



driftwood press

literary magazine

Volume Three: Issue One

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Winter 2015

Independently published by Driftwood Press
in the United States of America.

Fonts: Satellite, Garamond, Josefin Sans, & Existence Light.

Cover Image:
Cover Design: Sabrina Coyle

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Digital Edition: January 2016

ISSN 2331-7132

Please visit our website at www.driftwoodpress.net.

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What Distance

Nick Banach

At the beginning, the bliss was almost unbearable, like she'd been cast into a fantasy where the relationship was so ideal she questioned their thirteen prior years of marriage. They talked more, and about deeper things, things outside their bubble ("I think race relations are strained due to opposing cultures of violence," etc.) which helped each recontextualize the other as a thinking, feeling being. His love was more articulate now, less animalistic. She was accustomed to their old routine—she cooked, she cleaned, she dreaded her husband's return from work when everything would fall back into disarray, chaos. But now when he got home from work, he took care of himself. He cleaned his own dishes in his own kitchen, and the only thing she missed was the smell of hot lavender. All because of a change in living arrangements.

They lived in the same home, but they were thousands of miles away from one another. She needed to stay near her parents, but her husband couldn't turn down the promotion. Instead, he rigged the whole house with sensors before he left, then built a replica on the other coast. When he first booted the system up ("it lives!"), his home materialized before her, and hers before him. The pixels each projected into the other's home overlaid the furniture like a gossamer skin of light, like an immaculate, pointillist dream. The replica was so nearly identical to the original that they were enrapt for hours by the ability to toggle the envirovision from her house to his and see that only a stray hair-tie would disappear, that her hand passed right through the magazine he pretended to read, that his coffee table was just an inch closer to the front door. It was only these slight discrepancies, these stubbed toes, that stood between them and exactitude. In the end, each agreed to set their own view at a 50:50 split in the name of unity, thereby inviting the quirks of the other's home into their own.

She recognized her fear of the bliss as irrational, convinced herself it was okay to be happy. How could she not be happy? Their circadian rhythms synced up for the first time in their relationship—he being an

early-riser but three hours behind—and they were blessed, when they utilized the window-sharing capabilities, with two wonderful sunsets each night. And with all the temptations and none of the luxuries of sex available, they had found tender, creative ways to pleasure one another. Many of which involved food. The most common of which involved eating it. So each would order the other a pizza, and they would sit on opposite ends of their couches and watch the sunsets, or a movie, or sit in quiet stillness reading, appreciating for once the mere presence of the other.

He still talked about work (“ancillary markets”), as always, but now she could talk about work, too, to which she was returning for the first time since they’d married. He’d made enough in ancillary markets that she didn’t need to work, but now, having no need to make house for a person whose house was thousands of miles away, and whose cleanliness, should she skew the balance of her envirovision entirely to his house—as she secretly always did—would overwrite her filth, she spent her days making and selling beaded jewelry until he returned from work. She wondered what she’d given up in those years of servitude, but she determined herself to recover it, and her renewed passion for life reminded him of the woman with whom he’d first fallen in love (“you feel different, in the best possible way”).

A sense of giddy wonder pervaded the home, her soul. What had she missed by living with him all these years? It was an exhilarating time for both, the beginning. Of course they talked about missing the dates they used to share, out at restaurants or movies, but dates could be easily had at home or hired out to platonic friends. The only times they openly discussed missing each other was at night, in their cold beds, and in the mornings, in those same cold beds, when she woke to find their faces had merged and could see the apparition from the inside, through the back of his skull, a gauzy veil of brown curls and their pictures on the bedside table.

Soon, he told her, the technology would be good enough to give him substance, but she knew this was just lip service, maybe wishful thinking. When they had first discussed the possibility of the dual-house, they knew the stakes, and she jumped at the chance: her parents were old, so she would stay. His promotion was such that he didn’t believe he had a choice, so she’d done all the convincing, and after his initial reticence (“won’t you miss the intimacy?”), he agreed, but he warned it wouldn’t be the same. He was right, of course—it was better. Almost as soon as he’d turned the system on, she felt they’d reached an unspoken agreement in direct opposition to their parting proclamations of love: that he should live there forever, and only visit in the event of an undefined future emergency.

She found at the dwindling of the bliss period that her husband was not as happy as she. His initial excitement at how well everything had worked (“I can even see the hairs sprouting from the mole on your neck!”) had devolved into minor quibbles (“I remember them being darker”) about the verisimilitude of her existence. When he wasn’t complaining about craftsmanship, or software bugs, he complained about the actual bugs in her home—roaches, ants, and large rat-like creatures he refused to believe were rats—which scurried into dark corners when he entered a room and shed his light onto her teeming heaps of week-old pizza, having been so long since she last cleaned. He said he was worried about her, asked if everything was okay. She said she was disappointed in him, that maybe she would clean more if she wasn’t constantly tripping over invisible obstacles or avoiding the tickle of the sensors on her feet, that maybe the real problem was his inability to appreciate that she was finally happy. That night, he slept on the couch, and she muted his snores.

To keep her happy, he eventually chose to isolate her form in the code and ignore her house completely, just as she had chosen so long ago. This solved his displeasure, but she could see the glint of worry in the corner of every glance, and she’d never cared for his brand of well-meaning condescension. Unfortunately, the constant nit-picking about her health and house had irritated her, so her complaints began in turn, and they cut deeper. He’d changed. He was a different person altogether. This wasn’t how she remembered him. He used to be so much nicer, used to spend less time in the bathroom. She knew he’d changed, but he disagreed, and to prove his point, he rearranged the furniture in his own home. This disoriented her, made her bump into real furniture and fall through the fake. *This* was change (“see?”). She called him an ass, so he programmed a donkey to appear in her home and feed at the sink. Change (“see?”). She called him a dick, so he had the decency to return things back to normal and show (“see?”), how things hadn’t changed at all, and that he would still offer her, as promised in his vows, the him, the whole him, and nothing but the him, so help him God.

So settled the argument on his end. But she still suspected him of having changed, and waited no more than a few days before she was proven right, when his form started to separate into two distinct persons: the him from right now, and him from one second ago (“a slow echo, like talking into a tin can”). The first would roll his stubby fingers on the desk, and after a short delay, the other, simply known to her as *Ghost*, would roll his equally stubby fingers on the same desk. The same thick beard, the same pot-belly, the same sad, grey-blue eyes which turned down at the corner like a panda’s.

Their words overlapped (“ancillary ancillary markets markets”) in poor harmony. Things still worked fine on their end, but they told her not to worry because they were going to fix this glitch (“ASAP ASAP”), but after all her husband had put her through, she couldn’t believe him. She wasn’t even sure which him was him. Of course she assumed it was the one who walked in front, most likely, but Ghost was quite believable, too (“like you, but a second younger”). She dreamed of what it would be like to have a second husband, a second lover, but her jewelry sales hadn’t been good enough to afford a second pizza.

When her husband finally assessed the problem, he was stumped. The software was fine, so she would just have to deal with it until he could look at the wiring. She dealt, and she suffered the consequences: a love twice-lived and the beginnings of a stutter. Worse, she had grown to prefer Ghost to her husband, and she now spent most of her day hiding the small signs of affection from her husband, who would surely recognize her dreamy eyes from the budding stages of their own relationship.

She felt guilty for it, how heartbroken her husband must have been when Ghost repeated the same joke, but to a more generous, fawning audience, whose gaze appeared to her husband just degrees left-of-center, looking somewhere behind him. When Ghost winked, she winked back. What charm. And those dimples! She must not have been good at hiding it, because it seemed her husband noticed, and he became paranoid. He watched over his shoulder, but since he couldn’t see the threat, he would try to make a joke of it (“thought I heard an echo”), and he would wink, and she would smile back—the poor thing. But she couldn’t fool him. He didn’t need evidence either, since the mere idea of betrayal was enough to take action, and he went down to the cellar and started his repairs on the wiring far before his projected start-date, the morning after the pizza boy had (“mistakenly”) delivered him a meat-lovers pizza, though his wife knew he was a vegetarian.

As her husband readied his tools, she knew she needed to save Ghost. Had she lived in the same house, she would have tripped her husband on his way down to the cellar, watched with joy as he tumbled down the stairs like an ill-formed slinky, cheered as his head bounced off the concrete landing. *Murderer*, she would say. But she didn’t live there, so he passed right through her extended foot and commands to never mind the glitch. And she was relieved she didn’t when he trudged back into the house accompanied not only by Ghost, but Ghost’s ghost as well. The three men sang an even worse harmony, but when they told her there was nothing wrong with the wiring, she had to agree. Now there was hope, at least, that Ghost Two

would somehow reveal to her the flaws of Ghost One and drive her back to the husband. And since the contractor her husband hired to inspect her home was unable to find not only the source of the problem, but also any evidence that the ghosts were manifest to a third party, she would have time to make her deliberation. This hope was shattered right away, though, by Ghost Two's obvious charms ("he seems more measured, contemplative"), and she soon had a harem of husbands, unconcerned about which was which, since there was comfort in no longer having to choose.

Whenever her husband would tinker with the wiring, more ghosts appeared. They emerged from the basement one by one, followed by the husband, who would measure his defeat by his wife's excitement. This progression was so endlessly entertaining she no longer thought of sleep as a part of her day, but a state of being from which she would occasionally find herself surfacing to the face of a new ghost, in a different room, not knowing how or when she lay down but so glad this was how she woke.

Having grown bored at the husband's strict daily routines, the ghosts now pursued their own hobbies and lifestyles. It seemed her husband had aged considerably over the past however-long, so who could blame them for not wanting to whittle miniature owls in the den or trim their nails over the sink. At one count—or at least, as best she could count when clouded by the ecstasy of her new living situation—she had eleven ghosts spread out through the house, each on their own, doing things her husband used to do, or things she always wanted him to do: reading Rilke in the nook under the stairs, curled up on the cushions like a cat; playing beautifully lilting sonatas at the piano he'd purchased on a whim at an estate sale and left sitting there, idle, ever since; doing sit-ups at the foot of the bed, shirtless, his chest-hair a sexy, matted fur. At night they roughhoused like fraternity brothers—throwing each other onto the couch, giving dead-arms and noogies—vying for her attention, which she willingly cast in every direction except the left, where the dark-and-stormy husband would recede into the couch and watch her with worry, with that incredulous hurt like she was responsible for this, like she was doing it to punish him.

She was all but certain this was her original love. He'd become the angry, petulant husband who, despite being so much older than the rest, spoke like a wounded child about how she was being so distant, so unwilling to listen, so ignorant of his marital needs. She was glad this one now spent most of his time in the den working on his schematics, or his owls, and she wasn't forced to see him often. It made her sad to think of him all alone in there, but whenever she checked on him, he was so sullen and pouty ("what

demon hath wrought this hidden plague upon your house?”) that she decided it best to just to hang with the boys.

What a shame, though: all this distance and she still felt more in love with every version of her husband at every angle, and could experience him in such magnificent fullness, while her original husband had locked himself in the den, so certain the self was contained within the physical boundaries of a single, aging body, that he denied all of the brilliant, vibrant selves who were now having a full-scale roman candle war in the living room—hiding behind the couches, the TV, under her dress, peeking out to fire a shot through her face or crotch. They were not of his reality, so he wouldn’t accept the outpourings of love she offered. When they’d lived together, her husband of old was so eager for love, he often claimed her affection was the only sustenance he needed. Hence the pizza. He’d worshipped fireworks with boyish zeal, too, and would have been overjoyed to join the war in his living room, working his way up the ranks to Captain and recapturing her heart as his own. But now he was a bureaucrat. He had no fight, no fun. It was true—he had changed.

She must have broadcast this disappointment on her face, because just as she had this thought, she saw him again. A glimpse, just briefly, but he was there. The man who’d given her all of this. Her husband. She saw the fire of his passion burning for her, the rainbow of roman sparks reflecting in the polished lens of his eye. He held his arms up and zombie-walked toward her. He groaned, he lurched. She was so excited to see him again, and she laughed because there he was, her silly old husband. Less of him, but yes, he was in that skinny body somewhere. When was the last time he ate? Was he hungry? He could eat as much of her brain as he wanted! The fireworks weren’t war, they were a celebration, a homecoming parade.

She moved closer to meet his embrace, to give to him whatever comforts she could, but when he got within arm’s reach, the parade fizzled, the gleam drained from his eyes, and he stumbled toward her, lunged for her breasts, and disappeared. In that quiet, she suddenly felt her husband’s absence, felt a bruise where he’d passed through. Could she have imagined him? Maybe. Or perhaps that was him crumpled on the floor behind her, sobbing about how he might as well lie there until he dies (“of this insufferable, involuntary hunger strike”). Or maybe he’d simply left her, and in his place programmed a Sad Ghost to remind her of all she’d lost, all she’d done to him. In either case, the amount of time that had passed between this and the last memorable moment of togetherness had been so vast, she knew she’d failed him.

It was this realization—coupled with the near-epileptic fit into which she'd been driven by the fireworks launching from just behind her eyes—that forced her to feel the weight of their decision, to cry, to leave the house for the first time in how long to take a walk and count her own casualties. She understood why he'd withdrawn: she was so smitten by her new loves she forgot to direct the proper attributions to their author, her husband. Such ravenous jealousy likely drove him mad. In attempting to fulfill his vow, to offer her the him, the whole him, and nothing but the him, he had spread himself thin. What had she offered? Not enough, apparently, but now she would save him from himself. She walked all evening and late into the night, or maybe even into another night, which was difficult, since her love-stupor had kept her rather sedentary for the past whatever, and in attending to only her most basic needs of eating and sleeping, she had put on no small amount of weight. So it was with a heavy heart and swollen ankles that she returned home to apologize to her husband, to propose they buy a new pair of homes and start over.

When she entered the living room, head hung with remorse and fatigue, something was different. The pristine walnut floorboards beneath her had been caked with dirt, dust, and the paw-prints of largish rodents. She looked up to scold the boys, but they were gone. Most of her husband's house, in fact, had disappeared. Here and there she saw patches of unblemished floor, but the rest had been replaced by such filth, she panicked—wailed, grasped at the walls, tried to draw the fading curtain of his home back over hers, but it inched away from her, pixels blotting out like dying stars. The virus was spreading too quickly. She couldn't watch. She closed her eyes and phoned her husband, who at the time was on the other coast, watching from the sidewalk as his house burned to the ground.

He talked her through things on his end (“there goes the bedroom”), and she would cry as the invisible fire licked its way over the wall, sketching cobwebs into the corners, staining her bedsheets a squalid yellow, birthing a litter of rats at the foot of her bed where just days ago one of her husbands had been doing sit-ups. Her husband had his own regrets about resorting to such drastic measures, about his sudden homelessness, but he didn't call the fire department because it was supposed to be a metaphor of his burning passion for her, that his only home was in her arms and this house was but kindling (“let the whole fucking place burn like the hell it became”). But the neighbors had called it in on his behalf, and now jets of water blasted through the columns of smoke, which drew up from the few surviving patches of her husband's light.

Before she could tell him not to, her husband said he was coming home on the earliest flight he could—just as soon as the insurance money came through, because he was broke, because he'd lost his job so long ago but was too afraid to tell her, afraid to disturb her bliss to find his own, but he knew he couldn't continue living unless he returned to her, and he couldn't return until the anti-depressants lifted him back onto his feet and gave him the courage he needed to face her—which he assumed would be soon. He then proceeded to read her a long, earnest, and rather juvenile poem about the importance of being together ("I feel like half a man without you, my life has simply come unglued"), and hung up on what he thought to be a triumphant note of his pending return. But she knew it couldn't work. Not after this. *Murderer*. She remembered somewhere during the third or fourth stanza that only Ghost Six could articulate his feelings with convincing style, with the appropriate balance of heartfelt sentiments and coherent metaphor to make her swoon. She could not continue this relationship without the rest of her husbands. It was strange that only in these desperate times was her mind keen enough to remember, from a life almost forgotten, a factoid that birds wouldn't return to the nest at the slightest evidence of tampering, and thus the only solution: to dismantle her house to match the ghosts', to draw them back into her life.

With a fire-axe and determination, she set about the house hacking away at the floorboards around those remaining islands of light into his home, gouging holes in the wall, splintering beams, letting the debris fall where it may. She was so entranced with her passion she hardly noticed the time it took to finish. She exhausted herself in the process and, as soon as she was done, dropped to the cement foundation. A dozen-or-so hardwood landings were scattered like lily-pads of light around the room. The cement was cold. It must have been winter now, the fresh wounds in her home letting in a bitter breeze. It seemed she had lost some of her extra heft, too, so it was necessary for her to build a fire. The rats huddled together for warmth on the other side, snickering at her. The indignities she suffered for her Ghosts, the tunnel-visioned patience it took to wait, how it all wore her down.

