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How has Invasive Studies evolved since the first issue?

Looking back now, it’s clear that some of the imagery has evolved and solidified. Over the course of that first year, the characters settled down into more stable versions of themselves. One of the biggest changes over the course of working on the comic was the slow addition of grays to the original black and white look. Originally, I made this decision for thematic reasons, thinking that the more complex shades of gray would nicely reflect the increasing complexity of Seth’s perspective on his mission. However, I began to appreciate the aesthetic sense of depth these grays added to the work and now I’m considering adding them to the first half of the comic.

How has your process changed?

While I still undergo the same basic process, I go through it more deliberately now. I’m more comfortable with the later phases of the work and I trust the process to produce a final result that will surprise me in good ways. The thumbnailing, writing, sketching, inking and digital editing are such different animals that they each illuminate different strengths and weaknesses of the whole.

What are you planning on working on next?

Now that Invasive Studies has wrapped up, I’ll be returning to my sci-fi novel The IZ, about a kid who works at an interstellar zoo run by nefarious pharmaceutical companies, which I hope to complete in the coming year. I’ll also be producing some comic shorts to stay sharp visually, and I may be lucky enough to work with Driftwood Press to put Invasive Studies together as a single collection.

Talk to us about how the autobiographical influences have shaped
the story beyond its conception.

I wanted the story to stay centered on Seth and Mara’s relationship at this moment of impending parenthood. This is the time just before everything changes. The comic has really become a tribute to that part of my life—I was deep within this transition when the comic began, and I’ve exited that period with the birth of my second child (at least that’s the plan). My own father kept asking me when the invasion was going to happen—you know, the explosions and the excitement and everything. I had to keep disappointing him, but it was important to me not to lose the real heart of the project. There are panels throughout that connect directly to my life—the ultrasound pictures of my son in Unit 3, the Curriculon “faculty meeting” in Unit 4, and Seth’s song at the hatch (I sang to my daughter to calm her down when she was born) are all good examples.

Do you have a favorite panel or page? If so, why?

If I had to pick one sequence, it would be when Mara “visits” Seth in the bathroom in Unit 5. The interplay of their conversation and the mirror imagery that literally ties my world to this one all worked to elevate a moment that I worried might be one of the dullest of the comic—the moment Seth voices his doubts out loud. I managed to wrap his big speech really snugly in the dialog and intimate gestures. It worked. Visually, I’m also proud of the grocery store page in Unit 6 that surrounded Seth with “Digestible Flakes” cereal boxes— that page was a huge pain to make, but it paid off.

What tips do you have for artists making comics?

The best advice I can give to aspiring comics artists is the same advice one of my teachers, Alec Longstreth (Phase 7 and Basewood), once gave me, which was to “Make Comics Every Day.” Really. Every day, draw something. I owe Invasive Studies a debt of gratitude in terms of forcing this goal to become a reality over the last few years, but every aspiring artist needs to find a rhythm to their work. All good things come from the process.

What was the hardest part about crafting Invasive Studies?

I’ve always got ideas, but it’s not easy to push through the times when it’s late, there’s grading to do, a sick kid coughing in bed, and I don’t feel inspired to produce. Some of the things that I’ve really come to enjoy about comics, however, are parts of the process, such as inking, that can be meditative and refreshing. There are ways to manipulate your workflow to take advantage of this: thumbnail and sketch when you have energy to give; ink
and edit when you need to get something back.

**How did the editing and revision process work?**

I’m a person that needs a plan to start work, but not a rigid one. I edit at every phase of the process. However, the feedback that *Driftwood Press* provided at the close of each unit was particularly important. That last step, having some of my original notions challenged, was invaluable. I wish every artist the chance to work with an editor in a similar capacity and I look forward to the chance to do it again.

**Any parting words?**

It’s been an amazing experience keeping *Invasive Studies* going these past couple of years, and it’s made me a better artist. Not in an abstract, feel-good way— I mean literally a better illustrator, writer, and communicator. I want to thank *Driftwood Press*, and especially James McNulty, for both the encouragement and the thorough critiques that invariably improved the quality of the comic. Thank you for taking a chance on this weird little egg of a project and holding it for a while.
I trust you.

Right. Good, okay.

So this is...

...happening.
INSTALLATION INSTRUCTIONS:
COMPONENT IDENTIFICATION:

A.
B.
C.
D.

TOOLS REQUIRED:
1 - Domestic Animal
1 - Airlock Release
2 - Invasion Survival Kit
1 - Reproductive Partner

1

2

3
So what exactly am I trusting you with?

Everything! This is about taking a stand for—You know—What we believe in. For our egg!

Right, of course all that, but...

How about the next twelve hours, the next twelve minutes?

What's the plan?

The plan? Of course there's a plan, we escape. We say goodbye to the whole invasion, we make a home together on a new world.

Oh, good! Then you already packed.

Right, yeah, I mean, I think we've got what we need.

Invasion Survival kits
So, there's Tronhea, a tropical planet where we'll find primitive, nomadic crustaceans roaming endless sand beaches, hidden lagoons, natural hot pools, more waterfalls than we can shower in over a lifetime, and cool breezes at night blowing a thousand species of fireflies through lush, fruit-bearing trees.

Or, there's B2322, a humid swamp world with native mushroom colonies, bog leeches, mud leeches, tree leeches, some tics. We'd be eating a lot of fungus. Most building material will be fungus, and it could be tough to get a proper fire going with all the rain.

So... both habitable, but the brains are dragging us another nine years to Earth for their victory.

And you're really ready to leave it all behind? Our jobs... our friends, our invasion?
Of course we'd be bringing a male with us. An officer like mom and dad.

I had to look. Sorry. An officer? Could be. If we stay.

Hold him for me.

I think I'm ready.

Turn three pages.
YOU'RE SELECTED: ABORT

GO ON! YOU CAN DO IT! PUSH!

SING HIM THAT SONG HE LIKES.

WHAT? YOU MEAN "AIN'T NOBODY HERE BUT US CLONES?"

I'M NOT SURE THIS IS THE RIGHT VENUE FOR THE ABductees.

THERE AINT NOBODY HERE BUT US CLOTHES. THERE AINT NOBODY HERE AT ALL. SO SE-DATE YOURSELF, AND STOP THAT FOG, THERE AINT NOBODY HERE BUT US, AND CALMLY PUT THAT GUN AWAY.

OH GOD, AND STUMBLE, STUMBLE, STUMBLE TO YOUR FREE-ZER POD!
OH, TOMORROW IS A BUSY DAY. WE GOT THINGS TO DO, WE GOT EGGS TO LAY, WE GOT MINES TO BORE AND STRIP-U-LETS TO SHOW! IT TAKES A LOT OF PROTONS GET'N WORLD LEADERS TO BOW!

SETH...

NOW STAND BACK...

DUO-SHIELD
MY EYES!

MY...

FOR MEGHAN AND THE EGGS
Mississippi Gold Rush
Jon Fischer

Two of us stayed in the bruise—
farmhouse on the prairie,
searchin’ for momma.

Ol’ bowery hasn’t herd a damned
thing come outta her mouth
since she went missing.

We heard a Van Morrison
song on the radio. Could of
turned these fields

sallow.
Momma lay still
like a tradesman’s axe after
a long day’s breach.

Bowery be stuck tasting coal in the morn —
the evening croon fiddles
on mommas behalf.

Inkling the prairie eyes,
throwing gold in the river’s cheekbone.
Marauders come

with their rolling knives and torch sticks.
Fiddled the radio switch till
caravan came roaring.
What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I’ve always had an interest in petty criminals, outlaws, gunslingers; those who—for whatever reason—refuse to abide by society’s rigid standards and instead are fulfilled by leading a life of moral solipsism. So that was a large part of where my inspiration came from. Furthermore, I had no preconceived notion about what the poem was going to be about, just that it was going to be set in the south. Something about Mississippi—or the general deep south for that matter—appears very unhinged, and at times dangerous. I wanted to find some sort of beauty within that chaos. In regards to theme, I feel the piece is imbued with a strong sense of isolation and loneliness. I wanted the lines to strike a good balance between apprehension and urgency. And while I’ve never lived in the south, I have lived with burdening anxiety, so it was important I communicate the narrator’s feelings succinctly.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

Not really, no. With “Mississippi Gold Rush,” I knew I wanted to approach it using a very specific dialect, and I’ve always had a fascination with the south so that more or less fell together. This poem is very reliant on theme and narrative whereas my other works are more concerned with the aesthetics of language. It is also by far the most “experimental” piece I’ve written. Indeed, most of my other work is rather direct.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

Unique is a dubious term, but it does take me an incredibly long time to write anything I feel is of decent quality. Writing is not easy for me. It can be very strenuous and tiresome, yet I feel compelled to do it anyway.

Another interesting tidbit is that when I decide to write I have no formal plot, theme, or motif. Nothing. I begin with random words, sometimes sentences that I find sonically pleasing and they direct and create the subject matter. No formal drafting is involved.
Who are some of your favorite authors?

Yukio Mishima, Haruki Murakami, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Fernando Pessoa, Don DeLillo, and William H. Gass. Far too many to list.

How would you personally define poetry?

That’s a risky question, but I will attempt to answer. I believe each word must hold and carry its own weight in accordance with that which it follows. In other words, poetry, much like any other medium of art, must adhere to a specific rhythm and aesthetic sensibility so as to not lose influence on the reader. Cohesion is important. Moreover, I believe a poem must also withhold a premise that blends within the confines of its own words; a theme hidden below the surface, one could say. The audience’s understanding of that theme is unimportant so long as the writer is aware of his or her own intentions. But, at the end of the day, there are many different ways one could define poetry.

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

My work has appeared or is forthcoming in Literary Orphans, Blast Furnace Press, Riding Light Review, and Torrid Literature Journal, among others. I would urge any reader who enjoyed my work to read Mark Strand’s prose poem “Bury Your Face in Your Hands.”
As if a tectonic shift has dumped a mountain on his chest, my husband slumps on the couch. Five weeks until the homeowners insurance drops us, stacks of useful junk around the yard. The deadweight machine measures how you hold up against tension and compression.

When he begins to snore like Rip Van Winkle, I imagine an organic grocer’s typo has created a display of orgasmic blueberries. I eat them all without paying. A man in a green apron restocks the shelves with tender hands.

