



# Robert Lawson

Distinguished Kansas Poet

- [E-mail](#)
- [Website](#)

Robert N. Lawson taught English at Washburn University (including Shakespeare and courses in Japanese Literature) from 1963 until he retired in 1994. He was General Editor of The Woodley Press (about 40 slender paperbacks of poems, plays, and stories by Kansas authors) from 1980 to 2000. He has been active in the Kansas Authors Club and sat as its president in 1989.

In 2000, Lawson established a web site on which he has self-serialized two novels, *The Bridge of Dreams* (2000-01) and *The Sequel* (2005). He has also published two collection of poems, *Going Formal* (2004), and *The Collected Sonnets* from The Woodley Press, 2004, and half a dozen plays. The web site also contains writing samples of about 40 Kansas authors with a book in print and items on about 20 Japanese works and authors.

## Somewhere Near Abilene

"G. H." . . . a Kansas artist . . .  
Somewhere near Abilene,  
Took canvas, paint, and strips of wood,  
And conjured up a scene  
That hangs on our living room wall.

Not every day,  
But when I'm in the mood,  
That painting takes my eye  
Into that Kansas scene,  
Somewhere near Abilene.

Does the power lie  
In color, form, or texture?  
Strips of cedar, glued onto canvas,  
For clouds, and trees, and fence--  
Then all painted one golden color.

No . . . look closer . . .  
It just seems one color,  
But the color is what first catches the eye,  
Shades of yellow, brown, and gold,  
For both Kansas sky and prairie grass,  
As if reflecting one another,  
Then merging . . . becoming one . . . at the horizon.

But in that prairie grass . . . there . . .  
See . . . a touch of green.  
If the sun were setting just right,  
Off there in the distance,  
Just below that lost horizon,  
Reflecting off of those cedar-chip clouds,  
It might then imbue everything--  
Sky, and trees, and grass--  
With its own golden color.

You can imagine such a scene . . .  
Somewhere near Abilene.

But aren't these shapes too surreal?  
Trees that cannot be trees,  
Strips of wood, glued to canvas.  
The large one on the left,  
On this side of the fence,  
A tree or a cactus plant?  
In Kansas . . . it must be a tree . . .  
But a strip of wood . . .  
Like the fence, like the clouds.  
That smaller tree,  
Further away, far beyond the fence,  
Less distinct in the distance,  
May be more believable,  
As stylized as the clouds.  
Still . . . I've seen those weathered trees . . .  
Haven't I?  
Somewhere near Abilene?

The fence may be the secret.  
Those strips of wood,  
Posts and rails,  
Do look like a fence,  
A fence that might be found  
Somewhere near Abilene,  
Running off to the horizon,  
Running off into that sunset,  
Getting smaller and smaller until it disappears,  
Having found another dimension for the spirit  
Out there on that open prairie.

That's what holds my imagination.  
I step into that scene,  
To lean against that fence,  
Contemplate that sunset,  
Then walk on down that fence-line . . .  
Walk out of sight,  
Into that other dimension,  
Somewhere near Abilene.

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Published in Inscape, Spring 1992.



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## Definition

### Heredity

The product of a million years of change,  
I am my genes, reflect biology,  
As DNA works patterns in a range  
Of proteins just to fabricate a "me"  
Of little cells, repeating endlessly  
Some simple combinations that define  
A complex that's unique, as I can see  
When I look in the mirror--the face is mine--  
So long in evolution, but, I think, "Looks fine!"

### Environment

Still, every time I look is here and now--  
I am my time, determined by the place,  
Its mores and its myths, its why and how--  
That's why I wear a tie and how my face  
Gets shaved, electric'ly. The human race  
Now races to the market in a car.  
What I was taught in school provides the base  
For what I think I think. Look up! A "star!"  
Indoctrinated locally, I can't see far.

### Society

And man's a "social" animal they say.  
I am one of a group, a family,  
A married man, defined, at work or play.  
A father, teacher, citizen--that's "me"--  
My family name is half my destiny.  
American and Kansan just as much,  
With numbers that insure "security,"  
Certificates, and licenses, and such--  
And credit cards define a me they all can touch.

## Choice

But yet I feel I'm capable of choice.  
I am a creature exercising will,  
Can choose to read a book, can raise my voice,  
Can write a poem, refuse to pay a bill,  
Can spare an ant, or elephant, or kill--  
On impulse, or on calculated plan.  
I say I have a spirit, dreaming still  
Of what I might become, and still be man,  
Imagining no limits when I say, "I can!"

## Fate

So what is man--the dancer or the dance?  
Am I the sum of four? Of two times two?  
My mother and my father met by chance,  
Their genes combined, one evening, as genes do,  
And there I was! The social forces knew--  
They'd married first, an act of will, sublime.  
And fate then touched that moment. Something new  
Began to be, was then informed in time--  
An accident, 'twould seem--who sits composing rhyme.

Published in Inscape, 1990,  
...then as first poem in Going Formal

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## William Stafford -- A Giant Within

We all have those giants within  
Who have informed our thought and feeling,  
Some speaking from foreign lands and long ago  
Simply asking "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"  
Or telling us "This above all, to thine own self be true,"  
Defining poetry as "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd"  
And affirming "One truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT."  
Some of these giants even lived here in this country--  
Perhaps most long before we were born--  
Leaving us with stories of Evangeline and Hiawatha  
The village blacksmith and Paul Revere's ride,  
Or stranger stories about Annabel Lee and Ulalume  
Of "the viol, the violet, and the vine" in the City in the Sea,  
Though certainly some have spoken to us in this century,  
Voices on old records that are still memorable  
As they were off taking the road less traveled by  
Or stopping by woods in New England  
Measuring out their lives with coffee spoons in London  
While remembering the river flowing by St. Louis as a great brown god.  
But were there giants in our time--giants standing among us in Kansas?  
Yes, for a long time there was one,  
One we often heard read his poems in his own voice,  
About finding a dead deer in traveling through the dark  
Or seeing the branding iron take the first snowflake,  
And sometimes about things he had seen in Kansas--  
Roadside Markers for West of Dodge  
Or a path North of Liberal.  
Though he was not much given to the traditional verse forms  
Many of those giants of earlier ages favored,  
When it begins to rain  
One of his haiku may come to mind:  
You again, raindrop,  
the same as our first day--and,  
yes, it's me again.  
I've been there and done that--and,  
Even given the unusual punctuation,  
Wish I'd said that--and other things he said.  
Now, as people often put it, "He's gone . . .  
No longer among us,"  
But, like those other giants, he's still here within.

First prize in the "theme" category, KAC contest, 1999

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