

JOAN BECKER

Jenny in the Swamp, 2024
Watercolor, 16 x 12 in.



COURTESY GROSS MCCLEAF GALLERY

JAN PRIDDY

The Winter Garden

The garden that first spring was all sad, pale pinks and fog-washed greens. Kora grew no bloodred blooms. Faded roses crept across rockeries on the hill behind the house and tended to mildew. The dusty millers grew two feet high, and Kora pruned the tops before their hard buds revealed sulfur blossoms. Behind her borders of clove pinks and snow-in-summer, creamy impatiens and alyssum, pineapple mint and pale sage, spikes of white foxglove grew tall along the fence. We admired her pretty garden but privately thought her weak, possibly dangerous—those foxglove flowers, stems, and roots contained digitalis, which makes the heart beat faster and is used to cure or poison.

Soon she would be gone away for months.

We saw less than we hoped, less than we claimed to one another in her years on the hill. What bloomed beneath we did not want to guess. Astoria, Oregon, is an old American city, the oldest on this side of the nation, and we're proud of our city's history, its noble past. Pride makes us certain of too much.

Kora had arrived in winter, her hand on the arm of the butcher. She must have been cold climbing the hill with only a patterned cotton dress with bare legs and black leather shoes, down at the heels. She bent over to hold between her fingers and admire flowers in others' gardens until her husband tugged her along. We judged her pretty but disappointing in her reticence.

The butcher was the last of a wealthy trading family since his mother died. His house at the top of the hill was once grand, with all that fancy trim and broad porches on three sides. And we resented the butcher but stayed out of his way. He could be short. He sometimes pretended not to hear greetings when he walked down the hill to his shop in town. But after all, his family was known, established, one of the original families.

His bride was something else.

"You are from—?" we began when we finally had the opportunity to ask.

She blinked and said nothing.

"Where are your people?"

"Far away," she said. She did not meet our eyes. Her voice was melodious, deeper than expected. It surprised us every time she spoke.

The grandmothers gave her the benefit of the doubt,

among so many strangers and missing her mother, perhaps? She was young. Some suggested she had married against the wishes of her family or had given in to their demands. For love? We did not like to think she had been coerced or had married for money. Such things were possible.

The butcher might have made promises to convince Kora to marry him. She might not have known him well. This seemed more likely. He towered over her. There were rumors of his temper, well, but didn't all men have a temper if they were not respected? He was a good provider, hardworking, prosperous. She could have done worse.

Early mornings, we watched the new wife in her garden from behind our kitchen curtains. Kora cut the tall grass, double-dug soil along the fences, and cleared stones to make borders. She planted seedlings started in her kitchen windows and made of them rambling rows that followed the contour of the property. Everything seemed to begin growing at once. In so many ways, she made the butcher's neglected garden fruitful. Lamb's ears sprouted between summer squash. Peas shared a border with the foxglove. It was a handsome sight after decades of neglect. All those new pale flowers. The butcher cared nothing for appearances. He was fortunate to have a wife who took the trouble. So we judged from behind our front windows.

We admired the tidiness of Kora's beds, her smoky herbs and the empty stone birdbath held aloft by a dolphin's tail. Had it been there all along? She used a little wooden-handled shovel to dig out weeds, the green paint rubbed nearly off, and she kneeled beside the beds on a folded towel in the early dawn. She seemed harmless enough when we passed the house, this strange new wife. At least, there was nothing anyone could point to that told against her. But Kora's unblinking water-blue eyes made some look away and hesitate to talk to her. Her pale full lips seemed to hold in some secret we might not want to hear.

Too, in the darkest days, there was something odd in the lushness of her garden, and it began to trouble us to see how Kora composed her beds, how they grew out of season. White delphiniums glistened like platinum in the morning fog. Her roses bloomed through January. White blooms bigger than peonies in winter, and surely the same bushes had bloomed pink the previous spring? We turned away. It seemed risky to look too long. People avoided crossing over the hill and walked down and around instead of

passing by the elegant house and garden. So much pale growth. Such a still place in our breezy city.

