KANSAS CITY VOICES
a periodical of writing and art

volume 12
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* Winners of the Annual Whispering Prairie Press Contest
† Featured cover artist

We are tireless advocates for the arts. We support established artists and inspire new voices, growing the community and conversation.
Three years ago a magazine fell into my lap. Exactly how that happened I will never know. When the board asked me to be managing editor I thought I wasn’t qualified, and it didn’t make any sense, and I already had a day job. I knew that just because my brain bleeds stories when I dream, it didn’t necessarily mean I would be a good managing editor. But, after lots of over-analyzing, I realized being given a magazine and told, “Do whatever you want. We trust you.”, was a gift I just couldn’t pass up.

I accepted the role with one caveat: I needed the people who were turning over the operation to stay on board for a year or two. They were to be my sage advisors, people who talked me off ledges, and people who were crazy enough to trust me when I said something like, “Hey, we’re overhauling the entire aesthetic.” Or, “Our Web site looks like 1987.” To which they answered, “Jessica, the Internet wasn’t around in ‘87.” And then I said, “Exactly.” Lucky for me they did stay on, and I’m grateful to every one of those people for helping Kansas City Voices and me.

Today Kansas City Voices is a catalyst for the arts and writing community. We give creative individuals a place to showcase their work. We arrange free events to get the public involved with our writers and artists. We give first-time artists a chance to meet their more established counterparts. We see our veteran creative minds mentoring those who are new to the field, and we let the excitement of the newly published fuel those of us who have been around a while and need a little recharging.

I am indebted, grateful, and in awe of my editors and board members who volunteer their time and skill. Our staff has so much talent I get overwhelmed when I look at their credentials. Did you know we’re an entirely volunteer organization? No one on the editorial staff or board is paid. The only way we can afford to print is because of the generosity of our donors and grants from local arts organizations like ArtsKC and the Missouri Arts Council. Thank you to all of our volunteers for your countless hours and hard work. Thank you to our donors for funding this creative enterprise. Thank you to the bookstores and venues that sell our wares and promote our artists. I am proud of what we do.

I ask my editors to look for pieces they physically react to. If you tear up or shiver or speak out loud when you’re reading/seeing a piece, there’s something there. And one of my absolute favorite things is when we ship magazines to the coasts or overseas and it says Kansas City in the title. People pick it up expecting to see cowboys or Dorothy or cows, and instead they find a publication that holds a strong voice and unique viewpoint paramount. It’s fun to challenge people’s expectations, and I am sure you’ll find a piece or two in this issue that makes you stop and think.

Jessica Conoley
Helen always had a switchblade in the floorboard of her Camaro, & a broke boyfriend who thought the weekend started on Monday.

She first eyed her latest thrombosis, Bo, at a honky-tonk named Jitterbugs while she was line dancing with a suave gentleman who had a faint halo on his ring finger—(which she finally noticed through the neon haze), & was reciting Browning between bouts of her margarita flurry.

Bo was given to petty schemes, parking lot ploys, & seemed of even lesser intelligence than the typical unshaven beasts who visited her trailer park diva dome.

Three nights ago (& I saw this myself), she pushed him out of the Camaro—& he bounced down the street like a flicked cigarette. Quite a shame that Helen of Troy never met Helen of mugshot.

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After ten, eleven years of repairing restaurant equipment, living a mostly trouble-free life, his criminal past was now just one of his quirks, a way people knew him, like the way he did his yoga. He was always one move behind everyone else in class, not because he didn’t get it, but because he never rushed anything; he moved through his poses like he had all the time in the world.

He had unpredictable fits of generosity—Panhandlers, homeless guys—nine times out of ten, maybe more, if someone came up to him while he was working, he’d tell them to fuck off. Every now and then he’d hold up some guy tell his whole story, then open up his wallet and hand him a hundred or two hundred dollars.

If anyone asked him why he gave away cash like that, he’d get a hard, level look on his face and say with an absolutely flat voice, “Because it’s my money.” A lot of people in town knew him. The restaurant and bar owners in Kansas City knew him as a guy who did good work and charged what it was worth. The charity people knew him as a guy who usually would buy a ticket. The yoga teachers knew him as a skinny, serious man who’d come to class five or six times a week when his business was slow. No one knew where he lived, no one knew what he drove besides a plain white van, and nobody knew that no one else knew it.

