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The Pharmacist

Samsun Knight

So there's this pharmacist, right. And this one day, he gives this guy the wrong prescription. As in, he fills the bottle with the wrong pills. Nothing terrible or anything fun—he just gives the guy placebos when he was supposed to give him antidepressants. He doesn't realize it either—it's an accident. He doesn't mean to do it; he just accidentally puts the pills in the wrong bottle. He's just gotten dumped, right, so he's not really thinking about what's in front of him, and he puts the placebos down in one place and the antidepressants in another and mixes them up. He doesn't realize what he's done until a few hours later, way after the guy has already disappeared and probably taken the wrong pills, and the pharmacist suddenly notices that the antidepressants and placebos have switched places on the shelves, and he's like, fuck. He knows who the guy was—he's a regular, comes in every once in a while, the pharmacist has all his information on file—but he doesn't want to get in trouble. Because he just got dumped, and he's already feeling generally bad, and it's not like it's that-that big of a deal, because they're just placebos, after all. So he doesn't say anything. A day passes, and then another day, and he pretty much forgets about the whole thing.

Until randomly, totally by chance, he runs into the guy in the grocery store. The pharmacist is pushing his cart and he runs into the guy and the guy doesn't recognize him, probably because he's not wearing his pharmacist gear, or probably because they barely know each other at all—but regardless the pharmacist sees this guy and all of a sudden he remembers that *this* is the guy, the guy whose pills he fucked up, and he's especially sure because the guy's just standing there, staring at the pile of oranges with his arms slack and his jaw slack and standing hunched into his shoulders like a dormant zombie unable to smell any fresh humans, just—staring. It's obvious that something in this guy has just sort of unhitched, and now he's just drifting apart, staring at these oranges, and the pharmacist gets this stab in his gut as he realizes that he's actually really fucked this guy up. After a little bit staring at the oranges, the guy finally snaps out of it and walks on but

the pharmacist is still stuck, still sort of grotesquely fascinated with this person that he's broken, and so the pharmacist just mechanically follows him from a little distance, but if the guy notices he doesn't give a shit. So the pharmacist follows him all the way to the checkout counter, until he finally has to stop there to pay for his own food. He stands at the counter and watches the guy go, all discombobulated and slow, and the pharmacist, he's just never felt this much guilt. Part of it is, also, that he just got dumped and all, so he feels like he can relate so strongly to the guy but at the same time this just makes it so much worse. And also, he's almost 100% certain now that he would definitely be fired if this comes out. So what he does is, he looks up the guy's info in the computer the next day, tracks the guy down, and then goes to the guy's apartment later that night. And he's sitting in his car outside the apartment with some actually bona fide antidepressants that he snuck out of the shop, trying to figure out a way to convince the guy to switch out his pills and at the same time not tell anybody about it. So he's sitting in his car, basically just shitting himself, sweating it out, and then out of the blue his ex-girlfriend calls: the girl that just dumped him, just a few days out. And she wants to talk. In person. And he just, he instantly forgets everything that he was doing, drops everything, tosses the pills in the glove and pulls out and goes to her place. And they do that post-break-up second-guess not-really furious-sex thing, where they're just fucking and saying they love each other and then screaming and fucking and so on, and about a week passes like that, and then when it's over he's sort of shocked and appalled to realize that he's still dumped—that he didn't even have the balls to take the opportunity to dump her back. And now he really feels like shit. Then he remembers the guy that he fucked over, and the guilt is all back, all of it—all the bad feelings from this latest implosion with his ex funnel into this guilt and he's crippled by it, and now he can't think about anything else. Because this is proof that he's exactly as selfish and conceited and self-centered and shitty as his ex has just spent a week telling him he is. He looks up the guy's info again, sneaks out another bottle of real antidepressants, and then he goes to the guy's apartment again. And then he's right back where he was exactly seven days before, and it feels that much worse. He sits in the car for about two hours, just looking at the bottle in his hand, not even really thinking about how to finesse this interaction because at this point he knows that he's just going to have to go up there and eat it, that he's not going to get the guy to take the real pills unless he explains who he is and what he did, and gets himself fired. And he starts to feel like, why do I have to do this. I just made an honest mistake—everybody is always trying to get rid of me just because I make honest mistakes

