

To Live In Symbols

By Neil Byer

These, then, are *emblema* of our state: the sunflower, the cottonwood, and the meadow lark; legally proclaimed to be, respectively, the state flower, the state tree, and the state bird. I cannot help choosing to pursue the roots of *emblema* (from Greek *emblema*, derivative of *en*, in, plus *ballein*, to throw.) I choose the word itself advisedly. For these things of great price are, in general, thrown into the common stream with utmost unconcern.

Symbols in themselves, they have become only echoes of symbols. I would hazard the opinion that the honest legislative fire which proclaimed them is long since ashes, that the sunflower blooms and is not seen, that the cottonwood stands up in bold command only to suffer in-subordination, that the meadow lark sings and is not heard.

There is cruelty in forgotten memories. But the forgotten memory has at least once had life. Have the succeeding generations of the sunflower, the cottonwood, the meadow lark ever been granted this first breath of life that they might then be forgotten? I think not, at least not lately. For we seem no longer to approach any of the three with spirit or intelligence or sympathy or understanding.

Now there is no denying, it seems to me, the original or ultimate perfectness of the selections: that is, the sunflower, certainly *our* flower, which becomes for practical purposes little more than a name for a something which derives from words meaning *sun* and *flower*, the name going back to the Greeks and the flower being indigenous to all parts of Kansas; or the *Populus deltoides*, the cottonwood, that is, which may raise stately, fearless limbs to any weather Kansas can offer and still be nothing in the popular heart and no more in the popular mind than—a name with no blood or warmth or real connotation—“the Pioneer Tree of Kansas”; or, last, the western meadow lark (the *Sturnella-Neglecta*, if you will), which produces a complete scale of haunting, mysterious, seeking beauty that *is* Kansas, but should not be defined. There is certain information, factual and scientific, which in certain instances—those of creative awareness and responsibility—simply is not to the point. Finally.

I really do mean to carp. I do mean to suggest the abrogation of scientific fact. Certainly the knowlege—not the wisdom—which science provides us with is in most instances necessary, significant, vital.

To prove this I have included in the following selections the scientific counterparts of the best poetic descriptions I could muster.

But in the same vein, I am driven to deep despair in my research for materials on the state's—on *our* state's—flower, tree, and bird. The state agencies have done their jobs and done them well. But none of the poets of Kansas—and there are poets everywhere; who of us is not one in his secret heart—has responded, contemporaneously, to these things. We have only, or largely, facts. Our hearts are mute.

I admit there is a certain ineffableness about precious things, just as there is a certain commonness that seems not to need talking about. Most of us have contemplated the startling gold of the sunflower set off by its brown center and wondered if—as the myth says—it really follows the sun across the sky, always facing it.

Most of us have at least shared the shade of the cottonwood. Some of us have carved initials in a great, broad trunk somewhere. Most of us have waited for school to start, so that we might have the mighty tree's green pellets for study hall ammunition. Or waited for the pods to burst and collect in gutters that they might be set fire to for a moment of harmless danger.

And, finally, we have been in company with the meadow lark. What more can one say than "I was in the country today, and I saw a meadow lark and heard him sing as he perched atop a fence post. What he sang I can't describe." Yet most of us have been there to hear him.

Most of us know, is my point. Yet some do not—sad must be their lot. And sad is ours unless we forever and continually analyze and evaluate, for our own good, what these things mean. For it is no good to speak with fervency about an object, or to write about it. The thing is to envelope it, to abscond with it, to live with it, to believe it.

I fear I do not make my case. Let me give you something concrete. I read from Margaret Whittemore's *Sketchbook of Kansas Landmarks*.¹ Referring to the giant cottonwood which stands on the southeast corner of the State-house grounds in Topeka, she writes that "Former presidents Harrison, McKinley and Taft made campaign speeches beneath this tree and under it the Twentieth Kansas Regiment of volunteers assembled. After making a record in the Philippines, the regiment and its commander bade farewell under its branches. The tree is said to have been a great favorite with the late senators, John J. Ingalls and Preston B. Plumb. It is as dear to the hearts of the Jayhawkers as is the Washington Elm to the people of Cambridge." Author Whittemore goes on to recount other historical events which the shade of this tree has been witness to.

But I submit that a far less positive "fact," one which follows on the same page, is quite nearer the good and receptive heart. "Some miles west of Topeka stands a cottonwood tree, the silhouette of which bears a

marked resemblance to a Dutch windmill. As it grows year by year it preserves this unusual form, fashioned originally by the wind itself.”

I know about the tree on the Capitol grounds. I have not seen the windmill tree. I do not know if it still stands. But I do not need to know, for unseen, in creative memory, I recognize it as the stuff of poetry and the poetic spirit itself—the signal beauty of elements of Nature which in harmony work for their own best realization.

Perhaps I have merely talked around the point. I shall try to be more direct. The sunflower and its meaning, the cottonwood and its meaning, the meadow lark and its meaning—these are the proper, precious, and necessary province of all of us who live here.

In all fairness, I have included in the following selections the cold side of the matter along with the warmest I could find. But, again, my point is that the meanings of these things do not end with description, with definition, with law. In their various ways they are symbols of health and freedom to us all. They demand attention. They demand study and understanding. They demand sympathy and intelligence, and they ask, not that we stand and wait, but that we seek to know.

Mostly these three—the *emblema* of Kansas—call on us only to take part. Theirs is the final beauty they offer to share; they ask; we must only respond. But this we must.

For the spectre of death looks over the shoulder of all of us; dead to these emblems, these symbols, we too are dead. Those among us philosophically mature are willing to accede to his rightful claims. But I should think that we need not, as we do, hasten his ascendancy and dominance by aggressive resistance to the life offered us.

For example—as I write the rain is plashing against a windowpane moderately. It is, of course, telling painlessly a vast story. I crick my ear, I set my heart to know this meaning. I know that this same plashing rain is misting down on the season's last sunflower, washing in the course of the night waxed and green cottonwood leaves, driving a meadow lark to better shelter.

So for the receptive there is under cover of night this additional cover of rain: we need to be blanketed in both awareness and peace. We can learn much through the simple process of absorption—rain, birds, trees, flowers can teach the receptive, unfold to them the wonders that glisten in far-off mystery. And then—in a burst of sunlight—all these things and their meanings will occur on every hand. They always have been there, and there is hope.

They wait only for soul.