



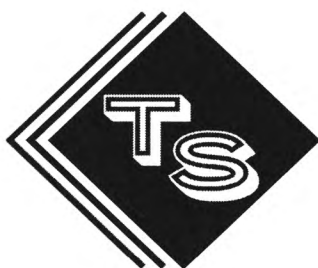
# TOUCHSTONE



*Kansas State University*



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*Spring 2018*

*Kansas State University*

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## *A Note From the Editor*

Dear Reader,

This year at *Touchstone* we celebrate several things: the return to print, the creation of our new online platform, the digitalization of the *Touchstone* archives and, of course, the wonderful writing that appears in this issue. From stories of neurotic auctioneers selling key-lime Volkswagen Beetles to nostalgic dances back to childhood, topless by the pool, this year's issue paints an unmistakably Mid-western picture of America. The pensive reflections that herein lie probe and wring deeply-wrought issues of inequalities and injustice that, sadly, still plague society today. Throughout the editing process, these tales and poems blossomed into a bouquet of work that I'm pleased to share with you.

I hope for many things to come from this year's issue: I hope you contemplate a myriad of passions and sensations as you absorb these pages and emerge having learned a thing or two about Manhattan, KS, having experienced the lived-realities of so many in America. I hope you drink from the hearts of the poets who've uncorked them for us, and gaze at a wintery afternoon at Kansas State University through Riley's kindhearted camera lens.

Onto the many thanks that are due. This issue had its advent some day in April of last year when Max and I gave life to *touchstonek-state.org*, where we began archiving last year's work and uploading Eddie Chuculate's first chapter from his upcoming novel, *Home-grown*. I'd like to thank Max for his work and know-how in designing the new platform. I'd like to thank my team of staunch genre editors, Peter, Maia, Catherine, and Kenny and their many assistant editors, who curated the work under your nose. Many thanks are due to Jaime for her astonishing organization of submissions this year, which made all of our lives a great deal more comfortable.

Alyssa, who assembled the issue you hold in your hand worked tediously to do so, under the burden of a too-tight deadline, I should add. Thanks to Joe, who drove @TouchstoneKSU into the Twitter world and expanded our arms-length remarkably. Thanks to Jamie and her team of copy-editors for making our reading experiences that much smoother.

For the forthcoming digital archives, I must express gratitude to Michelle Turvey-Welch and her colleagues across the way in Hale Library, who worked graciously with our team. And to Maddie, Anna, and Peter, who monotonously collected metadata one Saturday morning in January with me over coffee and baked goods. Sifting through past issues, pausing to read pieces, some from writers who've gone on to publish incredible work, some from writers who may never have written a word again, we felt the weight of the editors and writers that preceded us and who built the foundation we lounge on to read this issue.

The move back into print wasn't an easy one, but worthwhile to be sure. Many thanks must go to our faculty advisor Dr. Kimball Smith, department head Dr. Karin Westman, and Creative Writing Track head Dr. Katherine Karlin, as well as the rest of the magnificent faculty in the Kansas State English Department who encouraged their students to submit their work.

Relish it! I certainly did.

Gavin Colton  
Editor-in-Chief

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# Gigi's Bon Voyage Party

*Krista Danielson*

When Pastor Tom asked me to auction off his '67 key lime VW Bug, I knew he was in worse health than he let on. Gigi was as much a part of his identity as his Bible and holy robes. The Bug had taken him from Ft. Lauderdale to Fairbanks to First Presbyterian here in Manhattan, where every Saturday afternoon, she was washed and waxed, ready for morning worship. Pastor Tom would roll through town, windows down, one hand on the slick grey steering wheel, the other waving to staring passers-by. Gigi and Pastor Tom, why, they were inseparable. I also knew that Pastor Tom was in his 80s, that he tried to hide a shuffling left foot, and that he'd had a few strokes earlier this year. Nothing major, so he said, but I bet that the Kansas Department of Motor Vehicles wouldn't look too favorably upon a senior citizen, minister or not, whose misfired synapses might lead to a smash-up on Poyntz Avenue.

So when Pastor Tom rang me up one afternoon and asked if I might want to come by the church office to talk about Gigi's future over a cup of coffee and maybe some of Julianne's baked apple doughnuts, I found the time.

"Marlena, I am in a bind," he said. "Ecclesiastes tells us that there's a time for every season. Sometimes, that's hard to accept, even for me."

He sipped his coffee, then rubbed his thumb on the thick ivory rim. "They say that you're the best auctioneer in the Great Plains. And I do think that's true."

"There are others who are better," I said.

"Maybe they can fetch a higher price. But we both know money isn't everything." Pastor Tom set down the cup. "No, I'm more concerned about how things are done."

"I need you to help me find a new home for Gigi." Pastor Tom peered over his half-moon glasses, his amber eyes deep and

quiet. "Will you help me, Marlena?"

I bit into an apple doughnut to hide my thoughts. Pastor Tom without his VW? That's like a K-State football game without the Wabash Cannonball. Just not right. Like those spring days when the robins stop singing and the hunter cat hides in the basement and the sky gets battleship gray...and you just know that something's wrong in the atmosphere, something off-kilter that has got to be righted.

"The money will go to First Pres. The Youth Group would like to go to Christ Camp in Colorado...the Ministry of the Decorative Scissors wants to do more quilting projects with the seniors at Meadowlark Hills...and we could use a new dishwasher."

"Pastor Tom, Gigi is worth a hundred dishwashers and a decade of church camps," I said. "Alright. I give you my word. I will do whatever I can to make sure that Gigi goes to a good home."

"Thank you. I know she's just a car. But she's my Volksy. And it would kill me if she went to a junkyard. Or to someone who wouldn't change her oil monthly."

How am going to pitch this one? I squeezed some Colgate onto my toothbrush. Auctioneers can set the price, generate excitement, gather the crowds. But they cannot—repeat—cannot guarantee an end buyer. Even if you seed the audience with your mother and your best friends, there's always the chance that someone with a fat wallet and a hankering for a key-lime VW Bug will offer a dollar more.

How am I going to make sure Gigi gets her oil changed? I scrubbed my teeth in tight round circles on the back molars. Did I make a false promise to my priest?

No. I have good intentions and an even better set of skills.

Chance Roberts, however, did not have good intentions. Sweet Mary above, where'd that come from?

I bit hard on my toothbrush. Chance Roberts. Even after two years, I still feel my heart split into a hundred little broken drumbeats when I think about that man.



I spat into the basin. Is that cowboy worth a heart attack? No. Am I glad I walked away? Heck, yeah. Good. Now, focus.

There's no way Pastor Tom would be able to renew his driver's license. And what if—God forbid—he did run over a dog, or worse, a child, or a member of First Pres? I shuddered and turned on the faucet. The bubbly toothpaste swirled down the drain.

We set the auction date for three months out, in May. I called about a dozen big-name antique car dealers from KC to Denver and places in between, inquiring about what price a “vintage key lime '67 Bug, original owner, white wall tires, creamy leather bench seats, no seatbelts, original AM radio, working choke, smells like apple pie (Dang, Pastor Tom, your wife can bake), manual transmission, never been in an accident but once nudged a shopping cart at Hy-Vee” might fetch. And, oh, by the way, the aforementioned Bug would be on the auction block up in Manhattan, in case they knew anyone who might be interested. That's right, the second Saturday in May.

Gigi was not junkyard material. She was pure vintage. I could hear the collectors salivate behind their smartphones, dollar signs popping in their heads. One offered me \$12,000 for an immediate sale.

I ran ads in Classic Cars, Vintage VW, and the KC Star. I posted on eBay. Even the Mercury ran an article in the Sunday paper, with a photo of Pastor Tom in his khaki driving cap, waving out of Gigi's window. His thin gold wedding ring, barely noticeable, glinted in the light. His face was a map of decisions and directions, his eyes an almanac of stories. In his generous smile, I could see traces of a young man fresh out of seminary, trading his surfboard for snowshoes as he left palm trees on the Atlantic shore for the icy unknown of Alaska's mountainous interior. At some intersection, he and Julianne met, and took a turn for better or for worse. Gigi motored the honeymooners back down to the Lone Star State and on to the Sunflower State, where for richer or poorer,

they settled in Manhattan and raised a church family.

Pastor Tom broke the news to the congregation in a sermon. Cynthia Tate fainted. Her husband had to revive her with a whiff of coffee grounds and then a dozen kisses. Paul Martin offered to buy Gigi outright, but Pastor Tom said, thank you, but bring your pennies to Gigi's Bon Voyage Party, that's what he called it.

"Gigi can't leave Manhattan!" Cynthia said later. "She's a fixture on Leavenworth!"

"She's as Manhattan as Johnny Kaw!" said Paul.

All this promotion required large amounts of caffeine. I stopped into Bluestem Bistro for a Cuban latte, and who was there but Belinda Wildfang and her Tuesday afternoon bridge club. Turns out Belinda's daughter was married by Pastor Tom.

"I don't know if it's worth anything," Belinda said, "but I could donate my grandma's 12-piece silver flatware. Ginny doesn't want it, and Tony's not interested, and it's not doing anybody any good sitting in the china cabinet. Would you consider taking it for the auction?"

Would a hungry man refuse a prime rib dinner?

"Belinda, you are a gem," I said.

"Nonsense! You're helping me out, too. Say, did I ever tell you that Pastor Tom drove Ginny and Sam to the Bluemont Hotel after their wedding?"

"You're kidding!" I sat down.

Belinda leaned forward on her elbows. "After the kids said their 'I do's', well, Tony started pouring the champagne. First a toast to his sister, then to the groom. And then, the Cat Band members started clapping out songs—each and every one of them!—which meant another toast. You know how that goes. Pretty soon, neither Sam nor Ginny could drive. They weren't drunk, but I wasn't sure how the kids were going to get to the Bluemont safely. Lord knows the last thing Ginny wanted was to be chauffeured by her mother, or a DUI.