from time to time. And finally he's just like, fuck this. Everybody has to eat other people's mistakes sometimes—thinking of himself and his ex, of course—and he puts the real pills back in his glove. And he's about to pull out and drive off when he catches a glimpse of the guy, standing at his full-length window on the fourth story, staring at him. And this chill runs all through the pharmacist's body as he feels suddenly seen, and he's all deer-in-headlights, just absolutely frozen, feeling completely stuck. But then after a little while he realizes that the guy's not actually staring at him. He's just staring out, forward, at the black night sky or maybe just his own reflection in the glass. And this is a relief but it's also more horrifying, because it's obvious that the guy has just gotten worse—that this is another visible crack in the guy's surface. But it's also entrancing; the pharmacist doesn't know why, but he's just enthralled by the guy, and he sits there for another ten minutes, just watching him stare off into the distance. After ten minutes, the guy finally withdraws from the window, and the pharmacist realizes that his heart is beating really fast, and he starts his car and makes to pull out but then there's this big crash and he turns and sees, actually sees the guy falling after he's jumped out of his window. The thump is so quiet. He barely hears it. And he sits there for another minute, staring at the dark bundle on the ground, until all of a sudden he feels sure that he's going to get caught, that he's going to be arrested and convicted for murder and he's going to get the death sentence and die on the electric chair, and he pulls out and drives away and goes home and climbs into bed and watches the ceiling all night.

So the pharmacist is broken for a couple days after that. That is, he's still functional, still going to work and all, but he's just all fucked up. He keeps hearing the thump of the body in every door opening and closing, every time somebody scuffs their shoes behind him, and windows give him this weird, all-over tingly feeling, like he can feel the distance between his body and his soul, increasing. He doesn't exactly feel guilty, though. This is important to note: he doesn't really feel guilt. It's just, it's too much, really, to put himself into that meat grinder, so he just, doesn't. Probably because of all the girlfriend shit that had been leading up to this, he's just exhausted from hating himself so violently, more or less. His feelings are all on pause for a couple of days while he tries to sort out how else to react. Then, on the third day, while he's watching some cartoon, he starts to wonder if it might not just be sickly funny; as in, if somebody was watching his life on the other side of a screen, how they might react. And he realizes, they must find it amusing in some way, especially when he jumps every time a customer knocks their foot against something—that might actually be kind of

funny to them. He doesn't go so far as to actually find it funny himself, but it gives his thoughts a destination outside of guilt—so that whenever he leaps out of his own skin he can think about the reaction itself rather than what he's reacting to, in the way of wondering how others would see him as a character. And he starts be okay with it. Not as in he thinks it's okay, but he doesn't feel he has to feel awful all the time. And then his ex calls him again and they do their whole thing one more time. I love you, never leave me, I'll never leave you, promise me you'll never go, you know.