Before the war, people weighed beginning again in a new language against the coming storm. Every time I think of leaving, he catches a death rattle in my car, stops the house from flooding, sweet-talks a raccoon out the kitchen door.
When did you write the poem?
Between May and October of 2016.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?
I heard a report on NPR about the world’s largest deadweight machine, and I saw a Facebook post about a supermarket typo: “orgasmic blueberries.” These things percolated for a while and then worked their way into a poem about my marriage.
Our homeowners’ insurance was going to cancel our coverage unless my husband cleaned up his junk (“important stuff for projects”) in our backyard by the end of July. I was frustrated with his procrastination, laziness, distractibility, and messiness. Shortly after we successfully finished the clean-up project, a raccoon invaded my parents’ home while they were out of town. My husband deployed his raccoon-wrangling skills, and it was out of the bathtub, down the stairs, and out the door in no time. I am lucky to be married to a guy who inspires my writing by his internal contradictions and who doesn’t read poetry.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?
The hardest part was making it all hang together and convincing myself it was not too strange a series of juxtapositions: the deadweight machine, the marital saga, the orgasmic blueberries, and the World War II survivors. My MFA thesis advisor, Alessandra Lynch, suggested that I extend the mountain imagery, and I added Rip Van Winkle, who slept over twenty years in the Catskill Mountains and thereby escaped his nagging wife. I can laugh at myself. I’m on the five-year MFA plan: I should finish my thesis this coming spring and graduate in May.

Was there anything in your original conception of the poem that did not make it in?
I started with the deadweight machine and didn’t take anything out. That is fairly unusual for me.

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

I began using CRWROPPS, Allison Joseph’s Creative Writing Opportunities listserv, in the summer of 2014 after I met her at a conference. Allison bought a copy of my first chapbook and encouraged me to send more of my work out—because she is a tireless supporter of emerging writers. My first chapbook is *I Almost Didn’t Make It to McDonald’s* (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and my second is *The Night I Quit Flossing* (Five Oaks Press, 2016). I have a website (https://tracymishkin.wordpress.com/) that contains links to my journal publications.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Right now I am reading Rebecca Foust and Jeffrey Harrison. I like narrative poetry with humor, bite, and sound work. When the hair stands up on my neck before I stop laughing out loud—that’s what I want in a poem.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I liked the map graphic on your website and this statement: “Overly romanticized, antiquated, or colloquial poetry is not our focus. Narrative poetry, experimental forms and content that reveals your unique style are welcomed.” I recognized some of the names of the poets you have published, but not many, which suggested to me that you accept a broad range of work. I don’t think too many places are seriously looking for narrative and experimental work.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

Brenda Shaughnessy recently suggested that I try composing on an 11 x 17 sheet of paper. I had told her that I usually have a lot of notes that end up coming together, both handwritten and on the computer, to make a poem. Her suggestion seems to be a good fit for me: I have written two interesting poems in this way and am working on a third.

For most of my writing life, let’s say from age fourteen to forty-six, I wrote in bursts of inspiration and didn’t revise much. My poetry group was in awe of my speed: I typically turned a writing prompt into a relatively snazzy poem in under twenty minutes. The MFA program at Butler University has taught me to slow down, and my writing is much better as a result.
Cable

Eric Vithalani

It’s been years since I had cable television in the house. I have it now. There is a grey box next to the television that lets the world in. The clock on it is never wrong. Never right. A couple, contracted by the cable company, came to hook it up. He, a big man, seemed to barely fit in the atmosphere, and when he walked up the stairs, he breathed hard and the wood below his feet creaked like violins thundering from the moon. Two up here, he yelled down to the woman sitting on the arm of the couch. She scribbled something on a yellow note pad. Then scanning the room she asked, Dogs, do you have dogs? One, I said, Baxter, but he’s not here right now. At the Vet. She moved her gaze to where the music fell through the ceiling. John’s mom breeds Cockers, she said. Showed’em too. We like big dogs. A few minutes later, John was back. He turned on the television in the den and showed me how to use the remote control. He put it down on the coffee table next to the note Campbell left under the candle: Don’t forget about Baxter’s appointment. Get him a new bone and food at Petsmart. The good kind. See you tomorrow. xoxo. The woman asked if she could use the bathroom. I remembered too late: the last bit of you still in the toilet. And then I heard the flush. I haven’t turned on the television since they were here. Almost a month now. The grey box makes noises at times. Mechanical noises. Running noises. Clicking noises. Noises that run through my veins. Noises and sounds and clicking and clicking and clicking, and at night when the candle casts carnival shadows on the wall, it sounds like an entire orchestra.
Driving to work, I am thankful for every dark mile, leaving behind the dishes soaking in the sink, the crumpled laundry abandoned in baskets at the foot of the stairs, the children still quiet under the soft hood of sleep. This morning

I notice the street lights that line the interstate in reliable intervals like cordial encounters between people, like the defined distance between home and work. This morning

I want more than cordial. I’m running late and am forced to park on the top deck of the garage. My consolation prize is the view from the roof—cargo liners docked at the mouth of the silver river and the tips of old stone churches at my eye line.

Stepping out of my car, the sky is spitting and the wind is trying to wash something from me.

Today at the hospital, looking down at an open chest held apart by a steel retractor, watching the taut knot of ripe human muscle panting like a hungry dog’s lips,

I think I’m getting closer.
When did you write the poem?

I wrote this poem a few months ago on a random weeknight, after dinner, while my kids were watching TV and doing their homework.

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

All of the images and themes in this poem are inspired by my own life, particularly my struggle to coalesce the mundane aspects of motherhood and home life along with my role as a cardiac OR nurse, in which I’m regularly faced with the intense mysteries of life and death in a very vivid and visceral way. I suppose this poem was an attempt to navigate how these worlds converge, how they speak to each other. I think of William Stafford’s words when he says, “my life as a writer comes to me as two parts, like two rivers that blend. One part is easy to tell: the times, the places, the events, people. The other part is mysterious; it is my thoughts, the flow of my inner life, the reveries and impulses that never get known—perhaps even to me.” I'm starting to see that each poem I write is part of a collective journey to better understand the mystery of how the rivers between the seen and unseen worlds blend together in my own life. The best way I know how to do this is through the images I witness on a daily basis, and how these images connect to each other.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I’m not sure how unique it is, but I’ve realized that I generate my best work when I allow the process to be incredibly messy. My poems typically start as an image or a particular moment written down in a page of my notebook, and then I allow my mind to free associate from there. By the end, the page is full of words written in clusters all over the paper like a web that weaves out from the center. Then I will translate the disjointed words into cohesive lines on my computer, and that’s when an actual poem starts
to take shape. Once the body of the poem is down, I play around with word choices, form, and line breaks.

**How long have you been writing poetry?**

I’ve been writing poetry for about seven years. I came upon it accidentally and I wish I had discovered it much sooner. I was set on studying creative nonfiction during my MFA, and after I took my first poetry workshop, I was a goner! The contemporary poets I was exposed to captured a way of being in the world that felt like home to me. In many ways, I feel that my unplanned journey into poetry is a metaphor for poetry itself: a genre known for its unexpected turns, its illogical insights, and its meanings that are hard to pin down.

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

My work has appeared in *The Poet’s Billow, Relief Journal*, and is forthcoming in *Literary Mama*. I occasionally write at my little site (www.libbykurz.com) and contribute to a faith-based women’s publication called *Red Tent Living*.

**How would you personally define poetry?**

I’ll have to borrow from Tony Hoagland when he says that poetry, better than any other form, can “take the distinct lyric moment and slice it open, expose the musculature and skeleton, label its more particular tissues.” For me, poetry is like a door—a way to enter in the truth of what it means to be human in this world by deconstructing a singular moment. It’s a way to be present in the world without being bound by the confines of facts, plot, and time. It’s a way to find beauty and meaning in commonplace things we don’t usually pay attention to, and this act, I find, brings a lot of joy amidst a world that can be incredibly unforgiving.

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

I found *Driftwood* through *The Review Review*. I was immediately captivated. I love that *Driftwood* is welcoming to emerging voices, and the author interviews add dimension, character, and a sense of connection between the writers and readers.
The lineman with bionic hands told me
that, after contact with the hot line,
he didn’t feel pain at first, but saw the skin slivers
between his leather gloves and sleeves glow red. Told me
only then his heart surged, his body seared and seized
and he passed out in the bucket. While his crew lowered him
from the pole, he said he had a dream (he’d never recognized
his dreams before), but this time he was building a new line
– the ground wire silver, and the copper, gold.

Now the man with battery-powered hands lives
by strange alchemies – a wrist that hums and turns 360,
fine digits that articulate, slightly slow but non-arthritic,
smooth on a charge that lasts nine hours. He can hold
a fork and knife, drink a cup of coffee, turn a screw,
drop an engine in his car, shake your hand, touch,
but just not feel.

Electricity runs through this house. I thought I knew
the thing to light your eyes, the switch – my
coming through the door, my coming through the door
with a puppy, my carrying you through the door, finding
a newer, antique door, us toting across its threshold a stinky,
squalling stranger who might grow to look like us –
electricity.

I have taken a hammer to the walls,
clawed away the bedroom plaster, great piles at my feet,
the dust still settling as I run my palms along the naked ribbing,
the lathes between the studs. I am looking there for travelers
and commons, for you, for me, the boy, the lineman, the silver,
copper, gold, the tissue, tendons, bones, and veins.
I need to touch here, grab there, close the circuit,
shimmer my wrists, energize the line,
conduct the last and largest jolt.
What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I started this poem during the September meeting of the board of directors of the Energy Education Council (on which I serve). Part of this non-profit organization’s mission is to provide safety education not only for consumers but also for utility workers. As such, they often make testimonial videos from line workers who have survived accidents. One former line worker visited our meeting. He’d lost both his hands a year ago, the result of making contact with an energized line while he and his coworkers were installing a new neutral. Although he also sometimes uses the metal crab claw pinchers you may have seen, he mostly uses ‘bionic’ prosthetic hands, where the wrists turn and the fingers articulate at all the joints. As best I can understand, he makes all the intricate hand motions based on how he moves and rotates the remaining musculature in his arms at the point of amputation. (The technology was developed for returning injured Iraq War veterans— the only good thing to come out of the war, he told us.)

Stories from injured line workers are obviously hard to take. But this man, with a delightful sense of humor, has made a remarkable recovery, spending the majority of each day learning how to use his new hands. (Not easy. His doctor told him most people fitted with such hands get frustrated and end up storing them in the closet.) He is every bit as enthusiastic about showing people how to live through adversity as he is to remind his fellow line workers to follow all safety precautions to the letter so an accident like his will not befall them. He seems—stunningly and inexplicably to me— truly happy and unregretful with who he is and how he is.