"Then, like an angel, Pastor Tom whispered in my ear, 'I'll drive them. You relax and enjoy.' And he said something about

Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding, and told Ginny and Sam that part of their marriage ceremony included a ride in Gigi's Limousine Service. Can you believe it?"

I grinned. "That's one full-service officiation!"

Julie McAllister, one of the Bridge Club ladies, started to laugh. "You know, Gigi chauffeured some of the Confirmation kids to Lawrence for the K-State/KU basketball game a few years ago."

"I didn't know the Bug could go over 45! How'd she manage on the freeway?" Belinda said.

"George told me Pastor Tom took the scenic route, through Wabaunsee and Lecompton. They stopped at the Beecher Bible & Rifle Church, and at the ice cream store in St. Mary's for root beer floats. Took 'em three hours to get to the Sunflower Showdown! But they loved it, even if K-State lost," Julie said. "George still talks about Gigi, how she smelled like apple pie and toasted marshmallows, and she only had an AM radio, so they listened to the farm news for part of the time, then some country music, then made up songs about how K-State was going to slam the Jayhawks."

"Marlena, could I have a couple of those flyers? I might be able to hand some out at the next Rotary Club meeting," Belinda said.

Bless you Belinda, I thought. "Sure. Anyone else want some party invitations?"

By the time I'd finished my latte, Julie McAllister offered a 100-piece tool kit, Linda Greggs promised a weekend getaway in their family cabin in the Ozarks, and Darleen McGarry would see about donating four tickets to next season's K-State / Oklahoma football game.

This was too good of news to keep to myself. If donations came in and we got a good turn-out, First Pres would be on financially solid ground. Beyond the normal expenses, a successful auction would mean that several years of Confirmation kids could go to Christ Camp, the Ministry of Decorative Scissors could cloak each senior at Meadowlark in a quilt, and there'd be a nice little sum

set aside for emergencies or health care or whatever benefits the church gave to her minister.

I was on my way back to my office when I saw him swagger out of Rock-A Belly Bar & Deli. I knew that silhouette. The sway of those thighs, the curve of those shoulders, the outline of an oilskin cowboy hat. Damn it, there's the bar on one side of the sidewalk and a row of parked pickup trucks on the other. There's no way out.

"Marlena." Chance Roberts tipped his tan cowboy hat towards me. He'd started to grow a beard, I noticed.

"Well, hello, Chance."

"You're looking good, lady."

"Just keeping busy." You had three years, man. Now you notice?

"Work's been good?" Chance slid his thumbs into his blue-jean pockets. He leaned back into a half grin, the kind that convinced me that light really did shine from a man's smile. The lines around his dangerously blue eyes crinkled. My heart drummed harder; my head wanted Chance to go away.

"Oh, you know. The KC Art Auction. Some estate sales out by the lake."

"That's big money. Good for you."

"It's what I do. How's the ranch?"

"Growing. Calving starts next week. And I'm offering guided hunting trips on the back property come pheasant season."

I pictured the creek and the cedar woods where we had startled a flock of pheasants. I always liked that spot. "You heard that Pastor Tom's letting go of his Bug?"

"Is that right?"

I handed Chance a flyer.

He skimmed the headlines. "You're auctioning it?"

"That's right."

"Huh. Well, I'll be damned."

"Pastor Tom can't drive it much longer."

"True. But I thought old Pastor Tom would've chosen



someone who's used to getting top dollar. Not that you're cheap."

I felt my heart clench. "Really. After all this time, you still don't know me at all."

"But I do know you."

"And I know you."

We stared at each other. We were two bobcats, circling around each other, waiting for the other to show a jugular. Waiting for the other to back down. To rush back together in a passionate collision. How was it possible for a man to be so alluring yet so repulsive at the same time?

I stared at Chance, remembering how I'd watch him mend a fence just to appreciate the way he moved in his body. How he caught me staring, more than once, flashed that half-smile and kept on threading the wire so no calves would be tempted to make a break. I remembered how he smelled like earth and granite and salty gardenia. What man smells like salty gardenia? I'd lick his neck, just to make sure, and he'd track me around the ranch house, his shirt untucked and his belt buckle undone. He'd snicker in his sleep, and belt out AC/DC while cleaning the barbecue. We made plans for getting the horses, but we never talked marriage. He said we didn't need a ring and a date because we were rock solid. And I believed him. We were going to open up the ranch to day guests and chuckwagon cowboy suppers. Home on the Range, right? Until he met that skinny blond chick—Riley—while I was away, leading an art auction in Wichita. I heard from Belinda that they tied the knot back in September.

I blinked.

"Chance, I have to go. Real nice to see you."

For the second time, I walked away.

The next morning broke weirdly. My cat thought she was a ninja warrior and attacked my hair with fangs and claws. The coffee maker spat out extra-strength brew, which meant adding two spoons of brown sugar and a ½ cup of milk. I locked the cat out of my bedroom while putting on my signature navy blue suit, lest she

think I was an enemy sailor and hi-ya my pant legs with her needle-sharp claws.

Word of the auction had gotten out, for First Presbyterian's Parish Hall was packed, standing room only. A bunch of people from First Pres were sipping coffee in paper cups. Cynthia, Michael, and oh mercy, Texas Trudi had attached herself to Luke McDaniel. Poor bastard won't be able to peel her off without a promise for a gin and tonic at Auntie Mae's.

"How you doing, honey?" My Mama hovered, her chestnut waves floating to her shoulders.

"I'm alright, but I'd feel better if you kept an eye on those two." I pointed at the buyers from the KC Vintage Bug Club: Joe Pyle with his pressed and starched blue-checkered collared shirt, and Leroy Jones in denim overalls. "And that guy in the camo-jacket? He's from the junkyard. Don't know why he's here."

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "And them fellows in the gray suits?"

"Watch them as well. I think they're from Denver. The Front Range Air-Coolers or some such auto club. Say, you're getting pretty good at this. You sure you don't want to be my partner?"

"Daddy always knew you'd follow in his footsteps. Miss Holtz, your music teacher did, too. Now go get 'em, champ."

Mama's cell phone started ringing in her purse. I let her take the call. I needed to double check the merchandise and go through the ticket order again.

Belinda Wildfang's silver flatware gleamed in its blue velvet case. The McAllister's had found some hammers and that massive toolkit, and four Persian rugs. Darleen McGarry came through with those K-State / Oklahoma football tickets. The Lindsay's had also donated camping gear, some mid-range watercolors from local artists, and a ton of K-State sports paraphernalia. Other members of the congregation had cleaned out their basements and attics. It was going to be one heck of an auction.

Pastor Tom would make a grand entrance in about 20

minutes. He and Julianne would drive Gigi up to the front doors, and we'd begin with a blessing and a prayer. Dear Lord, give me strength to do good today.

I turned to triple check the sound system when I nearly bumped into the back of a man in a red and gold plaid shirt and a tan oilskin cowboy hat. Now where'd he come from? I hate it when I don't see someone so close to me.

"Pardon me, sir."

The cowboy turned around, revealing a half-smile I knew too well. Except his eyes were wild, like a prairie fire gone out of control. "Marlena. I've been looking for you. There's something I need to tell you."

I gaped. My heart began to boil in my brain.

"No, Chance. Not now. I have work to do."

"Wait." Chance held his hand up.

"Does Riley know you're here?"

"Yes, she does. And I need to tell you something."

"Save the sweet talk for your wife. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a car to sell."

I bust through the restroom door and slung my purse onto the counter. Why? Why? Why? I squeezed a drop of Colgate onto my shaking toothbrush. Neurotic, yes, but no cavities.

I scrubbed my teeth, trying to erase any memories of Chance and me meeting at the cattle auction, then at his ranch for an appraisal of a calf, then in his bed. Three years. Why hadn't it worked? Yes, he loved his land. Yes, I was on the road a lot once I shifted away from cattle and into art and estates. And, no, I would not have made a satisfying ranch wife. Not with my love of the sale.

I reapplied lipstick. Burgundy. My good-luck color. I imagined Pastor Tom's face. His amber eyes peering over those wire-rimmed half-moon glasses. That trust. Gigi, all shiny and Key Lime.

I checked my watch. Ten minutes till show time.

"Marlena?" Mama found me backstage. "Pastor Tom called. He can't do it. His leg's given out. I think his heart would, too, if he had to sit through this. Julianne's staying home with him."

"Okay...I get it....they're doing the right thing. But what about the car? Are we on?"

"Chance Roberts offered to drive Gigi here. He's on his way now."

"Chance?!"

"He overheard me on the cell phone and offered to help. Said it was the least he could do."

"Jesus, Mama. You believe that?"

"Honey, he screwed up with you once. No man's fool enough to make the same mistake twice."

"Good afternoon, friends and family! My name's Marlena Sparks, and welcome to the first ever First Presbyterian Auction!" I swept my hand in an arc, greeting the 300 or so people in the audience.

"Our first item is a toolkit with over 100 pieces in it kindly donated by Larry and Julie McAllister. What's in here? Hammer, wrenches, sockets...what a beauty! Fellows, if the part you're looking for isn't in here, then you probably don't need it. Where am I goin' first? I'm at fifty, that's fifty, now fifty-five, sixty. Who bid sixty-seven? Sixty-seven? Now seventy, there's seventy, seventy-five, seventy-five? There's eighty..."

I smiled and kept a steady gaze on the audience. Luke McDaniel had extracted himself from Trudi. Good man, she's a gold digger. I pointed my hand in his general direction. He bid \$95. Michael Tate raised up for \$100. Back to Luke for \$120. Back to Michael—how do I know him?—for \$130. Luke bid one-thirty-five, one-thirty-five, then Michael for \$140. That's right, Michael runs the repair shop out on Highway 24. Changes oil and does good brake work. Do I hear \$145? One-forty? One-forty once? Twice?