Except this time, at the peak of their renewed intimacy, when they basically feel like they pulled their soulmate back from the edge and just-barely saved them from a life of eternal loneliness, when they really trust each other again, just for a second, just at that peak—he tells her that he witnessed a suicide. And she gives him the oh no and you poor thing and that's so awful, right, reaching over to touch his face, but then he recoils, and he's all, but what if. And there's this pause. And she's like, but what if what? And he says what if this guy was one of his costumers, and what if he'd fucked up that customers pills and not given him his antidepressants but placebos instead, and how can he ever know. And she's lets out this sigh and is all you fucking stupid good-hearted goon, obviously that's impossible, what a useless train of thought, that would never happen, etc., etc. And he's burning up at this point, really fucking boiling in his skin, and he looks at her for just a little too long. And he doesn't tell her, and she doesn't really figure it out, but that's the moment—that's the moment when they lose the magic. When they trip off the peak. They pretend for another day or so that they're still all good, but they're on their way down. And cue, four days later, the ex is shouting that he probably liked watching the suicide, that it probably was all his fault, that he's a fucking sociopath. She just doesn't understand what she's doing to him. Because now he's just broken into too many bits. He feels like she knows, he feels like everyone knows, and all he can really think about was how it really did feel good to watch that guy, also broken, to know that there was someone else who couldn't get out of that pit in their chest. All he can really think is that he kind of wants to watch it again. And he buries that thought as deep as it'll go, but his girlfriend keeps peeling his layers loose, stripping him down and stripping him down until finally, the morning after he's dumped for the third time in a row by the same girl, about a week and a half after the body-fall, he swaps out a bottle of antidepressants for a bottle of placebos in exactly the way he did before—like it was an accident—and gives a bottle of wrong pills to someone else.

This time he's a little more intentional. Both in the start and in the follow-up—he gets the guy's info right-right away from their computers, and starts immediately, well, stalking him. Checking in, is how he's thinking about it. Because in his head, he's not going to let it get as far as last time, right—he's not going to let this guy just go and off himself. Maybe that's part of his rationalization; that he wants to make up for his failure to save the last guy by saving this guy. Which of course doesn't add up, but nonetheless he tells himself that he plans to intervene, and that's his reason for regularly checking in on this guy, about once every other day, after he gives him the wrong pills.

It turns out this second guy is some sort of office drone, a cubicle wyrm, who disappears into the basement of this massive hive complex every morning at exactly 8:55 AM and rears back out into the world at exactly 5:05 PM. After work he takes the subway for exactly forty minutes and then disappears into his apartment, far in the center of another hive complex, and doesn't emerge again until exactly 8:15 the next morning. On Saturdays, he goes running and drops off his dry cleaning and on Sundays he goes back and picks up his dry cleaning. But what's way worse, what really jars the pharmacist about this guy, is that he doesn't really change at all after he goes off his antidepressants. He's one of those people who are essentially just suits that happen to own bodies, and after three weeks he's pretty much about the same as he was on the first day. The pharmacist is all sorts of twisted up about it, you know. He really wanted to be able to exercise his empathy, to watch pain that was like his pain, but the suit just doesn't seem to feel at all. And this just makes the pharmacist feel so, so much lonelier, and also trapped, because he is horrified by this man—probably because of similarities between their lives that he doesn't want to think about—but he can't stop watching him because he's responsible for him, and he has to know when to give him back his meds. Except then, on that first day of the third week, at exactly 8:55 AM, the guy takes a pistol out of his briefcase and blows his fucking brains all over the front plaza of his work. And our guy, the pharmacist, he's sitting in his car not twenty yards off, and his jaw just, drops. And this feeling inside of him—something he hadn't really noticed with the first, but this time—this feeling of cold just branches out, blooms: good cold: like a sip of ice water spreading into your belly after a long, hard run. This sort of shocked wonder at the reality of what he's witnessing, which is shockingly similar to this physical sensation of relief, just this motherfucking joy, essentially, at seeing something that feels as real as he is, basically just this awful bloody confirmation that other souls exists, alongside this fucking fantastic adrenaline rush from being so close to

another's annhi-fucking-lation. And he just feels, like, drunk. Happy drunk.

