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From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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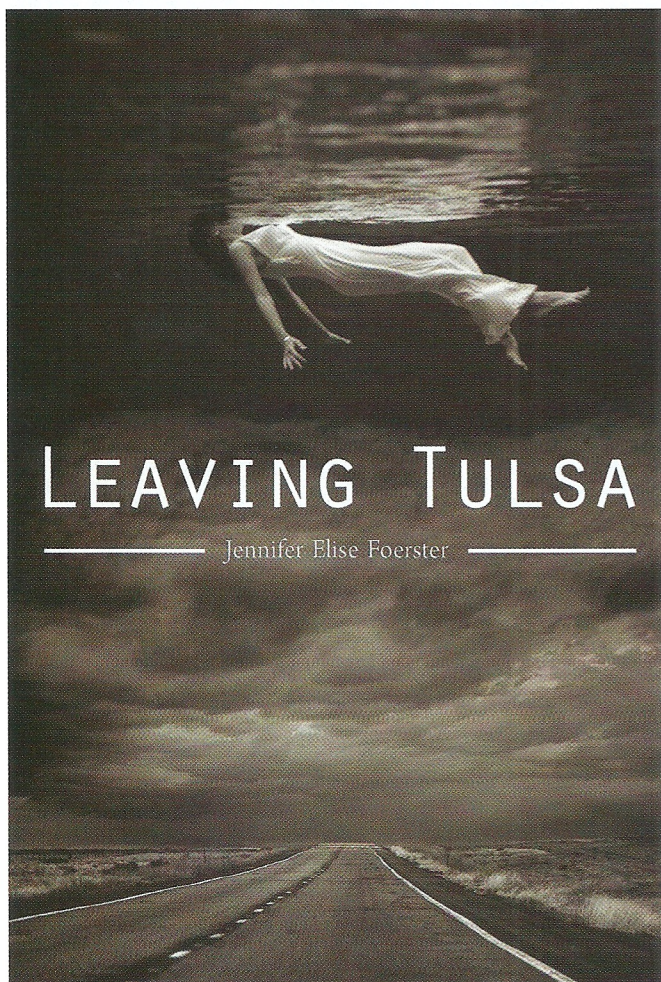
# Mvskoke Poet & Educator Jennifer Foerster

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## JENNIFER FOERSTER

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



**A** MEMBER OF THE MUSCOGEE NATION and of Mvskoke, German, and Dutch descent, Jennifer Elise Foerster currently lives and works in San Francisco. As the daughter of a military diplomat, she spent her early life in many cities throughout Europe and the United States. Foerster earned her bachelor of fine arts degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), a master of fine arts degree from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, and a doctoral degree in English and Literary Arts from the University of Denver. She published both her first poetry collection *Leaving Tulsa* (2013) and the poetry collection *Bright Raft in the Afterweather* (2018), with the University of Arizona Press. Her third collection, *The Maybe-Bird*, is forthcoming from The Song Cave in 2022. She coedited *When the Light of*

*the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2020) with US Poet Laureate Joy Harjo (Muscogee) and LeAnne Howe (Choctaw Nation).

Among her many awards and accolades, Foerster received a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowship and a Wallace Stegner fellowship in poetry at Stanford University. Jennifer teaches poetry at the Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington; the IAIA MFA creating writing program; and at other institutions.

**MRS:** What does poetry mean to you today? How has it evolved over the years to bring you here?

JF: I believe poetry is a language of listening, a language that lingers in the question, in the not knowing, a language that does not preclude the possibility of new insights and perspectives. In this, it is an art of being active and activated in the ever-changing world. It is an art of attending to transformations.

Early on, when I was writing as a kid, poetry was really about two things: joy in the musical play of language and an intense need to put into language the experience of awe, wonder, and beauty. As I grew up I learned, as we all do, how difficult it is to translate—let alone to understand—the experience of awe, of surprising and often sudden slippages of illuminations that make life, for a brief moment, “make sense.”