"Sold! \$140 to number 63!"



Someone in the crowd whooped and whistled. Luke shook Michael's hand.

"This next item is from Belinda Wildfang. Belinda has donated her grandmother's beautiful 12-piece silver flatware set. Look at the detail work! If you want to make memorable Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, this is for you. Let's start with three hundred, that's three hundred, there's three hundred, do I hear three-fifty? Three-fifty? Yep there's three-fifty, how 'bout four? Four-hundred? Four-hundred? Got it, Four. Let me hear five, five-hundred, five-hundred? Thank you, there, got it five, five hundred. How 'bout six? Six hundred? Who's got six? Five-fifty? There's five-fifty. Let's go six. Six-hundred, six-hundred..."

Linda Greggs put up for six hundred. Sold.

The crowd was enthusiastic. Each item was honored with a vibrant round of bidding. Cynthia Tate and Joelle Rodriguez elbowed each other for the football tickets, Joelle making the winning offer. I saw Cynthia whisper something to Joelle, and they shook hands, and I admired her composure, for I was never a gracious underdog.

"Now for our final item. We have something very special here. A true gem that has been a member of our church family for these past 27 years. So special that my words cannot begin to do justice. Today, Gigi is going to a new home."

Meep-meep! That was Gigi's horn, coming from outside the Parish Hall. Heads turned to the wall of windows. Gigi was in the courtyard, dressed in her Sunday finest. Her key-lime body gleamed in the spring sun. Her headlights sparkled. Someone had put a little yellow smiley-face ball on top of her antennae.

A scarlet and gold clothed arm waved out the window. I heard someone say, "That's not Pastor Tom."

The driver's door opened, and a cowboy boot stepped out. The boots crunched gravel in the courtyard.

Chance tipped his cowboy hat to the crowd.

At least he wasn't wearing Pastor Tom's driving cap.

"Where's Pastor Tom?" someone, maybe Luke McDaniel,

called. "And Julianne?"

Chance handed the key to me, and nodded.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said. "We have a small change in plans. Pastor Tom will not be here today. He has already said his good-byes, and he needs your help to make sure that this beloved Volksy goes to someone who will love and respect her like family. Those are his wishes.

"So please do bid, but do so with integrity." I rested my gaze on the vintage collectors from KC, Denver and Wichita.

"Let's take a moment for Pastor Tom, for Julianne, and for Gigi."

The silence hung like a prayer.

"Okay. Let's begin. Five thousand bid, got a five thousand bid, there's a five thousand do I hear six? Six thousand bid there's a seven over there where's an eight? Eight thousand bid, eight, eight thousand yo! Nine thousand bid who's got nine thousand?"

Why was Chance raising his sign? Where was he going to find nine thousand dollars? Mama? There's Luke McDaniel, gotta love you, your grain exchange plays fair to our farmers. Eleven grand? No Mama, we don't have eleven grand, don't do it. There, #615. Who's that man holding sign #615? Oh crud, it's Joe Pyle from KC. Twelve thousand here's twelve thousand. Chance what are you thinking? What about the horses? What about Riley? Now thirteen. Take it Luke, thank you, man.

I scanned the room while chanting. Signs popped up to the cadence of the chant. Do I hear fourteen thousand? Fourteen? Belinda bit her lip. Yep there's fourteen with Larry McAllister, you are the most generous dentist. Where's fifteen thousand, thank you Belinda, there's sixteen, damn it, the junkyard got sixteen. Do I have seventeen, seventeen, how 'bout sixteen five. Come on Larry! Luke? Sixteen five, thank you Luke. Now seventeen I'm seventeen who's seventeen, good man, Larry. There's eighteen, who's eighteen, Chance is eighteen? Now nineteen, gimme nineteen, there's nineteen from gray suit from Denver. Who's twenty? He's a-twenty. Chance is twenty. Come on Luke, can you gimme twenty-one, someone twenty-one...yes! Thank you Luke. How

about twenty-two? Twenty-two? Gray Suit from Denver bids twenty-two. Let's go twenty three. Who's twenty-three? Chance is twenty-three.

"Twenty-four? Twenty-four?" Luke shook his head.

"Twenty-three-five?" Gray Suit from Denver kept his sign down. Larry shook his head. "Twenty-three. Twenty-three once. Twenty-three twice. Sold."

Sold to Chance Roberts for \$23,000.

Somebody hollered, "Congratulations, Chance!" Belinda started clapping, Luke joined in, and the Parish Hall filled with applause.

"Hey, Chance." I tossed him the key. "You're going to need this. And make sure you change Gigi's oil once a month."

Chance tipped his oilskin hat. "With y'all as my witnesses, to that I do solemnly swear."

That night after the auction was one of those glorious Kansas spring evenings, where the first honeysuckle perfumes the air; the sky blazes magenta, tangerine and lavender; and a person can enjoy a glass of Chardonnay on the porch without getting bit by the mosquitos. I found a bottle in the fridge, wrapped it in a gift bag, and laced up my sneakers. Pastor Tom and Julianne lived an easy mile from my bungalow.

As the first crickets sang me down the buckling brick sidewalk, I thought of what we might toast to—Gigi's vrooming down Poyntz Avenue, the money raised by the auction, Chance Roberts making the bid. How tough but redemptive it is to let go.

I knew that before too long, Pastor Tom would be moving on from First Pres, maybe up to Meadowlark Hills where he'd be wrapped in at least a half-dozen quilts hand stitched by the Ministry of the Decorative Scissors. Chance and Riley might start a family, or some other dream that was meant for them, and Gigi, alone. But those were not thoughts for tonight.

The aroma of fresh apple pie welcomed me at their door-

step. I knocked on the glass storm door, wine bottle in hand. Pastor Tom and Juliana opened the door. Three plates, glasses, napkins and forks graced the dining room table. A clear mason jar with yellow roses. One white candle. Fellowship.

# Aloe Vera

*Cameron Morse*

Aloe vera leaves loll like tongues  
over the window ledge in the laundry room,

tongues bitten for sunburns and scalded  
wrists, their blood a salve, their ooze

salvation. By its stripes we are healed,  
and its lisp, and bitten tips, stumps

that tatter brown as burnt paper, brown  
as the oak leaves padding its roots, the oak leaves

that flood the flowerbed every autumn  
with the burnt pages of the gnostic

gospel of autumn when the backs of my hands  
crinkle and crack like those very pages,

and every sunset burns the book of my life,  
its leaves, the dry skin of its pages.

# To Touch God

*Riley Morsman*

*north of the Yangtze River*  
the felons of our lust  
are not the worms we thought  
three knots yellow, two  
knots blue—our children  
are triangular, reflecting  
time like prisms  
on brown thighs *brocaded*  
*in gold*, our desires suddenly  
unfurling like massive banners  
*soft as a sigh*, but at the price  
of the Assam Valley

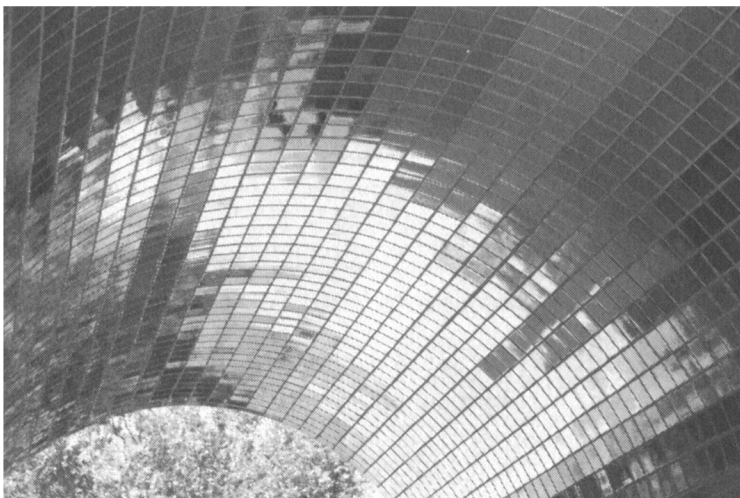
we thrive in the humidity,  
in extruding stories from  
winged mothers, steaming  
and weaving our stockings  
until they shine in solidarity  
with the ground, *it is what you wear*  
*when you want to touch God*  
it is what you gather  
from *thirty cents a day*

*long before anyone knew of microbes*  
we measured our height  
in filaments, one knot violet  
three knots violent  
four knots notch the  
fingertips of a *Uygur woman's dowry*

west of the Yangtze River

west of the Assam Valley  
west of winged mothers  
and west of wingless children

the felons sleep  
like prisms  
in their cocoons



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# Peculiar Geologic Phenomenon

*Caleb Merritt*

well see now me & poppa always said that if somebody was gunna come fir us theyd a come long time ago aint that right & see me & poppa was gonna go out to that one tree jus like we always do but knew that they new fellas had come and wed be outta luck if we dint wake early & well now im tellin this all wrong ok see me & poppa usta wake early but now poppas good leg is goin bad too and its all cuzza wat happened & ok so one morning it was the morning that momma died see & me & poppa

[pause transcript. 'momma' 'poppa' //: Dr(s). Meredith E. Jensen & Javon F. R. Jensen. latter current Hughes University doctoral candidate. together 6 years, never married. resume transcript]

see & me & poppa clambored into th truck and poppa sped like the cops come found his glowing spector or sumpin & poppa took me out ta the tree th tree that i was jus talking about that we usta climb & poppa swun the truck round real fast like i mean real fast & he jumpd out and i jumpd out and we lookd at that tree real hard i mean real focusd like & poppa said we had ta hurry or hed never make it & i said ok poppa so he went to the truck bed