We thought we might get to know her when she did the shopping, but groceries continued to be delivered. Kora stood inside the painted fence and seemed to study the harbor traffic far down the hill, but she never met our eyes, not even those of the woman just kitty-corner who said kind things about her flowers. Kora said nothing in response.

Family letters flew in and out of the house on the hill. The letter carrier was a chatty man. He paused sometimes to complain about the climb to the top since his route did not extend to the other side. Kora's people lived in the east, he claimed. The South perhaps or in the mountains? Were there mountains in the east? he laughed. Letters from Atlanta and Asheville. When family letters came—the postman said he recognized the fine slanted printing and crinkly amber envelopes—she held out her hand for them, slid the envelopes into her apron pocket, and was silent as usual. They were addressed to Kora by another last name that did not belong to Kora's husband, and the return address was headed by the same last name, her mother's? It was a feminine hand, he suggested. On days those family letters came, Kora carried that letter indoors, lowered her blinds, and didn't attend to her garden. We recognized her distress and meant to be supportive, sometimes even knocked or called, wanting to do the right thing. Something was wrong, but it was an unsatisfying mystery.

That first winter, she worked early afternoons beside her husband in his shop at the bottom of the hill. When customers chose their breakfast bacon, it was the butcher or his hired assistant who came to the counter. We might catch a glimpse of Kora as she fed meat into the grinder to make sausages. She wore the heavy oilskin apron and buckled rubber boots and her sleeves rolled up. Her hands were broad and steady. She added fat and herbs, pepper and spices. She responded to greetings by ducking her head, but she did not look up, and she offered no conversation while in the butcher's shop. Her husband watched her every move. When he called to her, she kept her eyes lowered as if in concentration, her face still and smooth—so distant some wondered if she ever found a word to say to him. She did what she was told.

In the late evenings, she left the house to gather bracken and wildflowers from the wood that spilled over the back

of the hill. She was a pale vision wearing a flowered white gown that buttoned all down the front. Mostly no one saw.

Kora might pause in the garden, lift her hand to wave at a passerby or a gardener just down the hill. Her kitty-corner neighbor concluded she was a shy person. She must have been overwhelmed to find herself with a new husband and surrounded by strangers.

Kora left a posy on neighbors' window ledges sometimes. There would be thyme and lavender and the odd white flower, round and full like a teacup. The white flowers' scent was rich and lasting. Placed in a flower vase, these rooted and could be planted.

Kora seemed happy in spring as she prepared for a visit to her family someplace far from here. The butcher came home in the evening and found Kora in her garden cutting flowers into a basket with a startled smile on her face as if she found the late blue rosemary, pale narcissus, and early snow-white tulips a gift from heaven. Vases appeared on window ledges, and she smiled and lifted her hand when we waved to her.

And then, after the long, wet winter, we heard she would be gone for a time. Visiting her family, the butcher said when we asked after her.

We noted he did not stop her leaving, but while she was gone, the butcher's house was hollow and dark. Flowers dried and fell over in the tall vases along her kitchen sills. He lowered the front blinds the evening she left, and they remained closed till she returned. It was dark when he arose and left for his shop, earlier and earlier. He ate his supper at the café by the river, fish chowder made with milk from the dairies in the valley, and bread from the Finnish bakery. In the long evenings, he sat in a leather chair kept in the back of his shop. He stayed open late on Saturdays, perhaps to pass the time until Kora would return.

In that summer separation of their marriage, Kora sent home a letter on amber rippled paper. It was clearly addressed to him, the postal carrier said. The butcher tore open the letter at the gate. He let slip the good news, but perhaps it was a surprise to the butcher that Kora was giving birth in her mother's house. None of us had known she was expecting.

We counted back the months and decided we knew everything. It made sense to us. She'd gone home to be with her people for the birth.