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

The hardest part was to give myself permission to write about someone else’s traumatic life event. I don’t want to be exploitative. So the easy decision was to choose someone other than the lineman as the speaker of the
poem—to have the speaker wonder what kind of electricity it might take to make him (like the lineman) begin to recognize his dreams.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

One thing I like about this poem is that it allowed me to mix an element of my day job (I run an electric efficiency program for thirty-two municipal electric systems in Illinois) into my poetry.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I set the alarm for 4:30 each weekday morning and write something—regardless of whether or not I have anything I’m working on. My brain at that early hour is ungoverned (so that alleviates the “instant editor” in my head who wants to remind me that I’ve no idea what I’m doing). Plus, that routine gives me a couple hours each morning to fantasize that, simply by getting up and writing, I am a real writer.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

I just finished Kerrin McCadden’s Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes. Lovely work there. She’s up for a Pushcart this year and deserves it. Jericho Brown is the Money Mayweather of poetry—beautiful and fast, and then, though you’re looking right at him, he’ll deliver a lighting gut punch that will buckle your knees. Also, if you haven’t already, go read Ada Limón’s Bright Dead Things. It will feed your soul.

How long have you been writing poetry?

Two years. I’m guessing my way through it.

How would you personally define poetry?

That which makes you see and feel the old things anew.

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

If I ever have a book published, I’ll make a website. For now, you can find more of my work forthcoming or in the online archives of Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Triggerfish Critical Review, Literary Orphans, Shot Glass Journal, Right Hand Pointing, Eunoia Review, Antiphon, Allegro, and The Chagrin River Review.
Captain’s Bed, when three years old

John Haugh

Should you steal out the window to lie,
again, under the outdoor protection of your
sylvan brothers’ oak-moss arms?

Aunt Rachel’s old horse broke
her kitchen door’s window, impatient, pushing
in for his meal, teeth too worn to feed himself.

Rigid-stiff in bed, you consider scalloped wood
above and below yourpillowed eye,
before sleep’s transformation.

Aunt Rachel says most horses die
of starvation because their teeth wear out,
but did not speak of giants.

Put one foot on your bed’s ladder, bend
over scalloped wood that will morph into teeth
as your bed becomes that giant’s mouth.

Aunt Rachel out-ran and out-shot her instructors
at the Police Academy; if she needs to investigate
your death and that giant, the truth should out.

Choose to stay and sleep in your mouth-bed,
unprotected by oak-moss arms, learn
if your giant finally decides to swallow tonight.
When did you write the poem?

I wrote this poem early in 2016, then kept it in a drawer until a birthday road trip with my mom to San Francisco. Not trusting my memories from the age of three, I ran it by mom and made sure that side of things rang true.

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

At the age of three, I slept in an unusual form of a captain’s bed. Basically, it was a deep shelf cut into my bedroom wall with scalloped wood half circles across the bottom of the bed and the roof of the bed. I had little stair steps carved into the wall to climb up and into the bed. I found the bed creepy, but could not quite figure out why until years later.

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

Trying to get the tone right was a struggle, the subjective feeling of what was safe and what was dangerous. I had a whole thing about scribbling nonsense letters in an attempted message to the scary giant, and then the P.O.V. voice realizing he didn’t know how to write yet.

Jerrod Schwarz at Driftwood asked for more about Aunt Rachel, and I think that helped the work. In reality, my friend has an old horse that pushed through her kitchen door’s window trying to join in a family meal.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

Much of my writing feels similar, at least to me. I tend to go edgy with biographical elements, some humor and some stuff on the privilege and pain of working with Olympic fencers when young (age ten).

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Favorite biggies include Ginsberg, William Carlos Williams, Dostoyevsky, and Kazantzakis. Other favorites include Gene Kimmet, Terri Kirby
Erickson, Sam Barbee, Tamara Tabel, and Michael Gaspeny.

How would you personally define poetry?
   Trying to craft the best song imaginable without any electric guitars.

Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?
   Kimmet’s book, Memories of my Father, and Gaspeny’s book, Vocation, and When She was Bad by Freeman.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?
   Rat’s Ass Review still has one up that I like in their first 2015 issue. Notre Dame Magazine and Poetry in Plain Sight have three others I still like. I’m reluctant to recommend a batch of others. Google “John Haugh poems” and you will find a link.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?
   A friend recommended some work published there, and I got a kick out of the name. Years ago, my family ate at a kind of driftwood table. There was a glass top, but you saw all this incredible detail of stained wood.
i. They built a lighthouse on the island where the house folded, built of creaks and ricketing. They say it’s for aesthetics, that no one sails here now. That no one needs to find a place where no one leaves.

ii. Your mother remarried, some soft-eyed lady in leather jackets and boots with four inch heels. Your father doesn’t know who to envy. But he keeps his garden, dirt and tulip bulbs by his side each September, careful to plant them before the ground hardens.
A tease of clouds intermits
the searing blueblack. Cicadas
drone in a 3 a.m. silence
and I fall back

onto an Army blanket, 1956,
a meadow outside Ithaca, lying with sister
and brother, in the grip of fierce
dreams and longings, my skin

alive with up,
drawn to the studded dark, whose
tiny burns might be those of a sparkler
twirled too fast.

This night, as you sleep inside,
I lift binoculars to contain
these pricking lights, which
perforate,

yet still pull me
to them. Your dream wafts from the house,
a stay. In waning heat, in my thin
nightshirt, I feel

the years accordion,
and I shiver. Each of us
gets to be vast sometime. Three
meteors streak
the length
of a star-glazed strand
of my hair. *How can the birds sleep
in this confetti of light?*

—for Evan
When did you write the poem?

I wrote the first draft of “Perseids, Later” about two years ago and revised it over the next year.

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

It was inspired by a sense of awe in this night’s intersection of time and timelessness I feel when I watch the meteor showers. That year, I was stunned by how many decades I have done so—lying on an Army blanket with siblings outside of Ithaca, New York. I must have wished on the meteors as they streaked across the sky; they have always brought ecstasy. Beneath this phenomenon, the self is both deeply conscious of its nature and almost completely dissolved.

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

The easiest was to recall the Army blanket—the scratch of it—and the press of the humid August night. Hardest was and is to capture that unaccountable citizenship we have in both time and timelessness. Also a challenge: to use well the form that seemed to shape this experience well—precisely and yet freely.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

A “precious particle,” as writer Henry James called such miniscule beginnings, may start to bloom in the ocean of the unconscious (I think suddenly of those odd little dry sponge-like animals that enlarge in water “on their own”). I try not to shape or groom a particle until it reveals itself after a bit of growing in what James refers to as that “happy dusk of indifference and neglect.” I let the image or bit of memory or compelling shred of dream lead me into territory I don’t know in advance. I love to capture something
precisely by describing it, then watch it take off down an unfamiliar path, riding its own details or the sound of its words.

I think my poems depend on a snag—and my writing on serial snagging. A writer may be caught, pierced, delighted, or dismayed by a snag. The snag might be a stump standing out from the trunk of the past or a branch of the present. As a writer, I try to recognize the sharp pull and let myself be arrested. Once snagged, I then try to follow William Stafford’s description of the poetic process as an act of discovery (in Writing the Australian Crawl). I follow words and images as they present themselves to see what they can offer and where they might lead the first draft of the poem.

**How long have you been writing poetry?**

About four decades, which astonishes me.

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

*Driftwood’s* publication of Robert W. King’s work, which was then included in his chapbook *In the Empty Mountains* (Lithic Press).
We watched the moon fall
on a flat screen TV in a room with no chairs.
Standing with the small crowd who
gathered there, we ached along
with its slow-motion, black light descent.
We wondered what it would mean not to have lunar months
as plastic faces strained to explain
the damage in terms we could understand.
Like, “bigger than the continental US but
smaller than Asia”.

I thought of the ocean with no tides,
the sky with no center, and wept.
I tried to explain to a nervous sylph.
She skirted around me,
consuming Chilean blueberries.
An overblown black balloon with a bagful of money
told me not to worry so much.
“It’s all sleight of hand,” he explained,
piling sandbags around himself,
“Just like the moon landing
and war.” Then he disappeared
behind his partition.

As the orb touched the ocean,
setting for the last time,
the gathering lost interest,
explaining that they had

(no stanza break)
business elsewhere. They exited through windows, already half-covered by water, swimming back to their SUVs. I asked you to hold my hand, you told me not to think so much, and in the rising flood, we waited, together.
When did you write the poem?
I originally wrote the poem in March 2016, but I’ve revised it several times since then.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?
The poem was inspired by conversations I kept having with people in which I felt like I was treading water, just getting nowhere. I tried to write about that, and I ended up with this poem.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?
The hardest part of writing a poem for me is revision, especially knowing where to stop and not to be so critical that I remove too much. The easiest part is just putting words down in the first place.

How long have you been writing poetry?
I am not really sure; it feels like I have always written poetry. But I have a strong memory of writing poetry and songs when I was around ten, so at least since then.

How would you personally define poetry?
I think that poetry is highly personal, so I don’t want to be proscriptive about it. I think that anything that plays with and distills language into feeling can be poetic. It just has to have an awareness of language and evoke something.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?
Yes! I have been fortunate enough to also be published in The Hawaii Pacific Review, The Raven’s Perch and Rag Queen Periodical.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I have read every issue of the journal and I am really drawn to narrative poetry and experimental forms, which Driftwood Press excels in. In particular, in issue 2.3 I was just blown away by the poems — the works by Tara Westmor, Mary Imo Stike, and the rest— and I thought, “I want to be published with these writers”. The work was just so excellent.
I mostly remember his body, gaunt
like an ambitious runway model hungry
for something intangible

an awkward cavity, where
his shoulder and neck should have
cradled my head but the bones
felt like shelves I could not reach

where could I put my desire? how to
organize it or place it appropriately
when his frailty slapped me in the face
and laughed cruelly at my longing

what a surprise to find him so hollow
beneath that stunning overcoat
a withered frame hidden by heroism

dear reader, please be careful:
frail is not the same as vulnerable
and vulnerability, as you probably know
too easily fuels desire

no: he was frail.
When did you write the poem?
I wrote “Dreamscape: Sherlock” while on sabbatical in Spring 2014.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?
I’m a big fan of the new Sherlock series with Benedict Cumberbatch. I love the brilliantly awkward and aloof sexiness he brings to the character. I’m interested in the complexity of desire and how desire is cultivated, how Cumberbatch’s Sherlock is both an asshole and a savior, a drug addict and a genius, an utter failure and a superhero.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?
I typically write poems very slowly. I plod, wring my hands, debate word choice for hours. This poem, though, came right out. An intense image of frailty came to me in a dream, and that image in stark comparison with the robust immortality of the Sherlock figure became the central tension of the poem.