[pause transcript. 'truck' //: 2006 chevy silverado. license plate: AE226F. found nov 6th, both front tires missing, battery dead. resume transcript]

went to the truck bed and pulled out his garmet grey cloth thing & there was this hand poking out of the cloth i swear it and i said poppa & he said dont worry & i said ok poppa & then he was strugglin to carry it & i said poppa ill help & he said no & he also said hed be along jus fine and that itll all be good and ta be honest i wouldnt even remember this jus like last time if it all went right & i said ok



even though i dont git it so much & so then poppa puts the grey cloth on the ground by the tree & no joke he takes a little bit jus a little bit a the bark offa the tree in a perfect rectangle see like its sum kinda secret door & he says hold this and so i do & then theres all these buttons and wires left right inside the tree

[pause transcript. 'buttons and wires left right inside the tree' //:  
according to reporters on scene, Jensen reportedly built solar powered tesla coil inside trunk of oak tree. 2 miles east of Hayfire rd.  
resume transcript]

left right inside the tree i swear it only poppa dont want me to swear so much but anyway the wires is like a space thing like one a those movies we usta watch bout Buck Rogers and his cadets & poppa was always wanting me to be like Buck but i always says poppa you know im jus a kid that aint as smart as but then poppa would always be cutting me off see and thats where hed give me a hug and hed put his grey whiskers on my cheek right here see and hed say that one sayin that oh yea you parently alredy know bout & anyways i was telling you bout the tree ok so the bark is off and it looks like space and poppa is pressing buttons and levels and widgits like hes some Buck Rogers and i axe him if he thinks hes travelling to the next century or even next decade and i laugh and poppa jus look back at me and his mouth is smiling see but his eyes look all sad like & then poppa dos even more like opening containers and handling wires and moving things all over & so i walk up and pull the grey cloth off the hand & i say poppa this aint jus a hand! & poppa says you put that down but this time i disobeyed poppa and i know i shouldnt a disobeyed i jus had this feeling & poppa says you cant trust most them feelings but you gotta ra-shon-al them with the Scientific Method i remember that well see & when i pull back the grey its momma & i dont say nothing cuz i try to think a the Hy-poth-e-siss like the Tes-T and the Con-Clue-Shzun & poppas being all rushed like he gotta hurry and so i ask him why poppa you being all worried and why is momma in the grey cloth i thought we buried her &

he still has kind eyes but he still looks all worried & then poppa says all quiet like that your mommas gonna come back & then he says ok ok take a breath

[pause transcript. 'momma' //: reported reanimation test of (1) Dr. Meredith E. Jensen. probable unsuccess. resume transcript]

ok ok take a breath cuz my chest starts feeling all funny and i says poppa why did momma haveta die and i says poppa is there science for this & poppa says shh soon youll forget again jus like last time and i says poppa im not sure i wanna forget and then poppa hugs me again & his callusd hands like they are both rough and kind and thats why they callusd & anyway his hands bring me over to another tree and he starts attaching wires and i say poppa im scared cuz i tryin' not to feel but im definitely scared at that point and poppa says dont you worry & i said poppa you remember that book about algeron and his flowers and poppa said yea & i say poppa i think i wanna read that book agin will you read it to me all question like but then poppa told me quiet down and he looked all scared too & that jus git me more scared and i said poppa wut happened to the white mouse and the boy and poppa said all real quiet agin that the boy knew he was fading but i dint have ta worry cuz tomorrer wed be back at the house all three of us and we could have jelly toast and i said jelly toast like a question right and poppa said yea & he put his big hand on my left cheek right here see but then he jus turn away & then these headlights come on & they aint lookin right at us but it still scary & all a sudden poppa real near and holding my arm real tight my right arm right here like & his whiskers the grey ones on his cheek yea they get real near my cheek & poppa says all quiet like that i gotta hold real still and i say poppa but then he holds my arm so tight it gets red like this see

[pause transcript. noted injuries of subject: 2.25 in. abrasion - forearm. evidence of electrical shock. probable node attachment points: back of knees, inside elbows, back of neck. injuries have yet to heal.

no sign of recovery. resume transcript]

it gets all red like this see & the lights are still there & poppa walks real sof on the leaves cuz theres a little chill & with one hand bitin me poppa puts his other hand on this lever inside the tree & then & then & then my eyes flicker & i feel my body shake like i aint even doing it & i see momma or momma's body or somepin on th ground & its quiverin and shakin all the like & then she starts to sit up & i say momma or poppa or i shoudt to one of em & poppa turns back & his eyes is all glazd over like i can't tell he been crying and jus git done or if he sleepn but walkin but in any case he look real surprised that im talkin & he come over still all slow like see & then it was real scary cuz poppa dont seem like poppa agin or anymore & then his hand is real tight on my neck & i say poppa i dont know if you in there but & then i see momma and her eyes dont have the glaze & then the light go out and i realize that weve been out here for awhile but then these men these men in suits and stuff or somepin cuz its hard the light is so grey and dark & i see them push momma down or at least she was then on her knees and then she was on the ground but i still see her eyes & then my vision goes all hazy like the smoke clouds when we go drivin on tuesday afternoon jus me & poppa & then i hear this crack like a real crack pretty loud you know and poppas eyes go all somein weird like & then this man or woman i dont really know is holding real tight onto poppa like tighter than a really good hug but poppa aint holdin me tight like his hand slides right off & then i see theres more of them & at this point i still dont got a voice for what reason i couldnt tell ya like & then these people from the car got momma and poppa together standing up & then real sudden like real sudden theres two pops jus like nothing and then momma and poppa arnt standing anymore see

[pause transcript. noted death of (1) Dr. Meredith E. Jensen. presumed immediately upon bullet entry from back through left ventricle. resume transcript]

anymore see & then its quiet but loud & i know that dont make a lotta sense but i swear thats how it felt & then i felt myself slippin like it was before & i knew i gotta be quiet but momma always said when the science didnt work then i could jus sing & poppa i think liked the singing even though i know im notta real good singer like momma & so i was wired up to this tree see & i couldnt really move but i knew poppa dun that to make me safe but i still all scared & i start this little hum i didnt even know i had in me but then all the people are looking at me & its jus like i wish i was invisible like when momma & poppa would have their little fights & i know they dint mean fir me ta hear i jus well see poppa i know hes a good man right but sometimes i think hed tell momma that it was her fault it was her science that made me so i wasnt so at the same pace as th other kids & momma would tell him you cant say that hes our son & i said all real quiet to myself that yes im her sun and im poppas sun & i keep repeatin it like im her sun im her sun im her sun & so anyways im there in the forest right like wired er whatever up to this tree & i cant really move away from the tree & theres all those people & thas what i start singing right then even though im real scared

[pause transcript. 'singing' //: witness report 4 as follows. play witness 4 report. 'shaky music like... old hymn... amazing grace or whatever' end witness 4 report. resume transcript.]

even though im real scared like real shaky like & then theres this pop like what i herd earlier & i see poppa standin like hes hurt & theres one of them people from the car on the ground

[pause transcript. noted death of (1) \*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* (name withdrawn) confirmed cause: bullet wound to left temple. perpetrator: Javon F. R. Jensen. resume transcript]

on the ground & i say poppa you hurt like a question see & at that

point i aint sure if hes poppa or not but in any case the people is all now looking at poppa agin & then this man least i think hes the one well hes got his hand on me well hes also got this rock like poppa usta teach me bout like Gee-Alloh-Gee maybe its Kwuh-Aurtz-It or Ig-Nee-Yous or sompin & then real quick like i dont even member it real well it was so quick & all a sudden theres red on poppas face & the man keeps putting the rock back onto poppa face real hard like & i cant really look at it cuz its hard ta look at you know & then my poppa is on the ground and he dont really have a face no more like its all red and he's on the ground all red & i member that color so well jus like i think bout that grey cloth & that red oh & then the man stands above my poppa and puts his leg down real hard on where poppas face was

[pause transcript. noted death of (1) Javon F. R. Jensen. probably cause: repeated abrasions to face with rock (1.26 kilograms). indentation to skull, evidence of leather boot (size 12), owner \*\*\*\*\* \*  
\*\*\*\*\* (name withdrawn). resume transcript]

puts his leg down real hard on where poppas face was but then i cant no worry bout poppa cuz the man who jus dun that ta poppa looks real deep or real hard inta ma eyes & im a little scared but its also like notta lotta people goin look me in the eye & then the man well he see he dun like poppa nalways did when we was hedded ta bed & i feel ma hed go all weird like all fuzzgrey and compluhkated like & th lights ar all flickerin like real stormtumble & guashcat & at this point i think im thinking that i wish poppa wasnt not on the ground & then im interruptd all like the man whos got this shirt and i can see its collar all pressd real nice like we usta have going to church when momma wood take us before the nice church man said we aint allowed no more i alright bout it but i know momma misssd it & anyway mistrnicepressdcollar well he starts saying they bin lookin fir me fir a long time and i said what like all question like & well anyway you know what i been saying cuz thas when you made it go all dark like & brought me here wherever that is & on the way

kep sayin i jus gotta tell you what my poppa was doin but like i say i  
dont know much i just know that i miss him & those real nice picnic  
like jus what me & him usta do what do you think bout that?

[pause transcript. final notes. 'i/me' //: ? end transcript]

# how the world ends

*Mawi Sonna*

each falling petal burns  
through thickets of skin

as floods raid veins on  
wings of snow moths and

honey bee suckles dry  
our souls crystal thin

as bygone days  
drip into dried corpses,

ancient bones bloom  
eternal rosemary.

