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## Midwestern Voice: Still Listening

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## Midwestern Voice: Still Listening

A review of Charles Baxter's *There's Something I Want You to Do: Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 2015), Ron Parsons's *A Sense of Touch: Stories* (Birmingham, Ala.: Aqueous Books, 2013), Patrick Hicks's *The Collector of Names: Stories* (Tucson: Shaffner Press, 2014), and Luke Rolfes's *Flyover Country* (Georgetown, Ky.: Georgetown Review Press, 2015).

The all-time best title of a book on the short story form has to be Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*. Published in 1957, good parts of it still hold up, particularly O'Connor's ideas about "loneliness"—an essential quality of the writer, he believes—and the necessity of a writer to have a "voice." The latter term is mostly misused these days. In creative writing classes it's usually applied to characters and characterization, while O'Connor rightfully confers "voice" upon authors—their intelligence, their worldview, the characteristics of their "loneliness" (they wouldn't be writing, otherwise) as it leaks through the story, and gradually over the length of a collection, accumulates meaning. Three new short story collections by Minnesota-connected authors Charles Baxter, Patrick Hicks, and Ron Parsons, along with a midwesterner-at-large, Luke Rolfes, give us a chance to listen, in particular, for midwestern voice.

Patrick Hicks's new collection, *The Collector of Names*, reveals a remarkable, sometimes creepy intelligence. His skill is in deeply inhabiting wildly disparate characters: an aging country coroner who's seen it all (but not a plane crash that rains bodies on Duluth); the pilot of B-17 Flying Fortress in World War Two; a geeky high school art student whose muse arrives in a (literal) tornado; an aging widow whose son appears on the doorstep—though he was killed in Vietnam in 1969 (or was he?); a fourth grade boy whose life's work is listing the names of everyone he knows and everyone he meets. This authorial shape shifting can be disorienting as his concrete, muscular prose kicks us from story to story, world to world.

"She was naked on the embalming table, and I couldn't stop staring at

her nipples.” So begins “Living With the Dead,” narrated by teenaged Brian, whose father owns a funeral home. Brian is speaking of dead Ginny, a high school classmate who was texting as she ran a red light. “Growing up in a funeral home is a bit like growing up on a farm because it’s a family business,” Brian continues. “Everybody pitches in.” One of the better stories in the collection, “Living With the Dead” riffs on the irony of a horny teenager working with dead bodies while fixated with the sweet, real body of Ashley, a schoolmate. Ashley is weirdly obsessed with breast cancer, and she’s happy to show Brian her goods in return for a favor: have him take her to the basement of the funeral home and “show me a dead person.” Unlike other stories in Hicks’s collection, this one churns smoothly, and with growing force, to the top of its container but never spills over.

“57 Gatwick,” on the other hand, reels under the weight of plot. A world-weary county coroner who carries unprocessed grief for his late wife is suddenly overtaken by a larger catastrophe: bodies falling on the city of Duluth. After the mid-air disintegration of a large passenger plane bound from Minneapolis to London, George McCourt’s business is bodies (maybe he’s an older version of Brian from “Living With the Dead”). However, this time there are simply too many of them. And too many authorities from various agencies. And too much chaos—too much of everything. As a way to cope, he begins to obsess over the passenger list—the names, their lives, their stories—and gradually reframes his work into an outwardly noble action: fundraising for a memorial to “57 Gatwick.” At the memorial’s dedication, George is treated as a kind of a survivor—a hero, even. After the service and the bagpipe’s last note, “. . . the families came over to George McCourt. Some of them shook his hand, others embraced him.” From his business, George understands that memorials are largely artifice mustered by those who deal with the dead for a living, but he too is able to let go of old grief—an epiphany that rescues the story at the last moment.

Add other stories such as “Leaving Hospice” and “The Missing,” and it’s clear that Hicks is up to something: as the book jacket reads, “Each [main] character . . . must confront and accept the reality of death.” While this gives readers a hook to hang onto, and offers reviewers a means to say what *The Collector of Names* is “about,” as a theme it is less charitable to the collection than Hicks might have expected. “Death” affords him too many psychic landscapes to fill—which he does, with unimpeachable verisimilitude—but the effect can also be disorienting, and to the detriment of a singular voice.

