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J. Annie MacLeod is an assistant professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland where she teaches nineteenth-century literature and fiction writing. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her creative work has appeared in The Cream City Review, The Briar Cliff Review, South Dakota Review, Roanoke Review, and Another Chicago Magazine. "Gasoline" is her first work of fantasy fiction.

Gasoline

By J. Annie MacLeod

THE FIRST TIME VIOLA changed Jo into a wolf was the second time Jo got to see the big city.

Big for Jo, at least. She'd grown up in Hay Springs out near the sandhills — a town, Mom said, six hundred and ninety-three souls strong last July with the birth of Marie's baby sister just two hours shy of Independence Day. Bone-barren cold in the winter, Hay Springs was so humid come summer that most women cooked supper in their underwear, in plain view of anyone who happened to cut home across people's backyards. Jo knew (and didn't want to know) that Mrs. Wurst wore hip-hugger briefs with tiny jumping frogs that shook and leapt to the buzz of her electric mixer. The only true bikinis in Hay Springs were hand-me-downs from big-city cousins.

Like this May with the candy-red bikini Jo'd gotten in the mail from Cousin Jeanette. Ever since, Jo'd wanted to run away to Omaha. Omaha, where Jeanette had lived with Aunt Celia and Uncle Howard since she was three. As far as Jo was concerned, Jeanette had it all: a movie theater with

six screens, a football field with permanent bleachers, a mall with real stores like the Limited and the Gap — no "Caroline's Fashions for Young and Old" where Jo's mom got her Levi's and Fruit-of-the-Loom T-shirts.

And boys. Jeanette knew boys who bought their own cigarettes and drove their own cars and didn't think swiping a sixth of their dad's Jim Beam meant they were cool. All summer, Jo wore Jeanette's cherry-colored bikini top, cutoff shorts slung low enough to let a little bit of the red bottoms show. Stopping by Minute Mart for ice cream, biking to and from Marie's house, lying out on the cracked pavement of the only public pool for three counties — no matter what she did, in Jeanette's bikini, Jo thought she could smell the city: metal, grease, the low burn of exhaust fumes like incense from the other side of the world.

So when Viola took Jo to the field just outside Omaha, Jo thought more about Jeanette and the city and less about what it was actually going to be like, becoming a wolf.

Viola had made Jo drive like she made her do everything else. Eight long hours, Jo kept both hands on the wheel, exactly two and ten o'clock. Just like Dad told her when they'd practiced on the Honda: brake and gas with the right foot, clutch with the left. The car was heavy, a big Ford truck. It didn't shift smooth like Jo was used to (that close Japanese handling) and the pedals were a million miles away. The truck was old, too, old like Viola herself, and the seats smelled of stale fries and spilled Coke, a high-school gym. Jo had figured Viola's truck would smell more like her whole house — like witchcraft. Mint, basil, and wax. But Jo was getting used to being surprised by Viola Tisserand.

Jo sneezed often. They said her allergies were psychosomatic, a nervous tick. Wiping her nose on the back of one hand, she hoped Viola wouldn't give her the third degree for being gross, unladylike.

"I've had really bad allergies my whole life," she said to Viola. Short and shrill, Jo's voice had a nasal quality like her sneeze. She hated it; it made her sound childish, whiny. "I'm on all kinds of medication for it. The pills dry me up pretty good, but I can't taste anything. Candy bars, hamburgers, bananas. All of it's sorta like mashed potatoes."

Viola kept her hands in her lap, one thumb pushing the wrinkles of the other, a plow making furrows. She seemed to be watching the dirt billowing up from the side road, dry and hot. Thank God Viola had air

conditioning. Most old women who Jo knew from church practically lived in sod houses and drove Model T's. No convenience. Convenience was a sin, especially in Hay Springs where microwaves were still suspected of being UFO technology.

"So I stop taking the stuff whenever I can sneak a pill into the toilet behind Mom's back," she said. "But then my nose runs, and if my mom finds out, she gets pretty ticked. All that money down the drain and everything."