Was there anything in your original conception of the poem that did not make it in?
In this case, I didn’t have a clear conception of the poem before I started writing. I just tried to get out of my own way and let the images interact with one another.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?
I don’t think so. I tend to focus on the playfulness and complexity of language in my work. As a reader and writer, I’m drawn to innovative aesthetics and how experimental art helps us to reconceptualize the world. As a poet, I’m particularly interested in teasing out the possibilities of language. This poem, to me, feels much more driven by its imagery.
Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?
I highly doubt my writing process is unique in any way. I often like to begin with a separate text, whether another author’s work or some other “found” item, and work from there, letting the aspects of the language guide me into new territory.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

How long have you been writing poetry?
Most of my life. My parents encouraged writing and creativity from as early as I can remember.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?
I’m a literary scholar, a translator, and a poet, and these aspects of my brain are intimately intertwined. Reading my scholarly work helps to shed light on my conceptions of poetry, and vice versa. My work has appeared in Women’s Studies, Frontiers, Metamorphoses, Azalea, and The American Reader, among other journals.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?
The range and diversity of high quality contemporary writing featured in the journal. Driftwood pays close attention to craft without subscribing to more rigid definitions of genre.
I saw a white pelican floating
in the coolness of the lake
like the swan of dreamtime
with dragonflies flitting beside her—
full of messages about the universe’s
rhythms such as those of the binary
star, Albireo, the head of the swan
in the constellation Cygnus, one
of the forty-eight Ptolemy included
in his famous list of constellations.

I am rinsing my thoughts, asking,
what might succeed grief and how
will I be transformed by sorrow
on this unfinished earth?
The chamber at the end
of the mind has seven rooms
and the seventh and last
is diffused into channels.
Each step becomes a step
into mystery, eternity.

The surface of the lake
is full of clouds.
What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Observations of the natural world interwoven with reflections on consciousness, sentience.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Alice Fulton, Nance Van Winckel, Linda Hogan, and many others.

How would you personally define poetry?

Emily Dickinson: “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I wanted to see my work in print in this journal. I like the press’s aesthetic and overall excellence (e.g. graphic design, advice to submitters, quality of work appearing in each issue).
half a sunset here
where all the
world is hanging off
the dark lake top.
a couple (man, wife)
walk the rock-shore
reading themselves in ripples.

iotas on the landscape.

rain water
drying on the dock.

where the water ends there are roads.
a log truck out of the fog rides
101 around the world.
billowy pale pink
blotch of
cumulus cloud holds
late light.

a fisherman’s wife has dinner ready.
    somewhere.

mild May night not
    quite like
    the movies.

“couple degrees colder
    and I’d think
    it was gonna snow”

“but look Oh! Look
    at that
    sky.”
When did you write the poem?
I wrote this poem in the summer of 2013 while working a seasonal job in Olympic National Park.

What inspired the poem? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?
That summer in Olympic I had a habit of walking to the lake in the evenings after work to write. This poem is a result of one of those sessions. With a notebook in my lap, I would watch people wander around the lake, enjoying the dock, the rhythm of the shoreline—getting down what I could. I was also reading a lot of Lew Welch that summer, trying to mimic his way of incorporating snippets of conversations into poems. The husband and wife I saw walking the dock had such an appreciation for where they were and what they were witnessing, and I happened to catch on paper a piece of their dialogue, which to me seemed to sum up the evening.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem? What was the easiest?
I had the material for this poem down in my notebook, but the hardest part was typing it up, deciding where to end lines, playing with sound and pacing. The poem went through a few different drafts before finding the state it is in currently.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?
My poems do tend to involve a particular place and my relationship to it, though this one is unique in the fact that it went down on paper as it happened. Normally my poems come from a certain distance, looking back.

Who are some of your favorite authors?
Some of my favorite poets currently are David Wagoner, James Wright and Thomas McGrath. But the writer who has held most of my attention
recently is Judith Kitchen—whose work has led me down some interesting roads, trying to bring a poet’s ear to the essay.

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

This poem is definitely a result of reading Lew Welch and Philip Whalen, two poets I would highly recommend to anyone who likes what is going on in my poem here.

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

I have a handful of pieces out there—both poems and essays—floating around in various journals. I am working on gathering a book of poems together, but for the time being anyone interested in reading more of my work could check out my poems in *The Cossack Review, Ascent,* or *Barnstorm.* My essays can be found online in *Hippocampus* or *High Desert Journal.*

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

The cover art for the issues immediately caught my eye. The quality and excitement in the writing lured me as well.
Doves strum the fir, the pair that overwintered here
to grieve the lost singleton, frost on pointed wings.

A woman may wed, her animal warmth call to a mate;
she may plant clematis relentless in ascent, and lupine stalks,
furnish rooms with sound, unremarkable things.
And yet.

Bereft is to have twelve empty plates,
to scrape ash from the teeth, suffer the burning sun
as the necessary steps of going on, go on.

A dervish of sand sweeps through the screen
leaving nothing clean enough to eat.
No water but the fluid of love, visible in her belly's swell.
Veins map the silk roads home.

Quickening, the unborn stakes her claim,
insistent as any creature fully made.

Two wills, one that nulls my offerings--
the day's mail, whole-meal bread, lavender for a bath.
Instead, a mess of entrails left unread, the drying husks of beans.
Her closed mouth, a sickle moon.

It rises in the east, over the garden wall
and the drains from which I pick white slugs.

What will hold this acreage? the tardy, knife-like shoots,
brambles laced with stippled jewels, straining to the ground?
Salt wind creeps through the seams of the house, through every joist,
a word from the Old French meaning, to lie down.
When did you write the poem? What inspired the poem?

I wrote "The Leaving" in August of this past year. A poet friend invited me to read a work about the events of 9/11 for a memorial at a downtown venue in New York City; I realized I'd been afraid of delving into an important episode surrounding the death of a dear friend's husband during the attack on the World Trade Center.

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

I've never found a poem so hard to write. The widowed friend was expecting a child, and her emotional devastation and the grief of those around her were difficult feelings to revisit in writing. I guess the easy part was that the whole experience was etched into my brain: from the email alerting me to Brent's disappearance to the service conducted in his honor months later. It would be impossible to forget any of this, and the details emerged in the poem.

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

Yes, I wrote quite a few drafts of this poem. I didn't want it to be overly sentimental because that would have been the obvious thing. On the other hand, I didn't want to let style take over and obscure the emotional content.

Is this poem categorical of your work? Why or why not?

I think the poem is representative of my writing; I like to use imagery and play with words but not go the whole route into "language poetry."

Who are some of your favorite authors?

It's hard to know where to start with that question. Here's a funny thing—for my eleventh birthday, a friend of the family gave me an anthology called *Poet's Choice*, which contained a single poem by each author. And
that poem was not necessarily one that had made the poet widely known; it was the one the poet had a grudging or sneaking fondness for, so there were some surprising entries. So, as a child, I stumbled on poets like Theodore Roethke, ee. cummings, Leonard Cohen, Edmund Blunden, and Denise Levertov. What a gift! I think their poems have been singing in my head for decades.

How long have you been writing poetry?
I started writing poetry in childhood, wrote often as a young adult, then took a long, long hiatus after I attended graduate school in literature and developed the disgusting idea that it wasn't worthwhile to write because all the good stuff had eons ago been published. Obviously, if we all thought that way, there would be no contemporary poetry!

How would you personally define poetry?
Many have described poetry more wisely and succinctly than I could. Think of Emily Dickinson famously saying, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." The language has to do something magical, something wholly unexpected to make us feel this way.

Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?
I love the Mary Oliver quote, "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work." If we, as writers, pay attention to our world, we are sure to be authentic, if nothing else.

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?
Yes, I have a chapbook out from Flutter Press titled Bridal Veil Falls. I've been published in quite a few anthologies and print and online journals. A few of these are Bluestem, Canary, The Common, MadHat Lit, Mobius, San Pedro River Review, Poetrybay, Poetry Quarterly, THEMA, and Zymbol.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?
I like the vibe, the artwork, the different ages and backgrounds of the writers you publish—it's a welcoming, intriguing place for writers.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your work in particular?
Only that I'm grateful when a poem unfurls in my head. Aren't we all?
They were playing with the snake. Squirt said he wasn’t allowed but the older boys said how was anybody going to know and anyway the snake was dead, it had been dead for days, and it didn’t care, did it. The metal merry-go-round was too hot for sitting and he hadn’t brought his army men. It wasn’t good to bring the army men when the older boys were at the playground because one time they said let them play and then they melted one of the snipers. It took a couple of tries with charcoal fluid and half a book of stolen matches, but finally they said the flamethrower got him and screamed his screaming and laughed as he melted. They were throwing the snake up to see if it would wrap around the tree branch the way swing chains would wrap around the bar, but it kept falling and then the game was to throw the snake so it would fall on someone and if it fell on you then you were a dildo. When Squirt said okay and went to play with them, the snake kept falling on him. They said he was the dildo and he never got a turn to throw it into the tree himself. They got bored soon enough and then it was time to lay the snake on the tracks to see what happened when the train came.

It was okay to stand at the edge of the playground and wave when the trains came but the tracks were Off Limits. The older boys didn’t care. They left pennies and branches and one time a bird skull from the gutter so the train would run over them. One of the older boys, Scott, had given him a penny, smashed and stretched by the train wheels. A souvenir, Scott called it. Squirt had not wanted his mother to ask where he had gotten the penny so he had dropped it into the storm drain on his way home.

Now they were climbing the gravelly rise up to the tracks and when he stopped at the edge of the lot they said come on, come on, what are you a baby. So he scrambled up with them. It was okay, see: the train was far

Cock of the Walk

Michael Thurston
away, you couldn’t even hear it yet and they would be down in the vacant lot before it got there. Nothing to worry about and how was his mom going to know, what, did she have x-ray eyes? The snake was as long as his leg but it had gotten ragged from the morning’s play and little bits of it were leaking out and it smelled like mustard. The older boys argued over which way to lay it on the tracks. It would be cool to lay it across both tracks if it went all the way across, but it wasn’t long enough and so some said it would be better if they laid it out the other way. The train wouldn’t cut it in half that way, though. Yeah but who cares: it would smash the living shit out of it. They turned to him and said all right, which way do you think. Dildo said to smash the living shit out of it because he liked the way that sounded. They laughed and said that was that, you heard the man, and they stretched the snake out along the hot metal track. One of them, Eric, said, you could almost hear it sizzle. Maybe it would cook before the train came. The snake kept wanting to roll off the track, but they made it stay. Everyone crept back and watched to make sure it was still on the track before they turned and slid down the gravel.