So, to cut to the chase, he keeps doing this. He gets hooked, more or less. Swapping out antidepressants for placebos and then following the people as they fall apart. Maybe for the first couple he still tells himself that he's going to save them, but he never does. Because the death itself is actually integral to it: the sense of completion, right? Those that don't eventually off themselves start to come as a rather bitter disappointment—the pharmacist finds himself getting impatient, not really knowing when to move on and do someone new, not wanting to miss the finale if it is just a long time coming. But most of the time, it does come, usually within a few months. Not many of them off themselves so quickly as the first two, but most don't take too much longer, either. And the pharmacist is addicted. Engrossed. It takes up almost all the space in his mind, so that he no longer feels that sort of everyday slow-motion panic about his aloneness, about the directionlessness of his life, about anything at all, because all he wants to do is watch. That's all he really thinks about. Over the course of two years of doing this, he even lets go of any normal sense that he's implicated in what's happening and starts to think of them as just objects of his witness. He empathizes with them and cares for them and hopes for them as if they were on the other side of a screen, as if he was just some 1960s biddy watching her soaps.

Although he does almost get caught once. His boss notices that he's about to put some placebos in a bottle of antidepressants and literally sprints over to intervene, physically puts his hand over the mouth of the bottle with this set expression on his face like he's throwing his body over a fucking grenade, and the pharmacist is absolutely fucking terrified, stands there waiting to get fired and then arrested and then thrown in jail. But the boss, he just shakes his head slowly with raised eyebrows and lets out a big breath and gives the pharmacist a slap on the back and tells him to be more careful next time, and just Thank God they caught this. The pharmacist tries and fails to laugh, trying to agree, but he can't even really move for the next five minutes and he calls in sick the next day and the next, waiting for the authorities to arrive. And for two or so weeks after that he just goes to work normally, not following anyone, doesn't have anyone active, so to speak. He just sits on his couch at home and stands behind his counter at work and sweats.

Except then, after two weeks or so, a different kind of panic starts to rise in his chest. This little voice that sounds just like him from a year ago says What the fuck have you been doing these last ten months? What the fuck kind of person have you been? It's like that flashback moment at the

peak of the gangster movie, when the gangster's about to kill his own brother or some shit and the movie goes back to that old black-and-white clip of—I don't know, like—tossing a football in the backyard, and the gangster realizes that he's lost his soul and he just wants to get fucking hammered more than anything else in the world. He gets this whole host of feelings, right, that it's hard to express how much he doesn't want to feel. He sits on his couch at home, standing behind his counter at work, saying “hello” and “thank you” to all the customers he'd planned to watch die. And so the pharmacist starts up again, but ten times more careful this time—filling the wrong bottle before the boss gets in, using sleight of hand to swap it out, and so on—and it's hard to explain how much relief he feels, getting back into the swing of things, when he finally gets to watch this latest person start to droop.

But while he really needs this, needs this witness of others' descents into suicide, he's forced to admit to himself that he can't do this forever without getting caught, so he decides that he'll just do it a few more times and then stop. But as a stopgap, he also decides that he'll record them this time: that he'll catch it all on tape. So when it does get too hot and he has to quit, at least he'll have something to tide him over. Someone to keep him company. Of course, it's way riskier to do this with a camera, to be stalking someone with a video camera, leaving a trail of evidence, but he figures it's better to do a few months of heightened risk and then stop than to just continue indefinitely. So he goes for it. He gets this little camera and he starts it up again.

And it's actually a pretty natural-feeling transition, it turns out. He's been thinking of these people like they're on the other side of a screen for a long time, so it feels pretty natural to actually put them there. In fact, after just a few days, he realizes that taping them feels way fucking better than before. Because now he can go home and he can edit his footage and sort it all out and make it into this smooth arc. He feels involved in the action in a way he didn't feel before, in a good way, like he's creating something. Like he's creating something real. He can tell right away that these shots are actually pretty fucking raw. Good drama. Really fucking good. Which is why he was drawn to it from the start, of course, but now he can really see the appeal in a new sense. He starts to love creating the videos even more than the actual events. Well after the third and the fourth and the fifth suicides have been captured on tape, he doesn't stop. Because he can't stop. Because it's so good now that it's basically worth the risk. Because he doesn't want to live in any way that doesn't involve this, now that he knows how it feels.