Mostly, if someone asked him to tell a story about how he’d been to jail or how thieves really got things done, he’d wave it off and say that had all been a long time ago. Occasionally, just every so often, he’d give an embarrassed smile and talk about how he’d come up on the East Coast, working with a crew out of Philadelphia and Baltimore, stealing gold chains and diamonds. Almost all of that was bullshit.

He’d spent his senior year of high school stealing cars in San Francisco. He hadn’t needed the money, he’d just been a bored teen who’d fallen in love with being a criminal, in love with the high of turning forty seconds of terrified sweating and thirty minutes of anxious driving into a fat wad of cash. Car theft was his first true love. Twelve years later, he could still remember the triumph, the pure aliveness of it.

He had knocked over a few jewelry places, that was true. One of the guys he ran with, a perpetually angry and terrifying man named Francis, had for some reason picked him as a sidekick. That was another thing he remembered years later—the fear when Francis would look at him and say, “Get your ass ready, Chicken Legs. We got work tonight.” When people asked him to tell a story, asked him what it had been like to be a thief, one story he wanted to tell—and it was a story he never could tell, because his plea bargain hadn’t covered it—was one of the jobs where Francis had roped him in.

Back then he’d been named Bobby Conroy—honors student, National Merit Scholar, debate team member, awkward loner. Francis was waiting for him after school one day, leaning up against the hood of Bobby’s Chevy Impala.

“Ready to work tonight?”
“I don’t know if I can. Francis, I have a big test tomorrow, and . . .”
“Oh bullshit, motherfucker. You’re going to be my wheelman tonight and you’re gonna make a few hundred dollars for sneaking out past your bedtime.”

“Come on, Francis, isn’t there anyone else? Jimmy could do this, Raul could do it, Curt knows some guys . . .”

“Curt knows assholes who will fuck shit up. Jimmy won’t even shut up, and Raul is fucking high out of his mind every goddam time I see him. You don’t get high, you don’t talk much, and you’re an asshole but you don’t fuck shit up. So quit moaning and start earning because I have selected your ass in the first round of the Theft and Burglary Draft. I’ll see you at midnight tonight at the Safeway out on Alameda.”
Bobby hated working with Francis, not only because Francis smelled like cigarettes, coffee, and nail polish, but because every time they rode together Bobby wondered if he was going to live through the night.

Francis picked his jobs the same way: small businesses that kept doors and windows open needed big volume or big tickets. Dry cleaners, jewelers, coin dealers, breakfast-only restaurants—anything like that where the owners could get sloppy with the cash and the credit card receipts. They would do one job in a night, and if they couldn’t get inside in under three minutes, Francis called it off, went home. When the job worked, Francis gave Bobby the cash, and kept the credit card receipts; he sold them to a guy who sold them to another guy in Hong Kong.

This place Francis had picked was across the South Bay out in Hayward. As Bobby drove, Francis listed all of the reasons why this was going to be a great score: rare coin store, owner struggling to stay afloat, cameras outside were fakes, reasons why this was going to be a great score: rare coin store, owner struggling to stay afloat, cameras outside were fakes.

Francis was a professional; he didn’t steal thirty bucks because every time they rode together Bobby wondered if he was going to live through the night. Bobby didn’t know what to do with that. “So, do we face. “See that purple around his lips? This man’s dying.”

The man in the chair wasn’t moving. He was in his sixties, white thin hair, jowly face, wearing a white button-down shirt, one sleeve rolled all the way up past his elbow. His head was tilted back and the comb-over of his thinning hair had flipped up. He was drooling a little, a stream coming down his cheek.

Francis walked into the office, started opening drawers and cabinets. “Hey, man, you hear me? You hear me talking to you?”

The man didn’t make a sound, didn’t move, didn’t open his eyes. There was a little gurgle in his throat.