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The butcher hired his assistant's wife to help afternoons in the shop until Kora returned. We asked after her at the shop. There was no question of him going east to be with his wife, he said. He had a business to attend to. Perhaps he spoke to Kora on the telephone. There was no telling. When the weather changed, he sat in his chair on the porch facing the Columbia River, watched the boats, and left only to work. Kora's garden lay neglected throughout the barren spring and summer. Weedy grasses grew tall, browned, and fell over behind the fence.

On the day before an early frost, Kora returned with a daughter.

It was not immediately clear the butcher was pleased with Melony. He frowned over the child, and he could not hold her without her wailing. The man was inclined to pronouncements, but he said nothing about the girl.

Kora's daughter was pale like her mother, but with dark eyes, not her father's gray. She cried in the darkness all that winter, colicky but strong. Neighbors noted Kora moved to a cot in Melony's small side bedroom on the main floor that opened to the garden. In the darkest winter months, Melony fussed and screamed and drove sleep from the house. We could see it was a difficult time, and Kora's eyes shadowed round as she carried her daughter in and out of the house. By spring, we saw more.

When the butcher picked her up, Melony stared into his eyes as seriously as her mother, but when Kora held her, a dimple appeared in her daughter’s left cheek. Kora hummed and the child laughed. We brought her berries and spring vegetables from our gardens. The mother welcomed us when we came to admire her baby and invited us into the house, offered hot sweet tea and shortbread cookies flavored with lavender blossoms. We passed the child from lap to lap and found comfort in Melony’s sweet brown eyes.

That spring, Kora again traveled east to her family, this time with her daughter. When she returned late in the fall, she brought bare-root roses to plant in her garden and a daughter who slept at night and crawled across the lawn after flowers. The roses flowered white that next spring, earlier than crocus. In the meantime, Kora grew green-tinged white chrysanthemums and winter squash and carried her daughter to the garden gate when the butcher came home in the evening. She smiled.

The butcher should have been a happy man. Perhaps he was and grateful for Kora’s joy that slid onto himself.

That autumn, he kept on his assistant’s wife to help with the slaughter and sausage. By late winter, Kora was heavy with pregnancy and tired shadows again ringed her eyes. We thought she would fly east, but she stayed. We took to stopping by with casseroles and cakes and offers of assistance.

She accepted.

Kora took us into her garden on the soft warm evenings, served tea from a low table and told stories. “There once was a sailor lost in the north . . .” she began and her tales were full of dragon soldiers and fairy kidnappings, bargains in the forest and trees transformed from wives. There might be a fire in our own home, but we were never cold while perched on stones in Kora’s garden. We went home shivering but returned the next day to hear more. Soon her garden filled with visitors each afternoon, and people walked from the other side of the hill to hear Kora’s stories.

When her son Zane was born in the local hospital, we heard from the nurse who lived on the other side of the hill that someone sent a bouquet of flowers. Cards arrived but not her husband.

When she was home, days later, we brought dry applewood for a fire, and she invited us inside. She served

shortbread cookies with lavender and a sweet tea of rosehips and flowers and honey. We were impressed to see the family Haviland service. No one remembered the last time there had been guests in that house. Perhaps never since the butcher’s mother had passed away.

We took turns holding Kora’s new baby. She sat on a wool rug beside the fireplace, told her stories, her feet curled under and her eyes watching the sweet fire on the hearth. Her stories took us to faraway places, and Melony toddled from lap to lap. The girl only listened to the ends of stories, when her mother’s voice smiled and she said the words, “And they lived happily ever after.”

Rain warmed the earth and tender green spread across the hilltop. Kora’s new white and pale-lemon roses leafed and bloomed before the end of winter. The butcher came home one early evening to find us leaving his gate, calling out goodbye and thank you and kisses. He said nothing as we passed, seeming as gruff and distant as ever. His wife stood at the front of her garden. She held an amber envelope pressed against the infant on her hip. Melony’s left hand in her right. The butcher called out, but his family, all three, looked past him to the harbor.