And the heat does start to grow. His boss gets significantly more concerned when he catches him swapping pills the second time. He warns him that his job is on the line. The pharmacist lays low for about a week but he never seriously considers stopping. He gets caught videotaping two people on three separate occasions and one of them notifies the police. He knows that his name is recorded on a list somewhere, but he can't stop, so he figures why even worry about whether or not he should. Because at the same time that all this shit is starting to pick up, he's also getting better every day at his craft. He has a feel for each individual shot and he has a feel for a whole person's story and then, after a time, he gets a sense for a compilation of stories put together. He figures that it's about right to give each person's story twenty or so minutes, with various different permutations of the rise and the stumble and the fake-out and the apparent turn-for-the-better and the fall. And as he gets more and more proud of himself, he also gets more and more nervous that he's not actually as good as he thinks. Because this is important to him now—now that he's really proud of what he's done, he wants to make sure that he's not just fooling himself. He wants the affirmation from the outside world, to make sure. So he does a stupid thing. He puts a feature-length collection of his best clips online.

It goes viral in forty-two minutes. He knows that it goes viral in forty-two minutes because that's the amount of time he leaves it online before he's sufficiently flattered by the praise and sufficiently afraid of the popularity and he takes it down. But by that time it's way too late. It blows the fuck up. Like, everyone wants to watch. People take it as fiction, and they just can't believe how motherfucking real it feels, how motherfucking good it is, as a movie. By the second day, bloggers have pieced together that all the people they can find online in the film died in real life, in the way depicted, and by the third day, the pharmacist is arrested and thrown in jail. But the video keeps spreading. It becomes entirely its own thing. People start watching it with the understanding that it is, in fact, real. Reputable websites take it down and people who watched it wonder what it means about them, that they liked it so much, and they all flock to the disreputable websites to watch it again, to figure out why it makes them feel so directly and intensely seen. It's the most popular video on the internet after four months.

And this affirmation is everything to the pharmacist at first, right. He's just fucking over the moon at first. Even from the inside of his jail cell, even when he's getting his shit kicked in by the other inmates, nothing can touch him those first few weeks. He barely sleeps. He's thinking so hard

about each of the clips, about how many times each of the clips have been played. How many people have heard his voice through the images, through the sequences on the screen. How his ex-girlfriend has probably watched it. Some of the other prisoners mark time in a tally along the wall, but he just carves the outline of his hand over and over because, for the first time, it feels like he really believes in the outline of his own hand. I am here, and here, and here, and here.

But then the first few weeks turn into the first few months and the freshness fades. The feeling of recognition fades, and he starts to plummet back into that nothing-space, that nothing-feeling, neither watching nor being watched. He tries to play his own videos on the prison library computer, but it turns out there's a parental lock on the prison library computer and he can't play his videos there. The trial comes and goes and he gets four life sentences, but what really bothers him is that the courtroom cameras are getting him wrong: they're making him flatter, smaller, farther from the viewer, almost out of sight. Like he was never really visible to begin with, almost. He calls his ex-girlfriend every day even though she never answers, even after she changes her number and puts her old number out of service, even after the outlines of his hand cover all the walls of his jail cell and he switches, finally, to just marking a tally of the number of passing days.

Interview

Samsun Knight

When did you write "The Pharmacist"?

I wrote this story in the winter of 2014, some months after graduating Oberlin.

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

I never found a title of this piece that I felt 100% about. I considered "Pharmacist (4)" because I was considering telling different versions of the story from different speakers, but I have yet to write those other pieces, so...

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

I was interested in the shadenfreude of the reader experience—why it is that we're so interested in pain. In the context of autofiction and the fascination with the reality of the work, it struck me that if factuality in realism improved the quality of the work—and it may well—and if more pain was more affecting, then a rendition of an actual suicide was the epitome of a certain kind of realism. I wanted this work to explore that idea.