# Dislodge

*Matt Champagne*

A burden  
                  my throat  
cannot  
                  swallow,  
grape,  
                  brandy,  
burr,  
                  rakes my  
esophagus,  
                  a wedding  
ring wrung  
                  too tightly,  
a glottal  
                  stop.  
no maneuver  
                  or aspiration  
can dislodge  
                  the end  
of our  
                  enjoinment,  
the haunting  
                  remains past  
midnight,  
                  the haunted  
pray for  
                  an end.  
It is silent  
                  but it is there,  
turning, pulsing,  
                  a demonic  
twitch in



need.  
Exorcism, exorcism,  
    each second  
aching, joints  
    on the  
rack. My  
    hands, sweaty  
boar faces,  
    clutch the  
rooting swallow,  
    wring it  
out as  
    a bell  
ringing and ringing,  
    calling sinners,  
calling church-yard  
    Sacraments as i  
cough and cough.  
    Open, mouth.  
Leave me be.  
    And you  
depart, i  
    with damp  
sheets, swollen  
    face.

# Crackers

*K. Goetting*

Jimmy spotted the small, heat-blurred figure of a hitchhiker and slowed down. Maybe. He reached across the cigarette-stained seat to crank down the passenger window and asked if he needed a lift.

The drifter stopped and leaned closer to the car, shielding his eyes with a callused hand against the glare from the maroon paint.

“That’d be mighty kind. Ol’ Crackers here is damn near overheated.”

“Crackers can sit in the back.”

“Much obliged. Go on, Crackers. Git.”

After a few misguided hops, the heat-worn matted mutt jumped into the backseat and collapsed, its tongue lolling foam. Jimmy grimaced.

“Crackers looks like hell.”

“Wouldn’t happen to have any water for ‘im, would ya? Hasn’t had a drink all day.”

Jimmy shifted, sliding his partly crushed bottle water under his seat. “Nope. Sorry.”

“S’alright. Name’s Smitty, by the way.”

Jimmy nodded and drove. “Heading back home, Smitty?”

“Anywhere’s home, as long as I got Ol’ Crackers back there.”

Jimmy smirked and took a detour past town. Said he was taking them to his mom’s for a meal. But they’d have to be quiet—she had sensitive hearing.

#

Crackers needed a bath. While Smitty untangled the sun-

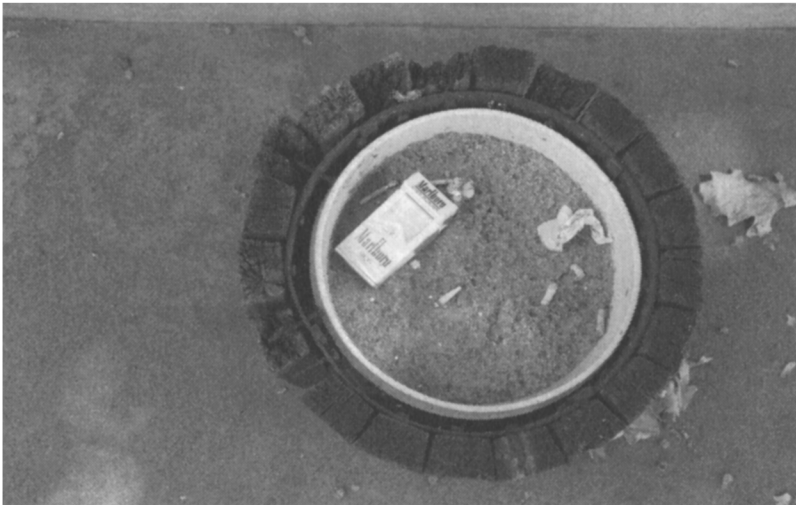
bleached garden hose in the backyard, Jimmy unsheathed a knife from his sleeve.

Staring from the second-floor balcony, his mother swayed in a rocking chair, backlit by candles in the window. He looked to her. She dipped her head. And Jimmy smiled.

He stabbed through the side of Smitty's neck, forcing the blade downward through his vocal cords, turning a raspy scream into a soft, gurgling brook.

Smitty's warm blood bathed Crackers, and Jimmy turned on the hose.

Crackers looked thirsty.



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# The Panic Room

*Matt Champagne*

Is an inland sea,  
A mythic cocoon to  
Grow my teeth

And think. I am lost  
Where the walls  
Do the lapping and my

Bloody mouth,  
Mark of love  
Mark of wholeness,

Does not mind.  
Salt, coarse and defined  
Rubs my skin,

A Calypso touch to  
Take my blackened third eye

And fling it far across the waters.  
The sangria of my crisp dreams,

Pour the torrid wine.  
Deeply drink.



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# Becoming

*Sofia Yarberry*

I am topless  
and six years old wanting the sun on every part of me.

The sun covers me in light  
like a chosen one or even like the boys  
down the street. I drink my glass of cold  
coca cola and the thin layer  
of cold cola sweat drips onto my little sprawl of chest.

I use two hands to bring the glass to my mouth. She's getting too old  
for this I hear my grandfather telling my mother.

My feet dangle in the barely-breeze  
of the afternoon.

Half of me feels embarrassed and wants to reach  
for my little pink towel like Adam's desperate grasp for leaves.

And half of me feels unfallen, not reaching for a thing.

If I were a boy I would never wear a shirt I say to myself.  
I go back into the pool and bury myself in water,  
so no one can see me,  
so deep that it hurt to open my eyes.

# Dysphagic

*Riley Morsman*

My fingers caress  
our flesh, feeling  
each depression and bruise  
like lumps on an old dog's  
loved and sagging body  
careful—  
not to press too hard

But I can't stop stroking  
the wilted places  
so they bulge on one side  
and then the other  
my fingertip guiding these swollen  
reminders that we have  
lungs

I press our flesh and it  
reaches back—as if September leaves  
had bled their rust and their roses  
into mud, swirling  
until the perfect tone was  
ready to be glazed  
across our limbs  
like a blanket over a child  
or a sheet over a body—

I am still trying to learn  
to swallow what is broken



*photograph by Riley Morsman*



# The Changeling

*Stephanie Wallace*

Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.  
William Butler Yeats, "The Stolen Child"

The cool air smelled like juniper berries, soil, and the frozen whisper of snow higher up in the mountains. Blue jays chirruped in the pines above the brown-painted, chain-link fence that divided the front yard of the cabin from the two-lane highway and more trees. Cars didn't pass by. My less than ten-year-old hands were dusty with dirt and chipped bark. I'd been collecting long, thick sticks to build a fort beside the gravel driveway where our green Audi collected sap on its roof. The rough ends of my sticks punctured the grass like candles into an ice cream cake.

I was still alone when I finished building my stick fort. It came up to my chest and was round like a fairy ring. I put my hands on my hips to admire my work for a minute, then I crawled into the tight space to fit inside like a rabbit nestling into its warren. Sitting on my haunches with my legs against my chest, I grinned. The tangled twigs above me veiled the trees and the patches of pale sky behind their needles. The opening of my stick fort framed my view of the cabin, with its white shingles, oak door, and the round window above the stairs inside where I curled up in its curved windowsill just to see if I could fit. (I did, but it was not a comfortable spot.)

My fort stayed in the front yard most of that winter. I imagined what it would be like to shrink and live inside its delicate embrace. It was a home meant for forest creatures and fair folk. I was merely a guest in their realm. The woven twigs of my fort eventually

fell out into a pile beneath its frame, leaving behind a skeleton of sticks half-buried by snow and the memory of being enchanted by nature's possibilities.

Most of my pleasant childhood memories were at the cabin: rolling snowballs for snowmen so big I couldn't push them any farther, planting sunflowers beneath the birdhouse on a wooden pole, playing Poohsticks at the creek in the woods behind our backyard, swinging upside-down with my hair dragging through woodchips, climbing the leaning tree and the limestone boulders, sledding down the deck stairs, and stargazing through my bedroom window. I do not remember fighting with my mom at the cabin. That came later. We fought in the urban desert of southern Arizona, where the mountain's presence could not reach us. The cabin was the one place we could live together beyond the rest of the world, an in-between space we had shared.

The following summer, my stick fort had long since fallen apart. We eventually sold the cabin and moved to Kansas in 2007. I have never seen the stars as clearly as I once did through my bedroom window.

A changeling can be one of two possibilities: a child that has been taken by faeries or a faery that has replaced a stolen child. The reasons for the exchange vary greatly. Stories about changelings stretch through centuries and across most European countries, with many different names for faeries such as elves or the fair folk. Some tales say faery children need human milk to grow strong. Others say faeries take human children to raise them as their own or keep them for entertainment. Sometimes the body of a sudden death is called a changeling, and that the dearly departed had simply been whisked away and replaced with a corpse.

One facet of these stories remains consistent – changelings are unlucky in-betweens, almost always scorned and never fully accepted

by humans or faeries.

I have lived through many ages, through the eyes of salmon, deer, and wolf. ... I've seen suffering and the darkness. Yet, I've seen beauty thrive in the most fragile of places. I have seen the book – the book that turned darkness into light.

Aisling, *The Secret of Kells*

I learned my mom was mentally ill when I showed my notebook to my friend Frankie in my 7th grade P.E. class. She had bouncy hair, ample curves, hipster glasses, and a theater-born savvy I admired. Unlike me, she could be any person she wanted. We had been dribbling basketballs or running laps, probably for heart monitor exercises that made us sweat and curse as the tight monitors beneath our bras kept slipping and dead-lining our pulses. When we had a break, I took my dog-eared notebook from my locker and folded back the pages.

“Whoa,” Frankie said when she saw my tiny handwriting pinched against a zig-zag timeline for the novel I was planning. I couldn't tell if she was amused or slightly overwhelmed by the amount of text on those two notebook pages, but she kindly squinted at my writing and listened to me ramble about my story while she tried to read.

Eventually, we ended up talking about my mom and why I didn't want her to read my work. It could have been that same day, or it might have been a week later. Frankie's support for my writing proved to me that I could trust her.