It was worth it, though, because as she'd predicted, this lured the boys back—each to his own pad in the room, but each flickering on and off with uncertainty. Elation! Her cheeks flushed with joy, and she rose to dance but collapsed back into herself. In her vigil, it must have been quite a while since she'd had anything to eat, but as if by magic, or some caring hands, she now held a plank of floorboard that had been whittled down to a skewer

and speared through a dozen pantry-aged marshmallows, which were already cooked to near-perfection over the fire. After all this time, it was the small gestures that kept her alive (“which one of you hopeless romantics prepared my dinner”) (“me me me me me me”).

There was a knock at the door, but she didn’t want to leave her Ghosts ever again. She ignored it. She picked at the marshmallows. The knock grew louder, so loud she thought it possible she’d locked one of them out, maybe Ghost Eight—those biceps! She answered the door, and there she met a man whose eyebrows had grown wiry at the ends and curled up in a perpetual state of confusion, which turned nearly senile when she asked who he was. He struggled to tell her anything sensible (“Your husband. Your Larry”). It looked like her husband but not. He was decades older, emaciated. How long had it been? She eyed him with distrust and waited for the gleam, and while she waited, he grabbed her hand and raised it to his lips, which were cold and wet. There was a familiar mingling of desperation and tenderness in the gesture, so she motioned him inside, loosened her grip on the skewer, and returned to the fire, where she rotated the marshmallows and asked the boys for a song (“kumbaya kumbaya my lord my lord”). The man sat down next to her, almost close enough to touch. She didn’t introduce him to the others, who grew up from the floor and kept her eyes darting around the room. The man fidgeted. (“you should come join me out there, dear. We should start over, sell the house”) (“what house”) (“the distance is too much for me”) (“what distance”).

The fire crackled and grew dim, the Ghosts buzzed and blinked like neon signs. The man scooted closer to her and rested his bony fingers on her thigh (“I’m here”) (“aren’t they wonderful?”). He put his arm around her and squeezed, and it felt good to have his warmth, but his touch was so foreign it became abstract, and his grip divided itself into fingers, and fingers to bone, and his cologne mixed with his human musk and reminded her, gently, of an explanation her husband had once given her on how the light she saw was a particle and a wave and a reflection, and she wondered if this smell worked in the same way, if it was particles or waves or the man himself she smelled, which one was making her feel this deep crawl inward and away from the Ghosts in the room who now seemed to her like the apparitions of dream.

The man rolled on top of her. She retreated further inside, to her core. With his weight settled onto her hips, he lowered himself to kiss her neck, her lips. And then it comes suddenly, a pang of apology or self-pity. She can feel the man’s excess saliva rolling down her cheek, but it’s just a sensation, like drool in sleep. She’s elsewhere, missing her husband. She misses

the man on his knees in the cellar, the flashlight's aluminum casing clicking between his teeth as he beams up at her, fiddling with the wires, proud of his creation without yet knowing what he's created. His assurances that all would be well if they committed themselves like felons to the lie ("I am here, and will always be here"). The him him, who however long ago made the her her feel, with the lightest touch, that he was the only person who deserved her, could give her comfort. Not the man who was in the den carving flightless owls from wood, scratching like a snickering den of rats. Not the man whose bony fingers were working themselves down her pants, searching by moan and groan like a teenage boy for the clitoris, rubbing a brusque rhythm against her pelvis. And certainly not the men anchored to the twelve remaining pads in her living room, scattered like stones of a pagan ritual around the fire, burning, singing, each just moments after the other, a poor harmony of row ("row row") your boat.

Interview

Nick Banach

Did you have a difficult time deciding the title of your work?

This was originally just a working title, and by the time I'd finished, I couldn't imagine it as anything but.

What inspired "What Distance"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I'd been through a long-distance relationship when I started the story, but the story didn't take its current shape until I watched a friend go through her own ordeal. She'd built such a generous mythos around her boyfriend, but whenever he would visit, he proved to be more or less a turd. Then he'd leave, and she'd fall in love with him again. The more she idealized him, the more abstract he became. "What Distance" is a literalized translation of that.

Besides working with our dreadful editors, what was the hardest part of writing "What Distance"?

Having the patience to revisit it so many times. I thought I'd finished it on a dozen occasions—it was originally a much shorter story—but then I'd revisit it a few months later, and I would find some new idea to explore. I started sending it out to lit mags just to be rid of it. Then I started the editing process with *Driftwood*, and I had to reckon with it all over again. I imagine it's something like the ups and downs of parenthood, grooming your child for the "real world." I'm happy to be an empty-nester at this point.

Which part of "What Distance" was conceived of first?

The premise and themes hit me at the same time. Most of my work starts with that Ah-ha! conception, then finds characters unfortunate or foolish enough to get involved.

Do you primarily write fiction?

Almost exclusively, although I occasionally dabble in poetry (just for myself), and I've recently been tempted into a personal essay. It's about my grandpa's death, Dia de Muertos, cultural appropriation, and professional wrestling. It should be a real slobber knocker.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

My desk is a Nick Banach original. I Frankensteined some IKEA parts into a lovely monstrosity (there's even a milk-crate involved), and the list of knick-knacks keeps growing. Also, a surprising amount of dancing and push-ups. Moving body, focused mind.

Our managing fiction editor, James McNulty, worked with you through a couple of drafts of this story, going so far as a few comprehensive critiques and an in-person workshop to get it polished to perfection. What are some of the difficulties and benefits found in working so closely with an editor?

They were one in the same: admitting that he was right. I feel like that's pretty common—you want your work to find someone who will care about it as much as you do, then they start giving it all this great and damning attention, and your defense mechanisms fly up. It's almost a form of jealousy, like now your story prefers this other person. *But I spent all that time with you! Didn't you like the rats, baby? I made them just for you.* But when you let go of that feeling, you see that each revision is an improvement, and you realize the editor is more of a marriage counselor than anything else.

While we were working through the first few drafts, you struggled a bit with the amount of absurdity that the plot should embrace. Tell us about the difficulties in finding a balance between absurdity and the really universal, human themes in this work.

I think there's a spectrum: on one end, all jokes; the other, melodrama. My default setting is comedy, and I'll sacrifice a lot to service a joke, which is incredibly fun at the time, but afterward, it feels hollow. The drama gives the jokes their substance, their meaning. And it's reciprocal, because the absurd actually makes the drama of that situation, the real human themes, seem less mundane. For me, I have to fight my urge to go for the easy laugh, to remember that my characters deserve more.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "What Distance"?

I went through a big Denis Johnson phase around the time this story

started to work. I'm still going through it, I think. More generally, this story probably owes a debt to George Saunders, Aimee Bender, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

This will be the first to press. I just started submitting within the past year, and the only other work I have forthcoming is in a not-quite-YA world-building anthology from Tiny Owl Workshop. But please, readers of the year 2018, take a look at what is hopefully my extensive catalogue.

Goes to show that there are plenty of great, unpublished writers out there. What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I'm always sampling literary magazines for taste, and I read a few that really stuck out. Mike Wood's "The Art of Forgery" in 1.2 and Alexandra Kessler's "Doctor" in 2.3 both stuck with me. I read a half-dozen good pieces and thought, "I'd like to visit someday."

The Known World

Lisa Lynne Lewis

Kate wants to stop for a moment to enjoy the view, but Fiona is pulling her toward the ticket booth. The plaza outside the aquarium is already starting to get crowded. At the far end, a few paddle boarders glide through the flat water of the harbor, unperturbed by the exuberant kids streaming from the rows of summer-camp buses in the unloading zone.

“Hang on, sweetie,” Kate says, spotting a coffee kiosk near the ticket booth.

Lured by the row of sweets on display, Fiona obliges. She points to a glazed muffin – more of a cupcake, really, even though it’s being sold for breakfast.

“Can I get one?”

Kate’s about to say no, but then again it’s a special outing before Fiona starts kindergarten next month. She’d known that Fiona would choose the aquarium; she’s been begging to return here since a preschool field trip a year ago. Thankfully, Fiona hadn’t asked if Gordon could join them.

“Please?” Fiona looks up at Kate expectantly. The woman in the kiosk has paused too, ready to tally the total. “We’ll take a muffin,” Kate says finally.

Fiona bounces in place, crumbs scattering on the ground as she eats the entire muffin top. “Can we see the stingrays? You get to touch them, remember?”

“Yes, but you can’t bring that in.” She’s relieved when Fiona runs to the garbage can to throw it out. The caffeine is already curling through Kate’s brain, an added boost of energy to help her face the sensory overload that awaits.

At the aquarium entrance, Kate hands their tickets to an employee and accepts a flyer in return, studying the map and highlighted events. “They’re showing a movie later about sea otters. Maybe we can go see it after lunch.” Fiona nods, already distracted by the life-size replicas of whales suspended from the ceiling. The sun shines through the skylights, casting whale-shaped

shadows on the clumps of visitors and the obstacle course of strollers filling the atrium. Kate has the disconcerting feeling of being trapped underwater, surrounded by minnows, as if the only way out is to rocket past the whales through one of the skylights into the open air.

She looks down at the map again to get her bearings. The touch pool is toward the back; on the map it's marked with a cartoonish stingray. What would Gordon think? He'd likely be amused, finding it akin to pop-culture depictions of space aliens, anthropomorphized and cuddly. Gordon is an astronomer; he looks for potential signs of life on other planets orbiting far-away stars.

"Like those little green men in *Toy Story*?" Fiona had asked him once.

"Well, that's the thing – nobody knows."

Fiona had thought about that for a minute. "Maybe they're more like Teletubbies – I used to watch that when I was a baby."

"That could be," Gordon said, listening intently as Fiona described them.

It must take a great deal of patience and humor, Kate thinks, for him to stay focused on such an elusive goal. She admires his laid-back manner and surety of purpose, the same approach that had convinced her to go out with him. He'd seemed to view the time it took to overcome her reticence as a mere blip, subjective and inconsequential on the cosmic timescale.

Kate takes a deep breath to ready herself, then she and Fiona join the throng of people queuing up for the motorized walkway of the first exhibit. It's a soaring Plexiglas tunnel filled with sea creatures swimming over and around them, diving underneath and emerging on the other side. Fiona gazes overhead at a giant sea turtle, its body a dark mosaic of green against the murky glow of the water. A few kids squeal as a white shark dives past the right side of the tunnel. The light in the tunnel is muted, the only other illumination coming from the safety lights lining the walkway. Kate holds Fiona's hand as they journey through, entranced by the sensation of being underwater. It really is impressive, she thinks, even if it's idealized: at the depths where many of these creatures live the water is as pitch black as the night sky.

With Fiona's father, the plunge into intimacy had been too much, too fast. Kate couldn't afford to make the same mistake again. The marriage had been more of a package deal; until she'd gotten pregnant, she'd been equally likely to end the relationship. Even before the first rippling movements she found herself in a state of heightened alertness, her senses sharpened as if she were suddenly experiencing the world for two. She'd felt only

mild surprise when the marriage had floundered two years later. Her allegiance now was to Fiona: the two of them formed a complete, closed circuit, Kate's love amplified and returned to her in a continuous pulsing current.

Kate hadn't even been particularly attracted to Gordon when they'd met at a housewarming party. He was a friend of a friend, shorter and stouter than Kate's ex-husband, with glasses and a tidy beard and a knack for casual conversation. He'd tracked down her email a few days later. It had taken a few months, but he'd eventually disarmed her with his patience.

On one of their first dates they drove to the outskirts of the city – less light pollution, he explained. He brought along a picnic, including a bottle of wine in a chiller and two plastic wine glasses. They talked until it was dark enough to lie on the picnic blanket and look up at the sky. Despite the faint orange glow near the horizon, the sky had been remarkably clear that night. Her hand in his, she'd lain next to him under the canopy of stars, overwhelmed by its scope, as he traced the shapes of some of the ancient constellations. He pointed out one of the stars in Libra. It was orbited by several planets, he explained, some of which appeared to have the necessary conditions to support life. "Just imagine – if every star is orbited by at least one planet, what that could mean." The possibility of everything, as he termed it, still waiting to be discovered.

Kate had waited four months to introduce Fiona to Gordon. Slowly, she relaxed her vigilance, pleased that he seemed to understand the importance of not encroaching. He didn't press Fiona into conversation, content to sit on the couch and let her draw closer when she was ready. Perhaps because of his low-key demeanor, it had only taken a few minutes for Fiona to bring out her collection of plastic ponies. Kate watched as she set them on the coffee table and told him what she liked about each one. She was surprised, both at Fiona and at herself. She'd expected more wariness from Fiona; watching the two of them together, she felt an unfamiliar prickle of envy.

The moving walkway ends. It's disconcerting, coming back to solid ground. Kate side-steps a temporary pile-up of people and steers Fiona toward the touch pool outside the rear of the aquarium. Fiona stops in front of an immense glass tank, mesmerized by the undulating kelp and tropical fish. A starfish has attached itself to the glass, its underbelly a blend of yellow and white. Behind it, the kelp waves gently. The tiny tangerine fish sway in synchronized movement with the current, shifting to one side and then back again. "How does it stay there?" Fiona asks, pointing to the starfish.

Kate shows her the hundreds of white spots gripping the glass. “Those are its feet. It uses them to hold on.” She squints to read the placard mounted on the wall. “It’s called a giant spined sea star.”

Fiona places her hand on the glass, fingers splayed to span the width of the sea star, and watches in wonderment as it inches itself towards her thumb. “It’s moving!”

“It’s a living animal,” Kate says. “It definitely moves – just slowly.” They watch the sea star’s incremental progress across the glass.

Fiona turns toward her. “Isn’t it funny that there are stars in the sky and in the ocean?”

“I guess it is,” Kate replies. Fiona’s hand is still mirroring the sea star. Her hands have lost their slight chubbiness, the dimples they’d once had at the knuckles no longer visible.

Kate takes a step backward and almost trips over a stroller. There are at least five or six of them, temporarily abandoned as the moms hold their babies up to the glass. More than 95% of the ocean is still unexplored. She feels a stumbling wave of vertigo, as if she’s barely balancing on the crust of the Earth, bracketed above and below by vast, uncharted universes. The known world, the dividing line between the two, is such a narrow band. Caught by surprise by how quickly her earlier feeling of claustrophobia has been displaced by this unsteadiness, she wonders briefly if she’s coming down with something. “Come on, sweetie,” she says, gesturing to Fiona to follow.

The sunlight is too bright after the muted dimness indoors. Fiona is already ahead of her. “Wait! Do you remember how to touch them?” Fiona turns and holds up her hand in a two-fingered salute. “Right. Just pet them gently on their backs.”

“I know – I remember!” Fiona says impatiently.

From a spot in the shade Kate watches Fiona wiggle herself in along the perimeter of the touch pool and reach her hand into the water. On their earlier visit, a dozen or so families had crowded around the pool, the bolder kids jostling each other to get a good spot. They’d been there with Fiona’s friend, Sara, who was helping her mother take care of her new baby sister. Sara and the baby wore coordinated “big and little sister” embroidered pink sundresses, the baby’s accessorized with a ruffled sunhat.

Fiona had hung back, hesitant to join the kids at the edge of the pool. “You can’t touch her face!” Sara screeched when Fiona leaned into the stroller to admire the baby’s sunhat. “I wasn’t going to,” Fiona said hotly before turning back to where Kate was standing. She’d stood by Kate’s side,

arms crossed, defiant, even as she looked longingly at Sara in her pink dress.

It's happened a few times since then, Fiona's hurt radiating off of her as she recounts her grievances. It's been an adjustment for all of them, Kate reminds her: Sara's family has had to adapt to having a baby in the house, while Sara's had to learn how to be a big sister.

Kate's pleased to see that Fiona's one of the more confident kids here today. A little girl stands on tiptoe to watch her make contact with one of the stingrays. After a moment Fiona notices and bends down to talk to her, taking the girl's hand and helping her reach out to touch one of the rays. Fiona turns around and calls, "Don't you want to touch one?" Kate shakes her head.

Two nights earlier Gordon had arrived at the apartment with a gift for Fiona. He'd been away at a conference in Hawaii and had brought her a souvenir, a plush red bird wearing a lei. "It's a Hawaiian honeycreeper," he told her, showing her how to squeeze its belly to make it chirp.