“Tell you what, soldier,” Francis said to the coin dealer, clapping him on the shoulder like they were having a beer together. “We’re going to be here as long as you need us. We’re gonna see you out.”

“Shit, you think I go to church? I don’t know how it works. I’m just telling you to help him out.”

“The Catholics do something called extreme unction. Well, this man’s a coin dealer, so pretty good odds he’s Jewish.”

Bobby stood there. “Give me a minute.”

Bobby didn’t know what to do with that. “So, do we go get a doctor or call an ambulance or something?”

Francis looked down at the desk. “Didn’t leave a note, but . . .” He opened the right-hand drawer. “Yep, right where I thought it was.” Bobby came around. There was a needle and a rubber tube in there.

“See, the thing with heroin,” Francis said, “is the thing is that the purity changes from batch to batch. You just never knew what you got. So, coin dealer here may have just made a big deal, or maybe he was tired of losing money. Tired of struggling to make a living. That happens, especially guys riding horse. Riding horse is easy, dealing with all the bullshit—that’s hard. A lot of these guys—one day, they just ride the horse off into the sunset. I understand.”

“Tell you what, soldier,” Francis said to the coin dealer, clapping him on the shoulder like they were having a beer together. “We’re going to be here as long as you need us. We’re gonna see you out.”

“What?”

“Hey, man, you hear me?”

“Shit, you think I go to church? I don’t know how it works. I’m just telling you to help him out.”

Bobby nodded, still sniffing.

“Don’t move, don’t breathe, don’t move, don’t breathe,” Bobby said. “Tell him he’s been here awhile. Hour, maybe two. Ambulance would have been here by now.”

Francis clapped the man on the shoulder again, looked at him deep like he was surveying a melon at the market. “I don’t know, soldier. Maybe you fucked up, maybe you just did the only thing you could think to do. I hope you’re going some place better.”

Francis looked up at Bobby.

“Shit,” he said. “Even the people I’ve killed haven’t had to die alone. Goddamn.”

They sat in the dark room for about an hour, not saying a word, Francis sitting on the edge of the desk, Bobby wishing he had something to read.

“Ah, I got more. About two in the morning, Francis looked over at Bobby. “Your dad a preacher, right? You go to church, say your prayers, all that?”

“Guess.”

“You know. Believe in God or not, Chicken Legs?”

“I don’t know, I guess so.”

“This man is listening to us, Bobby. Right now, he is hearing every word we say, and he knows he is dying. So go on, preacher’s son . . . give him something he can use.”

“What should I say?”

“Shit, you think I go to church? I don’t know how it works. I’m just telling you to help him out.”

The coin dealer clamped his jaw, the coin dealer frowning.

“Hello, this man’s a coin dealer, so pretty good odds he’s Jewish.”

Bobby stood there. “Give me a minute.”

“Don’t say anything. Don’t say anything, I just want to say something before he dies. The coin dealer sat up, the coin dealer frowning.

He wondered a lot of other things too. He wondered why a killer like Francis wanted to stay and wait for a man to die. Was that some attempt at compassion from a broken violent man? Or was it some kind of act? Had Francis set all in motion somehow? That mention of the coin dealer being Jewish—that never settled comfortably. Why had Francis looked for a note? How had Francis known to look in the desk drawer for a junkie’s works?

Most of all he wondered if the coin dealer had heard him. Had he given the coin dealer permission to leave? Was that more blood on his hands?

The questions were like midge flies—they came and went, and there was nothing that could be done when they came except suffer through through.***

Later on, Bobby testified against the crew, rattled them all out. Francis got sent up for seven years on felony theft. He’d promised Bobby that one day he would go to find him, and kill him slowly. That had been a long time ago, but there was no reason to think Francis had forgiven those sins. Some days he thought he should probably find Francis, put a bullet or six into him.