The setting sun shone hard in Jo's side-mirror, a crystal flash that blinded her for a second, making her think for the first time all day why they were really there. White magic. Transformation. For a second her stomach hurt, a sharp tug stronger than the new cramps she'd had for three days now.

Taking a bend to the right, Jo turned too fast, and her heart went with it. The truck fishtailed. Calm down, she thought. We're not in that big a hurry. She told herself to breathe deep, through her mouth.

"You want to keep your body free from man-made materials for this kind of work," said Viola, her face still turned to the road. Here we go. Viola had been schooling her in witchcraft for three weeks, and Jo was almost used to the old woman's harangues on health and diet and proper behavior. "If your nose bothers you, Miss Joanna, you try a capsule of cayenne twice a day. Try it with strong tea — bourbon's better, of course, but you're too young to start all that. And stop eating French fries. They clog the heart and cloud the mind. Surely your mother doesn't let you eat that junk."

"You eat French fries," Jo said. "I just saw you eat a whole box. A super-size."

"Well, I can. I'm past all that now. My heart and mind can be as slow and thick as I want them to be."

As the truck crested a hill, Jo thought she could make out long shadows from the circle of pines some two miles off, but she didn't look long or close, too careful about the three-second rule. ("If you have to look at something other than the road," Dad had said, "you put those eyes back in three seconds. No more.") Jo hardly ever came out in the country because of her allergies. Pollen city. The clumps of crabtrees and maples and birch at the edge of each field looked tired, bent into each other like

worn-out athletes. An unusually hot August this year, everyone was saying. A bad August for breathing.

Again that drag in her stomach and along her legs, a new deep space and pain she wasn't used to. It embarrassed her, this period thing. It had come late, after all her other friends. Just last night, looking over the Triple-A map, tracing Route 20 like a spider vein along a thigh, she'd told Viola the truth — how she'd lied to them, carried maxi-pads around in her backpack even though she didn't need to. Now shifting in the seat, straightening her back to try and ease the new pain, Jo asked, "Are we getting close?" Her voice was even tighter than usual, all *n*'s and *ing*'s.

"Don't you be jumping the gun." Viola turned to face Jo, and Jo's cheeks got hot the way they always did when adults paid her special attention, picked her out of a crowd. "I told you. Three days after the first blood, full stomach, sunset on the eve of a new moon, and a mind as clear as running water. You've got to focus all your energy to do this. You get sloppy, you get distracted and start your woolgathering, and you know what happens."

"I could die. I know. You told me." Jo didn't believe it. How could she? She'd seen a good deal of Viola's shape-changing magic in three weeks: a squirrel into a prairie dog, a blue jay into a crow, and the riskiest one three days ago, a dog into a wolf. But death hadn't been a part of all that. Not once. Just the words and then some blood, a sharp squeal of pain and that moment when one thing was between two things, the second when the air crackled, electric and blue.

"I remember," Jo said anyway. "You don't have to think I don't remember the risks. I was only asking if we were close or not. It's no big deal."

It was amazing how much she had learned about Viola in just three weeks. Before, Jo had known her as the crazy woman down the street, the hag, the old bitch everyone talked about like talking weather. Then three weeks ago Viola had grabbed her elbow while Jo was minding her own business, walking to Minute Mart to meet her best friend Marie for ice cream and a Coke. Viola had asked her to help with the ladder ("I have to get those leaves out of my drain pipe before fall"), and Jo had got the same prickly feeling she always had around people she thought of as touchers. Touchers. People who felt things to know them. Viola had wrapped her

hand around Jo's elbow, and Jo had felt that sting, that search like a doctor's swab down your throat, and then a tug on her arm that said, *She'll suit. She'll suit just fine.* At that moment, Jo's cheeks had burned so hot she'd thought they were going to melt right off.