Ron Parsons's collection, *The Sense of Touch*, is comfortable, controlled, and close- to-home to the point of being solipsistic. The title story, for example, strives for high drama from within the teacup confines of a graduate level creative writing class. It has the usual widely varied cast of damaged people, including the professor herself, and in the end mainly piles on an easy target, the creative writing industry.

One of the gems in Parsons's collection is "Midnight Bowling." A youngish professional black man, Virgil, and an older, broken-down white guy, Henry, have the same workout schedule at the local YMCA. Through locker room chitchat they become "friends"—more so in Henry's mind than in Virgil's, but Virgil is a charitable, patient man. This is tested when Henry brings up the matter of young Emery, his grandson. As Henry explains, "[Emery's mother] was, you know, African-American—like you." It's a lovely moment, the kind that good fiction turns upon. Virgil's response can be no less than a revelation of character, and Parsons's gift of understatement serves the story well: "'Uh-huh,' Virgil said, just about dressed."

Henry slyly and persistently maneuvers to get Virgil involved in little Emery's life. Or, as Virgil complains to his girlfriend, Chantel, "It's like he wants me to be a big brother or something."

"So what's wrong with that?" Chantel says.

Virgil has no answer to that or much of anything. Henry, a Vietnam veteran whose health is in decline, deepens Virgil's guilt trip; Chantel, who has been dating Virgil for four years, and living with him for two, presses for commitment; his neighbors ask Virgil to housesit, and he's too nice to say "no." All these ominous clouds of change on the horizon add up to conspiracy against Virgil, one that includes everyone around him. In a random street encounter with a strange looking man, Virgil mutters one of the most telling lines of the book: "Doesn't anyone fit in anywhere, anymore?"

"I'm afraid not," Charles Baxter, would say. His collection, *There's Something I Want You to Do*, has an ambitious *assemblage*. He arranges the book in general halves, the first dedicated to virtues, including "Bravery," "Loyalty," "Charity," and the like; the second centers on vices, including "Lust," "Sloth," "Gluttony," and more. But the true unifying theme of the collection is the sense of dislocation and mistrust of most everything.

In the opening story, "Bravery," a young woman psychiatric social worker meets a slightly odd fellow, Elijah, at an art gallery in San Francisco, where they both live. Turns out he's a pediatric resident, and they marry with a naturalistic inevitability. But soon after their marriage, and while on

a trip to Prague, cracks appear. They have a son, Raphael, the act of which cements some of their marital fissures but creates others. Gradually a fault line appears: “slightly odd” tilts toward “who is this stranger I married?” After a particularly bitter shouting match with Susan, Elijah storms out, returning later bloodied and bruised. “On his face was expression of joyful defiance.” He explains that he interrupted an attack on a woman, and fought off the men, breaking the jaw of one. To her, “There was something about his story she didn’t believe, and then for a moment didn’t believe a word of it, but she continued to wash him tenderly as if he were the hero he said he was.” (We meet Elijah later in the collection, as a middle aged man with serious identity issues.)

In “Loyalty,” a Carver-esque story, disloyalty and change seem like the norm. Wes’s wife, Corrine, has a close woman friend, Astrid, who advises Corrine to dump Wes: “Any morning you wake up without that guy’s stale beer breath on you will be pure profit.” Once Corrine is gone, Astrid marries Wes. “Wes, it seems you are the one. I’m surprised,” Astrid tells him. Wes goes along with this but redeems himself by remaining helpful (loyal) to Corrine as her mental health declines. He is one of the few male characters in the book to achieve a sense of clarity about his role and the path forward.

Characters from “Loyalty” reappear, older and with offspring, in another story, “Avarice,” as do other characters in other stories. In “Gluttony,” the penultimate story (there’s also a coda), we learn that Susan and Dr. Jones (Elijah) have hung on, just barely, and that “Rafe” is now seventeen. Susan takes a fiction writing course in which she creates a character, “Gerald, a balding, overweight criminal lawyer . . . prone to pronouncements and too wrapped up in his work.” Gerald is clearly based on Elijah, and when Susan kills him off in a “painful death from internal bleeding,” Elijah says he doesn’t mind; in fact, he “. . . feels flattered that she would think of putting him a piece of writing.” But ‘Gerald’ only exacerbates Elijah’s identity issues, his tendency to slip out of body, and “from time to time” he starts to think of himself as Gerald. In one of the best scenes in the book, Elijah goes to meet the parents of Raphael’s girlfriend, who has just gotten an abortion. Taking midwestern passive aggressiveness to new heights, Eleanor and Herb *very* gradually come around to it: “We have blood on our hands. All of us. And our children have blood on *their* hands. They have snuffed out a life, those two.”