I told Frankie how I wasn't allowed to go anywhere without my mom's permission, how she pretended to homeschool me and my sister in Arizona because she believed the schools there were “overcrowded” and had “high crime rates,” how she kept me up at night by yelling at the wall to “stress vent” about the criminals who

“poisoned” her while she was sleeping and “stole” money from her trust fund (the only reason we haven’t ended up homeless). My mom was trapped in a mind plagued by darkness, her delusions caging her like the fragile twigs of my stick fort. I left my fort behind at the cabin and was just beginning to step out of the world of my notebooks. The more I told Frankie, the more her eyebrows knitted together.

“Steph, that isn’t normal,” she said. “It sounds like she has paranoid schizophrenia.”

I googled it when I had to go to the library for a homework assignment. (We didn’t have internet access at our house until I was in high school.) I clicked through definition after definition, learning that schizophrenia was possibly a genetic trait that could be triggered by hallucinogenic drugs. The knowledge numbed me. It helped to finally have a reason, and yet it didn’t. It was not the answer I wanted. Frankie gave me a name for my mom’s problems, but she could not give me a cure for them. She couldn’t give me back my mother, the one stolen away and replaced by her mental illness.

In the early 1900s, two young girls tricked one of the most cunning authors of their era – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – into believing they had photographed faeries. The “Cottingley Fairies,” named so because the girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, lived in Cottingley, England. The girls had taken their father’s camera into the woods behind their house and claimed to have won the faeries’ trust because they were children. Their photos found their way to Doyle just as he was commissioned to write a story in the Christmas 1920 edition of *The Strand Magazine*. The story went viral. Hundreds of people believed the photos were real. Many still do today, despite that the girls have since admitted to faking the photos. Perhaps it is just human nature to believe what we wish was true.

I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream.  
I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar a gleam.  
And I know it's true, that visions are seldom all they seem.  
But if I know you, I know what you'll do: you'll love me at once,  
the way you did once upon a dream.

Princess Aurora, *Sleeping Beauty*

I cannot separate my mom from her mental illness. When my aunt Darlene tried an intervention to send my mom to a mental hospital when I was in 11th grade, she often told me that she copes with her sister's problems by reminding herself that my mom is not her mental illness. The illness makes her say awful things. It's only the illness that makes her act unreasonable.

Therapists have told me the same thing. I need to see my mom as who she is without paranoid schizophrenia. I can't. I don't know if it is because I am afraid of confronting that reality, or if it is simply impossible because I never knew my mom before she was ill. Darlene watched her sister grow up and do drugs with their two older sisters, but I had to watch my mom continue to lose more of herself year after year as I slowly realized what kind of person I was.

I've seen glimpses of who my mom might have been once. It's in her laugh when she remembers something funny from a movie or when she insists on going out for ice cream after dinner. I felt it when she hugged me after my ex-boyfriend dumped me and I cried. It was there when she used to say, "Have I told you yet today?" when she dropped me and my sister off at school. I would always intone back, "See you, love you, bye," yet I always mentally crossed my fingers at the not-quite truth.

My mom hurts me the most when I see these glimpses. It reminds me of what I have lost even though I don't remember ever having her as a mother. It's a hollow, icepick puncture in my chest, an iron-burn ache that won't close. Even when she spits delusional

vitriol about me or my friends, it is easier to keep the idea of her as my mother as an unattainable dream than accept that she was once more than her mental illness. If I only see the illness, I can hate her without guilt.

Yet I cannot escape the guilt, just as she cannot escape the web of delusions that has ensnared her mind. I have fled into my writing and now flee by focusing on the world outside my mom's house, but I am still a captive changeling child of a changeling masking as my mother. I do not know if I will have the strength to reach for my mother again if I ever fully escape the delusions between us.

To protect themselves from faeries, many people in the Middle Ages would hang charms like iron horseshoes or sprigs of rowan on their doors and above their babies' cradles. Others would leave peace offerings like a bowl of milk or bread crumbs to curry their favor. It was common to avoid places faeries frequented, such as forests.

People all react differently to the unknown. Whether we choose to embrace or reject our fears reveals more about ourselves than we may care to admit sometimes.

"Go back?" he thought. "No good at all! Go sideways? Impossible! Go forward? Only thing to do! On we go!" So up he got, and trotted along with his little sword held in front of him and one hand feeling the wall, and his heart all of a patter and a pitter.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

# A Mother's Gift

*Riley Morsman*

She wrapped it up  
In teardrops, creased its  
Edges with a laugh  
Took a gulp of sun  
A gulp of thunder  
To help wash it  
Down her throat

It was the moment I  
Began existing  
When she gave me  
My first gift  
It didn't need unwrapping to  
Become a part of me

A decade later I found myself  
Forehead kissing  
Knees again, no longer  
Cradled with her softness  
But with her bedroom door  
Instead

I heard her teardrops choke her  
The gasps that nearly sound  
Like laughs  
I begged the sun and thunder: *wash this*  
*Darkness down the drain*  
Another decade passed  
And I was on the other side  
Fighting for breath and  
Sanity

In a way only  
She would understand



*photograph by Riley Morsman*



# The Street

*Alli Kennon*

So, I walking down the street, bout what? three, four months ago? and I straight up saw Jesus. He was just sitting there, wearing a hoodie, and waiting for the bus. I. stopped. in. the. tracks. of. my. Skechers. Honest to God, y'all. I think he was listening to Chance the Rapper, and like I was too, and it wasn't enough that Jesus was right in front of me, but He was also listening to the same music as me. I mean, this was the second coming! Like not first, but second! I had my dog with me, Dirt, he was a mutt, and Dirt straight up knew—like not when he ate the toilet paper and thought it was a tortilla knew, he knew this time. Dirt just rolled over and fell asleep next to Him. I wasn't even mad; I would do the same thing if I wasn't so shocked. What am I supposed to do with Jesus? Maybe He wants my bus pass? I was about to go give it to Him, but all these middle-aged women with pixie-cuts that smelt like Herberger's came out nowhere and brought Him dozens of cornucopias, so He was busy turning a red head into a brunette because she couldn't afford the new prices at Macy's and y'know, I saw things here at Big Butt's Bargain Store on the daily that kept me young, but this was dope as hell. These, like, police officers came out of nowhere too, and I thought, oh man, He's going to fix police brutality, this is lit! Jesus is up in here y'all! I could hear those ladies giggling too; the bus exhaustion was going all over the place. Dirt was just chillin', his wagging was unstoppable at this point, and like I said, my feet just stayed planted, only my shoelaces moved, I swear to God himself! But, the cops were still wearing their masks, like they do y'know, and they were like yelling all this, and He was listening to Chance. He had his hoodie up so I don't think He like, saw them. But, they had their guns up, and they start acting like they're gonna shoot Jesus, saying if He didn't do exactly what they said, they were gonna hurt Him. He was so calm too, y'all. He just walked up to them with a smile on his face and his hands up in prayer like

naw, they're cool, they're blessin' us too. They're just like us. And Jesus, He walked right up to them, walked right up to them, with footsteps so soft I swore the concrete was cotton. The cops, though, I swear they were blind as hell; they were still screaming, and it was getting so loud I could hear it over all the dogs and the ladies and the people like me with their feet all still like mine. So at that point I decided what I needed to do, ya know, when the rooster crows. I went in front of Jesus, I know, I know, and I said, "Hey! Are y'all blind? This is the Son of God! He's just here to help us! What are you doing?" and I swear I saw his mom in that moment too y'know, and that's when I felt the blood, and that was okay, because y'know Jesus was here. His dark hand held mine and He hugged me, because He knew He wasn't doing anything, He was just trying to help the people, and I think He saw that I got that. Y'know, we were both out there in the street, like, no one came for awhile. His hoodie was red now too, but something about His meant something. And I don't even care I can't walk no more, because y'know, anyone would do that for Jesus, right? Oh sorry, my bad, my man, do you want paper or plastic?

# "Mm!"

*Veronica Clay*

That boy is beautiful  
Fine as f—  
—flapjacks  
Mixed with cinnamon and nutmeg  
Drizzled with mama's homemade  
Brown sugar and vanilla  
Syrup—hot!  
From the pan,  
He is a stack of pancakes  
With a side of bacon  
Best believe  
I'd be waking  
Up every morning  
Hungry for breakfast!  
And heart sick  
'Cause he is  
Fresh brewed black tea  
With lemon and honey  
Hot to the lips,  
Warm in the chest  
A sigh of relief  
My sickness' welcome guest  
Yes, his mama  
Made him strong  
A plate of KC  
  
Honey barbeque wings  
Colla' greens  
And some cornbread!  
He is dinner, seconds, and dessert  
Sweet potato pie with pecans

Whip cream and coffee  
That boy is a sight for sore eyes  
Yea, his mama made him right.  
That boy is beautiful.



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# Prologue

*Caleb Merritt*

*after WCW's 'The Red Wheelbarrow' and 'This Is Just To Say' while  
looking at a painting by possibly Vettriano though i'm not 100% sure  
in three parts*

I.

so little depends  
upon two poorly  
reproduced

black umbrellas;  
fake crackles of  
oil paint

no white chickens here.  
just hidden  
maiden faces

and the tall white  
man - Vettriano  
himself.

do their reflections  
blurred orange and  
eight feet

dance with them?  
choose joy  
the handkerchief wind.

her wheelbarrow dress  
matte with yet

coming rain

II.

plums warming  
in the wet  
basket

not so cold  
eh, william?  
his wife -

the purple  
cloud; his hope  
the too-big pants

Jack is  
short; short  
for Phillies

and the gray  
triangle departure  
of Hopper's light

acquiescence;  
a new planet  
in barefoot beach feet

(at some point,  
you have to stop  
beating yourself up)

III.

what a murderously  
quiet grey  
spelled British like.

no one is being  
covered by the  
umbrellas and

the non-rain.  
unwetness except  
for damp feet and

shiny pebbles  
on shiny shoes on  
an unshiny man.

unface, the butler,  
hold the shiny  
gun out

of sight “dance”  
he says and turning  
to Jack “paint”.