But before he finished Francis off, they were going to have to talk about that coin dealer.
TIMOTHY VOLPERT

BLACK ICE DRIVING GUIDE

● Turn into the skid.
● Feather the brake pedal like a confident jazz drummer lays out during someone else’s solo.
  ○ This is the skid’s solo. Turn into the skid. Accelerate.
● Accelerate. Accept that this is happening.
● Don’t think about:
  ○ Your kid is sick, delirious;
  ○ Your lack of bachelor’s degree;
  ○ Carbon emissions from your car’s exhaust;
  ○ Income inequality;
  ○ How you could have let your high school sweetheart down more gently.
    ■ There is a time to think about these things.
    ■ This is not that time.
    ■ This is the time to turn into the skid.
● Turn into the skid like a young magician turns his assistant into a deceit of lapwings by mistake, wonders where the doves have gone.
  ○ Don’t wonder where the doves have gone.
● Ask the young magician to send you thirty, forty seconds back, let you slow down on the slick like you know you should have done, like Marianne will say you should have done when you make it home.
  ○ If you make it home.
● Focus on where you want to go, not what you want to avoid.
  ○ The barriers are coming, whether you want them to or not.
● Accelerate. Learn to love the skid. Visualize:
  ○ The smooth arc of your tires on the ice as your mother’s smile;
  ○ Your mother’s arms flurrying to encircle you like a pitying of turtledoves,
    ■ You are not above becoming misty, in this instant.
    ■ Do so as the need arises.
  ○ The young magician whisking you and your mother to the curbside.
    ■ Don’t wonder where the young magician comes from.
● Avoid understeering as your arms go limp.
● The importance cannot be overstated of feathering the brakes.
● Above all, remain calm.
ROY BECKEMEYER

JACK 1941-1959

flying off the levee road at 85 or so
his ’48 plymouth scraped bark off a
sycamore nosed over and flipped
top down into muck wheels spinning
he had no chance the stupid fuck the
state trooper said we all drove together
to see back behind the body shop
right side up roof shoved down into
the seats no blood just dirt
oh shit was all anybody could say
he was still there in the yearbook but
wouldn’t be tossing his damn cap in the air at graduation remember
them slick hunting knives he made
in his dad’s shop said frankie and we
all nodded felt our thumbs scraping
the blade hefting the damn lovely
balance of the thing before we handed
over a month’s gas money to buy it
remembered his open mouth grin
at the low whistle one of us would give
at the craft he put into it hell none of us could believe it till the funeral home with
noreen crying and his dad red-eyed and jack’s hair combed back in that
duck tail he liked and dammit his eyes were closed almost like the cool way he would squint
because of smoke from the pall mall that was always hanging at the corner
of his mouth but so tight now there was no way he would see us again and his
mouth was closed too and there was no way he was ever going to tell any of us
why

I found the tears
I cried for you
wadded up in a tissue
in the pocket of a coat
that I hadn’t worn
in almost a year
since your funeral
I found them
right before church
where the message was
to seek guidance
to say “yes” to God
even on a cold February day
when there is snow clinging to the ground
lingering refusing to go away
just like last year
just like last year
when I walked by your casket
on the way outside
into the cold light
when I thought
what a crying shame
to bury a California boy
so deep in cold Missouri clay
GLADYS HAUNTON
WILD ACRES

It was always my job to let the stale air out of the cabin when we arrived. Jeff might step in to pick up his tool box if a gate hinge needed fixing or his bow saw if a tree had dropped limbs across a path, but I stayed inside, propping the door wide and opening windows until curtains lifted and dead flies stirred across the floor. I liked to wait there while the atmosphere quickened and the scent of field clover or goldenrod, depending on the season, penetrated the hot attic stiffl.

I say “cabin,” but it’s really just a Tuff Shed, built in a single day to specifications we chose from a sheet of options: twenty feet long by ten wide, six windows, two skylights, barn style double door oriented to the south, and a loft in the east end for storage. From the outside it looks like a place to secure a riding mower and a wheel barrow or two, but we outfitted it with cot, futon, wicker table and chairs, small cabinet, and woodstove. Patchwork quilts and throw rugs help sell the cabin when we arrived. Jeff might step in to pick up his tool from his right. Next, in what seemed like a struggle from side to side as if comparing the data from her left eye and slack jowled—or so it seemed to me. She showed no fear. Spotting me from the edge of the loft, she traced a route in worn rodent path. Loft edge to crossbeam, down a stud to the worn rodent path. Loft edge to crossbeam, down a stud to the loft edge to crossbeam, down a stud to the wall between us to a few inches, where all her startling individuality would send her skittering. But no. It only closed the distance unnerved me, and I sat up, thinking my abrupt movement read challenge or determination in her stare. Her brazenness stifle.