Mrs. Odiorne’s cat was walking along the top of her fence. Usually, the cat crept through the tall grass around the playground, stalking birds or mice. They would find dead birds in the morning. The cat’s name was Lambchop but the boys called it Killer. Now it stepped along the fence top until, hearing something, it stopped and cocked its head and jumped off into Mrs. Odiorne’s yard.

How are we going to know the snake has stayed put, one of the boys said. Someone was going to have to go check. Dildo lost at hot potato so he was the one who would have to do it. You could hear the train now, the whistle as it came up to where the tracks crossed town roads. There was plenty of time: he just had to see if the snake was still on the track. He scrambled up the gravel and sure enough the snake had fallen off. It fell, Dildo said. They shouted to put it back, to hurry up. He laid the snake along the track again but it wanted to roll off to one side or the other. Just put it back, the boys shouted, but the metal was starting to quiver and it shook the snake so that it slithered off again. He could hear the train now, not loud yet, not like it would be when it whooshed by, but loud enough and
when he looked through the shimmer above the tracks he could see the engine. Just hold it there, the boy named Sam said, you can get new hands if the train cuts your hands off. Dildo knew you could not get new hands, he had seen the soldier with the hook instead of a hand at the post office. He did not want a hook and Sam said all right, don’t cry about it, Dildo. Scott came up then and said here, look, and he let the snake’s head loll off on one side of the track and made a curvy line with the snake back and forth across the metal, with the end of it lolling off on the other side. What do you think, Scott asked. He had to talk loudly because the train was loud now. Maybe the train will slice it into half a dozen pieces for us. The snake stayed put and by the time they slid back down the gravel the whistle was hooting. He had never been so close to the passing train. It was loud and made a hot wind that blew all of the boys’ hair around.

Sure enough, Scott said when they climbed up after the train went by. There were pieces of the snake on both sides of the metal but most of it was smeared along the track. Blood and stringy gristle still held some of the pieces together. The air smelled like the train and hot tar from the railroad ties and the mustard smell of the snake. Some of the boys picked the pieces up, but he heard his mother calling and it was time for lunch. His hands smelled like mustard even before he was going to put some on the bologna on his plate but his mother said oh no, Buster, you go wash your hands. She watched TV while he ate his sandwich. Buster did not ask any more why it was okay for her to watch during the day when she said all the time that it was bad for him to and he should play outside. On TV, Chuck and Tara were talking. Tara was crying and Chuck was looking at his hands. His mother said it was all Erica’s fault, oh she was a schemer that Erica, and then it was commercials. Drink your milk, his mother said, and why do you kids keep playing with that dead snake, didn’t I tell you to leave that thing alone. Why don’t you play hide and seek or something, play with your friends who are alive instead of with some rotting dead thing.

He drank his milk but he said he didn’t want to go back out and play with those dildos. What did he say, his mother asked: Where did he hear that word? He told her about the game with the snake and she said those fifth-grade boys have mouths like sewers. Last week, Mrs. Odiorne had
heard them cussing like sailors on the seesaw, each one outdoing the last one when he was up in the air. Stinkers. Mrs. Odiorne had told all the boys’ parents because she was a busybody. He could play inside this afternoon, she told him, but only if he was quiet because mommy had a headache.

In the morning there was a dead robin by the merry-go-round so he went exploring at the edge of the playground. Before the sun made the lot smell like shredded wheat, there was a muddy wet grass smell that he liked and on some of the tall weeds there were clumps of fizz that looked like somebody had spit there, and when you pushed weeds aside there were grasshoppers and roly poly bugs. Looks like Killer’s been on the prowl, Eric said. A couple of the boys put the dead robin on the merry-go-round and spun it until the bird slid off and Sam said hey, Dildo, what’ll the train do to that. Dildo did not want to see what the train did to the dead bird and instead he said it would be better to play with things that are alive. The roly polys curled up in little armored balls when he touched them and sometimes he could see a grasshopper spit tobacco juice before it jumped away and you know what, another boy, Randy, said, that little dildo is a genius.

It took half the day to catch Killer. They couldn’t go too close to Mrs. Odiorne’s yard. The cat just walked on top of the fence but did not come out into the playground. What if we hit it with a rock, Eric said, but what if the rock missed, dipshit, said Randy, and you hit a window. Maybe it would hit Mrs. Odiorne, one said, and they all said that would be okay with them. But they’d definitely get beaten for that. It had been bad enough when she had told on them for cussing. What if we trapped it? Sam even ran home to bring some tuna that was going to be on sandwiches and for a while they tried to get the cat to come to them, hissing and clucking and smearing their fingers with the oily fish, but the cat ignored them and they finally smeared their fingers on each other for a game instead. At home for lunch, his mother said god what have you been doing now. He said pussy hunting. She made the face that meant she was trying not to be mad and then she sent him to wash the smell from his hands and face and neck where the boys had got him with the tuna and to change his shirt. On TV, Chuck looked at his hands while Tara cried.
When he got back to the playground, the dead robin jiggled and danced at the end of a fishing line as Eric reeled it in and then they threw it again, all the way to the bottom of Mrs. Odiorne’s fence, where Killer sat now. He had jumped down to watch the bird ruffle and roll. The reel made a buzz as the bird flew and a clicking as Eric reeled, like when Scott had clothes-pinned a joker to his bike to make a motorcycle. Eric cast the bird again and let it sit still while the cat watched and then moved it so the cat lifted its ear and its paw twitched. Then he moved the bird again and the cat stood up and slunk a step toward it. That’s it, the other boys said, that’s it. Eric pulled the bird another click and the cat crept another step.

Dildo knew he should stay over by the swings and merry-go-round and he wished he had brought his army men. The sun made the soft dirt on top hot but the dirt underneath felt cooler and he mixed the hot dirt and the cool dirt and paved a road flat with his palm. The road stretched from the bottom of the slide to the roots of the big tree and tomorrow he would bring a Hot Wheels and roll it down the slide to jump onto the smooth road. All of a sudden, there was movement and hissing and shouting and the boys had Killer pinned to the ground. Sam took off his shirt and they wrapped it around the cat so that it could not scratch them and now the question was what were they going to do with it.

We could put it on the tracks, Randy said. Yes, let’s put it on the tracks, some others said, but Scott said they weren’t going to put it on the tracks, it was too late for the train. It had already gone by, and anyway they would not put the cat on the tracks. They had never put anything alive on. They could burn it but nobody had the stolen lighter anymore and you probably couldn’t catch the fur on fire anyway. Scott looked at the big tree and said wait. They could take the cat up to the top of the tree and drop him. The best part was it wouldn’t even hurt the cat because they always landed on their feet. He had seen it on TV. The boys had all climbed to the top of the tree before, but no one could climb to the top while holding the cat because you needed both hands, especially when you got up high. He watched from the merry-go-round and he was glad they would not put the cat on the tracks. He did not want to see parts of the cat leaking out and he did not want the cat to be dead. The snake had been already dead: you could play
with something that was already dead. He was glad the cat would land on its feet. Scott took charge and said bucket brigade and the boys all shouted bucket brigade. Scott climbed up and one after another the boys followed him, each stopping lower down in the tree. Someone in one of the houses around the playground turned on a radio and he heard the song his mother liked and sometimes when it came on she danced with him. The boys heard it too and they were singing put the lime in the coconut. Randy was the last boy who needed to climb. He said hey Dildo, come hold the cat and hand it to me when I’m up on the branch.

Dildo came over and held the cat wrapped in the shirt. It was yowling and trying to stick its paw out of the shirt. He squeezed the cat to his chest and said hiya Lambchop, good kitty. Randy was up on the branch. Dildo almost dropped the cat because when he wasn’t hugging it to him in the shirt it jumped around and tried to get away. He squeezed it harder, though it cried and hissed. Randy grabbed it and held it tight. The song was different now: the one that made his mother cry, the one about alone again. That Erica, boy she was a schemer. Soon, as the boys passed it from one to the next, the cat was at the top of the tree with Scott. All the other boys climbed down so they could see the cat land on its feet. He came over with them to see too. Okay, Scott called, but when he was taking the cat from the shirt he said ow fucker fuck and the top of the tree shook as he slipped and hung on and the cat came falling down.

The cat did not land on its feet.

No one moved. The cat made a yowl and it seemed like something held it down by its shoulder as it tried to get up. The cat’s back legs looked like they were riding a bike. Scott was climbing down and Eric said to him wrong-oh, man, that cat did not land on its feet. Scott said I didn’t mean to drop it yet but look how it scratched me.

Well, Sam said, what are we going to do now? The cat could not stand up and it made another yowl and nobody sang along like usual when the sailors said Brandy you’re a fine girl on the radio. We could take it to a vet, Randy said, isn’t there a vet we could ride bikes to? Dildo knew a vet was a soldier like the one with a hook. Why would you take the cat to a vet with a hook. No, Scott said, the vet would ask how we got it when it’s not our
cat. They all talked at once: We could say it got hit by a car. We could tell Mrs. Odiorne we saw it get hit and she could take it to the vet. She’d never believe that, she hates kids, Randy said. She’d say we hurt him on purpose. We could throw it over Mrs. Odiorne’s fence. We could throw it the other side of the tracks. The coyotes will get him there, they get cats sometimes. Everyone would just think a coyote got him.

The cat made a louder yowl and kicked its back legs at the sky but it could not get up.

We’ve got to put him out of his misery, Scott said. Look how he’s suffering.

Okay, Randy said, but how? They could put him on the tracks and let the train do it but the train already went. No, Scott said, we have to do it ourselves. We took him and we hurt him, so we have to stop his suffering. Eric said that he didn’t hurt the cat, and Sam and Randy said they didn’t either, but Scott asked were they in it together or not. Hadn’t he stuck up for all of them when that old bat told on them for the cussing contest. They said okay okay. But how were they going to do it? Did anybody have a knife? They could cut his throat. That’s how you kill someone fast on TV, but nobody had a knife. What if they choked him with the fishing line but no, choking was terrible. They had all seen on TV how guys fought and gagged and their eyes bugged when they were being choked. So finally they decided they would kick the cat against the trunk of the big tree. That would maybe break his neck and kill him painlessly. Who, Randy said, who is going to kick him? They could hot potato for it, but no, Scott said, didn’t you hear me, we’re all going to do it. But what if the cat was dead after the first one kicked him? It didn’t matter: they were in this together and every one of them was going to kick the cat so they would all have helped to put him out of his misery.