In a darkly funny twist, it’s Elijah’s alter ego, “Gerald,” who steps up. “Oh for shit’s sake,” Gerald blurted out. “A woman has a right to choose. We all know that.”

The final story, “Vanity,” feels like an outlier, but “Coda” attempts to knit things together by focusing not on damaged characters but on the stolid landscape of old Minneapolis: the tall silos of the Pillsbury Mill, the Stone Arch Bridge, the “. . . comfort of these old structures . . . built of limestone and granite.” These and the august names on streets and buildings—James J. Hill the “Empire Builder,” Father Hennepin, Saint Anthony Falls—are the modern tableau on which “contemptible young professionals” now do their business.

In terms of midwestern voice, Baxter’s *There’s Something I Want You to Do* carries a dark, indistinct sonority. There is no “real Midwest” left, no psychic center, nothing much to hold onto. As Elijah says to Susan, “I don’t understand anything . . . and I need to know what’s happening to me.” From its framework of virtues and vices, from names such as Elijah and Raphael, and from characters who can’t seem to make sense of their lives, the vice Charles Baxter doesn’t name is “Doubt”—as in “Faith” and “Doubt.” The entire collection is haunted by religion in the same, by-omission way as early fiction by Larry Woiwode: gradually we come to wait for another shoe to drop, but it doesn’t, at least not in this book.

In contrast, Luke Rolfe’s collection *Flyover Country* is very strong on place. In a recent interview he remarked that “establishing voice” was always his first goal as a writer, but now he sees place (setting) as more important. This seems insightful, because with his *Flyover Country* stories he manages to have both. Winner of the *Georgetown Review* Press manuscript prize, his fourteen stories take place across the greater Midwest and include specific “regionalities” that confirm authenticity: Minnesota lakes country, horse racing at the southern end of the Midwest, the front range Rockies, dams and reservoirs and flocks of snow geese in Missouri. He has a particularly pleasing knack of fusing human drama with events of nature. In “Mountain Passing,” a young couple nearing the breaking point in their relationship is confronted by a dangerous delay in a snowstorm on a mountain pass. Traffic is stalled to let a herd of Bighorn Sheep cross the road, and their simple beauty, close up, is a kind of forgiveness—exactly what the couple needs to try their love again.

“Snow Geese” has similar intersections of human and natural drama. A young man is in love with a cheating girl, at the same time that millions of Snow geese are gathering into a single flock in preparation to migrate. The two threads are woven with strong imagistic and metaphorical effect.

Rolfes is adept and assured with one symbolic setting: young men rag-

ing and screwing up and starting over, always with forgivable passions, on their arc toward becoming men. There is still room in literature for male coming-of-age stories, and Rolfe could easily make waves in young adult fiction—and save some lives in the process by keeping a few more teenage boys reading.

In the end, all four writers—Charles Baxter, Patrick Hicks, Ron Parsons, and Luke Rolfes—have given us collections with stories that were certainly pleasing, discrete reads in the magazines in which each was published. But how stories lie next to each other within a collection is another matter; one of most delicate of literary arts is the well-turned collection of stories, and in this respect, all three collections have limitations. If there is a cumulative midwestern voice in these collections, it is the sound of postmodern men moving along haltingly—all the street signs, all the guideposts, gone. (With some irony, it is the least experienced of the four writers, Ron Parsons and especially Luke Rolfes, who have the most confidence in their vision). In terms of finding a distinctive midwestern voice in these four collections, the search continues. Midwestern literature feels like it's waiting for someone, perhaps a sassy young woman, to take us under her wings, assert her powers, and lead us forward. Who cares where we're going—we're just looking for direction.

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