



Jane Kansas was an artist, activist and queer icon. A memorial for her will be held June 5 (her birthday) at The Bus Stop Theatre. Drop in from 1pm to midnight.

Jane Kansas, travelling light

Celebrating the late artist & activist on her 69th birthday.

By [Lis van Berkel](#)



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Editor's Note: Jane Kansas, an artist, activist and queer elder, passed away in late 2022—a loss felt by many Haligonians. On her first birthday since we lost Kansas, a memorial will be held Monday, June 5 at the Bus Stop Theatre (2203 Gottingen Street), with the opportunity to remember her from 1pm until midnight. An art show, an audio booth and screenings of her always-sold-out Fringe plays and short films populate the afternoon, while a live reading of Kansas' play My Funeral: The Dry Run happens at 5:30pm. A 7pm open mic is followed by more screenings of Kansas' theatre work.

Here, her close friend says goodbye:

Jane Kansas loved to travel, so when she died on December 18, I preferred to imagine her on a trip. Not the best trip, but the next trip she wanted to go on.

I went many places with my closest friend Jane, happy places and terrible places, places you go with a friend and ones you never do. She was an exacting friend, like she was an exacting writer, artist, performer and activist. She could make you go places you might rather not, and she was not all nicey-nice asking you to go. Sometimes it was like a delightful hostage-taking.

In the mid-1990s, she organized a sidewalk protest against bleeping out the first lesbian kiss on the ATV broadcast of *Star Trek*. As co-chair of Halifax Pride, she pushed for the first LGBTQ posters on Halifax city buses in 1995. She renamed Pride marches parades, and insisted the after-party move out of the bar into the streets. Even if it was someone else's idea, she ran with it.

She was a pied piper, a raconteur, but she also often avoided people. We frustrated her, she said.

Her last bigish trip was to Newfoundland in the fall of 2001. Her friend, also named Jane, took her and paid for everything. I came along for the ride. For her sake, she was strong enough to drink like a sailor, then we had to hold her up when the swelling in her legs caused them give out. She fell apart when I walked to one of the studios on Fogo Island at dusk. Back at the B&B, she argued it was because she didn't know how painful the wait would be.



Her next trip was going to be somewhere warm, like back to Costa Rica or to Mexico. A cruise. Just the two of us, possibly a cameraperson, too — because maybe we would shoot it, if she chose medical-assisted death. But maybe that would be too much for me. Maybe we could have separate cabins, and I could pick her up for dinner in the state room or wherever it is you eat. We could sit on the sunshiny deck, gaze at the perfect turquoise water, and take shelter from the wind, like we did on the Fogo ferry.

In my first years knowing and then living with Jane, we went to Pride rallies in New York, Washington, Charlottetown and even Pictou County to protest MP Roseanne Skoke, who called gays and lesbians unnatural. We travelled to Vegreville, Alberta and Brandon, Manitoba. After we split up, to Yarmouth to drop her off at Bar Harbor ferry with her bicycle weighted down for a trip, to Tampa, the Everglades and Key West, and to Portland, Maine for a Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings concert. We often stayed in hotels using coupons she'd collected.




Kansas, during her travels in the 1970s.

She went many, many more places. I don't know half of them. Bruce Peninsula. Australia, Greece. Vermont, Texas, Alabama — to research *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To see land artist Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* in New Mexico. To one Donald Trump rally in Florida for [her blog](#).

Jane was pro-America only because she liked shiny, colourful plastic American things — like [Fresca](#), Melmac, Bakelite, Pez. Playing cards and Bic lighters she found on the street, enough to make an exhibit.

She was born in Wichita, Kansas in 1954. Her mother was Miss Kansas 1953, Jane liked to say, and loved the year of her reign so much that when it ended, she had a legal name change, from Heifferstein to Kansas, so she could be called Miss Kansas for the rest of her life. Her mother would say goodnight in the doorway of her dark room using the glowing red end of her cigarette to draw shapes in the air, Jane once wrote. Cowboy lassos. Figure eights. Jane's name, really messy and so quick the afterimage still held the capital J.