Dildo sat on the merry-go-round even though the metal was hot through his shorts and he scuffed his feet against the dirt so the merry-go-round squeaked one way and then the other while the boys played hot potato to see who would kick the cat first. You too, Scott said to Dildo: Aren’t you one of us? Dildo did not want to kick the cat. But you helped, Scott said, you handed him up, and you played with the snake too. You’re one of
us and if you want to be one of us you have to kick him. Eric said to leave the little dildo alone. He still goes home to his mama for lunch. Yeah, Sam said, he goes home and sucks his mama’s titty. Scott said shut up. He looked at Dildo and said you’re not a little dildo are you, buddy, you’re one of us, cock of the walk.

Buddy liked the way that sounded so he said cock of the walk. The boys all laughed and said yeah, cock of the walk. He came over to the tree and played hot potato with them while the cat mewedled and pedaled its back legs in the dirt, waiting for the loser to kick it against the tree and put it out of its misery.
When did you write "Cock of the Walk"?

I wrote the first draft early in 2015; worked on it on and off until this summer.

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

I always find titles difficult. For desperate times, I keep a list of phrases I like—often lines of poems or even captions of images (from Breton’s *Nadja*, for example)—and choose one of those that seems right. In this case, when I got to the boy’s repetition of the phrase “cock of the walk,” a voice in my head said, “that’s the title.” I’ve since thought about others (I toyed with one of my Breton favorites: “The child of a moment ago enters without a word”), but none were any better than that one.

Which part of "Cock of the Walk" was conceived of first?

It started, like a lot of my stuff starts, with a couple of images and fragments: the snake, the dying cat, snippets of soundtrack from the early seventies. I’d written a couple other stories about a kid like the one in this story, and those bits and pieces seemed to be attached to him, too, so I played around with ways to put them and him together. The rest emerged from that initial combination.

What’s your favorite sentence in this work? Why?

Right now, I think my favorite might be the final sentence. I like the way the whole story is sort of there in its phrases: the merging of the boy into the community of these older kids, the suffering cat as the ground or
occasion for this bonding, and the way all of this is going to individuate the boy again—“the loser”—but in a way that’s changed utterly from the beginning of the story. And it’s got a rhythmic funkiness that I like.

**Do you primarily write fiction?**

I’d say I primarily write fiction as my not-job writing. What I write mostly, though, is literary history and literary criticism.

**What other mediums have influenced your work? How?**

Film. Especially non-Hollywood film, whether French New Wave stuff or some of the great Asian and South American movies of the 1950s and 60s, or the films of Terrence Malick or Guy Maddin. I love how a lot of this cinema subordinates character and narrative to other aesthetic interests, how a director like Godard estranges the medium while keeping one foot in recognizable genres or plots, how Malick in his recent films dramatizes interiority in ways that I find breathtaking and that make me say, right away, “Man, I want to try to do that on the page.”

**Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

I don’t think so. I try to write most days, usually in the morning, for whatever time I can give it (which is sometimes not much). I still write a lot of my first drafts longhand and then do the first work of revision as I type them up on my laptop. That might be increasingly peculiar, I don’t know.

**Tell us about your revision process regarding this work. What changed due to the critiques of our editors?**

There was very productive feedback that helped me to make clear who was who at various moments, to strike that balance between the kind of thing that simply slows a reader down (like the moment in “A Clean, Well Lighted Place” where you have to stop and try to figure out which waiter is speaking) and the kind of thing that might make a reader give up.

**Are any elements of this story based on personal experience?**

A few things here come from my own experience. When I was a kid in
Olathe, Kansas, the housing development we lived in had a playground behind the houses, and beyond that there was a vacant lot and then the train tracks. One day, some kids found a dead king snake, huge, at least it seemed huge to me (I was maybe five), and they played around with it, finally laying it on the tracks. I watched this from a distance. There was once a swearing contest on the seesaw; in it, I was participant and, indeed, victor. When the neighbor who heard us told my mother, I got the soap-in-the-mouth treatment. I would come in from playing sometimes, for lunch, and *All My Children* would be on TV. But those are little shards and flecks in the pottery, most of whose clay is totally made up. I mean, no cats were harmed in the production of this story.

**What was it like negotiating with the voice of the child for this story? Were any aspects of this particularly challenging?**

My idea was to try to capture the stream of consciousness when the banks of the stream are still unformed, when it’s open to other streams that are flowing in. Psychologists talk about how adolescents worry that their minds are “leaky,” that other people can hear what they’re thinking. That prompted me to play around with leakiness in the other direction that seems to me part of the child’s mind-in-formation, the way that what someone says fluidly becomes what the kid thinks. The challenge, of course, is to strike the balance between salutary confusion —“who said that?”— and sufficient clarity —“oh, I get it”— that enables the reader at once to follow what’s going on and to inhabit the strangeness of a child’s way of being in the world.

**Talk to us about sympathy while writing. Was it difficult to write about the cat’s death? Does the story affect you emotionally as you write it?**

I have a strange relationship to dark stuff in my writing. Until my spouse pointed out to me how messed-up and awful some of my stories were, I honestly had no idea. It was just what came out when I wrote. So, no, I didn’t find it hard to write about the cat; I’d seen a cat recently that had been hit by a car (not run over, but struck), and it was lying in the road as
if pinned by the shoulders, kicking its back legs up and trying to get up. The image was in my head, and then it was in the story. I find, often, that writing, for me, is the probably terrible and ethically dubious act of trying to take the messed-up stuff out of my head and putting it into someone else’s. Sorry.

Train tracks and coming-of-age stories seem to be inextricably linked, an idea that figures prominently into this story. Why do you think this connection is so universally powerful? What, to you, is the significance of the train tracks in this story?

In the 19th century, the train was the great emblem of fundamental change, of modernity. On a train, you could suddenly move faster than people had been able to move before. It changed the human relationship to space and time. So, it enters the writing of the period—Dickens in *Dombey and Son*, Thoreau in *Walden*—as a way to dramatize big changes. The most amazing 20th century version of that, for me, is in Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*, when Apu and Durga are running through a field and then there are the tracks and the pylons and wires and the train. It’s Bengal in the 1910s, and all of the kinds of change that Dickens and others struggled to process narratively are pressing and threatening. The film gets it beautifully. All those examples weld a connection between the train and coming of age so that it seems natural or automatic. So much so, that it was only when asked this question that I saw that I had unwittingly repeated this deeply conventional relationship.

There is a quiet sadness in knowing the inevitability of the ending. What influenced your decision to end the story at this point? In your mind, what will this moment mean for the boy in the story?

I think it’s the moment, or, better, a moment (we’ve all got more than one of these), when he emerges into a more fixed identity, a kind of stability as part of this group of boys. There’s a loss of innocence, and, for me, a horrifying aspect of how identity is formed in and through the structures of a toxic American masculinity (partly suggested by the shift from “dildo” to “cock”).
There is a great deal of cruelty here; and yet, so many tender moments too. Was that a hard balance to achieve?

It was important to me that the ringleader, Scott, is at once the agent of welcoming and generosity for the protagonist and the one who cooks up the whole chain of events that leads to the cat’s death. I wasn’t so much after a balance of cruelty and tenderness as just trying to acknowledge that those two aspects of character are rarely unmixed.

Why, in your mind, does the protagonist go unnamed?

It’s that fluidity of self in childhood. A name strongly suggests fixity, settledness (even as we’re all always still in the process of becoming). I wanted to capture the self that’s still a field of impressions, still so open that it’s sometimes hard to know what emanates from within it and what is imposed from outside, or exactly when the latter becomes the former. In all of my drafts of the story, he was just called “he” or “him.” Work with the editors at Driftwood produced what seems to me a better solution, in which the kid is called in the narrative voice whatever he’s been called by the characters around him.

You mentioned to us that you view this work as stream of consciousness. Do you often write in this style? What liberties does it give that more traditional styles don’t necessarily offer? What difficulties does it bring?

I’m increasingly interested in various ways of renovating the familiar in narrative, and stream of consciousness is clearly one of those. Or it’s several of them, really, because of course it’s not the same in Joyce as in Woolf, or in Faulkner as in either of those. One liberty it provides, I think, is just freedom from things like the felt need to mark time passing by having a character do something—look out a window, check her watch, take a bite of pasta carbonara, whatever. Especially these little actions as pauses between bits of dialogue. The main difficulty is bringing the reader along. Faulkner was supposed to have wanted to print the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury* in different typefaces and different colors so that the reader might get help with the temporal jumps and the shifts from speaker
to speaker, from inside Benjy’s head to outside it. Turns out that the willing reader doesn’t need that, but I can imagine a lot of work went into the ways imagery and diction subtly signal those moves. It’s similar in McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, which gives you no help at all at first and allows you eventually to figure out the relationship between “I” and “you” and how tenses work, etc., while still making you stop every page or so to figure out who just said something. That balance is maybe the hardest thing about this kind of writing.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "Cock of the Walk"?

For the last few years, I’ve been devouring books by Cesar Aira, Javier Marías, Alejandro Zambra, Eimear McBride, and Teju Cole. Before that, Julio Cortazar, Clarice Lispector, Peter Handke, W.G. Sebald, and Per Olof Enqvist. Always Hemingway (the early stories), Woolf, Beckett, and Baldwin. I don’t have the temerity to claim influence, in that if I tried to imitate any of these writers it would just show the vast gulf between them and me, but theirs are the voices in my head, and theirs were definitely the voices informing my choices as I wrote this story.

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

*Confrontation, apt, Eleven Eleven, Fringe, Knock, Quick Fiction* (alas, no longer with us), *Revolver*, and *Southeast Review*.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I liked some of what I read in the issue I downloaded to check out. I also liked the interest in stream of consciousness expressed on the website and in an interview I tracked down when I was looking into the magazine as a place to send work. It’s also visually striking, something I find really appealing (something that’s also been important to me at the magazine I do some work for, the *Massachusetts Review*).
In the living room the kids were sprawled on their bellies, playing with G.I. Joes and pastel-colored ponies, secondhand afterthoughts picked up at a yard sale. I was reading. Abuelita and my youngest aunt sat on the sofa watching television while my mother sat in a wooden chair she had dragged from the kitchen. She was working a button onto my dad’s shirt.

The talk show in Spanish that captured my Abuelita’s interest had just ended and was followed by the news. The anchorwoman had a voice like a tightrope, steady and unmistakable in its assurance. The throaty residue of Latin metropolises that were once invaded and had remained invaded. Abuelita snapped in Spanish, “Change it,” but the television knobs were all broken. We could change it, but only with pliers and a masculine hand. Nobody could find the remote. Eventually, Tia Juana was able to turn the knob twice before it would turn no more. It landed on an English news-hour. Abuelita relented. She could tune it out. The first story covered trade agreements and other exchanges between people of authority in places that did not include our living room. Abstracts that made us itchy.