Now Viola twitched her skirt, ran her thumb and forefinger along a pleat; Jo liked the way the polyester flowers whispered and shook between Viola's fingers, as if blowing with a breeze. Viola tidied herself like she tidied everything else — flicking an eyelash off Jo's cheek, arranging candles by smell and color, wiping the blood Jo'd left on Viola's toilet seat after figuring out her first tampon. It was her nature, Jo understood, putting things in their proper place.

"Are you old enough to be dating yet?" Viola asked. "Are you in love with some boy?"

"I'm only fourteen." Jo rubbed the back of her hand against her nose, blocking her cheek from Viola's sight.

"What difference does that make? They sell sex to babies."

Viola expected an answer. Her questions and answers were part of the method, trying to catch Jo in a lie, see if Jo was really worth her while. "Mike Sprague kissed me after a football game once last fall," Jo said. "He was going with Tiffany Mullison, and he even told me so before he kissed me, but I didn't care."

She liked the sound of that, *I didn't care.* It made her think of leather girls — sixteen-year-old city girls like Jeanette with bright lipstick and short-short tops that showed off their stomachs.

"His kiss was kinda gross, anyway. Like being swallowed."

But Jo remembered that night. Cold, so cold for October, the north wind hard, a physical thing, a shove against her face and chest. Mike had wrapped his jacket around her; it smelled of stolen smokes and gasoline. When he slid his hands under her sweater and swallowed her mouth, she had touched his hairless face, polished smooth and firm by so much cold, a frozen cue ball. Jo remembered the ache that next day, her lips puffy and sore to the touch. She had touched them often.

"That's the circle," said Viola. Now close, the ring of pines blotted out a small corner of the great Nebraska sky. "Pull off here."

Jo turned the wheel too fast; the car slid to a stop. Dust swirled and settled, glittered like gold confetti in the strong light. Viola smoothed her

blouse, old fingers checking each button in turn. "You're nervous. This won't do at all." Letting herself out, Viola slammed the door and walked toward the trees, not looking back.

Jo tried to hurry after Viola, but her new, slow pain made her walk tender, as if she had fresh bruises on both shins. The air was hot, heavy; it made Jo sneeze. "You know I only have a driver's permit," she called. "It's driving on these stupid dirt roads. My dad's taken me around the school parking lot a couple of times. That's all."

Viola stood quite still a few yards from the circle; she didn't turn to face Jo. "There are times when I'm sure of you, and there are times when I think I've made a very bad mistake. I won't take a chance. Understand me. I will not take any sort of chance. If there's anything you need to tell me, I suggest you do it right now. The incantation won't work if you haven't told me absolutely everything."

"I haven't got anything to tell." Jo chewed the inside of one cheek. The little tweak of pain from her mouth made her feel better, somehow, as if she really had something to tell, something hot and hard and bad. "I told you about Mike. I told you about the blood finally coming." Jo tried to look Viola in the face but had to squint against the setting sun, now gold — the sort of gold that only came late in summer, full of pollen and heat and haze and the promise of a wet night. What Jo's mom called an asthma sun, the kind of sun that made Mom drive Jo indoors.

"I guess if you're lying, we'll know right quick." Viola unsnapped her purse, old-fashioned with the clasp on top, and found a pack of Virginia Slims. "We've come too far to go back now. If you've huckstered me into thinking you're pure. Well." She struck a match and cupped her hands to light up, a pro.

Jo's throat closed up, just like when she inhaled dust from the vacuum cleaner bag or touched cats. She was here, after all, ready to change herself, ready for pain and even death, for chrissakes. Viola had picked her, special, but now she wouldn't let Jo feel special — instead she had to make it all a game, as if Jo had come to her first.

"I don't get it," Jo said.