*photograph by Riley Morsman*



# she started out as a flame-painting

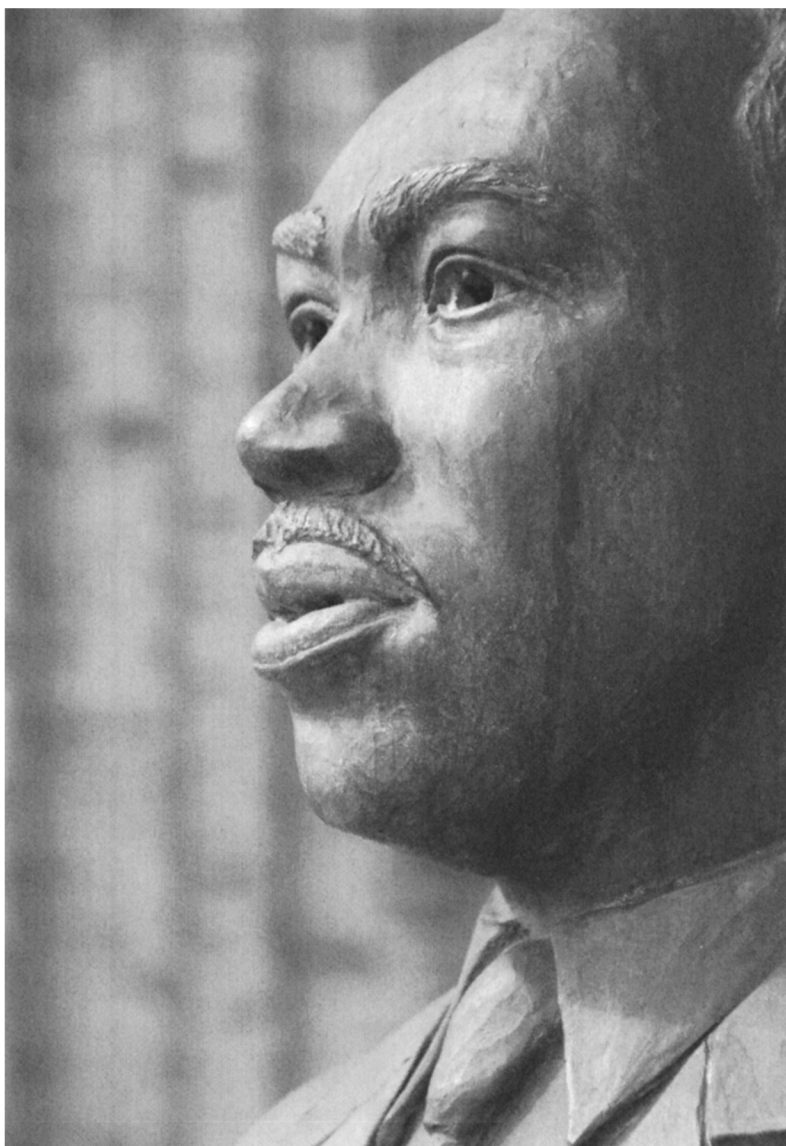
*Sofia Yarberry*

streaked in creaky-crimson & almost uncontainable,  
like Hester: red only for the sake of passion—  
I started to turn,  
but suddenly I saw too much  
of you in her so I let her love me anyway she could.

I know what it's like to be a starved seabird,  
I grew up afraid of their flocks. I was seven  
when they ate my entire bag of Cheetos  
at the beach. Why did you let them do that?  
I accusingly asked my mother. I couldn't stop  
them, she said. I couldn't stop them.

Red polished pebbles line whatever hell I'm  
in today. You're the real deal he says. I suppose  
I do what I can to be real, I think to myself.  
Oh what a world!  
loved only by those who burn wrong.  
Oh what a world!  
I laugh  
as the pebbles throb red and soft.  
Oh what a life this is without  
you here— the pebbled path has never looked  
so long shining in this eternal heat.  
I couldn't stop them.

glowing (in this eternal heat).



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# The Rogue Man and Me

*Matt Champagne*

He comes in the moving body bag of another's skin  
My Rouge man,  
His hair, moving purgatory lights sloping and  
Licking at my neck,  
My thigh, and tells me of a Murphy or O'Leary history.  
Godless and beautiful, his Jezebel heat rises  
Ripples and twists the air above us where  
A cartoon devil, with a "you-know-you-want-me"  
Eye of the same shade floats knowing, watching.  
Incubus, Incubus.

\*\*\*

I am     wild,  
          My     grandmother's Gypsy blood     assures that.

Hemoglobin laced with   tarnished gold,  
                  Stories of the weird,     old country cakes     and

Mends the     burns from purgatory   lights, from  
                  Heat-beat stubble. Burns, because     I wandered

Too far           from the           caravan.

\*\*\*

The hair of your stomach, light in the light  
Flickers its own glow-leading

Downward,  
An inferno in which I burn as a heretic.

Light me, Inquisitor and Devil.  
Sew my head backwards for I see other kingdoms.

Dostoyevsky knew of  
These hidden speeches.

\*\*\*

if i were a falcon, i would peck out my falconer's eyes.  
my blindness would be his.  
i would not see the candle where he writes love letters in  
his tent under the frost moon.  
the little heat of the candle draws us in.  
he stares and blinks away dark spots.

\*\*\*

The Rouge Man nears me,  
Legs open, lips, slight.  
I see the cartoon devil's mincing in the purgatory  
Lights, flames licking, tickling their heels.  
I feel this heat in my face, my tongue, my stomach.  
It burns me more than him because I am not of fire.  
I am not jinn.  
My hair is dark; it is fertile soil.  
His is that necessary fire.  
To leave the world, I must cross it.  
Incubus, Incubus.

# Maternal Instincts

*K. Goetting*

It made Frieda sick. It made her sick to see the announcement on Facebook, riddled with references to God and tacky heart emojis. It made her sick to see the bloating of Amy, and the excitement in Mark's eyes. It made her sick to watch him pressing his ear against her flesh only to flinch away and laugh at baby kicks.

Frieda drew the knife gingerly across her sister's swollen belly as she lay in a pool of her own beautiful brains on the kitchen floor. The same fat, distended belly Mark doted on. Amy had stolen Mark away, and carried what should be Frieda's. She charmed him with her ugly spider-leg lashes. Her whorish gait. Her law degree.

Blood pooled by her temple and stained the kitchen tile as her eyes stared ahead, tears resorbing into the tissue. Frieda had to be careful. There was a precious gift inside this tattered wrapping. A diamond in the rough of this sinew jungle. And Mark would return from the airport soon enough, to surprise Amy with keys to their new life. But Mark would be the one surprised.

Amy committed suicide; the gunshot residue on her hands would vouch for that. And Frieda walked in just as the bullet pierced the tile floor. Amy's note would have said something about making it easier to clean up, since the walls weren't painted with the right kind of paint. Mark would regret keeping that pistol under the mattress. And Frieda single-handedly saved Mark's unborn child from a suffocating fate, thanks to her head-nurse-reflexes—and Mark would be so grateful. He would. He will.

Without the protection of the blue vinyl gloves she was accustomed to, the uterus was greasier than expected. But there was no reason for sterility here.

She curled her fingertips through the incision and stretched until the womb ripped wide enough to withdraw the child from inside the dead, gaping mouth.

*Her child.*



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# The Story of a Dream

*Veronica Clay*

"I Have a Dream"

4 words 11 letters

That dared to believe

In a world that could be better

Unsevered by ancestral descent

Undivided by the color of skin

"I Have a Dream," and it came from long ago

When African Natives were taken from their homes

And made cargo

When cotton covered fields were a hellish form of snow

The summers were sweltering

Sweat dripped over welts covering

Black slaves in a sickly shine

And winters were no more kind than whips

When hovels for homes were bare, they dripped

The food—scarce, and the air frigid

But when sleep finally came

There was dance in a land that was distant

Not in space, but in time

And the babies who survived the freezing night

Awoke with wide eyes

Saying, "Mama, I Have a Dream"

Which passed to their great-grand babies

Who grasped for their blue coats

Who fought in their blue coats

Who died in their blue coats

And croaked, "I Have a Dream—a true hope"

Which rang from ancestors' Negro spirituals

To descendants' Harlem Blues

Sang by a people who

Were housed in slums, still viewed as foreigners to

A land which had taken their fruit  
Yet refused their roots  
Still, "I Have a Dream" was a seed  
Sown in weary and longing hearts—unwilling to die  
A flower in a desert, it grew in determined minds  
Who rebelled against the social standards of the times  
And marched, arms linked  
Like the chains that once bound them  
With heads bowed they  
Stood at the capital and cried:  
"I Have a Dream"  
4 words 11 letters  
That dared to believe  
In a world that could be better  
Unsevered by ancestral descent  
Undivided by the color of skin  
"I Have a Dream" sings in my chest  
I dance in the land my ancestors would call blessed  
Yes, I am the fruit from the tree from the seed of:  
"I have a dream that one day...  
Little black boys and black girls  
Will be able to join hands with  
Little white boys and white girls  
As sisters and brothers"<sup>1</sup>  
Because King, like those before him, had a dream  
I have a black father and a white mother  
And I see race as just a color  
God decided to paint with  
Making a masterpiece of pigment  
A prism of different intensities of melanin  
I see dark skin and light skin  
Black skin and white skin  
And I see humans.  
"I Have a Dream" beats within me

---

1 King, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther. "I Have A Dream Speech."



"I Have a Dream" is still hollering  
Because though it had made it far through history  
There is still a black versus white mentality  
And until we stand side by side  
"I Have a Dream" is incomplete  
Because it demands equality  
The torch is in our hands: It's up to you and me  
"I Have a Dream"  
4 words 11 letters  
That dare to believe  
In a world that could be better  
Unsevered by ancestral descent  
Undivided by the color of skin  
Our march is not over  
Will you take the next step?