But it was the second story of the news hour that brought the living room to a stillness that had a presence. I asked, “What are they doing?” Both my grandmother and my mother looked to see what I was seeing: aerial views of people napping among cacti and milkweed and twisted junipers. The helicopter remained on them. The news anchor spoke of borderland desert crossings and dehydration and zero survivors, something about how the group had included women and children. We could see them. Their legs were splayed out in front of them. Their hats shaded their faces. The sun was everywhere that day, a big witness. As the anchors spoke, the aerial camera did not cut away from the dusty men and women. They were further away than we’d ever been. We, with the sun, watched the rifled border agents step over the shrubbery underfoot near the bodies that looked like ours. The camera peered down without blinking. An anchor said, “One of the deceased was pregnant,” and even though Abuelita did not understand English she understood more than the anchors did in that moment.

I had never seen anything like it. The camera lens, aiming down, was
fixed on them and was not looking away, so we could not look away. I saw the bodies; I saw them. The desert cupped them in her hand. She held them out to me. They looked like my grandfather and grandmother and aunts and my father and mother sleeping in the various corners of the cramped bedroom we shared each night, three to a bed, some on cots. My parents slept on the floor. I had seen a lot of stories and people on TV before that moment, yet I had never noticed it before: there were a lot of people, a lot of bodies on TV. Mostly, they were not me.
When did you write "Brown Girls Have to Grow Up More Than Once"?

I wrote it in January of 2016 as part of a larger work for my graduate fiction workshop at Cornell. The project was supposed to be my thesis work, but I decided instead to take my time with it privately and at my own pace when it quickly became clear to me that the project was going to be way more intimate and honest and raw than I was prepared for.

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

I did! Shane Kowalski, a dear friend and brilliant writer who is in my Cornell cohort, suggested the title when those words were just place-holders for a better chapter name. I wasn’t in love with it, but only because it made me uncomfortable. But then he said he would buy any book with that kind of title, and that meant a lot to me because Shane is the ultimate book-lover and book-buyer. I took a good hard look at the rest of my pages and I thought, you know, this whole thing is about those many small, heart-breaking epiphanies that happen by virtue of being brown and woman and in America. It is an uncomfortable experience. So now it makes sense as a title for my whole project.

What inspired "Brown Girls Have to Grow Up More Than Once"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Something similar did happen to me when I was watching TV as a young child: news, bodies, desert, and that horrible realization that something profound and possibly traumatic was happening to my heart. Those men that day looked like my grandfather. Even at that age, I was aware that I couldn’t un-see it.

What was the hardest part of writing "Brown Girls Have to Grow Up
More Than Once”?

The hardest thing was not being maudlin or didactic about something that was very formative for me. I was actually incredibly angry when it initially happened. I still am; something about the way they shot the footage of the tragedy felt like macabre entertainment, and it felt wrong. It was very hard to not let that anger take over the piece.

Do you primarily write fiction?

I definitely belong to that club of fiction writers with a couple of decades-old, terrible poems locked away somewhere.

You mentioned to us that this was originally an excerpt; we worked with you to make it stand on its own with just a little more stability. Could you tell us about the larger work this is excerpted from?

The larger work is an experimental novel. It is about a young woman and her relationship with her sister, a lengthy “true” story told from an alternate dimension. It’s kind of trippy, but what is the wildest thing for me is that, in setting out to nail a radical, non-linear, speculative plot, it has allowed me the freedom to be the most personal I’ve ever been in any of my writing.

To you, is there a difference between a vignette and a short story? What do you consider this to be?

Definitely! The difference is that a well-made vignette can leave you with a specific mood, like a balanced perfume or a really good guitar riff. A well-made story gives you the sense that the world is made up of moods everywhere, all around you. It wants to show you them.

Many writers of flash fiction admit to having one line that acts as a kind of linchpin for the rest of the story. Is that our experience and, if so, which line has that function here?

The only thing I knew about this piece was that the last five words should be “mostly they were not me.” A lot of the piece has morphed and devolved, then reworked again, but all of it was to lead up to that moment, because I was aware that those five words held enough heartbreak, yet they could be read in various ways.

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

Yes! A short story of mine won Juxtaprose’s Short Fiction Contest this
year; it’s available online. I also have a flash fiction piece up on Acentos Review. And another piece forthcoming on Review: Literature and Art of the Americas. Lastly, I do this fashion satire thing (where I play a delusional fashion blogger named Hobo Scumbag) for Ohio Edit sometimes.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?

I liked the care Driftwood takes with everything: the website layout, the magazine design, the interviews. There is a sense that a sincere conversation about beauty is taking place between the magazine and anything it engages with, and I think that kind of connection is refreshing.
The Walking Woman
Rick Hoffman

I seen her one time. The Woman in Black, they call her. Seen her out by Landrum Road, heading north on Twenty-seven. Charlie Duggan said he seen her Saturday, down by Wartburg, and I figured she’d be coming through here soon enough. I seen her two days later. Colored woman, all in black, just like Charlie said. Long robes like in the Bible and dragging a big old suitcase.

Newspaper said she’s from down around Auburn way, trying to get north. Lord knows why. She won’t talk to nobody about it. She might could be on a mission walk, like a pilgrim walk for Jesus. She looks like church people with them robes, but she don’t say why she’s walking, so how’s anybody supposed to know?

I can guess though. I can tell from looking at her she lost somebody kin to her. Charlie said he thought maybe she was widowed, but I don’t think so. I think she lost a child. Had a slouch to her a widow ain’t got. Widow walks with pride, knowing she done her man right in his time. A woman who lost a child— that’s something different, and that’s what she lost. It wasn’t no baby, neither. She’s too old for babies. That woman lost a grown child. You can just tell. It’s in how she walks. Beaten. I don’t guess there’s anything special about being beaten though. Lots of folks are beaten.

Tell you what though. That old woman made a lot of people feel good when they seen her on the computer. Heard about this one mess of folks who drove from Pickett County in the church van just to line up by the dollar store so they could catch sight of her. I seen this one gal who got to where she was crying over that old walking woman. Said she was an angel of the Lord. Everybody’s always Godblessin’ her, I know that.

People say she’s going to Cleveland, and I guess that could be true, but you know how people talk. Maybe that’s where her boy lived. Maybe he had kin of his own up there, and that’s why she’s walking—to get to them. She probably thinks about her boy while she walks. You walk that long, all you do is recollect on memories. She’s got a lot to think about anyway, doing all that walking.
I read a person might take up to twenty-four hundred steps in a mile. Where she started it’s eight hundred miles to Cleveland. Charlie said he ain’t never heard about nobody set out to walking that far, so I told him that old gal probably just has a lot of memories need recollecting. Well, they’re her memories, and she can walk as far as she wants to with them. I just can’t shake seeing her out there on that road.
Did you have a difficult time deciding the title of your work? Were there any other titles you were considering?

Honestly, it never occurred to me to call it anything else. Once the idea started to coalesce, there was never any consideration for another title.

What inspired "The Walking Woman"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

I sort of stumbled on the idea while trying to get ideas for an assignment for my writing group. I was thinking about grief as a theme. I’ve heard writers say they never give themes any consideration—that themes emerge organically from the story, rather than artificially in the mind of the writer. There’s some truth to that, but I’ve always thought about themes beforehand, too.

The theme of grief got me thinking about the country song, “Long Black Veil,” in which a woman dressed all in black secretly visits the grave of her dead lover. I don’t know much about country music. The first time I ever heard the song was on a solo record by Mike Ness from Social Distortion, so while I remembered the content of the song, I couldn’t remember the name. I did a Google search for “woman walking in black,” and I stumbled upon the most amazing story from 2014.

Elizabeth Poles went walking one day from her Alabama home, headed for some unknown location in the North. She dressed all in black with a long head covering, and as she traveled, sightings of her became a viral phenomenon on social media. Speculation grew around her, and she became a symbol of hope and devotion wherever she went. The remarkable thing was that while she was polite to everyone who approached her, she refused to discuss the reasons for her journey. Her story fascinated me, but I knew I couldn’t steal it from her. I immediately thought of the people who saw her and were moved enough by her to seek her out on the road. None of them knew anything about her, but for some reason they felt
drawn to her. I decided to write a monologue from the point of view of one of the people affected by her and the rumors surrounding her endeavor.

**What was the hardest part of writing "The Walking Woman"?**

Getting the voice of the narrator right was very important to me. While the woman was always the focal point, it had to be the narrator’s story. He was the key to making it work. I spent a lot of time reading the story aloud, “listening” to him, trying to get his voice right.

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

The narrator talks about Charlie Duggan, but there was another character mentioned in early drafts. That character was merged with Charlie because it wasn’t really necessary to have two people. Charlie could handle it on his own.

**Do you primarily write fiction?**

These days I do. I used to write plays, and I think I will again someday. This story started as a monologue for the stage, and so I guess my mind goes there still, but it evolved into a flash piece. I suppose it could still hold up on stage, though, as an audition piece.

**What other mediums have influenced your work? How?**

Music, film, poetry, history. Anything that deals with regular people dealing with their baggage—that’s what I want to read and what I want to write.

**Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

It’s probably not unique, but it is a little old-fashioned. I think more creatively with a pen than with a keyboard, so I do most of my first drafts in a Moleskine notebook with green ink. When I go to the computer, I can think more critically, more practically. That’s where I make all the rewrites and revisions. It’s a slow process, but writing by hand forces me to choose my words deliberately. Each word is a bigger commitment than it is with a keyboard.

You mentioned to us that you grew up in the South but have since relocated to the Northeast. How has that relocation affected your writing?
Places matter. For a long time — when I first moved to New York — Manhattan in particular was a big influence on my writing. So was a trip I took to Ireland with my wife. Shortly afterward, I wrote a play set in an Irish pub in New York. Lately, I think it’s more those years in the South that are making the biggest impression.

My parents relocated to South Carolina, so I’ve been back to the South more in the past few years than in the twenty years prior to their move. My wife is getting to know much of the culture that had a formative influence on me, and our boys love shrimp and grits. What could be better? I’m currently working on a novel set in Mississippi during the time I lived there. It’s not autobiographical, but there’s a lot of red clay and pines.

The voice of this piece emerges as one of its most endearing qualities. Were you tempted to extend the piece into something larger? That is, have you considered using the protagonist in "The Walking Woman" to narrate a longer piece?