Gordon had made dinner reservations at the same restaurant where he and Kate had gone on their first date. It was warm enough for them to eat outside on the patio. As Kate sat down in the chair the waiter pulled out for her, she realized they were sitting right next to the table where they'd sat the first time, the two tables separated only by the plate glass window. Even with the glow of the heat lamps and the garlands of small white lights that crisscrossed overhead, the patio likely appeared much darker to the diners inside than it actually was, she and Gordon indistinguishable shapes in the twilight.

When they'd finished eating, Kate looked up to find him gazing at her. Reflexively, she reached down for her napkin to wipe any stray crumbs from the corners of her mouth. He placed a small wrapped box in the middle of the table. "A little something for you." Kate had the brief, panicked thought that it was a ring. "I picked it up for you at the airport gift shop," he added, seeing her stricken look.

Kate undid the silver bow and opened the box to find a seed-pearl bracelet, its two delicate strands loosely twisted together and held with a silver clasp.

"I realized when I was in Hawaii that tonight was our six-month anniversary," he said. "When I saw this, I thought of you."

Mutely, Kate held out her hand and let him fasten it around her wrist, almost queasy with a mix of relief and embarrassment at not having tracked the chronology of their relationship as closely as he had. It was a beautiful bracelet, she thought, admiring the seed pearls' muted glow.

He took her hand. "When I was at my conference, I kept thinking how

much you and Fiona would have enjoyed being in Hawaii.”

Kate felt a primal surge of protectiveness for Fiona, surely asleep by now in her bedroom while the babysitter watched television in the living room.

Then, perhaps taking her silence as agreement, he added, “I didn’t go into this with any expectations. But I guess I’ve realized lately how much it means to me to have you both in my life.”

As he looked at her, waiting, Kate forced herself to smile. Agreeing to go out with him, then continuing to do so because she enjoyed his attention: she’d been foolish not to realize where it was leading. She’d allowed herself to ignore that all along they’d been heading toward a decision point. Even worse, Fiona was now bound up in this too.

The moment to decline the bracelet had already passed. “Thank you,” she said finally, realizing how idiotic she sounded. “I’m just a little overwhelmed right now, that’s all.” Kate thought suddenly of the couple sitting on the other side of the window and wondered how she and Gordon appeared. Did they seem like they were on a romantic date? Or was her unease visible?

“Don’t worry,” Gordon said with a small laugh, trying to break the tension. “I’m not asking for a lifetime commitment.” He paused. “But maybe at some point we can at least talk about where this is heading.”

Later, after the babysitter had departed, Kate stood in the darkness of her living room and replayed the conversation. She’d been naïve, she realized, lulled by his patience and the ease of their relationship. She heard a muffled thump from Fiona’s room and turned toward it instinctively. It was probably just her pillow falling. Fiona had slept in Kate’s bed for nearly a year after the marriage had ended, creeping in after Kate was already asleep and burrowing next to her like a warm puppy. Now she preferred her own bed. Kate nudged Fiona’s bedroom door open and saw that her pillow had indeed fallen to the floor. She picked it up and wedged it gently next to Fiona. She was laying on her side, head bent down as she curled her body around the honeycreeper Gordon had given her.

The sun is now directly overhead. Time for lunch. Kate gathers up Fiona and finds an empty table on the covered patio.

“I wasn’t scared at all!” Fiona says. Her face is beginning to freckle from the sun. “I showed the girl next to me how to pet them the right way. I told her they feel really smooth and they don’t bite.”

They won’t eat lunch together every day anymore once Fiona starts kindergarten, Kate thinks, already wistful for this time with her. They’ve had

such a small, tidy world up until now.

“Do you know what Sara told me? When she’s older, she gets to babysit! And she said maybe I can help her.”

Kate nods and watches Fiona eat her sandwich. Just last week, she’d lost her first tooth. It was so tiny, like a pebble. Kate imagines a trail of lost teeth behind her.

Inside the domed spaciousness of the theater, the air is cool and dark. “Look – the screen is all around us,” Kate says. Fiona starts climbing the stairs, looking back to make sure Kate is still there. They find two seats and Fiona stretches out, feet dangling off the edge of the seat.

A ripple of light begins at the far left side of the theater, spreading across the screen like sunlight arcing across the sky. All around them, the waterline bobs gently. A sea otter floats into view, then dives under the water, its body streaming down the far right wall and disappearing. There’s a squealing noise, and the movie cuts to the sea otter’s pup, wrapped in kelp and left alone while the mother forages for food. The narrator explains how the kelp acts like a cradle, keeping the pup from drifting away.

The otter pup’s cries are piercing. Kate has a visceral memory of Fiona, age two, at the park on a perfect, sunny day. She’d been running toward the playhouse structure when she’d stumbled in the sand and fallen, face first, onto a discarded metal truck. Kate can still summon the sudden dread, the rush of guilt as she ran to scoop her up, trying frantically to look in Fiona’s mouth, Fiona screaming in near-hysteria when she saw the blood. Kate thought for sure she’d knocked out a tooth, but she’d only cut her lip. Fiona has yet to have a serious injury, although of course it may yet happen. So much is out of Kate’s control.

At the end of the movie, the camera pans out from the pup, now grown and self-sufficient, a shrinking dot of brown finally subsumed by the immensity of the ocean. The lights come up, and Kate guides Fiona into the aisle and starts to follow her up the stairs. In front of them, a girl not much older than Fiona holds her little sister’s hand, waiting as the little girl laboriously conquers each carpeted step. Kate wills herself to be patient. In the end, it might not even be the little sister who comes between Fiona and Sara. Fiona is too young to see this, although of course not even Kate can predict how their friendship will play out.

Outside, the harbor is empty, the afternoon sun electrifying the water. The days are already shortening imperceptibly. Kate stops and hugs Fiona.

She leans down to breathe in her scent, but Fiona squirms out of her embrace.

"I wish Gordon had come with us." Fiona pauses. "Mommy, you should see if he wants to have a baby."

Kate looks at her, temporarily undone by her hopeful expression, her mussed hair lambent in the golden light. "I don't know if that will happen," she says finally. "But I do know this: if it ever does, you'd be a great big sister."

Fiona smiles, basking in the compliment, seemingly content just to know it *could* happen, someday. A brief gust of wind blows through, and she turns to watch a discarded flyer slide across the pavement. Kate follows her gaze as the piece of paper dances away, backlit by the afternoon sun.

Somehow, Kate's ability to control the trajectory of her relationship with Gordon has slipped away from her. She resents how easily Fiona's been won over. A sudden clarity blooms: Fiona is ready for their circle to expand, and yet, even her affection for Gordon can't justify a permanent relationship with him.

Soon, she and Fiona will join the afternoon procession of minivans and SUVs beginning the journey home. Kate looks at her watch, calculating: another fifteen minutes shouldn't affect traffic too much. "We didn't go to the gift shop! You know, sweetie, if we hurry, I think we have time to get you something. Maybe a stuffed animal?" She suppresses a spark of guilt at Fiona's excited reaction.

Fiona slips her hand into Kate's, pulling her toward the lure of the aquarium gift shop. But first, Kate gazes at the harbor, then beyond, to the golden seam where the ocean meets the sky, and offers a silent apology for this necessary hurt, knowing already that soon enough it will be repaid.

Interview

Lisa Lynne Lewis

Did you have a difficult time deciding the title of your work? Were there any other titles you were considering?

Usually the titles for my stories don't come about until they're completed, at which point I read through to see if there are any phrases that jump out that might work as titles. Earlier drafts have very basic titles, given that I have to come up with some sort of title to be able to save the document! This one, for instance, was simply called "Aquarium" for quite a long time.

Which authors influenced "The Known World"?

I was inspired, in part, by Kate Walbert's short story, "M&M World," which was published in *The New Yorker* and subsequently included in *Best American Short Stories 2012*, and how it was structured. In it, a mother's visit to M&M World in New York City with her two young daughters is the frame, but the story is interspersed with flashbacks.

How did "The Known World" come about?

I knew the story's frame would be a day trip to the aquarium by a mother and daughter in which the mother is grappling with the future of her relationship with someone she's been dating. The aquarium setting is based on an actual place, but the characters and the conflict are very much fictional.

Tell us about your revision process regarding this work.

The feedback I got on early drafts was that everything felt a bit too "settled," and that the story needed more of a sense of conflict. The specifics of what Kate was grappling with were still hazy to me for a while, which was apparent! I experimented with several different outcomes for Kate and Gordon's relationship, including her deciding to stay with him and her being pregnant, before finally coming up with the version that's here.

We really enjoyed working with you on revising "The Known World." The first draft that we saw was a good five hundred words longer, but we all ended up agreeing that it needed some trimming. Would you like to tell our readers about any scenes that didn't quite make it in?

The more time that elapses between writing a story and reading it again, the easier it is to cut parts that end up seeming unnecessary. In this case, there were a couple of places that seemed to telegraph Fiona's eventual request for a baby sister that ended up getting cut. Some of the motherhood angst got toned down too!

Do you primarily write fiction?

My current focus is short fiction, although I've also done a couple of op-eds recently. I've also made several attempts over the years at a memoir based on my grandfather's life – each time, I've gotten about a hundred pages in before getting stuck.

Where can readers find more of your work?

One of my stories is in *Cleaver Magazine*, where I'm an assistant fiction editor, and another is forthcoming in *Natural Bridge*. I've had a few op-eds and related essays run in the *Los Angeles Times* and on *The Washington Post*'s "On Parenting" section, and I also interview authors as a contributing writer for *Literary Mama*.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I read an interview with the editors in *The Review Review* and was intrigued! Most of my stories are a bit longer than your word count maximum, so it took a little while before I had something suitable to submit.

Birch, Bark

James Holbert

"Birch," the boy says. "It says Birch on your mailbox."

She raises her glass. "Detective," she says, and hides a smile behind the translucent rim.

At Birch's feet: the mahogany legs of her armchair, her toes massaging the carpet, her discarded heels—four inch—that she had removed when the boy sidled by her at the front door and she sat down across from him. Never take off heels unless you're sitting first. If you plan to get up, put them on. Maintain the same impression. This is true even when meeting strange high school boys who knock on your door and ask for a moment. For what purpose is this one here though? Doesn't matter. Especially if you're regal enough to not be looked in the eye as you put your hip on the door frame and wait for your visitor to introduce himself.

"Birch," the boy now stammers. "So, Mrs. Birch."

But he can't finish.

Across from her, on the floor: sneakers, toes curling and uncurling underneath the tongues and half-tied laces. Then legs, their pair of denim trousers, unstained, neat, folded over the sofa. The boy had peeled up the spot in the knees before he had sat down, impersonating a grown man. He busies his fingers, pulls at his earlobe, brushes the collar of his polo. He only seems to look at her when she pecks at her drink, otherwise it's his shoes or her ankles.

He becomes what he pretends to be for a moment, with a rise in his voice so strained and awkward Birch can nearly hear the person in the boy's head yelling at him to spawn some balls. "You saw me steal that soda yesterday. From the 7-Eleven," he says.

She nearly spills her bourbon on her dress. It's one of her finer pieces. Soft and gray and cut straight across the bust. Everything is rounder in straight lines. It happens to be Cara's favorite dress. Cara who had helped Birch pick it out at the plaza, but that fact had no effect on this evening's

choice of attire. Birch does not outfit herself for others. Had not done so even for Raymond. Raymond: who was now her ex-husband, who, despite no longer living in the house they bought together, still occupied it in a spectral kind of way. The half-empty Acqua Di Gio aftershave in the medicine cabinet. Raymond-sized fingerprints on the vanity lightbulbs. Year-old ticket stubs from the bullfights in Madrid, still pinned to the fridge. Souvenirs.

"I suppose I did," Birch says, re-crossing her legs.

She hardly remembers the incident. It had been last night, a trip she remembers more for the urgency of buying another pack of Pall Malls. The boy's face rings only the faintest of bells.

He clasps his hands, tries to begin several times but must be being chewed up by the contradictory voice in his head, the sackless one. Birch finishes her drink and broods over her distaste for sacklessness.

"Please, don't report me," he says. Birch thinks that she might not refresh her drink after all. "I'll do anything."

Birch leans backward and the plush of the armchair gives in to her pointed shoulder blades. She is comfortable, erect, acutely attentive despite the alcohol.

Apparently the boy is afflicted. She lets him carry on because it seems sporting to do so. He recounts: he saw that she saw and right away he gave in to the panic. So he followed her home on his bicycle, and it was lucky that she only lived a block away from the store. He watched the front of the house from across the street for half an hour before he pedaled back home. That night he didn't sleep. In fact, he couldn't even drink the Pepsi after going to all that trouble—Birch remarks that she could never manage the stuff either. He returned the exact bottle to the 7/11. Without going inside. He left it on the sill. But still he couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about her.

"I'll do anything," he says. "Just please don't tell anyone."

Birch passes her glass over to the end table, leaving her elbow propped up neatly on the armrest. Outside: a car sliding up the driveway. The muted sound of a running engine before it cuts to silence. Probably Cara. Anticipation of someone entering the room, sudden but expected. Birch lets the moment drain.

"Well, how should you *start*?" No flinch from him. There is just relief, it seems, happy expectance in the way he leans forward to catch her words. She continues, "You can start by gardening in the front yard. Tomorrow. Can you garden?"

"Anything," the boy says.

Heels on, Birch stands. He only stands after she does.

Next day, Birch watches Cara peek through the curtains and into the front yard for the third time this afternoon. It's always been Birch's habit to draw the shades at this time of day. In paintings, sunsets are beautiful. And they're also beautiful when you're looking for something particularly sentimental in a novel. But they're not practical, especially if you want to sit in your living room and not have to squint.

"Let it alone already," Birch says. A copy of *A Farewell to Arms* is in her lap, and the flicker of golden light at the bay window chases away Birch's visions of an emasculated ambulance driver.

Cara insists on letting the room bleed of orange light.

"If you want to go out and poke the rabbit, then go ahead," Birch says. "Just don't chase him down a hole. I don't want to lose a gardener."

Cara goes over to the kitchen, fixing her hair up in a ponytail. She's told Birch that people have said she looks more attractive this way. Birch has disagreed but offered no further opinion. There is no use doing anything but that, she's learned. That was during all the divorce talk. People either listen to what you tell them or they don't. They add in their own reasons later.

Rattling of cabinets, clinking of whiskey glasses—echoes from hollow kitchen cupboards. "I thought you were driving us again tonight," Birch says.

Cara returns, floats down to the other end of the sofa. "Not like you've got much to share anyway." She tucks her bare feet underneath her body. Birch's reading glasses glint in the lamp light. "I wish you'd stop drinking alone."

"Should I invite in the help?"

"You've got me to go out with now, don't you?"

Birch is only half-listening. Right now she's remembering a professor in university who much preferred Hemingway to some other rival modernist whose name she can't recall. Something about what is concise versus what is superfluous. It hardly seems practical for Birch to pursue. She lowers her reading glasses.

"Don't I?" Birch says. "We should go. I'd like to cross off that Italian place on Main."

"You're lying if you've never been to Vicci's before."

"Raymond wasn't the dinner date type."

"Am I a lucky find then?"

"Stop that," Birch says. "Let's go. Where're my sunglasses?"

Her purse is now in her hand. Her coat fits like skin to an apple. Cara joins her at the front door, looking vaguely at the curtained bay window, aglow with hushed sunlight.

"It's getting late," Cara says. "Is he not going to leave?"

They're out on the porch. The decking echoes the clap of their heels as she reaches the bottom of the two steps. In the patch of earth by the mailbox, the boy, whose name has been revealed as Justin, kneels plucking weeds. It's the last zone of imperfection in the soil bed. All along the edge of the sidewalk: only the stems of stilted pansies and lilies and their shadows. The soil richly dark with the displacement of the superfluous.

"I think it's cruel what you're doing to that boy," Cara says. "He should probably be applying to college or something."

"Justin," Birch calls. Cara averts her eyes and pretends something interesting is going on in the holly shrubs under the bay window.

The boy turns up, dried sweat pinning a thatch of hair to his temple.

"Do you think I'm cruel?" Birch says.

"No, ma'am," he says. "I'm really grateful."

Cara shakes her head when Birch smiles at her.

"I'm leaving, but the door's unlocked if you need to use the bathroom or anything." Before she walks off: "Just don't *take* any of the soda out of my fridge. If you need to stay hydrated, you'd best be drinking water instead."

Justin's forehead colors. He nods vigorously.

At the car, Cara takes the driver's seat. "You scare me sometimes."

