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## Vacuuming Kansas

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## **Vacuuming Kansas**

Nothing is sucked into nothing inside the machine  
That roars for something not found on Doreen's clean carpet.  
The sound is a doppelganger, a whining ghost of constant  
Kansas

Wind that spiraled into Doreen's ears for 17 summers  
Until her brain hummed its tuneless song while the wind  
twisted up

Dust devils for fun around the staked tomatoes.

When the eye of a tornado pressed against a barn,  
A farm exploded. Better the unfocused buzz of constant wind.

Only once had Doreen talked about her growing-up years.  
Her children were incredulous. "You killed chickens . . . GROSS!"  
As if she were not already ashamed: when her children were born,  
She farrowed their bloody tissue-slick bodies: she was a sow,  
More animal than person. Because of that, part of her could not  
Love them. For her last child, Doreen was actually sliced open,  
Her belly bacon-striped layers peeled away from the baby.  
She does not tell these clean city children anything more  
About farm life and its dirt. Better forgotten.

But Doreen had absorbed Kansas: green pastures and brown fields  
Tilted into her hazel eyes. In 8th-grade civics

She memorized 105 counties: Sumner, Grant, Comanche,  
Kiowa . . .  
Names of 19th-century politicians and uprooted Indians.  
Doreen vacuums Kansas, cleaning up Quantrill's smoky  
Lawrence;  
Pulling up the county lines that quilt the state;  
Hoovering up the WPA bridges that tack down the Chickaska,  
the Neodasha, the Verdigris;  
Sweeping the high plains free of grasshopper-legged oil pumps  
and long-armed irrigators.

Finally Kansas lies still, just an old rug,  
Frayed across one corner by the Missouri River.  
To the east, wrinkled with flint; to the west,  
Stretched high and tight as a new canvas. Still Doreen vacuums.  
When she switches off the machine, the empty room buzzes.  
Doreen empties the dust bag, with the others,  
Somewhere west of Garden City.