



Set in the rough edges of America—lonely forests, rain-slicked streets, bars where the jukebox is often the loudest presence—this finely wrought collection digs into the ordinary moments of life. In “Uncle Floyd,” a man struggles to read the emotional opacity of his withdrawn teenage nephew, while “The Funny Way You Say Hello” finds a barroom observer—obsessed with deciphering the unsettling vacancy of a man’s gaze—surprised by his ultimate getaway. Again and again, Elwell’s characters, especially men, peer into the emotional fog that separates them from the world around them.

Elwell (author of *The Art of Terror and Wonder*) hovers around challenging topics like grief and mortality—such as the stream-of-consciousness spew of wild fear over a missing son in “North Dakota”—but just as frequently pokes at the stubborn human need for meaning and connection, with prose that shapeshifts to fit the moment: gritty and tactile in “Work It!,” tender and internal in “Petology,” pressured and sharp in “Hey Hey Paula.” Through a kind of narrative minimalism, Elwell captures how our inner lives are rarely linear, more often fragmented by loss, distorted by longing, yet still capable of brief, breathtaking clarity. Just as the central character in “A Good Long and Wide” feels “his own life combine to become something more... push[ing] hard to be included in that rarified space,” Elwell offers readers slices of purpose and meaning that linger.

Occasionally, the writing tarries too long in introspection, but this pacing feels intentional—inviting stillness, reflection, and presence rather than a plot-driven payoff. The stories often find significance in seemingly small moments: the proper way to build a burn pile, the struggle to articulate complex feelings, the unique qualities of different T'ai Chi masters. Each story becomes a tender excavation of what it means to live, hurt, love, and try again. And that, perhaps, is the point.