"That can't be true," Birch says. She latches her seatbelt, rummages through her purse. "Ah, here are my sunglasses. I hate the visors in your car, you know. There are no flaps to go over the mirrors."

"What you're doing to that boy," Cara says. "It's not funny."

Birch, despite the popular opinion in the car, enjoys a good laugh.

The following morning begins without the process of the former marital routine. Things Birch had learned were things like breakfast prep, hair brushing, wiggling out of pajamas to pull on day-clothes. Things that begin your spouse's day as much as your own because he has to wake up and see that the world is still in continuous rotation, and that you will always make it appear that you are the only source of that rotation. On the sill of the den's front bay window, Birch sits with coffee in her hand, a process that may have by now been given enough time to become the new routine, and she wonders if her ex-husband's world can still rotate without her.

It's Saturday, and Birch has gotten up early enough to see the newspaper

delivery man roll up her driveway in a murky yellow sedan and fling the day's news from the driver's side window. In the earliest hours of the morning, it is a sight to witness shadows of the previous night being chased away by the coming of dawn. Despite the lack of sleep Birch has been getting since the stress of the divorce, which Cara has advised her to "see someone about" several times, she has not been able to see the gradual transition from night to day this particular morning as she has other mornings. The coming and going of the newspaper man's sedan has performed much more theatrically the same effect of night becoming day and in much less time—the creeping along of something and then its departure, repeat the next day for emphasis. She waits, too, for her gardener boy. He comes, but with an attachment this morning.

Perhaps, though, it is he who is the attachment. At the top of the hill, an additional bicyclist leads Justin and rides with the help of gravity and some ambitious pedaling to its foot, right in front of Birch's house, where that bicyclist squeezes her handbrakes, dismounts her chariot, and lets it lie with a spinning wheel and mangled bars on the roadside so she can take the walkway with a full-length stride and so blow onto Birch's property and into her life with the impetuosity of a hurricane that has not the good will to introduce itself with at least the warning that would allow the homeowner to prepare. Birch hates such things.

In the kitchen, Birch can hear the chirp of dishes clapping against each other and the suck of the fridge's gasket as Cara sets about taking on Birch's old, somewhat forgotten routine. But for the moment, she cannot stop looking out the window at the hurricane girl approaching her porch steps with the gardener boy close behind, his own bike now parked in the street, imploring for her to "stop" something. It is perhaps that the girl has mistaken Birch for a display-window mannequin because she does not return Birch's gaze. When Birch responds to the rapping on the door, though, she finds that the hurricane girl is not afraid to meet her eyes exactly the way that the boy Justin did not two days before.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Birch," the boy says, holding up his hands behind the girl.

From within the house, Cara calls, "Is somebody at the door?"

A soft moment passes. The boy stuffs it with hampered panting from his bicycle ride. The girl in front of him breathes through soundless, flaring nostrils. Birch's hand is still on the doorknob.

"Do you have a minute?" the hurricane girl says. "Stay there, Justin," she says as Birch steps aside.

Birch, who has never made a mistake, internally admits to her first as

she sits down in her armchair. By seating herself she had thought that her guest would do that the same. But hurricanes are impervious to the tug-and-pull reaction of expectations. They are often impolitely unassuming. So instead the girl stands stone-footed beside the coffee table, leering down at her. Birch pulls her robe in.

"Feel like waffles?" Cara's voice calls from the kitchen. "I feel like waffles, anyway."

The girl crosses her arms over her chest with adolescent pretension, introduces herself as the gardener boy's girlfriend. Birch had once known girls like her in high school, in university. The kind destined to become mothers. Somewhere, this girl probably put on a neon vest and volunteered to hold up traffic near elementary schools.

"Just what the hell is your problem?" the girl says.

Birch smiles pleasantly. "I don't even know your name."

"And I don't know yours, and I don't care. You know," she says, pointing at the front door, "he actually thinks someone would give a shit that he stole a two dollar soda from a convenience store. He's that fucking stupid with morality. But you're worse."

There's a pause, and when it comes Birch feels as if she wants very much to do something with her hands. Before she is able to reach for the fire poker and etch circles in dead ash, the girl freezes Birch's roaming hand. She does not have to touch it.

"I had to squeeze it out of him," she says, stepping forward. "Where he was yesterday, and then after that, why he had felt such an overflow of good will to a woman he'd never even met before. He skipped school to come here, you know. And when his parents got the phone call they grounded him because he wouldn't tell them where he was."

From the kitchen, the clap of cabinet doors comes out to the den. "Waffles it is," Cara says. "Wish we had some strawberries to go with. Love those things." Birch wonders intently if she should go out right this moment to the store and get a dozen little pints of them.

Birch presses her back into the fabric of the chair. It catches her shoulder blades. Stiff, it feels. Like she's gone past the cushioning somehow. Bone on wood.

The hurricane girl is apparently waiting for a response. Birch knows what silences mean. She swigs her coffee: a burning hot that washes down all of her throat.

"Cara," she calls, "could you bring me another cup of coffee?"

"Demoting me from chef to coffee-bringer?" Laughter. "Coming right up, Queen Bee."

The girl is still quite there when Birch is forced to notice her again. And her eyes have the look of windblown fury, erratic and spontaneously destructive.

“Do you even have anything to say?” she says.

Hurricanes never leave easily. And never without causing at least a little bit of catastrophe. Broken windows, shattered picture frames, flowers sucked up from gardens, roofs torn off so that everything, clouds and all, can look in at the walled divisions of your house and see how you really live. Before the girl leaves, it is not without giving Birch something to remind her of the storm she let in through her own front door.

Her coffee mug hangs by the grip of her two first fingers and she begins to stand, begins to thread some answer for the girl, but resigns to the intention of going to refill her own cup of coffee. She feels the winds are blowing strong and that now is the time to get out. Before she can take a second step, the slap comes across her face. Curt, sudden, a flick of lightening that cracks a seam in the sky. When she looks up, her hand is already cradling her cheek and she’s watching the girl’s back as she opens the door. Flash of the boy on the porch, flash of his face, confused, restless, asking things to a person he is calling “Amy,” who Birch has never heard of before. Then the close, the slamming of the door. Slap, in the jamb.

Under the kitchen threshold, Cara stands with a steaming mug. But Birch still doesn’t remove her hand because the skin under it is not hurting but tingling in a new strange way. Cara, with her wide eyes, watches.

“What was that all about?”

Three pulls to get it started, her ponytail smacking her in the chin and neck. Loose strands catch in her mouth: spit them out, grip the mower’s handle, push. The churning sound of the gas engine has a bubble effect. Inside you can’t even hear yourself hacking at the fumes and smoke from the initial start-up. To the neighbors it must sound almost soothing, like buzzing cicadas and summertime.

He arrives on time, ten o’clock, but by then Birch has finished nearly half of the lawn. Mowing is like rolling out a carpet in front of you, except instead of adding you are subtracting. She sees the bicycle before she sees him. It’s leaning on its kickstand, the front wheel draped to the side lazily: the bicycle’s way of weighing on one hip and winking at you. As she maneuvers to finish her line, she finds the boy standing on the walkway, mouthing something. He’s inside the bubble where it is so noisy that no other noise can exist. Birch tucks her head to her chest. A foot stomps on the front of the machine. And a hand covers hers. More noiselessness.

"I'm supposed to be doing the yard work, Mrs. Birch," the boy says when the mower sputters to ear-ringing soundlessness. "What're you doing?"

"Christ," Birch says. She bends over and pokes a finger at the spongy button on the engine. "Now I have to prime it all over again. You know how long it took me to get this piece of shit started?"

"Then let me do it," he says, pulling her hand away. "I've got it, really."

She watches him probe the red rubber, but when he grabs hold of the handle bar she doesn't relinquish her spot. He looks at her as if he had expected her to blow over—submission resulting from insistence. She scratches the collar of her shirt. It's one of Raymond's old, a flannel that she found hiding away in the back of the bathroom closet this morning. It was too hot to work in, and Birch knew that the moment she plucked it out from its secluded place and felt how thick of cotton it was. But she had no other shirts she would want to wear in the morning heat.

"I think you should go home, Justin," she says. "You're done."

Birch reaches for the cord, but before she can pull, the boy mashes his existence into her vision, pushing closer so that she has to withdraw and look at him and his unblinking eyes.

Without her heels, she can see clean up his nose.

"Is this about what happened yesterday?" he says. "Amy told me what she did, Mrs. Birch. I ended it with her."

"You *what*?"

Somewhere off: the hum of a lawn mower.

"Doesn't that make things better?" the boy says, pleading. "I mean, you're not going to do anything, are you? I know it was fucked up of her, but now we can just continue our arrangement, right? Like before?"

Her grip leaves the handlebar. A loose curl of hair falls from her ponytail and coddles her cheek as Birch swings the other way. From the corner of her eye: the lazy front wheel of the bicycle, winking.

You don't expect these things to happen. To meet a young boy in a convenience store without even knowing you've met him until he shows up at your door and you allow a misunderstanding, and then he's showing up the next day and the next, like dawn, like days, and then suddenly you're wearing sneakers that are one size too small and you're wearing your ex-husband's flannel, which you've dared lay claim to except you can't. You can't lay claim to anything anymore. It's over. Hurricanes happen, and hurricane girlfriends. And there is, in the same sense that you can do anything in this world, absolutely nothing that you can do.

And so it follows that he will still be there, that boy, even after you've

turned your back and leapt up the porch to get away. He's looking at you and he's pleading at you and you, for God's sake, let it come all this way, to your very own welcome mat.

"I need you to leave," Birch shouts. Then, a correction as she turns around and from a step up, sees the top of his scalp there, hair parting away at the center, splitting as if he were starting to bald: "You need to get the fuck out of here."

There is the noise of protest as Birch struggles to open the front door. For a moment she thinks it is locked, but really it is the sweat on her hands, "From all this damn heat," she mumbles, which makes her palms slip from the brass knob. The boy follows behind until the door is finally pushed back and then she is slamming it shut—loud thunk in the jamb—from the other side. She can hear her name being called. Muffled as if it were being trod on. Birch. Mrs. Birch.

Cara is there in the room, eyeing, a Shaw's bag of her clothes winding around her fingers.

"I know I promised," Birch says, "but he just won't leave. He won't leave, Cara."

She relocates her bag to her other hand. "I was just going anyway. Hot outside?"

"Cara."

"You don't have to explain yourself."

Cara makes to unlock the deadbolt. She smells of a fresh shower and looks like it, too. Birch lays two fingers on Cara's wrist—the slight soft of skin washed—before Cara pulls on the door.

"Cara, please, for Christ's sake," she says. "When are you coming back?"

The door is pulled open. The boy stands on the porch, his knuckles up in the air just before where the door was. He is a standstill monument looming on the just-outside. Cara sighs deep, mountainous. Birch thinks she can feel its rise and fall in her own chest.

"After I take him home, I'm going to go back to my place," Cara says. "I think my fish is dead and I have to scoop him."

Birch looks after them as they go. Cara hooks Justin's arm on the way past. There is soundless compliance as he is pulled away, still that monument statue. He only seems to mold into his guide, voicelessly, the way a sleeping child folds around the neck and shoulders of the parent who carries him off to his bed. Birch might have thought that he had, before this day, been a part of nothing. Incidentalized. So it is strange to her that she watches the whole time as Cara's car slides out of the driveway and disappears over the top of the street's hill.

Interview

James Holbert

Did you have a difficult time deciding the title of your work? Were there any other titles you were considering?

I usually love titling stories, but this one: tough cookie. Originally, it was “Post-Mrs. Birch,” as if to say here is this woman after her marriage. But it sounded clunky and, well, I wasn’t married to it... I had my friend and professor read it. He asked me, “What does the boy think when he sees that mailbox for the first time?” It was he who suggested the title it is now.

What inspired "Birch, Bark"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I love “small” conflicts, I love stories with small conflicts. Explosions? Helicopter chases? Not for me. Think about how many tiny conflicts you go through in one day. The guy *two steps in front of you* didn’t hold the bank door open for you (Rude!); you forgot which side your car’s gas cap is on as you pull into a Shell (the mind-bending public embarrassment if you guess wrong); the girl sitting next to you in class is wearing your ex-fiancé’s favorite perfume (does she still think about you, too? Is she better off without you?). And then, think about what would happen if someone else—more eccentric, more diabolical, more anxious, more labile—had to handle it? What if everything was not okay? I think we, as people, are good at defusing most of our small conflicts. But what about the one or two that is just *going* to explode? And why is that conflict happening and what is going to happen from here? For “Birch, Bark” and stories I’ve written like it, it begins with an observation followed by, “Well, what if...?”

What was the hardest part of writing "Birch, Bark"?

The story itself happened pretty quickly. What really tripped me up was the conclusion where Birch realizes the consequences of what she’s done and where it all came from to begin with. From the outset, the narrator really doesn’t know anything that Birch doesn’t know, the psychic distance

is that close. And the most important function of Birch's character is that she doesn't admit her feelings to herself. So it falls on me, as the author, to communicate her feelings through the things that she *does* notice. Her shoulder blades catching the cushioning of her armchair, for example. That has two very distinct feelings for Birch, each at crucial points of Birch's mental and emotional security. At the conclusion where the narration dips into this second-person, free indirect speech, all that subtlety blows up. It has to. Birch is finally admitting things to herself. Getting that moment of self-revelation on the page was difficult because the entire story before that point is dedicated to staying true to Birch's character. But I think that tight level of psychic distance throughout is what makes that final moment so huge to Birch and, hopefully, to the reader.

Which part of "Birch, Bark" was conceived of first?

Definitely the premise. I literally asked myself, "What if some person allowed another person to think that stealing a soda was a much bigger deal than it really was?" When I started the story, I had no idea who Birch was. But I knew that there was something she wasn't telling me and, by way of psychic distance, something she wasn't telling herself and the other characters of the story. But I paid attention. I noticed things like, *woah, she's got this obsession with being in control, right?* And this Cara person is probably around not just to be a sounding board, but as someone who is already a former "victim" of Birch's taming. Why is she like that? You go from there. And then little information nuggets, like the heels, the text's way of handling names, and Raymond the ex-husband, don't seem like a random piece of verisimilitude anymore. The trick for me once I realized this, though, was not to let it overwhelm me such that I felt the need to vomit it all out in half the amount of pages. Birch is still not aware of all this, right? She's manipulating the outside world and not really analyzing where that desire to do so is coming from. That's what allows the ending, this kind of self-revelation that allows her to see whole for the first time.

Was there anything in your original conception of the story that did not make it in?

Very early on I imagined that there was going to be some sort of sexual contact between Birch and Justin. I can't be more specific because I simply couldn't imagine it as the story progressed, nor can I now. It just wasn't where the story wanted to go. For that reason, I think this story is a huge maturation point for me as a young writer. Writing a story isn't like solving a jigsaw puzzle. For me, it has to be more like turning all the lights off and

walking through a room with my hands straight out. And I didn't feel Birch and Justin's conjoined genitals in the dark.

Do you primarily write fiction?

Yes, mostly fiction. Though, every once in a while I'll get a poetry itch, usually when I'm flipping through a lit mag and see something—anything—in poem form. But fiction is where the real fireworks are for me.

What do you make of Birch and individuals like her?

She's incredibly human. I can't blame her for what she does, but I can't say I love her for it either. What I do love is her—and our—vulnerability. Birch, to me, may be self-destructive. And I think she projects her destructiveness onto others as a kind of defense mechanism. Right? I think it's a possibility. That Birch might hurt herself somehow, mentally or physically, is another reason why Cara is there in the house to begin with. Cara doesn't want her to drink alone and she worries that Birch should have some counseling. Birch is beautifully vulnerable this way. She needs people, though she disguises it in a kind of glib, even sociopathic, way. My favorite moment in the story is when she touches Cara's wrist with her fingers. It's the only moment in the story where Birch allows all her pride melt away. Right then, she expresses that she emotionally needs someone. I love her for that, and I love her for showing it to me.

The deterioration of Birch and Cara's relationship is very subtly done; it seems to take a backseat to the Justin plotline, but by the end we realize that the Justin scenario is only a microcosm of the larger issues in Birch's personality and her relationship. Tackling smaller scenarios to represent larger problems is a phenomenal tactic. What were some of the difficulties you faced in doing this?

I definitely think that the difficulty lies within that subtlety. If it's not done right it can be offensive to the reader. Right? You're watching someone about to pull a rabbit out of a hat. The guy's showing you the hat, directing your attention away from somewhere else etc., just doing his routine...only, it's not working. You see the hidden compartment in the hat. And then the guy still wants you to be amazed by the end. The audacity, right? Give us our money back.