Poetry began to be a way I could piece the fractals of these moments together, as if I could puzzle them out somehow. And the play of musicality remained an essential part of this endeavor. I have always been more musical than visual. Then I realized that puzzling out or making sense wasn't what I was really interested in. It is in the impossible puzzle, in fact. My poetics felt like working on a puzzle out of several incomplete collections of puzzle pieces, each an incomplete collection to a different image. My impulse, enjoyment, and motivation are in the experience of finding resonant shapes, tones, or hues that are suggestive of something beyond their particularities.

In this impulse is also a worldview, a belief in the value of poetry to human society: that poetry can open perception, change our codes of cognition, thus challenging what dominant language and society deems “legible.” If we listened to one another as if we were poems, we wouldn't be so quick to judge. We wouldn't be able to, or want to, define one another in ways that preclude our diversities, possibilities, and multidimensionality—in other words, we could more fully honor our humanity. I also believe it would open us to more carefully considering and respecting the relationships of humanity with the world's



ecosystems, because a poem will always be aware of dynamic interrelatedness, if it's to "poem" (as a verb) at all.

**MRS: Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your poetry? Has it changed the landscape of poetry in Turtle Island, North America?**

JF: Only insofar as poetry is always changing. It feels always, to me, just out of reach. If I manage a poem at all, by the time I've revised it many times and settled on it, it's already changed me. I've already changed in relation to it. The impacts of the ongoing pandemic are hard to trace in the work, but I do feel my writing has become increasingly resistant to answering itself, to making clear meaning. Not that the world has "lost meaning," but rather our paths of meaning-making seem especially muddy. There is vitality in this muddiness: rain, new growth, a chance to make new paths. If the pandemic has and is changing the landscape of poetry in the United States, I hope it's toward this revisioning, not just of what poetry is and who its voices are and can be, but a revisioning of this nation's story of itself, its way of perceiving itself and its relation to and in the world.

**MRS: What did you study for your PhD dissertation and how did this affect your poetry work?**

JF: I studied Visibility and Invisibility and how these concepts can be a way into poetry. I was, and still am, intrigued by how poetry can generate and enact a distinct form of seeing—the seeing of the visible and the invisible at once. To me, this continues to be a pressing question: the question of vision, which is also a question of insight and perception. The dissertation was a direct outcome of my most compelling question, one that paralyzed me at times. The dissertation didn't answer it but helped me learn new language to speak and think about it. It affected my work quite a lot, as I developed poetry experiments to help me engage in these questions, experiments I still work with. Specifically, the dissertation, which was both a critical and a creative project, experimented with form and source material to explore and expose areas of invisibility in landscape and history. I focused specifically on Muskogean origins in the American Southeast, tracing the emergence and submersion ((dis)appearances) of Mvskoke language and cultural forms throughout time, personal history, and national space. These are still concerns, questions, and obsessions at work in my writing.

**MRS: Can we discuss *Leaving Tulsa* and *Bright Raft in the Afterweather* for a moment? How did you shape these collections and how, in retrospect, have these works distinguished themselves from each other? How do you look upon them today?**

JF: I am critical of *Leaving Tulsa* in that it feels naïve, but that's also because it was an early work, and we are often critical of our early works. At the time though, it was a very important work for me. It was driven by my experience driving between Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I was living at the time, and Tulsa, where I would go regularly to visit my grandpa toward the end of his life. My time living in the Southwest also imbued much



ABOVE Jennifer Foerster. Image courtesy of the author.

OPPOSITE Cover of *Leaving Tulsa* (University of Arizona Press, 2013).