Later that evening, the kitty-corner neighbor saw her gathering those early blossoms after her children slept. White and violet foxglove, white roses glimmering bright against green.

The butcher later told a customer, who told his wife, who shared with others, that he meant to ask her about flowers she’d left on the kitchen counter—such a mess, he’d said. He meant to ask but forgot. He threw the flowers out. In that last spring of her marriage, he lost his opportunity to love his wife better.

The postman delivered a white envelope. It lay on Kora’s palm as she stood alone in the garden. Melony had been running about, and infant Zane crawling toward new blue pansies, but both turned to their mother as if she had called them awake from a terrible dream. Kora stood so still she might have been stone. Her daughter went to her little brother and together they ran to their mother.

“There now,” Kora said to her children. Someone heard her. “Your grandfather has died.”

Others saw her look down the hill and past the harbor to where the sea roared beyond for an hour or more that afternoon. She did not answer when we called out to her

from gardens or porches. As the sun rose to its highest point, she brought her children into the house and closed the blinds. When we came for a story, we found the door locked and the house still and dark. We felt the desertion, the withdrawal. Nothing breathed inside that proud house. Could she have gone east to her family without saying goodbye? That was the story from the bus station.

At dusk we stood behind our windows and watched the butcher walk up the hill and through his gate. We heard him call to Kora as he opened the door to an empty house.

He passed before windows, stomping from room to room inside his house. He growled and thundered and went back outside and around the garden and through the little gates that connected his yard to ours. He shouted and complained to anyone who would listen or even if they would not that the hospital and police could offer him no information. From neighbor to neighbor he demanded to know where his wife had gone. We had no answer we were willing to share. No, we didn’t see anything happen. We never saw her leave.

Melony, the baby, and their mother gone. Imagine that and without a word to anyone?

He entered the wood to search for her, though we could have told him he would not find her there. If he called her family, we never heard.

He paced, clenching and unclenching his broad fists, and people told him nothing more than what he asked, and he never asked. We wondered again how Kora came to be married to such a man.

It was cold for late April, but his fire remained unlit that evening as he stood at his window, his face fluttering between angry and mystified.

Before leaving for his shop, he despoiled her garden with a garden rake. All her flowers, the budding pale roses and dusty millers, lavenders and young perennials, sprawled upon the soil. He had never walked in her garden before, seemed hardly to notice what she planted, the drifts of light color and sorrow.

A chill swept over that hillside, and we put on coats to venture outside. We avoided the house on the hill where alder and bracken in the wood had not yet grown green with spring. Birds went wary and silent or flew away to another neighborhood. An owl briefly perched on the back fence in the dusk, pale in moonlight. Mice and voles and shrews

remained asleep. Perhaps the butcher shivered, chilled and alone in his house.

After a while Kora’s marriage to the butcher became part of our city’s story, a fable or warning about coerced marriage, however much of it was guesswork. Down in the town, some afterward claimed letting Kora go was the last of the butcher’s mistakes.

We know better.

Perhaps it was the cold, and that is why he served himself from what he thought was tea she left behind, the dry foxglove he brewed and sweetened with honey. Assuming he knew everything, he understood nothing at all, it seems to us. It’s far too late to ask him what he thought he was doing.

All quiet, all quiet and growing.

Kora’s flowers rise from the earth, refill their bruised petals with moisture overnight, turn their faces to the chilly sun. Behind the glass of our homes, we watch Kora’s garden surround the butcher’s silent house. All quiet, all quiet and growing. All her bright blossoms reborn.

Jan Priddy’s work has earned fellowships, a Pushcart Prize nomination, and publication in *Brevity*, *CALYX*, *The Humanist*, *North American Review*, anthologies on race and running, and elsewhere. She is an MFA graduate from Pacific University and her debut, utopian novel, *All the Daughters Sing*, launches in early 2026 from Ooligan Press.