

Dazzling essays from flyover country

There are two conditions Meghan O'Gieblyn can't escape: Christianity and Midwesternness.

by [Philip Christman](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Interior States

Essays

By Meghan O’Gieblyn

Anchor

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This debut collection of essays from the dazzlingly talented Meghan O’Gieblyn depressed me profoundly. Here I am, a writer whose main concerns include Christianity, the Midwest (Michigan in particular), and the terror and tedium of a fundamentalist childhood in the ’80s and ’90s. And here is O’Gieblyn, roughly my age, a Moody Bible Institute dropout from near Detroit, who in this book claims all these topics as authoritatively as Hemingway claimed hunting. That hint of color above a mostly washed-out sky at 3:53 p.m. on a February day in Michigan as you walk across a soggy field strewn with ice bits, repeating the sinner’s prayer for the thousandth time in the hope that this time it’ll take: this is O’Gieblyn country now. One might as well attempt to write a second book about Walden Pond.

My gain as a reader, however, surpasses my loss as a writer. *Interior States* is, sentence for sentence, image for image, unexpected connection for unexpected connection, the best new book I’ve read all year. O’Gieblyn writes in a controlled, level tone which, depending on topic, can sound beautifully muted, sardonic, or doomy. (One of the essays examines subtlety, its history and etymology—she concludes that it is always “a transaction of faith”—while noting wryly that it is the trait of her own writing that has most often annoyed readers.) Although, like any essay collection, it contains a few thematic outliers—book reviews, an ambivalent tribute to John Updike’s *Couples*, a profile of Mike Pence that is all the more damning for its restraint—the book mostly concerns midwesternness and Christianity, the two conditions O’Gieblyn seems unable to escape.

“The Midwest is a somewhat slippery notion,” she writes in the opening essay, “Dispatch from Flyover Country.”

It is a region whose existence—whose very name—has always been contingent upon the more fixed and concrete notion of the West. Historically, these interior states were less a destination than a corridor, a gateway that funneled travelers from the East into the vast expanse of the frontier.

Many writers have said something similar, but O’Gieblyn’s description of the psychological aftereffect is tangible and memorable: “It’s difficult to live here

without developing an existential dizziness, a sense that the rest of the world is moving while you remain still.”

The appeal of the essay form, for many writers, is the promise that one can skip over the hard novelistic business of scene setting and physical description. But O’Gieblyn is as careful as any master fiction writer to make sure that every mood is rooted in place and detail: “Ordinarily, Michigan sunsets are like a preview of the apocalypse, a celestial fury of reds and tangerines. But since we moved here, each day expires in white gauze.” Any midwestern writer had better be good at describing skies; O’Gieblyn is great at it.

O’Gieblyn repeatedly declares, throughout the book, that she is done with Christianity, has been done with it, has lost it, or has renounced it. In “Hell,” she seems to trace this loss to the focus-grouped wimpiness of contemporary evangelicalism, its abandonment of the harder edge of its own moral vocabulary. I won’t go to the trouble of believing this stuff, she seems to imply, if pastors don’t. “Sniffing Glue” tells the story of teenage O’Gieblyn, a dedicated fan of the era’s Christian rock, discovering MTV and gradually abandoning contemporary Christian music for the “real” bands that such groups mindlessly aped. O’Gieblyn, wicked ironist that she is, braids in as well the story of MTV’s meticulous, bloody-minded construction of the very authenticity that seemed to beckon to her from every Nirvana video.

“Ghost in the Cloud” tells the story of O’Gieblyn’s partial return to Christianity via a form of Christian transhumanism. She gives the deep history of the movement, illustrating the links between dotty techno-futurism and various strains of Christianity, alongside the pungent return of her own longing for eternal life.

To confront [a Godless universe] . . . after believing otherwise is to experience perhaps the deepest sense of loss we are capable of as humans. It’s not just about coming to terms with the fact that you will die. . . . It has to do with the inability to watch your reflection appear and vanish in a window without coming to believe you are identical to it.

The essay ends on a masterfully ambiguous image, O’Gieblyn hovering between believing in death as next step and death as final disappearance.

O'Gieblyn, whatever her current state of belief or disbelief, remains a religious writer, preoccupied with first and last things and ultimate horizons. My favorite piece in the book, "Contemporaries," ends as follows:

Increasingly there are nights when I sit up in bed, awakened by the panic of some half-remembered thought, one of those foundational problems that gets lost in the wash of secondary concerns and emerges only when you are loose and unguarded to remind you, with a start, that you've forgotten the original question; that you're missing the point.

This book, at its best, is like that half-remembered thought.