It was time to lay it all out. All these weeks of ancient books and candles and personal questions, Viola making Jo catch the animals, stir the herbs, take out the trash, make peanut butter sandwiches and hot tea,

Viola's with two thimblefuls of bourbon. Then last week, coming up with the story about Viola's ailing sister, the lie-that-was-not-quite-a-lie (Viola's sister was sick with cancer, but she lived in Chicago). Viola inviting Mom over for tea, her artful sighs and tight mouth and, who knows, a pinch of something in the snickerdoodle cookies that convinced Jo's mom to let her go. And here they were. Finally. Jo needed Viola to look at her, look through her if that's all she could get. Let her cheeks burn. If they were gonna do this thing, they'd better be honest.

"You treat your body like crap. I don't think the transformation's gonna work with you sucking cigarettes and mowing down French fries. You said you did this when you were my age. How am I supposed to believe that? You say one thing and do another. And I'm the liar."

Viola turned her wrist, sharp. It was the gesture she used to stop spells.

"Shut your mouth." Viola turned toward Jo with those hard, black eyes, iris and pupil practically one. "What do you know about magic, Miss Joanna?" Her voice was low, tight. "I use sunlight as thought. This field here's my body. I'm color and space and everything that you think about and want to know so very badly."

Viola blew the smoke hard, a punctuation mark. She looked younger somehow, loose through the hips. "You don't know anything," Viola said like she'd just said the most important line in a movie, the one everyone would quote for a month.

Jo wanted to tell her that she did know stuff — how she always knew who was going to call a full minute before the phone rang, or how she knew Greg Peterson was going to die in that car crash last year, a feeling she'd carried around for two days like the flu — but then Viola suddenly laughed, all teeth and wrinkles, eyes like lightning. And even though her hair, once gold, was gray and her face wrinkled, Jo could see that Viola had been beautiful. For the first time, Jo wondered if Viola had ever been touched by a boy, touched so the tips of her own hair brushing against her shoulders caused a shiver.

Viola shook her head, her laugh now a thin smile. "You don't even know about taking a man inside you," she said. Between Viola and Jo was so much of this big, blue bowl of sky it all made Jo feel off-kilter, out of her element. Small. "Making him soft or sad as you pull him in. Or about

blood, even though I'm sure you think you do. Or a baby ripping apart your insides and wriggling its head away from you. Like you're its pain."

Jo didn't know exactly what she meant, but she could feel a weight in Viola, a heavy need like a distant siren, a phone call late at night, a boy who looks at you once with force and heat and looks away. Jo knew that weight.

"What could you possibly know about purity, Miss Joanna Murray." Viola flicked her cigarette into a heap of brown stalks, broken corn plants piled up for the thresher. "You can't even talk about what's dirty."

Jo walked over and stepped on the glowing end of the butt, grinding it hard with her heel, tidying up. Something had settled between them, a handshake of sorts, a pact or a deal — Viola tired but ready, Jo not knowing what was ahead but still wanting to know. Wanting to know so much she shook with it, her stomach a knot, her nose running so she had to use the bottom of her shirt to wipe it when Viola wasn't looking.

And so it began. A thousand red rays shone through the pine needles as they walked toward the circle, and Jo wondered what it'd be like if they pierced her, riddled her body with holes of light. These trees were the one upright thing for miles and miles, and the land seemed to gather its folds and furrows into the circle, stretching itself as if to come together at this single point.

Inside the light changed, grew dense. With just her fingertips touching the rough bark of a tree, Jo felt this place, tried to figure it out. Now warm and damp, Jo imagined this circle in winter: the silent field, the pines heavy with snow, scattering on the wind like ash, the clean cold. She saw herself running, lungs hard with the scrubbed, cold air, a trickle of sweat beneath her jacket and sweater, wet between her growing breasts.

Removing plastic baggies from her purse, Viola got everything ready. Loose herbs, candles, a box of kitchen matches. "What do you hear?" she asked Jo.

"I don't know. The wind, I guess." But then Jo thought about her ears, shaped to catch sound. "The wind and pine needles rubbing against each other."

"And?" Viola lit three candles with one match. Small and neat, she sprinkled herbs around the candles as if seasoning a soup.

Jo closed her eyes, listening. "And a train a long ways away. A car.