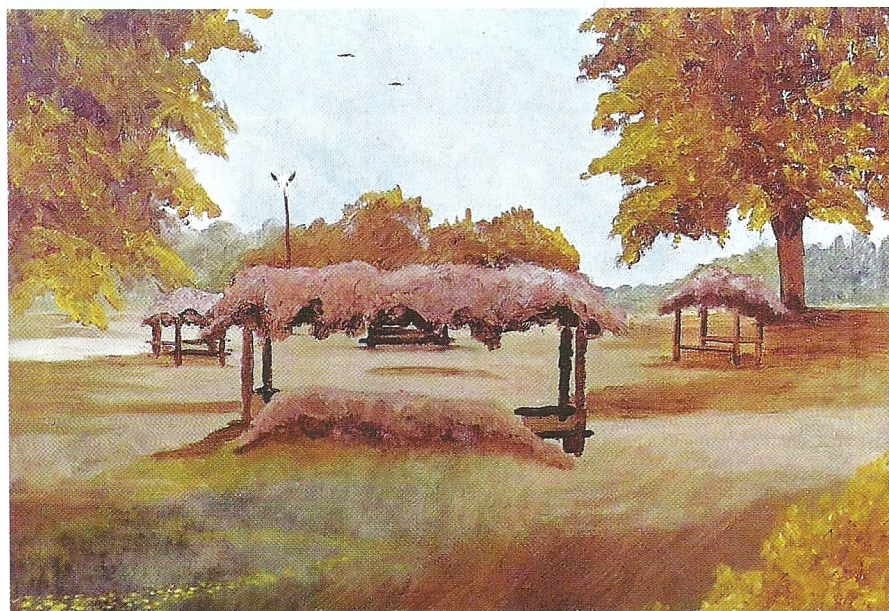
of the work in that book. The poems traced a very real, or real to me, figure of a woman, an apparition, I suppose. I would see her in a blue dress at gas stations and roadside rest stops on the highways as I made those long drives. So, the poems became a conversation with her, and all that she came to represent to me.

*Bright Raft in the Afterweather* began when I moved from New Mexico to California in 2005, though the poems themselves wouldn't quite find themselves until a decade later. At the western coastline of this continent, I encountered a different woman, whom I named Hoktvlwv (Mvskoke for an elderly woman). She would walk the beaches in fog, pushing a shopping cart. These books are collections of real moments in my life, so I see them as autobiographical, at least as an image-narrative. Even though I look on these two books too critically, at times, I do still learn from them. Every one of us is a work in progress.

**MRS: Mythology, environmental destruction, and restoration are central themes that thread through your work. How did these themes emerge as elemental to your writing? Why do they resonate with you?**

JF: These themes are lenses through which I see and experience daily life. They become elemental in my writing, because they are some of my most elemental and persistent concerns.





**ABOVE, TOP** Johnnie Diacon (Mvskoke), *Mvskoke Stickball Player*, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 58 in.

**ABOVE, BOTTOM** Johnnie Diacon (Mvskoke), *Stomp Ground*, 1993, oil on stretched canvas, 18 × 24 in.

**OPPOSITE, TOP** Johnnie Diacon (Mvskoke), *The Trail*, 2015, acrylic glaze and paper on stretched canvas, 18 × 24 in.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Johnnie Diacon (Mvskoke), *Cypress Knee Drum at Thlopthlocco*, 2000, acrylic on stretched canvas, 20 × 16 in.

**MRS: What is your approach to producing symbolism and imagery with your words and their structure? How do you imbue your work with life, with emotion?**

JF: I'm not very invested in creating symbolism, which feels like drawing definite correlations. I am interested in

creating indefinite imagery that can be a vehicle for transformation. I think of this like looking at something with one's eyes half-open: seeing the blur of the thing as it shifts to other states. This image-making is a balance between concrete imagery and the kind of imagery that floats at the brink of the dreaming mind upon waking. Music and rhythm are critical players in this process for me. Rhythm and sound in a poem can be used to help create the sense of an experience, the almost-visible motion of a "thing" or assortment of things that appear on the surface/page of the poem. I only ever hope to imbue the work with life, and with the motion that is "emotion." That is a dream of mine when I write, the hoped-for intention, which isn't always achieved. That is what makes poetry, for me at least, so difficult, which is what makes it art.