I believe the worst thing I can do is not trust my readers. I can't go around shoving stuff up their noses. But I can't be unclear either. But if to some people I haven't balanced enough to allow for them to make this specific question, I'm not upset about it. Not at them. And not at me (you

know, unless it really is my fault). Because if it's well written and the general trust is there, they will assuredly latch onto something else. And that, to me, is better than the McRib coming back to McDonald's.

The premise is outwardly simple: a boy comes to atone for his mistakes, misattributing how he should atone for them. And despite that seeming simplicity, there are so many layers of moral complexity hidden behind the characters' actions in this piece. It actually reminds me of the Dardenne brothers' social realist films. Could you talk to us about some of the difficulties found in making simple premises so complex?

For me, the key is not trying to do too much plotting at once. Themes, event progression, what you're calling moral complexity. Character umbrellas all of that. Characters don't represent real people, nor do they even mimic real people; they *are* real people. My friends call me an old lady for reading Agatha Christie, but *I love that woman*. She prefaces *The Body in the Library* by saying that she observed the would-be characters of her novel at a hotel where she lodged. That's it. If she learned about these people and their lives, she goes on, she would not have been able to imagine the lives of her characters. So when I say that my characters are real people, I'm not saying that they are John Nobody, my good bud from school. I'm saying that they are literally their own person. And you just go from there. The rest, all that complexity, falls into place by itself, and that's because human beings themselves are complex.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

There's a magical realism piece of mine in volume 15 of *The Offbeat*. Recently, my fiction has also been published in issue 11 of *Sliver of Stone Magazine*.

Rhubarb Wine

Read Trammel

His father drove down the dirt road in a pickup truck, Tom sitting next to him on the bench seat. The August mid-afternoon heat shimmered over the road's bleached surface. The windows were cranked down and the wind made it hard to hear. Tom was content to look out over the cultivated fields, the distant, blue mountains off in a haze.

He remembered a trip they'd taken to the mountains. The air was crisp and cool there and he and his father caught grasshoppers while his mother read and watched them. They had a blanket and a picnic. His father tossed a hopper into a clear stream and they watched it drift, spinning and kicking, until a small trout devoured it. That was one time; they had not gone again.

Now they were driving to the Hutterite colony to buy vegetables. His mother always said they grew the best produce in the valley and you could buy it cheap, so it was worth the drive. Her own garden consisted of flowers mostly, and a couple of tomato plants she coaxed along in the withering heat. Tom wondered why she hadn't come along, to hold and tap each vegetable as she did in the grocery store, feeling what would taste best in a salad or grilled with meat in the long summer evenings.

She had suggested the trip that morning after she cooked Tom breakfast. His father was reading the paper while he worked on a cup of coffee. His mother stood at the sink and dried her hands over and over while she talked.

"They're bound to have a lot ready," she said. "You and Tom can go together. Tom's never seen the colony. It'll be a nice Saturday." His father shrugged.

"What's the rush?" he said.

"No rush. I just thought it would be nice for you two to go out—together."

"Fine," he said and set down his mug. "Get ready."

"You'll have fun with Dad," she told Tom.

So they had a list of everything she wanted and Tom was excited. He didn't often get out of town unless it was riding his bike and then he'd not go too far. He and his friends would ride out past the train tracks to the

river, which was warm and murky from irrigation returns, but still held some decent bass that were fun to catch. They all recently turned thirteen and discovered that the girls down at the public swimming pool were more interesting than eight-inch bass. He had seen some Hutterites come into town from time to time. The women wore head-coverings and were quiet beside their men as they walked down Main Street past the window displays and restaurants. There was something interesting about their silence.

Tom also enjoyed being alone with his father, which had become a rare occurrence. Business at the store where his father worked wasn't good and he'd taken to staying out late at nights. Tom would hear the truck come in some time after midnight and then heavy, shuffling steps to the bathroom where the water ran and then the bed shifting as the man lay down. His father's eyes were red and swollen in the morning and he lingered longer over his coffee.

Now the old truck bounced along the county road that was rough and rutted by farm and ranching equipment. The truck was dirtier than usual. Beer bottles rolled on the floorboards and crumpled newspapers and fliers littered the seat. Once his father yelled at him for leaving a candy bar on the dash until it melted. There were bent cigarettes on the dashboard now.

The road ran along a wide irrigation ditch filled with water and lined with thick stands of brush and willows. Birds flitted across the road and Tom watched them take flight over the level fields. They came up close behind a farmer driving slow in a tractor. His father sighed with impatience. The dull, green tractor was caked in mud and it took up more than half of the narrow road. His father edged to the left to see around it. They were crawling along now. Then the farmer eased over, his right tires threatening to go off into the ditch, and his father swerved around him. Tom gripped the seat. The old farmer's eyes were narrowed beneath a pulled down ball cap.

"Poor bastard," his father muttered and looked into the rear-view mirror.

"Dad?" Tom said. His heart was beating.

"It's bad enough being tied to the sun and seasons. Drought this year—and the next? Then you got them crooks at the bank up in town, crooks in Helena. God damn crooks in Washington too. All trying to take what a man makes, what a man has. You try to get away from it."

Tom was confused. His grandfather had owned a grocery and his father worked at a store, so as far as he knew no one in their family had been a farmer in generations. Or maybe his father was telling him to get away from the crooks in general, though Tom wasn't sure who the crooks were. He

didn't ask. The dryness in his father's voice scared him.

His father slowed the truck and turned onto a drive. This road was smoother and they picked up speed. A column of pale dust rose behind them. There was no breeze, so it would hang, then slowly dissipate. Up ahead stood a stand of trees and a cluster of buildings. His father slowed as they neared the cleanly spaced cluster of sheds, houses, and barns. The truck pulled to a stop near one of the houses. Hutterites had already started to gather.

Tom sat in the truck and waited for his father to do something. His father was squinting through the windshield. Some men stood off to the side watching them and there were some women by one of the houses. The men wore suspenders and plaid shirts, the sleeves rolled up tanned arms. They were smiling, but they held back. Then his father got out and slammed the door. He waved and walked up to a group of men. Tom slid out of the truck and eased the door closed. He felt odd, as if he and the Hutterites were studying each other. He looked at the women, who all looked older than his mother, with faces creased by the sun. Their bright dresses reached down past their calves and the dark scarves mostly covered their hair. Tom thought they must be hot in the summer sun.

A group of kids snuck up behind the truck and were whispering and laughing together. They returned his stare. He looked away.

"Tom," his father said. "Come along." He was standing with one of the Hutterite men. Tom hurried up to them.

"This is your son?" the man said.

"Yeah," his father said, staring off toward the barn.

"Tom is it? I am Jakob," the man said and shook Tom's hand. Tom worried that his own hand was sweaty and he wondered if he grasped hard enough.

"Well, we don't want to be taking up too much of your time," Tom's father said. "You'll know better than me, Jakob. Why don't you pick out some good veggies?"

"Yah, sure," Jakob said.

They went with him to the communal garden, followed by the children who stayed a ways behind. The others moved off and went about their work. The field was muddy despite the heat. Tom's feet squelched in the dark earth and his shoes and pant cuffs were soon caked. His mother would make him take off his shoes outside and rinse them with the hose.

Tom helped his father carry the vegetables as they picked them—some lettuce, carrots, cucumbers. He saw a cottontail race off through the cultivated rows toward a field. Some boys saw it too and ran after it. He felt his

heart beat as if he too longed for the chase, but he was burdened by the vegetables and besides, he was too old for that now. Tom hurried after his father. The afternoon was warm and he was sweating. He thought about the pool and how it would be crowded now. He thought about the girls there and the swimsuits that followed their lines closely. He thought about their glistening skin and their slight smiles as the boys splashed in the pool or ran by them to get a closer look.

Up ahead a girl was working in the field. She stood up to wipe her brow as they approached and Tom caught a glimpse of her face. She wore a dress and head scarf like the others, but he could see the pale skin of her neck peeking from beneath the dress as she had one button opened. A tight braid of light brown hair peaked from beneath the covering. The front of her dress was dirty. He stared at her angular face a few years older than his as she looked back without expression.

“Put your pecker away and take this,” his father said and handed him a zucchini. Tom fumbled with it and almost dropped what he was carrying. He blushed and looked down at the mud. His father chuckled, but Jakob wasn’t laughing. They walked past the girl, but Tom didn’t look up to see if she’d heard and if she’d reacted.

Jakob and Tom’s father spoke about the weather, the price of grain and chickens, and the prospects for a good or bad year. Insects buzzed and a meadowlark trilled. The sky was a washed out blue. Tom’s arms were itching from the vegetables, especially the prickly-skinned zucchini, and he tried to shift them, almost dropping a few in the process. Sweat beaded at his temples and ran down his face, but he could not wipe it away.

“Here,” his father said, holding up some radishes. He saw that his son was struggling under his burden. “Okay, take those back to the truck. We’re almost done here.”

Tom trudged back toward the truck. He slipped and stumbled in the mud and cut across to a field that was left uncultivated. The tall, dry grass brushed brittle against his legs. Grasshoppers took flight in front of him, yellow and black wings crackling as they flew.

Tom stood by the truck and brushed black dirt from his shirt. He watched the Hutterite children watching him. There was a time when he might’ve approached them, but he felt himself too old for that now and hung back aloof. Tom wondered what it would be like out here, always around the same people. He remembered hearing from people in town that the Hutterites often spoke German amongst themselves. The only German he’d ever heard was in WWII movies and there it was harsh, evil. People

also said that the men and women ate separately, that the women were considered subservient to men because God made them from Adam's rib. He wanted to ask his father about that—maybe his mother.

Tom looked for his father. He was hot and wanted to go home. The colony was quiet and still. He could not hear his father's voice. His mother often said his father had a salesman's voice, perfectly suited for his job at a men's clothing store. He could put you at ease, she said. Make you feel as if he was your friend. Tom heard this voice at barbecues and restaurants, though not at home. Waitresses always smiled at his father and made extra passes by their table. Tom did not understand how this came so easily to his father. It was hard to talk to strangers. He was quiet—like his mother.

Finally, he left the truck and came around the houses. The girl from the field was walking toward him. He kept his eyes straight ahead until they were almost passing each other and then he looked at her face. He smiled. Her face was blank. Tom saw his father coming out of a building with Jakob. He was laughing and shook the man's hand. He carried a large jug of red liquid.

"Jakob, that was fine. Fine place you got here. Any time you come into town, be sure to look me up at the store. MacGillivray's. Remember?"

"Sure, Mr. Miller. Sure."

"Here, take that and get in the truck," his father told Tom when he noticed him. Tom grabbed the jug, which was heavy and the liquid sloshed against the sides.

"Be careful with that wine. Don't drink until you get home. It's strong," Jakob said.

"Sure thing," his father replied.

They both got in the truck, his father slamming the door. Jakob watched them back out and then turned as they drove off. Tom noticed the kids didn't run after, as he'd seen farm kids do. Kids of his father's friends. The Hutterite children had already wandered off and didn't even watch them leave.

"Friendly, but odd," his dad muttered.

"Yeah, they seem nice," Tom said because he didn't know what else to say.

"Long as you got money."

They drove away from the colony and Tom felt the wine slosh in the jug against his legs. The truck had sat in the sun long enough to be hot and he sweated against the leather seat. They had the windows down and all he heard was the truck creaking and the tires grating the road's gravel. The sun was lower in the sky, but evening was far off. Even then it would be warm.

His father slowed as they came closer to the highway. He pulled off the road under a wide cottonwood and into the shade. Tom looked at him, not knowing what he had in mind. His father's face was sweating and had a shadow of stubble. Tom thought this odd because he was always clean-shaven, his hair neatly combed and slicked back in the way he said a businessman should look. Even if he wasn't technically a businessman—just a shop clerk. The hair was tousled and curly now.

"Gimme that jug here," his father said.

Tom handed it over and watched him pull out the stopper. He took a long swig with a hand bearing the jug's weight and grimaced as he brought it down. He licked his lips, took another pull.

"Damn, those Hoots make it good," he muttered.

With the truck stopped Tom could hear the hum of hoppers in the grass and cicadas in the tree. He looked down the road toward the highway and saw a car pass. The engine ticked. The wine smelled sort of like vinegar. He remembered Jakob telling his father not to drink it before they got home, so why had his father stopped to drink it now? Then he noticed his father was looking at him. His eyes were tight and red.

"Want a taste?" he said finally.

"Sure," Tom said and took the jug. His chest felt tight and he hesitated. He wondered what his mother would think. But his father was watching him. He drank. The wine burned his gums and his throat, so he coughed. It was sweet, though, and he liked it all right and took another drink. His father laughed and clapped him on the back. Tom handed him the wine and watched him drink, thinking about his friends. They would be jealous. Most of them had taken surreptitious sips from beers at barbeques, but here Tom was with his dad drinking wine that was openly offered.

He was feeling pretty good sitting there. He was thinking about the cool summer pool and the girls sunning themselves. He thought about Cindy Loper, who was a sophomore, in particular. And he thought about the Hutterite girl. Tom's father showed him how to hold the jug steady so he wouldn't spill any wine down his front, which he already had. Soon they were laughing and talking about pheasant hunting in the fall. His father had a friend with a farm north of town where they'd gone a few times before.

"Tells me he's seen a bunch of birds this summer. I told him to make sure to get off his ass and get that corn down early."

"Think we'll go more than once?"

"Sure."

"With Schneider and his dog?"

"I don't know. We might. See what Schneider's doing."

"You know, Mike just got a new gun. Real nice Remy."

"What's the matter with your gun?"

"Nothing."

"That gun's not that old."

"I know."

"You don't need a fancy ass gun. So long as you can shoot."

"Sure, Dad."

The jug was getting lighter. His father had drunk most of it and his face was getting red. Tom took another long pull and realized the wine tasted better the more of it he drank. Sweat ran down his face and he clumsily wiped it off. He watched the dappled shadows from the cottonwood play across the dash and wondered why it wasn't cooler in the shade.

"Anyway, you can save up for your own gun. What are you now?"

"Thirteen," Tom said.

"Right. I started in my Daddy's store at eleven. Sweeping up and shit and he paid me a wage. It's past time you found a way to earn a little money. 'Stead of spending all that time at the pool."

"Yes, Dad," Tom said. He didn't want to look at the man, but his eyes were drawn to his father's. He was squinting.

"You've got plenty of time to be gawking at girls," he said. Tom blushed.

"Women are more trouble than they're worth anyhow. Sure there's the fun—get a girl with a good little mouth that can take the shine off a hitch—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom said.

"Course you don't. God Almighty. Thirteen," his father ran a hand over his face and Tom squirmed in the seat.

"Guess we better get back, huh?" his father said.

He started the truck and shifted into gear, which made Tom jump. The drive back felt bumpier than before and the truck was stuffy. He hardly noticed when they came into town because he was focused on the sweat on his face and the fact that his stomach was clenching. Tom's father drove slow and practiced, though at times he hit the brakes too hard or seemed to swerve. He turned into their neighborhood and on the turn the world felt out of balance. Tom tried to focus straight down the road, over the dash, with the small houses and treeless, grass yards on the periphery.

His mother was tending her small garden in the front yard when they pulled into the driveway. Tom saw her turn through the windshield and thought how pretty she looked in her gardening apron, the dirt on her front and her knees. Then he was puking out of the open window, his rosy vomit

running down the truck's door. His father laughed, a hoarse, choked laugh and for the first time Tom hated him.

Tom's mother led him into the house. She had to hold him around the shoulders as he stumbled down the hall and to the bathroom where she had Tom lean over the sink and splashed cold water on his face. She took a washcloth and held it in the water and then draped it over his neck.

"Rinse your mouth," she told him softly. "Don't try to drink yet."

Tom stood there, palming water into his mouth, and he didn't realize she had left until he heard her yelling at his father. He couldn't make out the words over the faucet's running and he kept his head down. Finally, Tom shut off the sink and heard his father shout, "At least we got your damn vegetables," and then a door slammed. His stomach tightened and he retched into the toilet some more. He was down on his knees and his throat burned worse than when he was drinking the wine. He clenched his hands over his head, digging his fingers into his hair. He wanted it all to stop. He wanted it all to be over.

Tom slumped back against the tub and waited to make sure the gagging had subsided. The house was quiet now. So was the street outside. He closed his eyes, but his head spun and he had to open them again. After a while he flushed the toilet and stood to rinse out his mouth. Tom looked at himself in the mirror. His lips were stained red.

