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The Sense of Touch

Ron Parsons
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In his debut collection, Ron Parsons mines the northernmost region of the American Midwest, mapping the lives of those bound to the beautiful and hard area by love, family, duty, and sometimes simply by snow.

Parsons is concerned with outsiders and misfits, those who stand out in an area that is, as one of his narrators notes, “strong and Scandinavian.” In “Hezekiah Number Three,” a brilliant Bangladeshi immigrant returns home to Rapid City, South Dakota, following an abrupt mental collapse; “The Sense of Touch” centers around a young man’s fascination with the African American woman who teaches his creative writing class at the University of Minnesota; in “Beginning with Minneapolis,” a woman who abandons her husband’s farm in mid-life starts anew in bohemian Minneapolis. Gradually, Parsons reveals a subculture living outside the common narrative, one populated by those disabled by accident, age, and war, and displaced by marriage or work, outsiders whose stories take place far from home.

Parsons’s title story follows a college student with one foot in Fort Worth, Texas, and the other in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as he tries to balance both lives with late-night phone calls and sixteen-hour drives on I-35. In Fort Worth, he attempts to comfort a girl he may love when her brother is suddenly disabled; in Minneapolis he chronicles the students in his creative writing class, watching as their own lives unfold. Vonda, the beautiful African American woman who leads his class, cautions him on the unreliability of senses—all but touch. “Touch is right exactly there,” Vonda advises, “You have it. It’s solid; you can grab and hold on.” This, too, is Parsons’s relationship to his setting. A few stories may be a bit self-indulgent or sentimental, but when writing at his best it is clear that Parsons knows the land he mines beyond the superficial sights, sounds, and smells, down to the feeling, the touch. And in this collection, he explores those who live and love in the cold and beautiful Midwest, all the way to their bones.
MICHAEL BEEMAN (Spring 2013)

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