



Kathleen Johnson

Distinguished Kansas Poet

• [E-mail](#)



Kathleen Johnson is the great-great granddaughter of Kansas frontier poet Orange Scott Cummins, best known in the Gyp Hills area as the Pilgrim Bard.

She is the editor and publisher of the [New Mexico Poetry Review](#). Johnson received her BFA in history of art and MFA in creative writing from the University of Kansas. As a freelance book critic, specializing in poetry, she published over sixty book reviews in The Kansas City Star between 2002 and 2009.

Her collection of poems, *Burn*, published by Woodley Press in 2008, was selected as a Kansas Notable Book in 2009.

Her poems have been published in such places as the *Concho River Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Kansas City Star*, *Kansas City Voices*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *The Louisville Review*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *West Branch*, and *Westview*.

After dividing her time between Kansas and New Mexico for many years, she lives in Santa Fe.

[See pages 2, 3 & 4 for poetry samples...](#)



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Dust Bowl Diary, 1935

Silt on the dishes.
Rags under the doors.
Horizon coppered by clouds of dirt.
The sun, a dim smear.
No stars, no moon for weeks.
No shadows.

Our farm is sifting away –
only a bit of cornfield stubble
poking up through shifting dunes,
cedars chalked with fine dust,
half-buried fenceposts.

Cattle are dying,
their lungs caked with mud.
Others, blinded by blowing grit,
stumble in brown blizzards.

Once my hair shone like corn silk
under the sun. Now it's dull, dry,
wrapped tight in a bun.

After a while, everything
seems the color of vermin,
the color of moths –
dirty wash pinned to
the clothesline,
damp dishcloths
stretched along windowsills.

This spring, no lilacs;
no luster left in Mother's eyes.

I've forgotten the true
colors of things. Even the sky
turns eerie shades I've never seen.

Tonight, before sleep,
I'll lie still on dusty sheets,
close my swollen eyelids,
and pray for vivid dreams.

Farm Wife

In the farmhouse on long
Oklahoma days
she waits
for peaches and tomatoes
to ripen, words
in her head.
Plump love-apples
line two kitchen windows
while she skins peaches.
Velvety curls drop
into a pail, pelting tin
one by one like rain
on the chicken-house roof.

Countless wedges
of angel-food cake
are cut for her husband,
neighbors when they visit,
and the sunburned strangers
who help with the wheat harvest.

Each Saturday,
wearing a dress, dark lipstick,
she drives red-dirt roads
into town to sell
her cardboard cartons
of fresh eggs.

And twice a week
she waters her multitude
of houseplants— African
violets, begonias, wandering
Jew, the tall rubber plants,
and grape ivy—while
poems lie in her
bureau drawer
and jars with handwritten labels
collect dust
in the dark fruit cellar.



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Mosaic

*I want to make
the intricate tessellated moments of our lives
a floor of jade, obsidian, turquoise, ebony, lapis.*

Arthur Sze, "The Moment of Creation"

Winter

Corelli's Christmas Concerto, chocolate and oranges in a sunny chair,
red scent of cinnamon, colors chasing like children through December air.
A new year promised to open, open as a stained-glass window might,
if it could, a passage to salvation. Then the year turned, and so did he.
The future fell silent, a diamond ring into snow. He left and took
the colors with him. Even my dog's white fur felt cold. Raw winds
whipped and moaned. Nothing to do but try to hold on.
It was the time of violet shadows. Violet, color of the end of the known
and beginning of the unknown. A twilight world. I could have wandered
into a picture on my wall, say Brueghel's Hunters in the Snow,
followed those lean dogs of winter wherever they might lead. Anything
but the gray procession of days and dread, endless walks down gravel roads.
Where is your God now? Hope is a hard, hard stone.
January's moon rises, a broken piece of milky quartz. Opaque. Cold.

Spring

Colors gradually resurrect themselves after weeks of fathomless blue.
Opalescent sunrise, sliver of ghostly moon. Even the darkest hues
are something to hold onto. I hear polished obsidian in Bach's Ciaccona,
onyx thunderheads in the voices of the Carmina Burana. I've given up
on God and promises. Colors speak to me: forsythia branches
arranged in a silver vase, jellybeans in a jar. Redbud trees
emerge in the woods. Their green hearts shimmer, orchid branches reach out
like arms. This world is more than the sum of its parts. I wear a ring
with a sapphire star and fill the house with hyacinths.
I plant rosemary and try not to remember. By April, green and new
are the same syllable. The word for him doesn't exist. Sudden storms
stir winds of change. I walk in woods of malachite, emerald, peridot.
And red still burns at the opening and closing of days.
The sun is a blood-red garnet. I won't let go. I'm learning a new language.

Summer

Hours fan out like mammoth sunflower petals.
A wedge of lemon cake waits on an amethyst plate.
Afternoons linger long and late. Color is its own language,
running rampant as I reach for it. Why try to hold on
to what's over? Sunlight escapes into the dark. Iridescence gathers:
dragonflies around a murky lake. Instead of gold-flecked midnight,
this silent bedroom, that full moon harsh as an interrogation light.
One definition of desire, always waiting for what never came:
two palettes combining, incandescent days. Nothing prepared me for
evenings blue as topaz. Turner painted with his brightest red
though he knew it wouldn't last. Van Gogh believed yellow was capable
of charming God. Even tomato vines, the potted basil on the porch,
smell of summer's citrine. There's nothing not stained with color.
Across the road, wildflowers dot a field, brilliant as gemstones.

Continued on following page



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Fall

He said it's all about letting go and then he did.
After the shatter, I keep stepping on the brilliant, the hard, the sharp.
Nothing is clear anymore. My world turns colors, so many shades
between creation and destruction, between loss and gain.
So many scattered pieces of love and hate. All year I wait
for autumn, but gold days pass; amber memories burn.
If everything we touch goes, why do we yearn
to hold on? Color is its own language and my only fluency.
Light filters through trees, each ruby leaf
holy, illuminated. Hummingbirds hover between
fading lantana blossoms. A heron flies in mist over the pond.
Bees buzz in thyme and lavender. Bluestem blows in the wind.
A shooting star streaks across black sky, leaving
a magenta and cobalt question mark, briefly, above us all.

All poetry on these pages
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