I willed a child’s patience and belief now, but adult concerns interfered and, to my shame, I broke the spell first. Ahead that only rabies could explain her fearlessness, I stood suddenly, making cot springs screech and quilt tumble to the floor. She disappeared so fast I missed the direction of her flight. And just that fast, I wanted her back with me. I wished I’d risked disease for one more chance to read her urgency and understand what pushed her past the usual boundaries to hold us there where something else seemed imminent between us. But she was gone, and I hurried out to tell Jeff the story.

Reentering the cabin moments later, I picked the quilt up from the floor, shook the dust from it, and spread it back across the cot. I smoothed the wrinkles and reached to quilt up from the floor, shook the dust from it, and spread it back across the cot. I smoothed the wrinkles and reached to hold us there where something else seemed imminent between us. The veil of separation stretched membrane thin. I remember childhood moments when my dog gazed at my face until I thought she’d spoken.

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Reentering the cabin moments later, I picked the quilt up from the floor, shook the dust from it, and spread it back across the cot. I smoothed the wrinkles and reached to fluff the pillow, then stopped. Something wasn’t right about the shadowed indentation where my head had lain. I bent closer. The weight of my head had flattened something deep into the pillow: a wad of fibers—shredded fabric, maybe, and downy stuffing from the vest Jeff kept on a nail by the door. But something moved the wad about so that it shivered and twitched. With a spasm of revulsion, I saw it clearly then—a writhing knot of baby mice, naked as grubs and as sightless, their future eyes bulging like blisters beneath stretched skin.

Did some genetic memory of plague-bearing rats trigger the horror in my response? I pulled the clip from my hair and shook it out full-length, bending low and raking my fingers through it, expecting to rain rodents onto the floor. Nothing fell, but that only convinced me that I felt them tangled tight against my scalp and struggling. I grabbed the pillow and carried it flat, at arm’s length, like a tray of toys, out the door and up behind the cabin to the tall grass. Then I dropped one end, grasped the other with both hands, and shook it with a snap and another snap and still another.

The nest flew skyward, loosening as it rose and disintegrating at the apex of its arc, spilling pink babies that rotated in the sun like a handful of jellybeans cast by a parade clown. They dropped into the grass, where distance separated them from one another for the first time ever and, I kept imagining in retrospect, filled them with some rafter version of despair as heat shriveled them to raisins.

For the second time that morning, I felt the heaviness of wanting to undo an act I’d just completed—watching it backwards like a video rewinding and searching for the point where I’d squandered my opportunity. If I’d recognized the mouse pups right away for the individuals they became as they tumbled through the sunshine, I’d have seen the adult, too, for what she was: not rabid, but maternal. Aggressive, yes; but animated by postpartal chemistry, or whatever marvel of mammalian engineering governs the fierce protectiveness of mothers.

****

Gaining turn me into a wild thing. Intellect was no match for the instinctual behavior that kicked in—triggered, I suppose, by a flood of hormones. In the first postnatal hours, body chemistry energized me for whatever tasks a woman delivering alone might need to perform for the survival of her baby. But I was not alone. Professionals eased my son from the
birth canal, severed his connection to me aseptically, and laid him on my chest just long enough for his light-struck eyes to sweep my face before they whisked him away. My husband, drained from coaching me through hours of labor, slipped off to phone relatives. I didn’t even have to summon the strength to sit upright. Prone on the gurney, I watched the ceiling slide over me as a nurse in pink and blue scrubs wheeled me from the delivery room and parked me in recovery. There, in spite of my physical depletion, energy deluged me. I recognized exhaustion in my limbs and back, my diaphragm and shoulders, but euphoria kept me from feeling its effects.