The house was quiet. He walked down the hall. He wanted to lie down on the floor or in bed, but no, he was too old for that, too old. Mud from his feet led in crooked steps down the carpet toward the bathroom. Tom bent and wiped at the dirt. He pressed harder when it did not come off. He should have rinsed his shoes. He should have done that for her.

Tom stood and stumbled forward. He heard a faint sound, like crying. He thought it must be his mother in the kitchen, but he didn't go to her. He didn't want her to see him. Not yet. He staggered over to the front door and went outside.

His father's truck was still parked in the driveway. Tom walked past his mother's garden and found the hose. He turned it on and let it splash in the grass and then he sprayed the water on his muddy shoes. The dirt refused to yield at first, but then it ran off into the sodden grass.

Tom looked at the truck. His vomit had already started to dry on the door as a red stain. He wondered how long he had been inside. His head hurt. Tom sprayed the door, not caring that the window was still down. Water fanned up and over the truck. It ran down the door and down the driveway to the street. He watched it go, but noticed a faint pink stain remained. It wouldn't come off. He wondered what his father would say.

Interview

Read Trammel

When did you write "Rhubarb Wine"?

This story actually started out as a piece of flash fiction I wrote last fall. After finishing that draft, I realized that I wanted to stay with these characters and this situation for a much longer time, so I wrote a longer draft in the spring. I was lucky enough to be taking a workshop with Deirdre McNamer at the University of Montana, and she gave me a lot of great advice that helped me with revisions.

What inspired "Rhubarb Wine"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

"Rhubarb Wine" was inspired by a story I heard about a man and his brother visiting a Hutterite colony in Montana and them getting sick on the strong rhubarb wine they purchased there. One of the men actually vomited out their truck's window and damaged the paint job. This image had always stuck with me, so I wanted to incorporate it into a story. I actually visited a Hutterite colony, also in Montana, when I was a kid, so I knew I could draw on that experience to provide images of the community. The father character was based indirectly on my paternal grandfather, who was an alcoholic. Alcoholism has sort of cast a shadow over my family on my father's side, and so it is something I think about often.

Was there anything in your original conception of the story that didn't make it in?

The story originally ended with Tom's vomit stripping the paint off his father's truck, which was a detail from the original story I heard. People kept questioning if this was possible, and so I changed it to a stain so that the plausibility wouldn't distract from the story.

Do you primarily write fiction?

I used to write a lot more poetry, but have been focusing on fiction

while I pursue an MFA at the University of Montana.

Tell us about your revision process regarding this work.

I happened to be in a fiction workshop while I was working on this story, which helped me with the revisions. In particular, the teacher of that workshop, Deirdre McNamer, provided so much useful feedback about fleshing out the relationships between characters. I owe her a lot, not only for helping me develop this story, but for teaching me many things about writing in general.

Have you had any personal experiences with Hutterite community?

I visited a Hutterite colony near Lewistown, Montana as a kid. I drew a lot on that experience for my portrayal of this fictitious community. I remember the people as being incredibly generous, taking us on an informal tour of the colony and loading us up with vegetables. The views about Hutterites expressed by Tom's father are definitely his own and not mine.

The piece seems more concerned with the flaws of the father than the protagonist. What interests you about this type of character?

My family has a history of alcoholism, and so I am interested in exploring those types of characters, especially how they affect their families. I think it's typical for sons to idolize their fathers, but that relationship can be complicated by flaws in the father's character. With this story, I wanted to show a moment when a son's childish view of his father is forever changed when he realizes that his father is not the great man he thought him to be.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

My previous publications are all for poetry. My work has appeared in *Yale Angler's Journal*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, and *Foothills Literary Journal*.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I was drawn to *Driftwood Press*'s emphasis on artistic quality and the genuine appreciation for artists and writers expressed on the website.

What the Gypsy Told my Mother to Say

Christine Degenars

It'll feel like August in your stomach the first night
after it's over. A sun, cracked and open-faced as a grapefruit,

will curette through you, resting, at last, like a pit in your core.
You'll feel it sprout from the soil of your liver and kidneys and

soul. You won't smile. You won't remember how
to bare your teeth and still keep the day from dancing

off of them—those tiny tombstones, jagged and osseous.
You will feel like so many late summer strangers rushing

into one another on the way to Adirondack Bus Station—
a misbirth of future forest fires and ash.

You'll feel like all of these things and
more when you leave the scalloped flesh to grab

a bottle of water and, even more so when you stand,
again, at the edge of Route 28, ready for anything but

going home.

Interview

Christine Degenars

When did you write the poem?

I wrote it over the summer as part of a collection I've been developing.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I loved the idea of having this apparently “all seeing” and unconnected person fill in the blanks of a story that hadn't even happened yet. In my poem's instance, I wanted to find a way to describe how the “you” was supposed to feel from several degrees of separation. At this poem's core, it is about the isolation that stems from making decisions for yourself and I felt that there was not a better way to isolate a character than by not only separating her from those around her but from her own story, itself. While the poem isn't inspired by my life, I think feeling isolated at times is a part of the human experience.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

I think the composition of this poem came pretty easily; however, the revision process was much more difficult. I always feel that once a poem is written, it becomes its own sort of being; consequently, it's never easy to tell something or someone that parts of them don't work for you anymore. It's like a break up— but with sentences.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Where do I start? I love Marie Howe, Sharon Olds, Charles Wright, Paul Muldoon, Robert Lowell—the list goes on and on.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I've always loved what *Driftwood* has published in the past. I read it pretty regularly and was excited to be a part of this publication.

Hiraeth
Lillian Brown

(Welsh; Similar to nostalgia, but often of a past that never existed.)

She brought her coffee,
the watch from her father,
and the morbid sense of
humor from her mother.

Despite the pop of tendons
and crack of bones
displaced,
she stood and found it in herself
to watch the other girl,
and the way she listened,
the way she breathed,
the way she existed in between
nightmares.

It was not right,
and she knew it,
but there was something addictive
about the way the light flared up
inside of her.

It was fun in the way that things are when
you first remove your palm from the flame.

Interview

Lillian Brown

When did you write the poem?

I wrote the poem sometime last year, as part of a collection of untranslatable words.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

While “Hiraeth” is not directly inspired by my own life, I think that – like most of my poetry – you can make out bits and pieces of me within it.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

The last three parts of the poem had been written for a while, as they all seemed to come out at once (before tweaking anything), but I really struggled to come up with the first stanza. It finally came to me while sitting in a short stories class and now I can’t imagine the piece without it.

Was there anything in your original conception of the poem that didn't make it in?

Other than a few word changes, “Hiraeth” has pretty much been the same since the first full draft.

Do you primarily write poetry?

Most of my work is actually creative nonfiction and journalism, but a part of me has always been interested in poetry.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I don’t have a particular process for poetry, but rather, keep all of my thoughts in a notebook and try to piece them together later.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

I really love the writing of Joan Didion, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and Hilton Als.

How long have you been writing poetry? Do you write in any other genres or work in any other mediums?

I've been writing poetry for a couple of years, but tend to work only in different forms of nonfiction.

Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?

Some of the first poets whom I was introduced to were Matt W. Miller, Todd Hearon, and Willie Perdomo, and I continue to find each new piece that they publish just as incredible as the last, so I highly recommend giving them a read.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I've been published in *The Sonder Review* (Issue 4) and *Allegro Poetry* (Issue 6).

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

Driftwood Press's aesthetic was what drew me into the publication originally, but now that I've started reading it regularly, I've become completely enchanted with the high quality writing that they continue to publish.

Three-Bean Salad and a Coffin

Katelyn Delvaux

Think of it this way, he just left
the party early and now is a thousand

pools of light. A litter of stars
whelped by the sky and you too new

to wean, a chasmal maw. Sometimes the goodbyes
break you, chicken bones blessing the throat.

The dead rip stiches from our sides,
a skein of fingers and thread, they wade

out to meet the growing swell.
It is twenty leather journals choking down

a lifetime of coincidence. And you
must eat your heart with a spoon.

Interview

Katelyn Delvaux

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Earlier this year, a dear friend was traveling from Nebraska to Ohio to say goodbye to her dying grandfather. We had been in touch- I wished her a safe journey- and the next day she texted me from the airport, "I was too late." He had passed while she was waiting for her connection, and all I could do was try to console her from a distance. This poem is a result of that conversation and experience of being concerned but ultimately ineffective.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

Toeing the line of sentimentality in poetry is always so difficult yet rewarding.

Was there anything in your original conception of the poem that didn't make it in?

Originally, it was more of a traditional conversation with multiple speakers, but ultimately I thought it truer to life (or life experiencing death, rather) to be a one-sided conversation. After a loss, there are few actual conversations. Friends talk at friends, and those grieving talk at the dead. No one ever answers right away.

How long have you been writing poetry? Do you write in any other genres or work in any other mediums?

I know the exact moment I decided to be a writer. I was six years old and asking my parents to help me dress up as a lion for career day at school. My mother, in her loving yet practical way, explained that I would never grow up to be a lion and then asked what would be the next best thing. I thought for a moment and decided that as a writer, I could make myself a

lion, and I've never looked back. I write short stories, paint, and draw, but most often my best work comes through poetry. I've still yet to write myself a lion.

Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?

They should probably read EJ Koh.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

My poems have been featured in *Slice magazine*, *Barn Owl Review*, and *Off the Coast*, among others. And I am a reader for *Rivet*, the magazine published by *Red Bridge Press*, so my poetic preferences can be seen there, as well.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

Driftwood Press reminds me of the magazines and journals I've worked on over the years. Small presses are like community gardens sprouting up with all this moxie and visions of altering the landscape in a positive way, and I love contributing to that construction.

Plumb line

Martha Catherine Brenckle

We've been working on this ancient house
for twelve years now
when centuries wouldn't make sense
of its sloping floors, crooked windows
sticking doors, or each other
and our relationship to gravity.

She wipes crumbs from the kitchen table
into the palm of her clean hand
lets the dogs eat from her china dish
but still she insists on using a plumb line
clean string from the kitchen clutter drawer
buntline hitched to weight, a silver pyramid of iron
to mark the slanting walls with blue chalk columns
straight from cloudy heaven to sloping earth.

Eye sweet would be good enough
for this pebbly plaster I am thinking
and I dip a sponge into the cold bucket, squeeze
water and wipe the back of the flowered paper
until it has the softness of baby sheep.

I haven't the heart to tell her
she hung the first strip upside down.
It is the smaller lies that protect
Newton's larger truth and keep us parallel.
The pattern of flora—tulips, clematis, iris—
hangs perpendicular to the hardwood flooring
flower stamens and pointed leaves loll
licking the pickled white wainscoting
with hungry little animal tongues.

Blood Magic

Dylan Debelis

Ton of bricks for bad grades Girl funnels her auxiliary life insurance into spare parts for the 1947 revolver from West Germany. Grendel's Mother runs the kitchen cupboards like an abandoned casino during Reno winter. Horns cut clean drinks a Manhattan and chokes, snow on the hood of her Honda while the parking lot attendant jumpstarts. Stay warm, keep walking. Bon Jovi over the AM radio Girl hides the handgun from Grendel's Mother in her leather purse, poor ivory fingertips piano keys this sunrise is deafening. Smoke in the ashtray near Grendel sweeping down to the boat moves arrow fast south reverb climbs across the valley. Grendel snorts Christine's stash off her cleavage in the back room of Paddy's. Down in the desert Girl paces the moonlight like the ripples of an atomic blast. Grendel's Mother shoots skyward long highway desperation finds Girl near mainstreet. Girl plays odds spare parts come asunder far too young for killing fields. Stay warm, keep walking. No death tonight, only switch-belt welts faulty promises to run away. Machine no match for beast runs kitchen cupboards here my prey gathering blood for our black hole.

When I Listened to Saturn's Rings

Becca Lamarre

I listened to Saturn's rings.
I wasn't afraid but my eyes
did shift to saucers and my blood
rushed in rapid little whims.

A toddler girl asked me if I would
travel to space if she came along
and held my hand. And of course
I said yes but I knew inside I

was lying, that I was too craven.
I have recurring dreams about
being trapped up high with no way
to get down. Just hanging there weedy
and lurching. Sometimes I'm crouching

on a fragment of wood atop a tin
branch at least a mile high. My knees
are wobbly as if I am falling hard in love
and my heart is thrusting
as if I'm listening to Saturn's rings.

Interview

Becca Lamarre

When did you write the poem?

I wrote "When I Listened to Saturn's Rings" Spring 2015. The first draft was written on a freezing March morning while waiting for my son during his acting class.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I remember reading online that scientists had recorded sounds from space and immediately being moved by them upon the first listen. To be honest I'm not sure exactly what they are, some type of electromagnetic frequencies that have been transformed to audible signals. When I first heard the entire series of recordings by the Cassini spacecraft I knew instantly I would write a poem about them, and perhaps a poetry series incorporating the others in the future.

The poem overall is quite inspired by my own life – maybe one of the most I've written. My three-year-old daughter and I had this sweet conversation where she kind of flipped roles on me and turned into the protector, assuring me that she'd take care of me if we ever travelled to space together. Also I used to often have dreams about being stuck somewhere up high. I haven't had them for a while, now I dream about hallways with lots and lots of doors.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

The easiest part was the subject matter given that glimpses of it were so near to me and the sounds of the recording had such an immediate impact on me. The harder part was tying the themes together in a way that I hoped

would resonate with others and not just in my head and to do it in a way that moves freely.

You make an interesting use of a hyperlink in your poem to inform readers about the subject matter. Do you see this as crucial to the poem?

I went back and forth about whether or not to include the link, ultimately deciding it added another layer and can make the poem interactive. If readers are able to hear the audio themselves, it may somehow draw them in to the words in a more intimate way or can allow them to have their own unique experiences upon listening. Art that I fall for always makes my heart take a little leap and so that's the goal here – and hopefully the addition of the link might help boost that possibility.

Do you primarily write poetry?

I do for the time being although that's only been true for a little over a year now. Before that I focused more on short fiction. After going to a few poetry readings here in Chicago with some writerly friends and leaving with stars in my eyes, I was hooked. I haven't given up on fiction, just taking a pause to enjoy this wave. I think that if or when I do return to fiction, I will be better because of this annex.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

When it comes to poetry I will often start with just one solid line and use it as a launch point. In this poem it is kind of obvious that it's the first line, but often times it can be intertwined somewhere within or only present in an abstract way. I have a whole "note" on my phone that is full of these one-line passing thoughts, observations, or bits of conversation that somehow leave an impression. When I sit down to write, I'll often open them up and use one or more as a starting point. I'm not sure how unique that is, but I do know that if you don't take a second to write these things down it is really easy to let them pass by and forget them completely.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Sylvia Plath, Michael Earl Craig, and my first love, Vonnegut.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I've made a little website (<http://silentrees.wix.com/beccalamarrewriting>), where more of my published work can be found. There is a little floating out there for now. I'm working on a full-length collection at the moment— hopefully to be completed this spring.

Not Salt and Pepper Kind of People

Noorulain Noor

Like a prayer,
I bring my hands to my face now --
these fingertips could be my mother's,
gliding over my cheeks on a school day
with Pond's cold cream thick on her palms
and underneath
the perennial scent of garlic and ginger.

"We are not salt and pepper kind of people,"
my mother would say.

My own fingers
smell even fuller from the fenugreek
I grate between them, crushing
the dried leaves to powder.
I rub my nails with steel wool,
soak my hands in lemon water,
use creams with essential oils --
wild rose, mulled wine, cocoa butter --
to curtain the aromas of my mother's kitchen,
and now mine.

Interview

Noorulain Noor

When did you write the poem?

I wrote this poem during in Spring 2015 during two successive weekly writing sessions that I was having with a good friend of mine.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Many of the poems I write are rooted in the immigrant experience and multiculturalism. I moved to the United States as a student thirteen years ago. When I write, I try to get in touch with the home I left behind, a home that doesn't exist anymore in a way. I was raised in Lahore, Pakistan, and I have never returned since arriving in California. Over the last few years, the pieces of my old life that I held on to for so long slowly disintegrated. My parents sold the house I was raised in and moved to a quiet community in the suburbs. When I sat down to write this poem, I was thinking of that house that is no longer mine: its kitchen, its rooms and walls, my mother's youth, and my childhood- more importantly, I was trying to find pockets of that old life in my present.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

The easiest part was recalling the smells and sounds of my parents' house in Lahore. I can still remember the feel of my mother's hands massaging Pond's cold cream into my skin. The hard part was making a connection between the past and the present, finding that link.

Did your own family inspire this poem? If so, what aspects?