*photograph by Riley Morsman*

# Interview with Mary Cisper

*Maddie Pospisil*

Amid bindweed and migrating hummingbirds, Mary Cisper lives with her husband in northern New Mexico. In 2017, Trio House Press published her first collection, *Dark Tussock Moth*, winner of the 2016 Trio Award. Her poems and reviews have been published in various journals including *Denver Quarterly*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Lana Turner*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Terrain*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Newfound*, *FIELD*, *1110*, *Omniverse*, and *Fourteen Hills*. She recently completed her MFA in Poetry at Saint Mary's College of California. A sometime chemist, Mary was once on intimate terms with ion trap mass spectrometers in search of ultra-low detection limits. Her admiration for the artist and naturalist, Maria Sibylla Merian, was sparked by Google's April 2, 2013 doodle celebrating Maria's 366th birthday.

Maddie Pospisil: In June of this year, you probably already know this, there was a conference in Amsterdam dedicated to Maria Sibylla Merian—

Mary Cisper: I did not know that!

MP: It was to bring together new research about her and her research, her art, and this year is the 300th anniversary of her death. To me, it's pretty amazing that centuries after this very complex woman was alive, there was an entire conference dedicated to her. So, I have a two-pronged question for you: First, if the laws of the universe stopped being laws, and you could meet Maria, what would you want to talk to her about?

MC: You know, I've read as much as I can find about her, and all the sources say we know so little about her personal life. One thing

I'd want to know is how she decided to fund her own voyage and go to the New World to study insects and plants there. I'd want to understand where she came up with this reserve of great risk-taking, right? She divorced her husband, you know? She was an amazing icon, and I'd want to know how she managed to withstand social and cultural pressures and make her own life. That's one thing—I'd just be curious about everything because I'm so fascinated by her.

MP: My second part of the question is if you had been in Amsterdam, what would you have wanted to tell a room of mostly scientists about Maria? Because you engaged with a different side of her than just the scientist side.

MC: Well, what engages me so much about her is that she engaged art and science. I'd want to talk about her compositions, her paintings, the aesthetic points of her visual art. That might be a fun thing to focus on, as opposed to "Yeah, she was this great observer and naturalist." Let's just talk about aesthetic issues. Have you looked at her work? That's how I first learned about her—through her art.

MP: I came across one [of her compositions] of a tarantula eating a hummingbird—I love that piece! It's so cool, and there was a little blurb on it that was like, "Can you imagine a woman drawing this in the late 1600s? This really gory image?"

MC: She got a lot of flak for that. There was a lot of denial—people said she made that up. And that was later refuted. There was resistance because other naturalists hadn't observed it and so they [said], "Oh, she didn't know what she was talking about." You can always speculate about what caused that, but whatever. Could be endless.

MP: Building off Maria being an artist and a scientist—you had a career in science, and now you're a poet. And Dark Tussock Moth is both fieldnotes and poetry and everything in between and both at once. What draws you to this cross-genre space? What keeps you

there?

MC: One of my mentors said, “How much can you include in a poem?” And I feel I can include as much as I want. That’s kind of my guideline. What can I include? Why do I need to exclude something? Can I make this more layered? It’s the desire to reflect my vision of the world—you know, the world is so complex and complicated—what can we bring that reflects that?

MP: Throughout *Dark Tussock Moth* “Field Notes” are interspersed. In the first of the “Field Notes,” you say “Learning that light might be coming from stars no longer in existence amazed me. I wanted to be an astronomer.” Then, in a later “Field Notes,” the lines “Maybe wondering about stars assuaged family chaos. A Vedic astrologer told me, we, all of us, had perished together centuries back in a fire. My inner theater expanded then, never mind belief.” Then, even later, “I didn’t become an astronomer.” Your collection is a metamorphosis in many ways—astronomy just one example of such. How did you conceptualize the order and evolution of this collection? Did Maria have any influence on that process?

MC: I don’t know that Maria had something to do with it. I feel, in some ways, ordering the poems was not a rational process. It was a poetic process. Based on feeling. Have you ever put pages on the floor? “Oh, how should I put these in order?” That’s kind of how I did it. And it was based on the moment. It wasn’t rational or scientific.

MP: I just love the process of making a book—how do you decide?

MC: It’s this great mystery, isn’t it? And I put other manuscripts together before, but I’d say it’s the look of the universe. It’s poetry.

MP: A poet I admire told me recently that I should make some collages. And I read that you are collagist, and I’m curious if you find

that working in collage has any effect on your poetry?

MC: Sometimes when I'm struggling with writing, I move into the visual mode. I do photographic collage, so I do it with Photoshop—and I have done paper collage, but not for a long time. If I can move back and forth, the one complements the other. And with photographic collage, it's liberating. Because I'm less attached. It's more fun. I know I have attachments to writing—"Oh, I want to write this wonderful poem!" But if I work in collage, I'm just playing. If someone advised you that, it might be fun for you to have this experience of playing with materials.

MP: Have you ever considered doing a collection that has both in it?

MC: That's interesting—someone said that to me just recently. Well maybe! I think it'd be fun. Who knows. Oh, I should say, I've made a few little movies of my poems. I put together images—some of them are still images and some are moving images—and then I'll read the poem over the images as they're moving. That's something I love doing. And I haven't done anything with them, but I really loved doing that. It's something I should explore more because it's so much fun.

MP: This book is built around an ecologist who lived 300 years ago and is grounded in the natural world, and yet, there are mentions of meditation apps and contemporary artwork (Jeff Koon's Michael Jackson sculpture, notably). What are you consuming these days—in terms of literature, music, and beyond?

MC: I was recently at the San Francisco MOMA. We were there to see the Walker Evans photograph exhibit, but we also ended up going to the seventh floor where they had all these sound installations. [Editor's note: The exhibit housed on this floor is "Soundtracks," a group exhibition that explores the role of sound in art.] This one

room was dedicated to this one work, “The Visitors” by Ragnar Kjartansson, which encompassed nine different screens of moving film, and it’s hard to describe, but it was an intense, moving experience. It was so beautiful; it was an amazing experience. It was also a social experience, so people were walking around, looking at each screen. People were enraptured. It gives me chills to think about it. That was a recent aesthetic experience, which was both film and music.

I’m reading Joanne Kyger, who died recently. She had a long career as a poet, maybe not as well-known as she should be. I’m also reading *The Hidden Life of Trees*, about trees and their amazing qualities as social beings—I’d call them beings. I like to be reading nonfiction, and I like things with a science-y bent, and I like poetry. That’s how I get inspiration—the associative process, what we can combine with something else. Reading is how I feed that—my mix-and-match.

MP: What advice do you have for any young writer trying to find their place in the world of artistry?

MC: This is advice I’ve heard a lot: “Follow your obsessions.” There’s something there that your soul is wanting. There’s something in that search that you’re needing to find out. Figure out how to play. Find the lightness—that’s a rich space. Don’t be afraid of exploring new things. In a workshop I was in, the poet who was leading it said, “A poet should know as much as possible about everything.” I kind of think that’s true. It’s our task to be aware of all the things going on, and that includes science.

I look at everything as an experiment. You don’t know the result. You’re just one of the variables. You’re in your own experiment, and you get to see what happens. You’re both participating and creating it and feeling the effects of it.

MP: Dark Tussock Moth has poems that are very grounded in place. You'll mention names of specific places, and just talking to you today—you lived in Kansas, did your MFA in California, and now you live in New Mexico. Those are very different places. Do you find the location you're in inspires your poetry in different ways?

MC: Totally. A lot of my poetry—well, all of it probably—is influenced by place, where I'm at. It's almost as if I can't resist the natural world, the environment. It enters. I feel very porous to where I'm at. If I lived here, I know I would be feeling the prairie and the hills, and they would come into my poetry. When I was in California, usually, there was morning fog. And there's all this fog in there [Dark Tussock Moth], that I know wouldn't be in there if I hadn't been in California.

MP: I should've known you'd lived in Manhattan. There's a poem in here: "Flint Hills Ligature."

MC: That was actually just from a few years ago; we did a hike out at the tallgrass prairie. It's incredible—such a lovely experience.

MP: There's a line in that poem: "Bluestem roots descend / eight feet." And there are these amazing pictures in the Beach Museum [on the Kansas State campus] that show the Bluestem grass above, and then the roots below that are literally eight feet long. Which to me is mind-blowing—this grass that's so thin and soft and so deeply rooted in Kansas.

MC: That, and learning about how trees communicate with each other, and the world is amazing. The pleasure for me is in being amazed rather than being horrified. It's easy and not unnatural to be horrified by a lot of stuff, but I try to come back to the amazing part.





*photograph by Riley Morsman*



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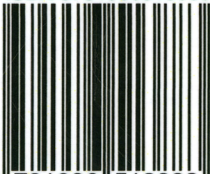


When Pastor Tom asked me to auction off his '67 key lime VW Bug, I knew he was in worse health than he let on. Gigi was as much a part of his identity as his Bible and holy robes. The Bug had taken him from Ft. Lauderdale to Fairbanks to First Presbyterian here in Manhattan, where every Saturday afternoon, she was washed and waxed, ready for morning worship. Pastor Tom would roll through town, windows down, one hand on the slick grey steering wheel, the other waving to staring passers-by. Gigi and Pastor Tom, why, they were inseparable. I also knew that Pastor Tom was in his 80s, that he tried to hide a shuffling left foot, and that he'd had a few strokes earlier this year. Nothing major, so he said, but I bet that the Kansas Department of Motor Vehicles wouldn't look too favorably upon a senior citizen, minister or not, whose misfired synapses might lead to a smash-up on Poyntz Avenue.

*"Gigi's Bon Voyage Party"*

*Krista Danielson*

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