



Melissa Fite Johnson, a high school English teacher, received her Master's in English literature from Pittsburg State University. Her poetry has appeared in several publications, including *I-70 Review*, *The Little Balkans Review*, *The New Verse News*, *velvet-tail*, *Inscape Magazine*, *Cave Region Review*, *The Invisible Bear*, *HomeWords: A Project of the Kansas Poet Laureate*, *Kansas Time + Place*, *Broadsided Press: 2014 Haiku Year in Review*, *Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems*, and *To the Stars through Difficulties: A Kansas Renga in 150 Voices*.

In 2015, Little Balkans Press published her first book of poetry, *While the Kettle's On*. Melissa and her husband, Marc, live in Pittsburg with their dog and several chickens.

## The Dead

I wished dead the girl who told me  
in third grade I was adopted. I'd believed her  
over my dad. Four years later,  
her family's car ran a stop sign  
and a semi blew into their backseat.

I picture her at a table with my father,  
a new Adam's apple plugging  
the hole cancer made. They don't talk  
about the town. They don't talk about me.  
The dead don't remember.

I like to think he has a dreamlike idea of me,  
and she of her father. At the table,  
she pours tea. He tucks  
the lace cloth into his shirt. They're together  
because isn't that nicer than sitting alone.

## Summer Wedding

*Midwestern Bride* advised drying  
my bridal bouquet—tying the stems  
to a hanger and letting  
the sunflower heads dangle.

But I couldn't watch  
vibrant colors drain like blood  
from the face of a dying man.  
I couldn't intentionally harden  
each petal into crumble  
at the slightest touch. Instead,

I parked my car across the street from  
my father's grave and sidestepped  
the 5:00 traffic. I said nothing and left  
my flowers to dry under the Kansas sun.

## Ode to Washing Dishes

First, make sure your sink is under a window.  
Look outside while you fill the basin. If daytime,  
don't scrutinize your lawn. Do laugh  
at quarreling birds or your own yawning dog.  
If night, be kind to your reflection.  
Appreciate your long arms that disappear  
at the wrists and the wrinkles at your mouth.

Don't think of this task as another in a hundred.  
It is the reward when those are done,  
the chocolate mousse after steamed vegetables.  
If the hot water and bubbles,  
the lavender smell, the wine glass  
to your left and soft terrycloth  
against your bare shoulder are not a comfort  
in this late hour, then you are doing it all wrong.



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## Good Housekeeping

I.  
The mother of my childhood  
is propped up by the vacuum handle.  
Her arms disappear at the ends  
into filmy sink water.  
She scrubs the kitchen floor the hard way,  
sponge instead of mop. She's tired.

She won't stop  
my father's cancer from sweeping  
through our tidy lives,  
but she is armed  
with spray bottles and paper towels.

II.  
My father's smoking  
transformed the bathroom vent  
from flute smooth to caked fireplace ash.  
I pictured his lungs changing texture,  
his heart no longer a red flame  
but the doused black matchstick.

I tried hiding his cigarettes.  
He always found them. Eventually,  
I learned the joy my mother took in controlling  
what could be. I polished the vent  
with a pretty white cloth,  
tenderly as she did her collection of tea spoons.

## Instructions for a Day Game

Eat two hot dogs instead of one when  
someone else is buying; take five-minute naps  
between innings three and six.

Ketchup wins the animated condiment race,  
and someone proposes on the JumboTron  
while everyone yells "Say no!"

Appreciate extra innings; they mean free baseball  
and 34,000 rally towels circling the air.

Forget possible metaphors—  
the glove swoops from out of nowhere  
like a shark's fin,  
bases are the stages of life or foreplay,  
'tis better to have swung and missed—

none of that is important.  
The closer should come out  
while everyone sings his theme song,  
and your team should win  
at the bottom of the eleventh.

See final poem on next page



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## Emily Dickinson in 2012

- I.  
The DVR is at capacity again, this time  
due to a Jane Austen marathon.  
I like Alan Rickman's  
Colonel Brandon, the way he  
carries a dripping wet Kate Winslet  
to safety. Some nights  
I'd like to sink  
into the chest and arms of a man,  
  
especially if he just happened to appear  
in my doorway the moment  
my fingers began their expert work  
at the pianoforte.  
No happy hour. No match.com.  
No goodhearted Dad  
coercing me to the market  
to meet his best stock boy, Paul.
- II.  
I eat lunch in my cubicle  
with a book so I won't accidentally meet eyes  
with a well-meaning co-worker.  
Last time that happened,  
Linda whisked me into the break room where  
for weeks I couldn't get out of my head  
  
the smell of Tom in accounting  
belching his Dr. Pepper breath  
into the air next to mine  
as I tried to eat my salad  
  
or, at the counter where Kevin  
in marketing was making a sandwich,  
the sound of mayonnaise  
slapping onto cold cuts  
like a hand across a bare ass.
- III.  
After my parents have gone  
to sleep, I open my laptop with the fanfare  
of removing a tarp from a Porsche.  
I am a pianist  
when I type these keys. Some nights  
I compose six or seven masterpieces.  
  
Around two or three a.m.  
I print my newest collection of poems,  
fold them up like love letters  
I'll never send,  
place them gently into the hope  
chest at the foot of my bed.  
  
Then I close each document  
without saving a single one.

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