



Roderick Townley is a Kansan by adoption, having moved here with his family from New York City in 1990. It is in Kansas that half of his twelve published books were written. Among his works are two volumes of poetry, *Three Musicians* and *Final Approach*, as well as two volumes of literary criticism, an adult novel, several works of nonfiction, and five children's novels (the latter published by Simon & Schuster).

Kansas is where Townley, in this one way like L. Frank Baum, found his way back to childhood; for it is here that his children's novels were written. Three of them (*The Great Good Thing*, *Into the Labyrinth*, and *The Constellation of Sylvie*) comprise a trilogy, *The Sylvie Cycle*, which has been optioned for film.

Townley continues, however, his commitment to poetry, publishing in a number of anthologies and magazines, including *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *The North American Review*, etc. The recipient of a Kansas Arts Commission fellowship, he has been honored by The Academy of American Poets, The Peregrine Prize, The Thorpe Menn Award, and The Kansas Governor's Arts Award.

The Red Blouse

Across Kansas on cruise control
he drives toward a woman's body.
Stubbed fields flush orange

in the final light. He squeezes
the pedal . . . 75 . . . 80,
a mad organist playing his deepest note.

Ahead 200 miles, a woman
crosses a room, sweetens
her tea, meets with students. But

something's off. A humming
like bees, like tires over darkening roads,
patrols her mind.

She searches the mirror for clues.
A coil of hair, loosened, hangs
like a bell-pull. She pins it up. No

use. Nothing is any use.
She touches her breast lightly
through the red blouse.

Originally published in *The Yale Review*;
also in *Poetry: An Introduction* (4th ed.),
edited by Michael Meyer. NY, St. Martin's Press, 2004

The Silk Dress

You have been going down
dawdling when suddenly she
sweeps up the staircase, her

loose hair streaming, her dress
an avalanche of lost
messages. Turn

on you heel. After her.
In a moment reverse
a lifetime of error.

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Roderick Townley

Distinguished Kansas Poet

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Wave

A trick of October light
made festive the trek we
took to the empty beach,

the four of us (five
counting the box
tucked in the knapsack).

You to thank, Mother,
for my bare feet in the sand,
brother beside me, wives

to the right, the sea's
blue cylinders rolling up,
rolling slowly away.

We fought open the lid,
looked at each other,
and waded in, two brothers

for once shoulder to shoulder
in an enterprise. He
dug in first, flung fistfuls

into the wind, flecks of
crushed bone sinking at once,
finer granules riding

in little cloud puffs, as if
from a last cigarette.
Then I joined in, gripped

by a wild, grieving joy,
till the thing was done. I let
receding water run

over my numbed fingers,
and stared out: blue, blue.
Lovely to turn, then,

and see the women
waiting on higher ground,
windblown and waving us home.

Originally published in *The Paris Review*

Mozart's Pigtail

I was braiding Mozart's hair,
morning sun

filling the room (Con-
stanze nowhere to be seen), when

all at once (you won't
believe it) the man

jumps up and makes a run
for the piano. I trot

behind, still holding
his pigtail, mind you, even

when he sits
and starts in. I know some

who'd have taken offense.
Not I. I remember once,

I was doing Frau von H.,
I abandoned an elaborate coif

at a whim (I can't call it
anything else), and went

for swirl. She loved it. "You
are an artist!" she cried.

He's the same. In fact,
so lovely a largo

it was that I
let go, although

the braid unwound
and I had to begin again.

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