When I left the hospital and responsibility shifted from the professionals to me, a darker side of the postpartum buzz revealed itself. The energy remained; but instead of joy, it fueled hyper-vigilance. On the short drive home, every approaching car veered dangerously in our direction and all intersections seemed patterned for disaster. At home hair-trigger reflexes ricocheted me from one startle response to another all day. At night shot me from sleep lactating at my baby’s first whimper. Obsessive rumination on that tiny creature’s vulnerability, coupled with sleep deprivation, sapped my powers to concentrate on anything else. I forgot how to put on eye makeup and check out library books, though I could remember the exact time and nature of the baby’s every body elimination for the last week. I forgot a meatloaf in the oven until I smelled it burning, but I could gauge the normal duration of the baby’s sleep cycle without consulting a clock—low-grade agitation distilled into cold fear if he remained silent ten minutes past his usual waking time.

I expected to grapple with identity shifts in the early stage of motherhood, but I saw this as a problem for the mind. I planned to reason my way across the gap between worksite order and domestic unpredictability and think my way from experienced professional to learn-as-you-go parent. This unfamiliar inner self, however, rewired to bypass reason and draw on some primitive power grid, was a complete surprise. She was an animal, and nothing had prepared me to house her in my body.

I don’t claim to know what the cabin mouse thought when she found me lying on her nest. But, because in my own early weeks of motherhood I felt stripped of thought and reduced to the raw material of instinct, I believe we shared a chemistry that makes us kindred. The feral intensity that birthing induced in me links me closer to that driven rodent than to those of my human sisters who are not much bothered by postpartum hormones. Yet in spite of our bond—because I recognized our bond too late—I was the agent of the very disaster that all that racking energy is programmed to prevent. I can hardly bear imagining what that programming did to her when she returned for her babies and found them gone.

Eventually I relinquished the cabin to the mouse and her subsequent litters. After our meeting, it was more hers than mine. Unwilling to take any of the measures that humans use to claim wild space from its local inhabitants, I ceded the territory as a kind of penance. I salvaged the quilt and rugs, moved field guides and maps to the trunk of the car, and made no more claims on the building. The community now flourishes. I’ve wondered since how long the matriarch survived and how many of her female descendants have been involved in shredding the curtains and gutting the futon. Jeff still stores his tools there, but he sends me in to get them. He knows whoever enters will meet with a flurry of frantic mice, and he is not physically disposed, as I am, to sympathize with them. But he lets me have my way, and I let the daughters of cabin mouse have theirs.

POETRY

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

PER HIS REQUEST,

a poem for Sam
on Wednesday morning
at the dining room table
as he eats his Nutella
on toast and we listen
to Aaron Copland and Sam
asks for a sip of my tea
and proceeds to chug half the mug
after which I read him what I’ve got

and he says it’s not done
and then says it’s not a real poem
it’s just about us
and I say Sam
that’s really all I know and then he
lunges for the paper with a marker
and says he’s going to put lines
all through what I wrote so it will go away
and I say Oh no you’re not you little

and now he is crying
and also he is screaming
and now I’ve got him pinned
and it’s a struggle for the marker
and we are both fighting for the poem

POETRY

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

PER HIS REQUEST,
MARYFRANCES WAGNER

CONTROL

I.
Mother set four sandwich triangles
on my plate, six Pringle chips, six
orange slices, six apple slices and a cookie.
She sat beside me with the same meal.

_The wrens are trying to fly_, she said.
_They chirp when I talk to them._ We
nibbled and watched birds. _Your father_
doesn’t think Ray’s a good match for you._

_You wouldn’t want to disappoint him._
I was nineteen. She scooted closer,
her hands bunched like a bouquet,
her coiffed hair sprayed into place.

We looked out the window in silence. Wrens
chattered. We ate the last orange slice. Peels
curled on plates in smiles, under the slice
of sunlight slanting in.

II.
Twenty years later, my father and I
sat at the same table for Sunday pasta.
We were single again, discussing
what we might like in a mate.

_Whatever happened to Ray?_ he asked.
_Did he get married?_ I looked up.
_I thought you didn’t like Ray?_
_He blinked. Who told you that?_