A colleague of mine who read a late draft of the story suggested a series of vignettes from the points of view of the various people who have seen the woman in the story. It’s a pretty good idea, but I think this particular narrator’s arc is complete.

You write some lovely sentences in this piece. Out of curiosity, which one is your favorite and why?

Thanks! Sentences are tricky things. My wife tells me I write too many long sentences. She’s right. Ironically, my favorite in this piece is rather short. I like the first one: “I seen her one time.” It’s packed with character, mystery, and expectation.

How long after learning of Elizabeth Poles did you begin writing "The Walking Woman"? What, initially, attracted you to her as source material?

I started immediately. After reading several newspaper stories about her and watching a few clips from local news in Tennessee, I wrote the first draft in about a half hour. I couldn’t get her out of my head for days.

Considering its brevity, we were able to give this story several rounds of extensive line edits. What was your experience working on so many revisions? How did the work change?

The revision was extensive. The editors at Driftwood saw potential in my submission, but felt it wasn’t quite ready for the publication. They gave me
detailed notes on the submission—in fact, there were probably more words in the notes than in the story! From there, it was a back and forth process of discussion, debate, and revelation. I learned a lot about my own writing and its effects on readers. It was an extremely gratifying experience.

The story started off very heavily laced with dialect. Since this was originally supposed to be a monologue for the stage, I wrote it with words like “cain’t” and “wadn’t” that ended up being cut from the page. An actor might have benefitted from the dialect, but as James, Dan, and Felicia pointed out to me, it was a distraction for fiction readers.

The woman is the focal point of the story, and yet so much of the detail surrounding her is given through speculation. How did you manage this balance? Was it more or less challenging to build a character on assumptions?

I didn’t find the speculation to be a challenge. It was easy to speculate because, like all the other people who were interested in Ms. Poles, I didn’t really know anything for certain about her except that she was walking. For me, it was all about the narrator.

In your mind, who is the narrator of this story? Anyone in particular?

Early drafts mentioned his name, Jim. I cut the name because it didn’t matter, ultimately. He’s whoever the reader imagines him to be, but for me, he’s a blue collar guy, maybe leaning against the tailgate of his pickup, having his morning coffee in a gas station parking lot, chatting with the other guys before work.

How did you arrive at the decision to keep the narrator (and, by extension, the reader) at such a distance from the woman in the story?

She did that for me. She won’t talk, so we all have to keep a respectful distance.

The narrative and tonal choices make the woman feel almost like a ghost, or a myth, or an urban legend. Was this the intended effect? Do you, personally, have experience with the kind of gossipy, small-town lore that this story captures so beautifully?

It was absolutely the intended effect. She was such a mystery already that much of that work was already done for me. I think every small town has a mysterious character. In Williamsport, Pennsylvania, there used to be a man who dressed in garish clothing and danced around town, whirling in circles but not talking to anyone. The locals called him Dancing Joe. Back
when I worked in retail, there was an old man who used to spend hours at the mall food court writing mathematical equations in a spiral notebook. Then he’d go and stare out the window at the sky, muttering to himself for a while before returning to his calculations. Were these people homeless? Mentally ill? Geniuses? Prophets? Who knows? People say they know someone who knows someone who knows the story, but with that many degrees of separation, who can say what’s real and what’s mere gossip?

We all struggled a bit with where the best place was to end this monologue. Could you talk a bit about finding that final line and the rationale that got you there?

It needed to sound final. There was some temptation to give more perspective on the woman herself—to reveal some part of the true story—but none of that worked as well as leaving the speculation up to the audience. Now that the narrator has finished speculating, the reader is free to do the same.

How do you feel about dialects in writing?

As I said earlier, this piece originally had a lot of it. I’m comfortable with dialect as a reader, but I think I need some more practice at it as a writer. You want people unfamiliar with the dialect to understand it, and you don’t want people familiar with it to be alienated by an inaccurate portrayal. Cormac McCarthy does it well. I recently read The Dragon Can’t Dance, by Earl Lovelace. He manages with a subtle hand to incorporate Caribbean dialect in both his dialogue and narration.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "The Walking Woman"?

I can’t get enough of Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, Graham Greene, Cormac McCarthy, and probably my favorite living writer, Colum McCann. I could reread their work for the rest of my life and be happy. The biggest influence on this story, though, was Rick Bragg. His true stories of small towns and family just wreck me every time.

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

This is my first story to be accepted to a literary magazine. My novel, The Devils That Haunt You, is available for download on Amazon.

What drew you to Driftwood Press?
I was browsing for submission calls—I think it was on New Pages—when I saw the post from Driftwood Press. It sounded like a good fit. It’s a great name, really. It’s always a treat to find a piece of driftwood on the beach. It comes with its own story that plays out in the nooks and convolutions on its surface, but, of course, we have to speculate even about that story, too.

**Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about this work in particular?**

It’s important to me that people appreciate that there’s a real woman who inspired this story, but as I said before, I couldn’t steal it from her. She has her own troubles, her own grief, or whatever it was that set her out on that road, and I certainly can’t claim any of that. She’s still out there, and I wouldn’t want anyone thinking I was trying to seize her story for myself. This story is about the narrator and how he was moved to speak about his experience seeing her, just as I was moved by reading about Elizabeth Poles.
Invasive Studies Cover
Scott Smith (art) & Sam Caldwell (color)
Assemblage
Meikel Church
Third Born
Meikel Church
How would you describe your aesthetic?
I work in collage/mixed-media.

Did you have a difficult time deciding on whether to add a title to your work?
I always add a title after I have competed a piece. I do sometimes struggle with coming up with a name. My back-up plan is to use a line or word from whatever music I am listening to when I’m working.

When did you create "Third Born" and “Assemblage"?
“Third Born” was created in 2015, and “Assemblage” in 2015.

Do you digitally manipulate photographs? If so, how much did you edit this one?
I do not manipulate the images I work with; all cut and paste collage.

What inspired "Third Born” and “Assemblage"?
All of my pieces are inspired by humanity. The good, bad, and ugly of being human.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?
Looking for images that illicit a response. It’s hard to explain, but I look for images that “feel” a certain way to me. I remove and/or distort most faces in my pieces so the face is usually unimportant to me.

Was there any theme or idea you hoped to address with this work?
I hope to create pieces that are thought provoking, and universal.

What is your creative process?
To find images that move me, then cut them out and reassemble the images in a creative way.
Who are some of your favorite artists? Do you have any recommendations for others who enjoyed your work?

Susan Ringler, Fred Free, Vincent Griffin, and Amy Edgington.

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

All of my work can be found on my website (www.meikelchurchcollage.com).

I have had several pieces published. One of my pieces was selected for the cover of the Winter Edition of *The Artist Catalogue*. I have also had features in *Satellite Magazine* (2013) and *The Idle Class Magazine*.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I was drawn to *Driftwood Press* because of the prestige and the communal feeling of the management, along with the artists. I also enjoy being part of the diverse world that we live in and that diversity is always on display with *Driftwood Press*.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

I am a Little Rock, Arkansas based collage/mixed-media artist who challenges concepts of perception through my artwork. I started creating collage in 2013 and quickly became addicted to the absurdity of taking found images, mostly from old books and magazines, and reimagining the meaning and context of the original intent. I am drawn to old, stained, worn, rusted, and torn images. These imperfect images are really about life and living. The creative possibilities are endless. The main themes of my work are hello's and goodbye's in all of their glorious incarnations.
Concrete City: Untitled
Michael Hower
Concrete City: Home Sweet Home
Michael Hower
When did you create "Concrete City"?
The “Concrete City” portfolio was shot in November 2015.

Do you digitally manipulate photographs? If so, how much did you edit this one?
Generally, no. I use a program called Adobe Lightroom, which operates like a digital darkroom, so everything I could do in a darkroom, like dodging, burning, etc., I can do digitally on my computer. In making these images I had to convert them to black and white since all digital images are captured in color. In doing the conversion process, I just manipulate the eight color channels, which act as filters to bring out contrast.

What inspired "Concrete City"?
“Concrete City” is part of my greater work to photograph ghost towns of Pennsylvania and the greater Mid-Atlantic region. It is one of the more unique ones because it is almost fully intact.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?
The hardest part was in photographing it. Because some of the places I go are a distance away from my home and I have a full-time job that is not photography related, when I pick a date to go I have to deal with whatever the weather may be, ideal or not. When I shot these images, it was late morning in full sun that was very harsh and directional. Therefore, when I was shooting outside I could only successfully aim in one direction. Also, while inside the brightness allowed for all handheld shooting, the harshness of light required extra burning to reduce the effects of light coming through the windows.

What camera was this image taken with?
Canon Rebel EOS T3.
Did you have any goal in taking the image?

My goal was to create an entire art show based on the Concrete City. I wanted to be able to craft a twenty-image show, representative of the twenty concrete duplexes, all in black and white, representative of the stark nature of the concrete buildings.

A yet to be titled show of this idea will be held at the Rehoboth Art League from 10/13/17 – 11/12/17.

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

I am interested in the idea of where there were once people and now there are none. I find the feeling of being in a place like that to be powerful.

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

Yes, but my training was originally in drawing and painting. I think that background brings a certain uniqueness to my work, which at times has been described as painterly.

Is visual art the medium that you're most invested in?

Yes. I have loved art since I was a young kid. Finding photography has rejuvenated my interest in art.

Are your other photos similar in subject or focus?

Yes. I love photographing abandoned and historical places. I have documented many of the ghost towns of Pennsylvania, including Centralia, Alvira, and Pandemonium among many. I have also photographed the historical landscapes of Pennsylvania’s extensive canal system. I have recently become interested in shooting abandoned coastal defense forts. I also have a passion for trains, and seek out old, unused, and abandoned trains.

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

My three favorite artists of all time are Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombley and Jasper Johns. These come from a general interest in art, though the first two did do some extensive photography.

Favorite photographers include David Duchemin, George Barr, Bruce Barnbaum, and Matthew Christopher.

Matthew Christopher is the photographer who shoots the “Abandoned America” series, and I would point people who like my work in that direction.
Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

I have a website (www.michaelhowerphotography.com). My work appears in gallery and museum shows up and down the east coast.

The full twenty image series will be appearing at the Ventures Gallery of the Rehoboth Art League in the fall of 2017 in Rehoboth Beach, DE.

I have been published before including Uproot Magazine (2016), GFT Press (November 2016), Foliate Oak (November 2016), and FLAR (Fall 2016). Currently, The Woven Tale Press (December 2016) has six images from the “Concrete City” series and The Tishman Review will be carrying three more in April of 2017.
Winter 2016

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Also featuring the finale of Scott R. Smith’s recurring comic.