drives to wonder at the experiences that named them, the immigrants who shaped a raw, open prairie into memories of home; of settlers who took the name of a native people to form their identity while others took European names. I'm reminded of how much this land and sky has influenced me, how it taught me to see, and how, in all the places I've lived, I've needed windows

where my eyes could stretch into space. What is it that so connects me to these High Plains? I've just seen my first sign for Hiawatha and watch for the line of windmills marching into town, wonder at the story that planted them in that particular field, following someone else's dream of wind and sky.

Mom was restless the first two months she lived at the Good Sam. She needed something to do, she said, some way to feel useful. She'd raised six kids and wasn't happy sitting around playing bingo. I asked the activities director, a farm neighbor who used to cut Mom's hair, to secure a job Mom's eyes and memory could do. And now, each morning, Mom folds two baskets of "clothes protectors" (she reminds me they don't say bibs). My mother is useful again. I've seen her stop to help an old woman in a wheelchair who's lost both her memory and her socks. Mom kneels and gently replaces the socks.

I guess the toughest part about her entering the nursing home is my own entrance into the memory of death. Too many deaths when I was young, or maybe the normal number, but I took them hard: my father, his father, great-grandparents, aunts. I suppose my father's death at my tender age of eight set me up for this death thing, but maybe we all have it—maybe there's a residual memory, a cellular memory, sort of like the reptilian brain but older, that remembers the time of nothing, of being a universe alone and contained—a one-cell time of existence before the mighty crash of joining, the blinding flash, the electrical charge riveting one egg, one sperm into an inexorable process of becoming. Mom's not afraid of death although she's content to live. What gives life quality? Dreams? Memories? Stooping to replace socks for someone who can't?

My mother isn't afraid of dying. Am I?

I didn't think so. Before this. Before beginning my travels on Highway 36, I was confident of my place with God, and I was confident my return to Kansas would begin something new. What I didn't know was that my beginning would include an ending. What I didn't know was how much my mother's face reflects my own mortality.

An unfamiliar tree jerks me from my rumination. Bare branches reach up, as a skeleton might, into a slice of sunlight through the overcast clouds; the bark gleams silver. An old homestead ringed with trees, yet one tree only breaks into song: *Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia. Amen.* My heart rises, flaps into my throat. The tree of light promises hope in a shaft of sun flung from shadows, and I'm reminded of El Greco's St. Peter, face lifted, illuminated and yearning, distorted in anguish, in hope.

I am distorted in anguish and hope. In hope that my free fall into tomorrow is somehow caught and suspended, that I will not die just yet. In the gleam of a silver tree, my heart leaps into song, flies, flutters up like a great, awakened butterfly.

Maybe by the time I reach the Good Sam, the sky will clear. We'll go for a drive. The family is coming in a couple of weeks to celebrate Mom's birthday and we have to plan, or rather, I'll plan and she'll say, "That's fine," as she watches out the car window for familiar sights. I often wonder how much she sees and how much is memory, uncurling. "Look at that tree," she'll say, raising her hand in a wide sweep. "That's a beautiful tree."

It's spring in Kansas. Time, compressed into winter's shadowed afternoons, is bursting free. ❖



image info