



Eric McHenry, Kansas' fifth Poet Laureate of Kansas (2015-2017), was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1972, and is a fifth-generation graduate of Topeka High School.

Eric has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for poetry seven times and received the Theodore Roethke Prize in 2011. His first book of poems, *Potscrubber Lullabies* (Waywiser Press, 2006), won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. McHenry's poetry has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Harvard Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Orion* and *Agni*.

He also writes about poetry for the The New York Times Book Review and Slate. He lives with his wife and two children in Topeka, and teaches at Washburn University.

Rebuilding Year

After Beloit I went back to the paper
and wrote arts features for eight dollars an hour,
and lived in the Gem Building, on the block between
Topeka High with its Gothic tower
and the disheveled Statehouse with its green
dome of oxidizing copper.

I was sorry that I had no view
of old First National. Something obscured it
from my inset balcony. I heard it
imploding, though, like Kansas Avenue
clearing its throat, and saw the gaudy brown
dust-edifice that went up when it came down.

Friday nights I walked to High's home games
and sat high in the bleachers,
and tried to look like a self-knowing new
student, and tried not to see my teachers,
and picked out players with familiar names
and told them what to do.

"Rebuilding Year" first appeared in *The New Republic*

Hypermart

It's the largest Wal-Mart in the plains states.
Some of the stockers are on rollerskates.
Adam wears a laminated tag,
ADAM, and a badge, HELLO.
He puts my bag of pretzels in a bag.

Back in Elmhurst, an airplane bungalow
is aging like a person — accomplishing years
in months, imposing itself upon its beams,
breathing out and opening its seams.
Gutters congest. Grey paint comes off in spears
revealing bits of old identities.
A strip of eccentric yellow reappears.

Thirty years ago, Dutch Elm Disease
stumped Elmhurst. But on a nylon banner
some preservationist or civic planner
drew up, the elm is unmistakable.
It bellies from the gable
of every sixth or seventh porch.
The canopy makes a sheltering arch
over the legend,

Good Neighbors Through Time
Since 1909.

I like it: one companionable line
and then another — iamb, anapest / iamb,
anapest, and that unassuming rhyme —
but what I want is a shirt:
You take the elms from Elmhurst, you get hurt.

"HyperMart" first appeared in *Bat City Review*

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Eric McHenry

Distinguished Kansas Poet

• [E-mail](#)

Figurative North Topeka

for Ben Lerner

Seasonal graffiti crawls
up the overpass like ivy —
abstract names on concrete stanchions.
To the south, symbolic walls:
NO OUTLET signs along the levee,
idle river, idle tracks,
bypass, bluffside and the backs
of Potwin's late-Victorian mansions,
flush like book spines on a shelf.
Drunk on your late-Victorian porch
you promised me that if elected
you'd have the river redirected
down Fourth Street, to make Potwin search
North Topeka for itself.

I told you to retire Ad Astra
Per Aspera and put For God's
Sake Take Cover on the state
seal and flag — the license plate
at least, since we collect disaster
and death like they were classic rods:
'51 Flood; '66 Tornado.
Even the foot-lit Statehouse mural
has a sword-bearing Coronado,
a Beecher's Bible-bearing Brown
and a tornado bearing down
on its defenseless mock-pastoral,
The Past. The present was still wet
when the embarrassed legislature
resolved that it would never let
John Steuart Curry paint the future.
He never did, although Topekans
would learn to let bygones be icons.

On Thursday, July 12, the rain
relented and the water rose,
darkened and stank more. The stain
is just shy of the second story
in what used to be Fernstrom Shoes.
That entire inventory
spent five nights underwater, gaping
like mussels on the riverbed.
Fernstrom spent the summer scraping
gobs of septic-smelling mud
out of eleven thousand toes.

On Friday the 13th, the Kaw
crested at thirty-seven feet.
They thought it might have cut a new
channel down Kansas Avenue.
One Capital reporter saw
a kid reach up from his canoe
and slap the stoplight at Gordon Street.

Porubsky's never did reclaim
its midday clientele; the torrents
sent the Sardou Bridge to Lawrence
and there was no more Oakland traffic.
Business hasn't been the same
for fifty years now. Fifty-two.
Ad astra per aspera: through
the general to the specific.
You do what you want to do
but I'm not using North Topeka
in conversation anymore
because there is no north to speak of;
there's only mud and metaphor.

"Figurative North Topeka" first appeared in Slate

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