**MRS: Who are you currently reading?**

JF: Lots of poets! I'm teaching at the Rainier Writing Workshop Low-Residency MFA and a few continuing studies courses in poetry at the Institute of American Indian Arts. I am reading what my students are reading, and these are long lists of poets. I'm also reading nonfiction, presently: books on physics and ecology, which are always illuminating to me. One book is about heat (thermodynamics); I don't understand most of it, but I imagine a lot of people say that about poetry. So I read it because of that: to surprise myself with what I do connect to, to challenge my cognition and codes of perceiving the world.

**MRS: What are you currently working on? Do you have any projects in the fold?**

JF: I am looking forward to the third book, *The Maybe-Bird*, coming out, but until that happens, I'm still tinkering and changing it. Outside of that, I'm just trying to generate whenever I can. The project is currently to be generative and free, to write often and radically. To not judge myself or shape anything quite yet.

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## THE MAYBE-BIRD

And when the autumn's sweep blows in and turns  
 tin the churning clouds, catfish trapped in ice  
 against their own reflection's frozen mood—  
 bereave their leafy drowning,  
 brush their pale reflections,  
 brown the mud, upturned by plow,  
 crushed parenthetical shapes of grass,  
 a cloud margin's evergreen signage:  
 pelofv yomockat se'cehoyarēs.  
 What detritus, the mind. I wade knee-deep  
 in eucalyptus leaves, crescent upon crescent's  
 green effluviant alphabet.

—Jennifer Elise Foerster (*Mvskoke*),  
 Excerpt from *The Maybe-Bird*

## JOHNNIE DIACON

**B**ASED IN TULSA, Johnnie Diacon (Muscogee Nation) is primarily a painter but also a comic artist and three-dimensional sculptor. A member of Native Realities, an Indigenous comic collective, Diacon created stories based on his original research about the Muscogee code talkers of World War II in *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers*.

While he paints in many diverse styles, Flatstyle holds a special significance for him. As a child his vision worsened, but in fourth grade he finally got glasses. The first thing he could see clearly through his new glasses were the Bacone School paintings in his optometrist's office. Later he attended Bacone College and studied art under Ruthe Blalock Jones (Shawnee/Delaware/Peoria). He attended Northeastern State University and the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, before enrolling in the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. There he studied under Karita Coffey (Comanche) and Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw). Inspired by the films of Ralph Bakshi, he briefly wanted to be an animator. "It was Flatstyle," he says of Bakshi's animation.<sup>1</sup>

A member of the Deer clan, Diacon belongs to Thlopthlocco Tribal Town. Muscogee culture informs his subject matter. "Other Creeks will see it, and they know what it is," says Diacon. "I usually don't do too many pieces outside of my tribe. It doesn't seem right, because that's not who I am."<sup>2</sup>

Diacon's painting, *Omvkv̄t Opv̄nvks* (*Everybody Dance*) *Green Corn Suite*, graces the cover of *An American Sunrise*, a poetry collection by US Poet Laureate Joy Harjo (Muscogee).



The Museum of Native American History in Bentonville, Arkansas, commissioned him to paint a triptych mural about the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of Muscogee people from their southeastern homelands to Indian Territory. The mural is now a stop on the National Trail of Tears Association map.

Wyld Gallery in Austin, Texas, and Redstick Gallery in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, represent Diacon's artwork.

—America Meredith (*Cherokee Nation*)

**INSTAGRAM @JOHNNIEDIACONART**

1. Julie Pearson-Little Thunder, "Johnnie Diacon: Oklahoma Native Artists," OOHHP (Oklahoma Oral History Research Program), September 11, 2017, YouTube video, August 16, 2019, 1:31:47, web.
2. Pearson-Little Thunder, video.