Maybe a truck. Probably a truck; it sounds big. Lots of tires. A bird calling from somewhere pretty close."

"Good," said Viola. "Now cast the circle like I taught you. Keep your chin up."

Jo fixed her gaze far away, through the pines to the flat horizon. She took off her clothes, shoes and socks first, folding her jeans and shirt on top. She tucked her underwear and bra between them, hidden. The wind, hot, caught her hair, strands in her mouth and across her eyes. Jo kept her hair long even though it got in the way, stuck in car doors and tangled in the straps on her backpack. It was like having a thousand tiny fingertips. Now they felt the wind, tapped her bare back and shoulders. She'd never been outside and naked.

Jo could sense Viola deep against the trees, her shape just a trace in the shadows, a pencil sketch waiting for color. Maybe a reminder or something she could not help, Viola murmured the words along with Jo, but Jo's voice above hers was higher, fuller, the nasal whine fading with the rising wind.

When the circle was cast, Viola asked, "What do you see?"

Jo kept her eyes shut. "A yard full of flowers. A clothesline. There's one sheet left to take in — white. The wind's come up, and it's snapping pretty hard. A pile of stones, I think, some kind of wall. An old, plastic pool. The ones little kids use in summer." But Jo saw more. Holes of light through pines. Sunset like fire. Long brown stalks, brittle and rotting. The purple vapor of night.

"Are you scared?" asked Viola. "Do you think you're set?" Her voice was rapid, machine-gunning the words.

"Yes." Shivering first inside, then out, Jo's skin prickled cold, even in the heat, her nipples hard — a pull in her stomach as if someone was yanking a string.

"Now what do you smell?" asked Viola.

At first, nothing. She crouched closer to the ground, needles pricking her palms. Her nose, she thought, her useless nose. Only pine and dirt, faint. She imagined her nose like a radiator grill, close to the land and moving fast, and she caught a sweet smell with a metal bite, sticky and sharp — a smell that widened and grew heavy. Her own body. She tilted back her head, wind like water over her face. A smell of rot, sweet like her

own skin but with a foulness she could not name. That last smell was night.

"Now think. What do you feel?" Jo felt, every inch, every nerve. Each hair — head, arms, back, legs — vibrated like little heartbeats. Jo felt the sun slip under the horizon line, the fierce hot heat of day now a low heat coming off the Earth, yeasty and expandable like new bread, the heavy ache of smooth, new breasts pulled toward the Earth. She felt that closer heat as her own pain, the delicious drag of contracting muscles deep inside.

Jo let herself remember a time before Mike. A secret — one she'd never told anyone, not even Marie. Especially not Marie.

It had happened the first time she'd been to Omaha. Twelve years old, Jo had gone with Marie to visit family. They'd spent their first day in the city at the new Leid Rainforest, touching shark bellies under glass and drinking sick-sweet Slurpies until their tongues were purple. They both got sunburns: shiny red noses, shoulders, thighs.

That night Marie's parents stayed with relatives — Marie's mom had swollen ankles from walking too much with the baby almost due. But the two girls slept over at her older brother's — Brad, a freshman at Creighton. An adventure. The three of them stayed up making fun of *Saturday Night Live*, and Jo watched Brad's leg from the corner of her eye, the way he bounced it all the time as if it had an itch. Much later, legs cocooned, still sore and much too warm in down-filled sleeping bags, Marie woke up with a bad dream, something about dark hands and a man in an antique cape. Leaving Jo alone in the family room, Marie went to her brother's room where it was cooler.

But Jo couldn't get back to sleep; her thighs and face throbbed. Instead she got up, hair sticky with sweat, wet strands across her forehead. In the blue light of early morning, she inched open the door of Brad's room. Brad was asleep in his bed, breath even and low, Marie in her sleeping bag, curled on the floor across the room.