Jane said travelling gave her room to think about the ~~want~~ do things — to experience the days moment by moment, one step at a time.  deli h i r d e r d e g h e d i s s t a n c e l i f e and a trip was a series of problem-solving exercises and decisions: *Is this trip my life or just something I'm doing?*



Submitted

A young Jane Kansas.

But Alexandria was Jane's first big trip — I thought Jane went with a friend she met in Ottawa, after dropping out of high school, but the friend remembers her going alone — after the summer train-rides from Ottawa with her maternal grandmother to the family cottage at Queensland Beach, after ski trips with school chums, and after hitchhiking to Alberta alone to meet her dad's family. Alexandria was the trip Jane described to me as the result of closing her eyes while spinning a globe, and landing her finger on this ancient city.

Since Jane died, I have been unwilling to erase her phone, or the messages in it to her friend Atta in Khartoum which she initiated seven years ago, mostly written in Arabic. There are year-long pauses between texts, but it's here I find out definitively that she

landed in Alexandria on December 25, 1974, staying at the hostel and then at something called the capsule. She was 20, and would live in Alexandria in Sudan for the next two years, I think with Atta.

One possible source of Jane's sea legs was her maternal grandfather. Tommy Griffin, who died when her mother was a child, sailed with Lawrence of Arabia. T.E. Lawrence was the British intelligence officer adopted Arab dress in 1914 after a posting to Cairo, and worked for Arab state independence.

Do our ancestral stories drip down to us? Even if their events happened many years before in a disconnected place and time. I think Tommy's story had that kind of power, the power to drive Jane on.

I know almost nothing about Egypt. If Jane was here to tell me, she would remember great details — like the smell of the air in the morning, of a brand of soap, or the taste of their coffee, what the espresso cup looked like. She had a way of taking you somewhere you'd never gone and might never go — with great attention to detail that I could learn a lot from.



Kansas and her friend Atta, in the 1970s.

And it wasn't me who thought of writing about this trip. I might have opted to write instead about the saga of open heart surgery and kidney disease. Bookseller John Doull, Jane's friend, raised the spectre of Alexandria when he told me he'd asked her to write a chapbook about her time there. He even wants to publish it, except Jane's sister Sue and I have so far found nothing.



A photo Kanas snapped of the pyramids.

For me, Jane's stories about Alexandria blend with her Arabic, the language she never completely forgot and started studying again when she messaged Atta. Sometimes it was with a tutor, in exchange for help with their English. Jane loved to discuss consonant blends and all the sounds an "o" or an "e" could elicit. She loved to think about how that would challenge a student of English. Sometimes I wonder, should I pick up her Arabic notes and start learning now, just to

nurse this memory of her?

From what I've read in books found on Jane's shelves and elsewhere, I understand Alexandria always was mythical. Rhakotis, the original name of the site, was already ancient when a 20-year-old Alexander the Great consulted an oracle in 300 BCE. Twenty-eight centuries of architectural influence, sculptures, temples and great institutions had already been destroyed, removed or fallen into the sea when he planned it as a symbol of the unity of humankind: Greek, Jewish and Egyptian culture living side by side.

Way before the Roman invasion and Arab Conquest, one of Alexandria's greatest realizations was the Pharos Lighthouse, an ancient wonder that began crumbling in a 956 CE earthquake — on par with the Great Pyramid of Giza, which Jane visited illegally at night in 1975.

Another was the short-lived Great Library, completed a generation after Alexander's death at age 32, and accidentally burned down by Julius Caesar. It was one of the largest and most significant libraries of the ancient world with up to 400,000 scrolls.

Jane loved books, libraries and archives, too. She kept a collection of art books and children's books. I think it was Reader's Digest Junior Omnibus she liked to quote, something like: *Every breath we take still has in it a molecule of the air Caesar breathed.*

I feel Jane's breath, too.

Then a friend introduced me to C. F. Cavafy — his Collected Works were on Jane's shelf, too — and his 1911 poem, "The God Abandons Antony," about the burning of the ancient city, and about courage in the face of inevitable death.

Alexandria has come to mean to me her death, met head on without much wavering. Because like Cavafy's Antony, Jane went firmly to the window, listened with deep emotion, not with much whining or the pleas of a coward, heard its invisible procession going by with exquisite music. And went for it.

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