

Jon Horvath  
Artist and Educator

The life expectancy of a typical birch may be short in comparison to other trees, but the species is hardy while it lasts. The tree is one that first emerges in the renewal of damaged ecosystems and has the capacity to endure harsh conditions long enough to bear witness to multiple generations of human experience. So, when Chelsea Darter writes of her great-great-great grandmother Augusta giving birth to a set of twins in a field at the age of 16, it is not unreasonable to presume that her ancestor's pained gaze may have fallen upon the very same colony of birch trees Chelsea has the opportunity to visit today.

*A Prairie Fisher King*, Darter's rumination on family and self through poetic photographs and text, invokes the legend of a wounded Arthurian king; a figure rendered impotent who presides over barren land, slowly wasting away, as he awaits the arrival of a savior to heal his wounds and restore growth to his kingdom. As Darter weaves her way through a narrative of familial hardship, she invites a window on to her own homeland in rural Iowa, a place that bears the burden of its own scars. However, unlike the incapacitated king, what the viewer is privileged to access through Darter's procession of portraiture, still lifes and landscapes, paced by bleak moments of text stripped bare, is an attempt by the reluctant hero, Chelsea, to transition out of the role of the wounded and into that of the healer.

The depiction of a recently burned field from the perspective of one looming over a newly dug grave. A middle-aged woman, hooded and cloaked before an open road, standing as both protector and protected beside her yellow lab, gaze averted and waiting. The entropic interior tableaux of unlit Christmas lights, hoarded grocery bags, and detritus from the autumn's pumpkin harvest, seated before a window revealing the dormant landscape just beyond. And a complicated, wavering list of adjectives from the pen of Darter herself: dry, patchy, overgrown, rotting, ghost-like, dead, empty; pure, magnificent, glistening, otherworldly, eternal, beautiful, fierce. In each instance, Darter reveals her own recognition of her subjects, trapped in suspended climax, awaiting permission to move forward. She reveals her willingness to confront perpetual turmoil, if only to compel a different outcome than those from the cycles of her past.

The paper-like skin of a live birch tree, peeled away, will reveal hidden histories of growth and decay, survivals and threats, and the scars from harms endured, before it regenerates a new, healthy, shiny layer. But if the skin is peeled back too far, the tree may succumb to irreparable harm. In *A Prairie Fisher King*, Chelsea Darter flirts with just this. How deep can one dig to reveal the buried burdens of the past, to pursue repair, without setting in motion an undesired and irreversible course of events? The narrative Darter presents stands as evidence of the choices that confront her as she dares to attempt escape from her stubborn wounds.