At the time, Jo told herself that she just wanted to roll up next to Marie, but she lifted the comforter and slipped beside Brad. Eighteen, Jo thought, he's eighteen. Brad woke up and said, "Jo," not a question, and put his hand between her legs. Hot and strong and wet, Jo had felt both pain and a current of pure pleasure. Then he'd whispered, "You'd better get out of here."

That's how Jo felt now, a wave of pleasure and pain along her legs. Wondering if she would die — she hadn't told Viola everything, had kept something bad from her — another wave hit Jo from the deep pit of her stomach, then wave upon wave. The air smelled like singed hair.

As if from a long distance, like the click and delay of an overseas phone call, now Jo heard Viola's voice ask what she could taste, but now the language wasn't English. Instead the sound barked at her, clipped edges and vowels from the front of the mouth, just behind the teeth. Jo realized Viola wasn't from Nebraska, her sound all East, Boston or New York.

Tasting salt, a sting in her mouth, Jo moved to the edge of the trees. She was still alive, after all. The magic and the plains and the vast, purple sky held Jo, no longer a girl, held her to the land, and as she left the circle of pines, her limbs lithe and fast, her body parallel to the ground, Jo, no longer a girl, saw herself run so fast that the world fell away, and whatever she thought happened.

At first she wasn't sure where to go. The whole Earth rang for Jo, no longer a girl but a wolf, corn and wind and night sky ringing with sharp sounds like blades meeting. Jo followed these sounds along an old creek bed to a farmhouse. Here the neat yard, the clothesline. The snap, snap of a sheet, bullets in the breeze. Here the rock wall and plastic pool, gaps in the rock where animals hid or lived, fat and small and pink. A line from a song she didn't recognize, Jo thought, *sometimes lovers begin this way too*, although her thoughts were smells and sights and sounds: tender plants waiting to be broken; the stink of fallow dirt against the house, needing to be hoed; small footprints in the lawn like a promise (a lazy circle from afternoon, a child playing).

Viola laughed. From a distance of half a mile, it sounded like a raveled sleeve, a pull and thread of laughter. "The land!" she yelled at Jo. "The land and the sky. The trees and the corn. The Moon and the stars. All yours!" She laughed again. "Take it. Take it all!" Jo understood Viola's hunger then, knew what it meant to want and to lose and occasionally to have.

Jo knew, too, the many names. Viola had taught them to her. *La loba*, *Rozsomák*, *Na'ashjé'ii Asdzáá*, *Numina*, *La Huesera*, *Dakini*. These were girl-wolf names, names she didn't like very much, especially now, her

million hairs touching the air, feeling everything, wanting everything — a plump child, for instance, his thick salt-blood losing its heat along her muzzle and down her ruff. She didn't feel anything like these words, these metaphors: a dancing mist, a spider or light or bone. She didn't even feel like a wolverine. She just felt like Jo: a teenager.

With Viola so far away, her long black silhouette like the leg of a fox, Jo thought how much she loved her, would always love her, for sharing the magic. But this field — the good mud, the sky a black vault, the ground-hogs and rabbits and squirrels, the promise of a child, the ring of pines — this field was Viola's way.

Jo left the farmhouse (not yet ready for children), whipping and spinning through the dead summer corn, rustling stalks like whispers. Knowing now that secrets couldn't harm her, that Viola didn't know and didn't need to know everything, Jo made plans. She knew that later she would flee from farmers, chase rabbits, steal a child. But tonight, Jo needed something else. Even in Hay Springs it wasn't the thing for teenagers to race along dry riverbeds or dig soil sharp with the stench of old tomato plants. The field could have too many leg traps, too many farmers with ready rifles. Jo wanted the city. She wanted what Jeanette had; she wanted Omaha, to run low and fast, lights and glass and asphalt melting past, a harsh blur. She wanted to run early in the morning, very early, the time when another wolf could be smelled two miles off, his smell so different from hers, not sweet or metallic but like meat — like gasoline.

She howled. Her howl was long and deep and not for fun. Jo howled, and then turned toward the city.

— for C.B.