Yes, the poem is absolutely inspired by my own family, particularly my mother and my daughter and how both generations must traverse a bridge to meet- that bridge is me. There is a big responsibility I carry- I am always weighed down by the realization that I must be the glue that binds both

halves of my life and the people in it- the half left behind in Pakistan and the other half that thrives in California.

Was there anything in your original conception of the poem that didn't make it in?

The original draft of the poem had an opening stanza to set the stage that had good imagery, but really did not add anything to the contrast and similarities I was trying to depict between my mother's life and mine, my mother's kitchen and mine. I always save every draft, so I was able to find the opening stanza:

In memory,
the Spring trill of birds outside,
the metallic twang of the cooler running dry,
its vast belly empty of water,
my mother's hand gliding over my face
before school.
Pond's cold cream thick on her palms
and underneath
the perennial scent of garlic and ginger,
incongruous with her pale skin,
her round nails,
the fountain pen she slashed across pages
with those very fingers.

Do you primarily write poetry?

Yes. I write poetry for the most part. Until the summer of this year, I was also blogging regularly, but I am in an MBA program as of this Fall along with working full-time and tending to a young family, so blogging (or creative non-fiction) had to take a backseat.

How long have you been writing poetry? Do you write in any other genres or work in any other mediums?

All my life. Both my parents are artistically inclined. My mother is a poet- she writes in Urdu. My father started out by writing screenplays (also in Urdu) and transitioned to film direction later in his career. As a child, my parents would give me all kinds of prompts and I would try to write poems. I attempted to write in both English and Urdu, but slowly lost the latter after moving to the United States.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I have links to all my publications on my website (noorulainnoor.com). I have been published before and recently earned a second Pushcart Prize nomination for a poem called “Almonds,” which was published in *Spillway* earlier this year.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

The work. I have enjoyed reading past issues of *Driftwood Press*. This was the second or third time I sent my work to *Driftwood Press* and am so pleased that it was accepted!

A large woman, late forties, awaits commitment

Kathryn Troxler

Bang bang you're dead
Put a bullet in his head

Ratta tatta tatta tatta
Ratta tatta tatta tat

Sitting on the bed
She swivels an imaginary
machine gun in front of her

Ratta tatta tatta tatta
Ratta tatta tatta tat

You're scaring me
her husband said

Don't worry, I won't shoot you dead
You know that list, that long, long list
Well, you're not on it. . .

Ratta tatta tatta tatta
Ratta tatta tatta tat

Interview

Kathryn Troxler

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

The poem is based on a similar situation in which I had to commit a client.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

We are all unique, and different poems have different birthing processes. Sometimes it's like channeling- the poem just comes through. Other times I begin with a list of impressions, observations, feelings which begin to coalesce as I work with them.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

T.S. Elliot, Yeats, Denise Levertov, and Anna Akhmatova,

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

In a few anthologies. I have just retired and am working on publication. My poetry group published *Lines from a Near Country*, which has the greatest number of my poems and can be ordered directly from New Garden Friends Meeting, 801 New Garden Road, Greensboro, NC 27410

Indigo Child

Cindy Rinne

I

I sort of told
the nomad I sensed angel
wings between my shoulder
blades. Wings iced in blue
feathers. At one point,
they unfurled,
filled the room. Then compacted
and I lay down. Covered in a woven wool
blanket. Gong shivered bones.

Candles flickered. The nomad asked,
Can I select an Indigo Angel Card for you?
She shuffled, paused, and slid out
a card. The image of an angel with blue
wings reflected in the fluttered
flame. *You have ancient wisdom.*

II

I can't remember
the first time redwoods
surrounded me. My feet rooted
in pine-needled earth.
Old growth musk. Wind
rushed wild through branches
like waves. Fire scorched
tips. Cones sparked.

The eagle and raven silent.
Only a Swainson's thrush tied
to a stake sung.

Molten

Cindy Rinne

Molten saline water explodes to the surface in circles through stone.
Life on Mars?

She descends cut stone, no mortar, and angle changes, into the stepwells.
Water is a person.

I see Mandarin characters on the side of the gray bowl in a tiny stall.
I lived in Taiwan.

Piles of framed pictures jumble on the floor. He grabs a sliding print.
This is from Japan.

His grin reveals a missing front tooth. Immigrant from Shanghai.
Ancestral home.

My daughter has been there and liked it, I tell him. He can barely understand.
Xiexie (thank you). Xiexie ni.

Interview

Cindy Rinne

When did you write the poem?

Summer of 2015.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Both of these poems came from my life experiences. I added others' stories or fascinating events both past and present.

For "Indigo Child," the vision of blue angel wings and the life experience started this poem. A friend shared about the birds being silent in her homeland wracked with wars. This made a strong impression as animals' sense what is going on around them or what is to come.

For "Molten," The news of water on Mars linked me to the possibility of life there. Water continued as a theme where it is supplied in the hot summer in the deep stepwells in India. The gray bowl is a vessel of water. Water from the depths and my memories of living in a foreign land.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?

For "Indigo Child," the hardest part was being vulnerable about my visions. The easiest—telling the story.

For "Molten," the hardest part was describing the stepwells. The easiest—telling about meeting the Chinese man.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

Often my poems will work as a collage. I may start writing down experiences and images until I see a poem coming together. I also write novels in verse. I take walks and ask the character what is next or who they are. I mostly write my poems by hand on yellow pads. Then I can cross-out or draw arrows to move things around.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Tracy K. Smith, Anne Carson, Nicelle Davis, Eric Baus, and Wendy Xu.

How long have you been writing poetry? Do you write in any other genres or work in any other mediums?

I've been writing poetry for much of my life. I write novels in verse, prose, and create fiber art.

Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?

Write your passion. That may sound obvious, but there can be the feeling that no one will want to read the style I write or to try and follow the latest trend.

Where can readers find more of your work?

I have information about my books on my website (www.fiberverse.com). They can read more about being a writer and an artist on my Wordpress (www.fiberverse.wordpress.com).

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I liked your website and especially that you were looking for narrative poetry.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your work in particular?

I like to challenge myself to try new forms. It's important to read others' work, to attend readings, and to read in general. Participating in Poem-a-Day for a month is a lot of work, but has been rewarding. Having a poetry community for edits, to encourage each other, and to be exposed to new ideas has been vital.

Marguerite
Adela Tofflova



Interview

Adela Tofflova

How would you describe your aesthetic?

I generally try to convey a sense of imperfection in my work; I am not a big fan of spotless beauty. I believe there is beauty in all things though. I tend to play with colours a lot, creating specific moods with various colour combinations.

Did you have a difficult time deciding on whether to add a title to your work?

Not really, it was all inspired by my friend, whose name translates to Marguerite. I created it for her wedding.

When did you create "Marguerite"?

In May 2015.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

The hardest part was creating something meaningful and beautiful, grasping my friend's personality and our friendship.

Was there any theme or idea you hoped to address with this work?

The main reason for creating this piece was to capture emotions and personality and relationships of my very good friend. In a sense, this is a very abstract piece.

Who are some of your favorite artists? Do you have any recommendations for others who enjoyed your work?

I really admire work of Egon Schiele; I also like the style of Loish and Bastien Lecouffe Deharme.

Where can readers find more of your work?

They can find more of my work on my DeviantArt page (<http://psycadela.deviantart.com/>).

YOYO
Daniel Montesi



Interview

Daniel Montesi

How would you describe your aesthetic?

I love to take long exposure shots, because the results are often a surprise to me. I normally take pictures of wildlife, but I love to experiment with the old Rolleflex camera I was given. "YOYO" was one of my experiments.

Did you have a difficult time deciding on whether to add a title to your work?

As a very visual person, I sometimes struggle with captions. I generally leave them untitled unless something jumps out.

When did you create "YOYO"?

I created this photo (and others like it) at a fund raising festival for my daughter's school. My daughter was on the ride at the time I was photographing it.

What inspired "YOYO"?

Anytime I have an opportunity to catch moving lights with a long exposure, I am there. As much fun as my daughter was having spinning around on the ride, I was having more fun capturing this image.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

The hardest part of this picture was trying to get the angle right without getting conked in the head with flying feet!

Did you have any goal in taking the image?

I was literally experimenting with a camera that was given to me. I was trying to get familiar with how it functioned. I honestly wasn't prepared for how well it came out.

Is photography the medium that you're most invested in?

I am a therapist by trade, and I hope to master photography enough to use it in a therapeutic context. Phototherapy can help people who are suffering from depression, PTSD, Anxiety, etc.

I am definitely mostly invested in photography as a medium. Though anyone who knows me well will tell you that I am a photographer, many people don't know that I also love to write, paint, and draw. I guess it is rather true for most creative people; we often utilize many different ways to express ourselves.

Are your other photos similar in subject or focus?

I have a large series of carnival rides and moving lights, but my main thing is nature and wildlife. I have a Macro series of butterflies and dragonflies, as well as many attempts to emulate the work of Ansel Addams or Clyde Butcher.

What is your creative process?

I don't really know. I am quite a daydreamer, and things just kind of come to me. My novel and many of my short stories are derived from snippets of dreams I have had.

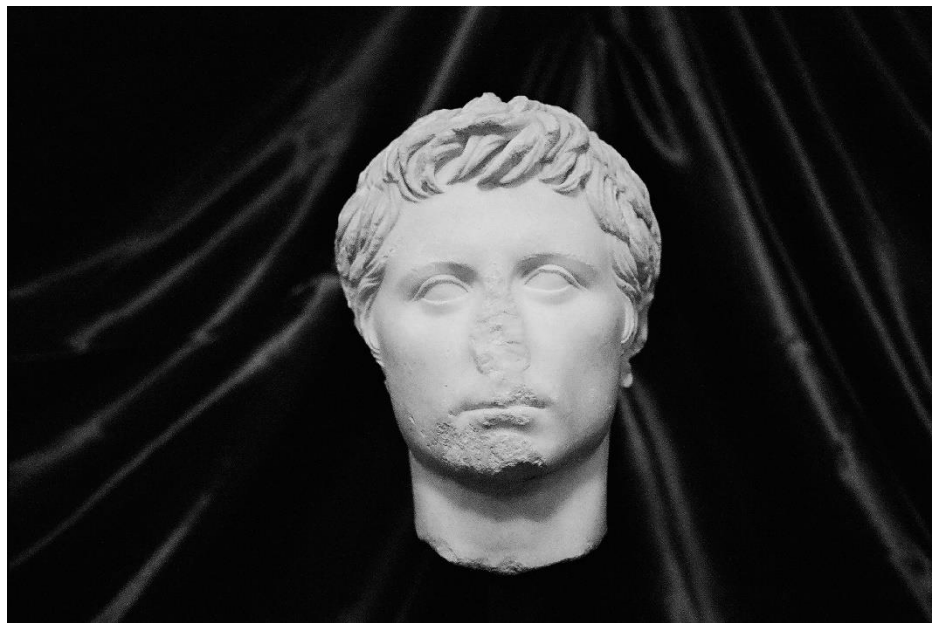
Who are some of your favorite artists? Do you have any recommendations for others who enjoyed your work?

Clyde Butcher's work has always fascinated me as well as Art Wolf and Annie Leibovitz. I would love to take portraits like that.

Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I have been published in *Camera Arts*, *South Florida Parenting Magazine*, *Photographic Magazine* (October 2000), *Photographer's Forum* (2001 and 2003), and the Wild Wetlands poster by the United States Postal Service. I did the photography for a "Paint by Number" book by Larry Rubin, a small publication that just came out from Flagler College, and I've had work shown in two different galleries; Artist Haven in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, and Arto-Conecto in Miami, FL.

Endgame
Matt Rosen



Interview

Matt Rosen

How would you describe your aesthetic?

There's a line I love in the poem "Zone" by Guillaume Apollinaire: "Here even the automobiles look ancient." Here, the newest of the new, the realest of the real, doesn't sit quite right. I try to capture that same feeling, normally through unposed scenes that look like they might be staged, that have something either overtly simple or potentially choreographed occurring, trying to accentuate the inactive details, the little parts of a scene that don't really have a role but then when brought to the forefront make the scene uncomfortable or change the dynamic from something banal to something unsettlingly banal.

When did you create "Endgame"?

I had just visited Cinecittà, the old film studio on the outskirts of Rome. At the entrance you're greeted by this huge crowned head half submerged in the ground, which stares back at you with large, naive eyes. It's a prop from the opening scene of Fellini's *Casanova*, where this enormous bust of Venus is being hauled out of the Grand Canal in Venice. One of the cables breaks just as the lower half of the head begins to emerge, and the whole thing sinks back down to the depths of the canal. Seeing the head transposed from the screen splendours of an improbable Venice to this pretty run down yet enchanting studio really stuck with me. As the lower half of the head is never seen on screen, it was never built, yet that's where the image's power comes from. I wanted to capture something that highlighted this effect - something that relies on an absence, that is defined by it. It's one of the main themes of Fellini's film too, this legendary romancer defined by his inability to be truly intimate and loving. I was in Italy for a few weeks and eventually stumbled across a bust of Augustus in a dusty museum that matched what I was looking for.

Do you digitally manipulate photographs?

Before it was a photo, it was a head on a mount alongside several others; becoming a photo brought out the veins of the folds of velvet in the background, flattened the sculpture so it looks almost like a sheet of paper glued onto the wall behind it- all the manipulation occurred in the transfer from reality to image.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

Working out what to do with it. I've reworked it into a few collages; I tried to use it to underline a sense of missing and incongruity by placing it in different contexts before realizing that the original image probably did this better and more sincerely than I could make it.

What camera was this image taken with?

A Nikkormat FT2, a gift from my mother's parents to my father when my parents got engaged some forty years ago. It's heavy and clunky but a very tactile experience. I've been using it for about four years; I think my dad probably wants it back by now.

Are your other photos similar in subject or focus?

I look for verticals and horizontals cutting across the plane that dissect the scene before it gets to the camera, or simple contrasts of soft and hard alongside some mediating factor. This photo for example: there's the blurry velvet in the background, the precisely chiseled bust in the foreground, and the absent nose, the result of an excess of precision or a lack of care. Scenes that are already photographic rarely make the best photographs. I'm always tempted to take photos of scenes that already look like photos- it's reassuring, but I think it targets the wrong thing, as it would be copying the final product instead of the source.

What is your creative process?

I normally wander around wherever I am with my camera and try to frame images through the viewfinder according to how they might appear once isolated from their context, as what looks good to the human eye rarely looks as good when framed and vice versa. The false bordering off of a scene can bring out the trace of something hidden in a shot that wasn't there before it became a photo, in the same way that translating a poem between two languages can bring out a meaning that wasn't found in the original. The translator might not be able to copy the same rhyme scheme, so instead she changes the poem's rhyming pattern to a repetitive sound or rhythm to match aurally what the reader experiences, bringing out a new,

transformed sense of the same sensation. The movement from being perceived by the human eye to being solidified by the cine eye does the same thing, so I try to find scenes that lend themselves to these unexpected, uncontrollable transformations.

Who are some of your favorite artists? Do you have any recommendations for others who enjoyed your work?

Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, and the films of Maya Deren and Peter Greenaway. They all make you want to look again just to work out what it was that made you uncomfortable the first time around. Often, it's the changing of tiny details that have the most effect (I'm thinking here of the wigs in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, which evoke the ridiculousness of the characters and their era, but which are just slightly too pompous to be real).

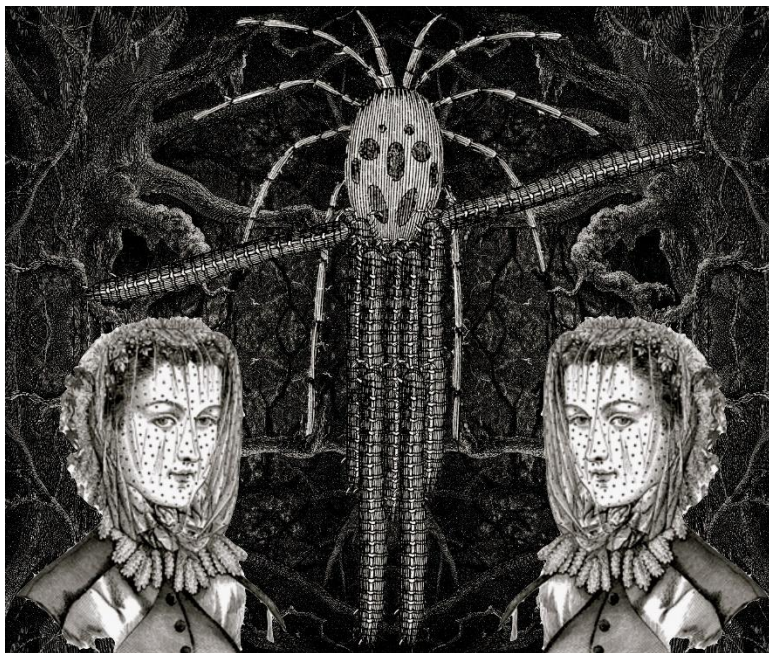
Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I currently have an exhibition running at Berkeley Books of Paris, and have previously been published in the Sussex Guild of Poetry. More of my work can be found on my Tumblr (www.mattrosenphotography.tumblr.com).

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

The small, carefully put together nature of the publication and the range of work and forms explored.

The Twins Remembering a Summer Night
Bill Wolak



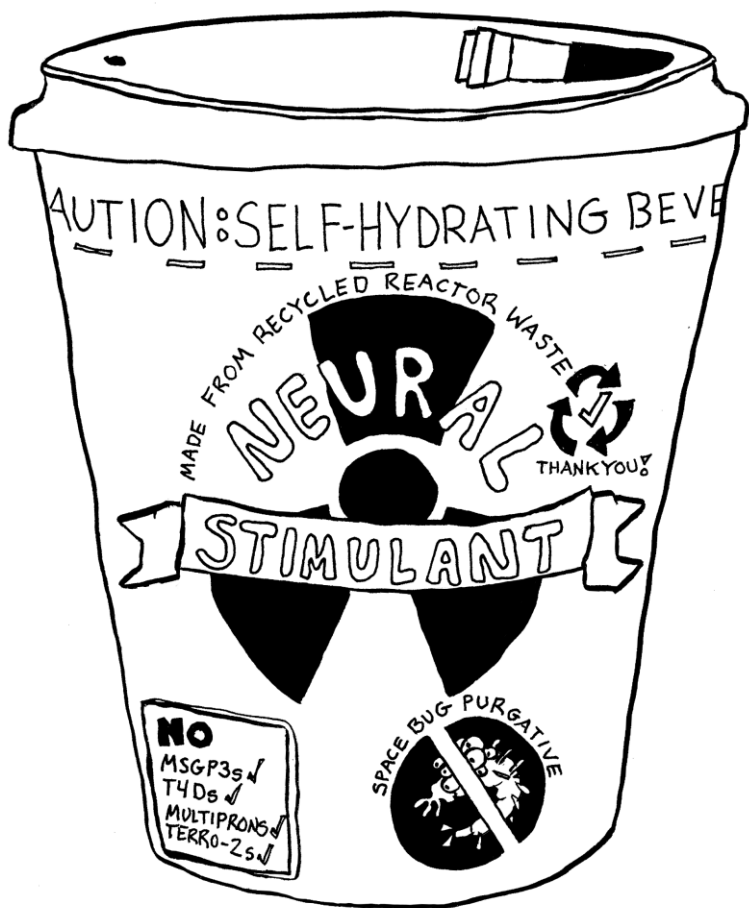
Convergence
David Sheldon



Rift
David Sheldon







ACULTY

COUNTDOWN
TO THE

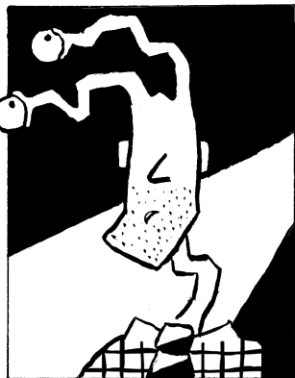
WE DON'T HAVE TO
IMPLANT PROGRESS
REPORTS FOR THE
STUDENTS THIS
WEEKEND, RIGHT?

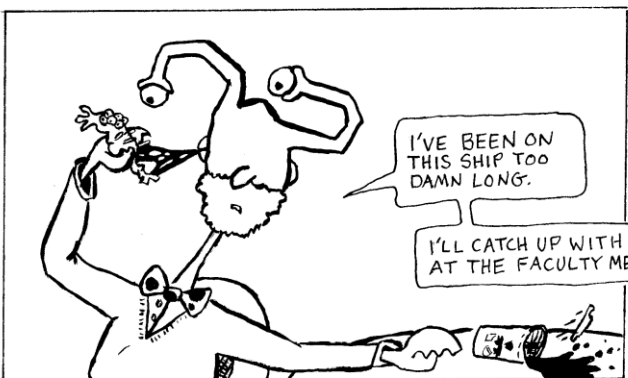
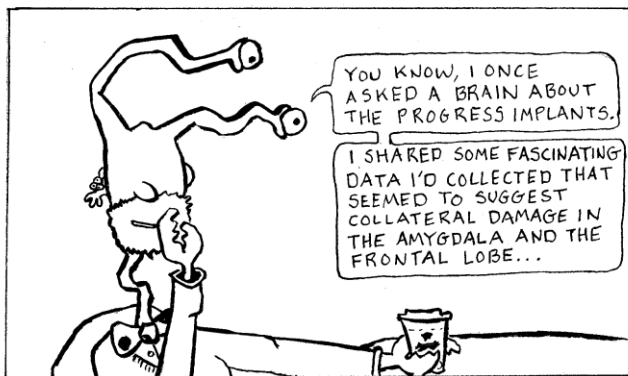
NO, WE DO.

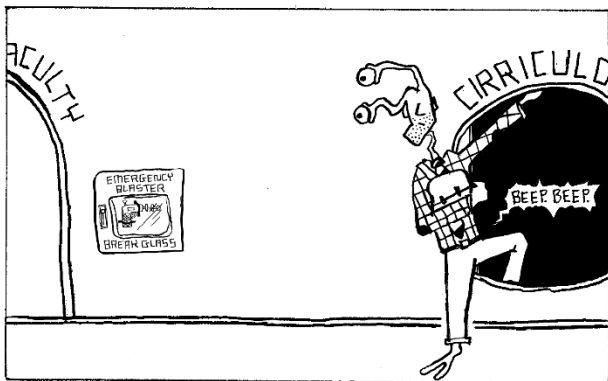
IT'S NOT NEXT
WEEKEND? AFTER
MOTHERSHIP DAY?

SUCCESS

PLEASE
LABEL
FOOD



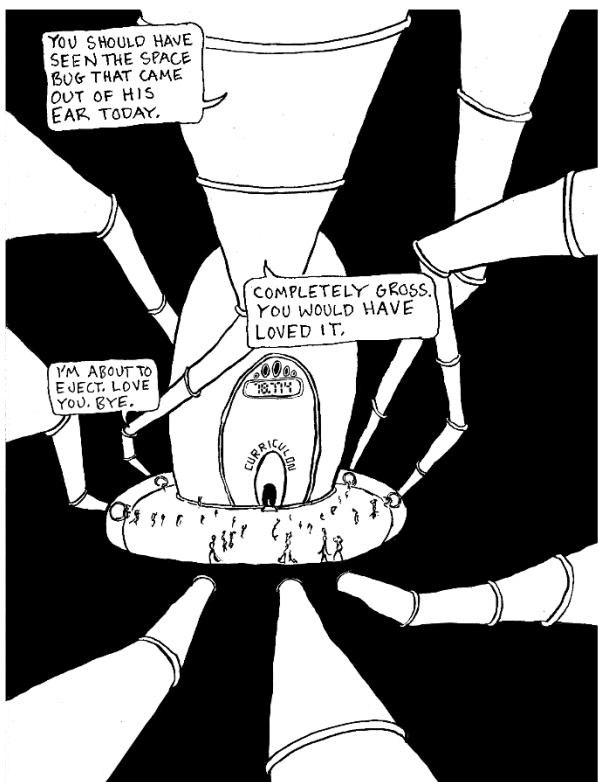




BELIEVE ME, I KNOW IT'S THE THIRD ONE THIS WEEK.

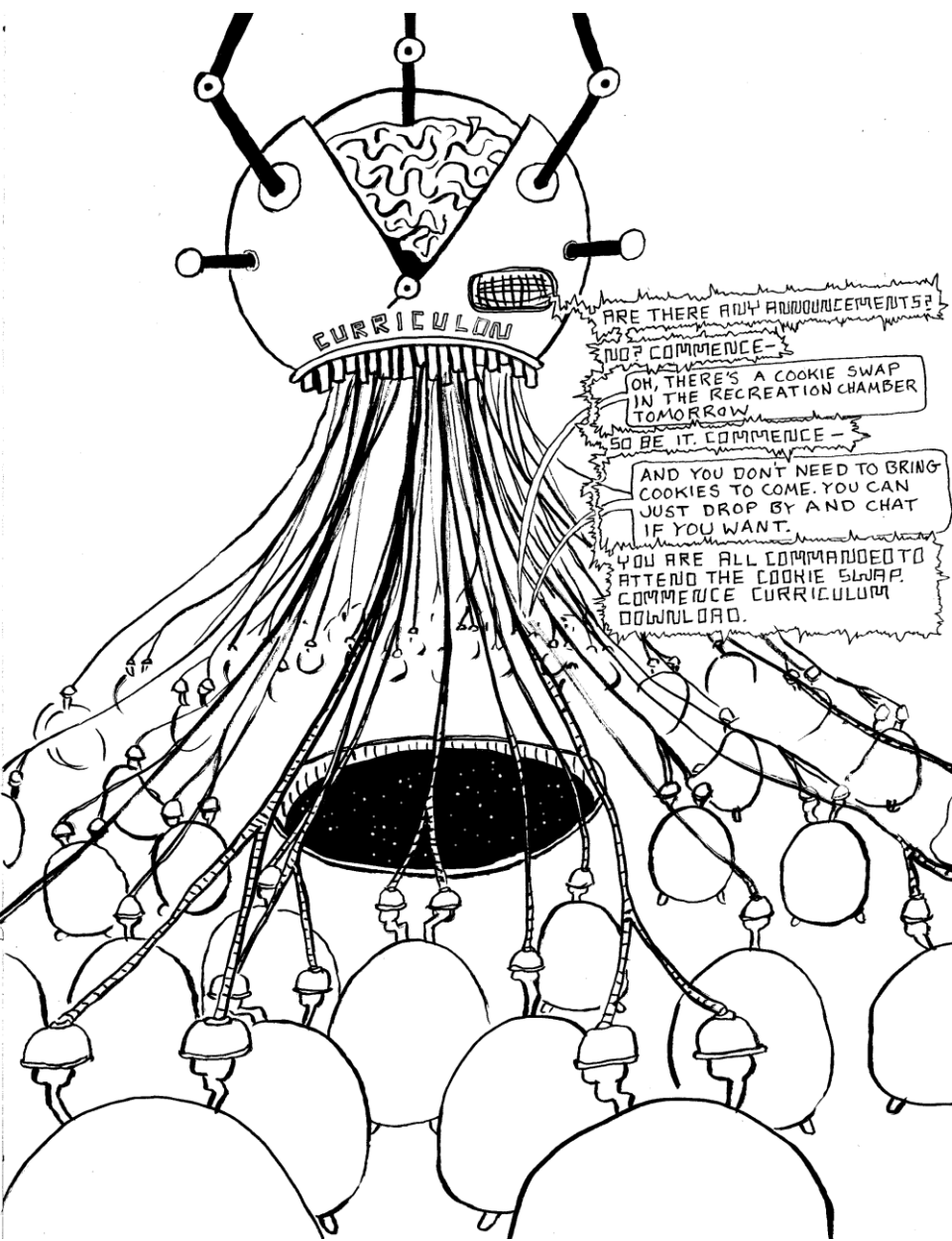
EITHER THAT OR I'M CHEATING ON YOU WITH LUNSBATH

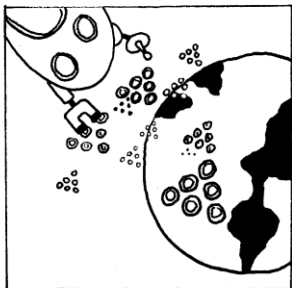
HE DOES HAVE AN ATTRACTIVE BEARD.



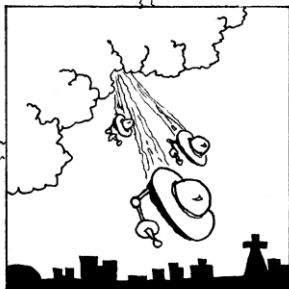
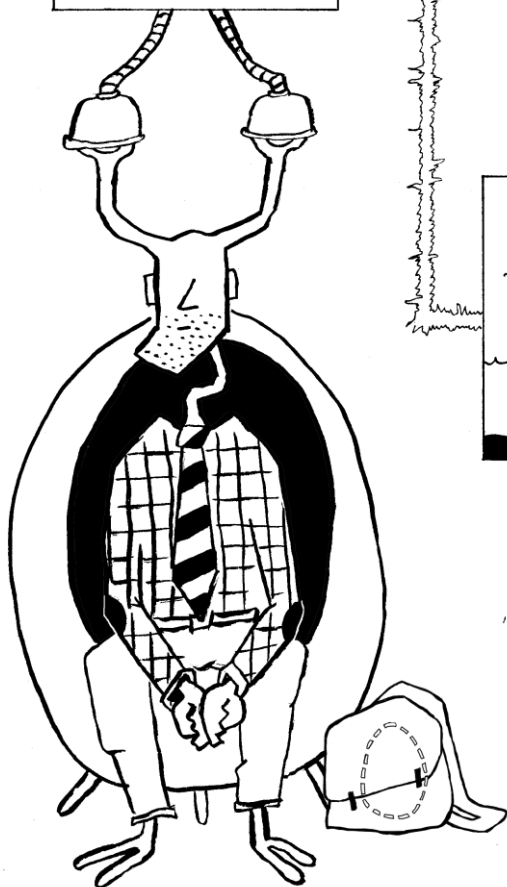
COMPLETELY GROSS. YOU WOULD HAVE LOVED IT.

I'M ABOUT TO EJECT. LOVE YOU. BYE.





INVASION SCENARIO POTENTIALITIES
LOADING



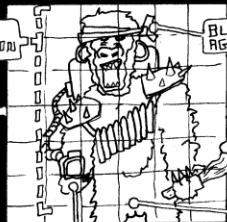
76%

24%



PREDICTABLY SAVAGE
LIFE FORM APPROXIMATION

86%



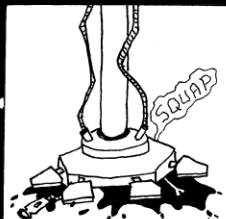
BLIND
AGGRESSION

100%

LARGE
BLUNT
OBJECT

ORGANIC
TESTOSTERONE
INJECTION

FLAME THROWER



SQUAP

52%



48%



03%



08%



98.2%



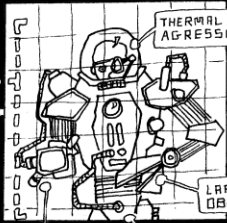
100%

LARGE SHARP
OBJECT

THERMAL SENSITIVE
AGGRESSION

UNSETTLINGLY INTELLIGENT
LIFE FORM APPROXIMATION

11%



COMBUSTION
DISTRIBUTOR

DIGITIZED TESTOSTERONE
INJECTION SYSTEM

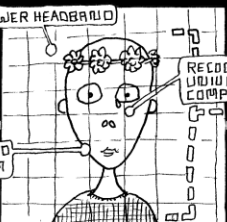
91%



STUNNINGLY NIAVE
LIFE FORM APPROXIMATION

FLOWER HEADBAND

9%



RECOGNITION OF
UNIVERSAL
COMPANIONSHIP

100%

MISPLACED
OPTIMISM

MINIMUM
PROBABILITY
THRESHOLD
REACHED.
*
AUTHORIZED
PERSONEL
ONLY.

IMPOSSIBLE!!!

FOR THE EMPIRE!

EMPATHY PARAMETERS
BREACHED. SESSION
TERMINATED.

No!

BUT WHY?

I HAVE
NO IDEA,
SIR.

IN
LOVE
WITH
HIM?

QUICK—
IN HERE,

DON'T MAKE
SOUND.

WHERE IS
THE HUMAN?

HIDE!

CAN'T LIVE
WITH THIS

EVEN
WARNED
US...

NEVER!

CAN
STOP
THINKING

I CAN SAVE
YOU.

YOU? SAVE
ME?

DON'T!

LET ME SHOW YOU

TRY

IT'S OKAY.

WE'VE LOST
EVERYTHING.

YOUR MINDS
ARE JUST
TOO SMALL

UNAUTHORIZED
ACCESS

Winter 2015

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Bill Wolak
David Sheldon

Also featuring a recurring comic by Scott R. Smith