Also, if I remember right, I was particularly interested at the time with how social media actively engages individuals with a constant practice of crafting their lives into story form—how Facebook and LinkedIn ask us to constantly filter our years into narratives and makes us feel actively meaningless if our lives appear to have no plot; and because lives don't have plots, this was a universal feeling (or at least, so I determined then). I decided that this was the source of the feeling of "missing someplace you've never been," which is so often described in fiction, because it asked us to inflate a fundamentally flat everyday experience to fit a plot arc. I only realized a few months later that I was basically just talking about the religious impulse, and that I was not the first to think this by any means. Regardless,

the pharmacist essentially invents a way to fit lives to a plot arc.

What was the hardest part of writing "The Pharmacist"?

Writing it all down fast enough before I lost the feeling behind the idea.

Which part of "The Pharmacist" was conceived of first?

The entire premise. Standing outside of a CVS, I thought of a pharmacist that swaps out antidepressants for placebos and watches the customer wilt, and then videotapes it and invents suicide porn. I ran home from the CVS and wrote it then.

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

"The distance between his body and his soul, increasing." This is a feeling I experience often, and I'm always trying to find different ways to describe it. This one feels closer than some other attempts.

What other mediums have influenced your work? How?

Theater, for this one; the piece is essentially written as monologue.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I like to write at a standing desk, listening to very loud music. The standing desk is not necessary, but the music is frustrating to go without.

You mentioned to us that this was an originally an excerpt. Could you tell us about the larger work this is excerpted from? Did you have any difficulties in shaping it into a short story?

This was excerpted from a novel about a man in an open relationship, who impregnates two of his lovers at once. The book is then the story of the two kids growing up in parallel. Threaded throughout the book are these spoken-stories about trying to craft a narrative out of your life or out of others' lives; the first novella (which looks like it might be cut soon) has two versions of a story-length joke—"the one about the guy whose neighbors are all serial killers." This piece picked up the thread from those pieces. I imagine I would've had more difficulty changing it into a short story without the excellent editorial advice of the Driftwood editors, but with their help, the reshaping was relatively straightforward.

The voice in this story is markedly colloquial—almost anecdotal—like a story being told between friends. Did you have a particular narrator or listener in mind while crafting this? Moreover, did you ever

consider the possibility of telling the story from first person—letting the pharmacist take the reins?

This story is told by one of the sons, age fifteen, to the other, also age fifteen. They're at the age when many Americans first start to associate themselves with a chosen type—jock, theater kid, band geek. They have an (unspoken) apprehension that by choosing a type, they will have friends of this same type who see them as individual and real people, but that all others will then engage with them not as persons but as representatives of their type of person. And in this framework, they (implicitly) worry that if they don't have any friends, then there is the possibility that there is no one who sees them as a real person, as more than a type. The pharmacist is one such person who has no one who sees him, who is occluded by his type. This is part of the reason he never gets a name and is only ever 'the pharmacist'. The story is then an exploration of how a person without a name, so to speak, can feel real through art, both in the consumption and in the creation. As well as, of course, an aside about the way that many people in our lives to whom we do not give names still profoundly impact our experience, in the way that the pharmacist impacts his unfortunate clients.

I didn't consider putting the pharmacist in charge, but that might be an interesting take; it would be a different story, though. I wanted this story to be 'the one about the pharmacist.'

The image of the pharmacist outlining his hand is so authentic, visceral, and unique in the way it's used. What initially drew you to this image? Which came first: the image or what it's made to represent?

I believe that the image flowed directly from the image of marking a tally on the wall, and deciding on the counterpart that the pharmacist would take, given that he feels real in that moment.

What it's made to represent came first.

Cliché though it is, "show; don't tell" has become a golden rule in most contemporary fiction. However, your choice of narrator basically limits you to a "mostly tell" style. Did that concern you? Did you ever find yourself tempted to cut the distance between our nameless narrator and the pharmacist for the purposes of "showing"?

"Show; don't tell" is, I believe, an excellent pedagogical tool for starting writers. It's an attempt to escape the insufficiency of language to explicitly capture experience by using implication, implying more than can be described in words. I prefer what Maggie Nelson has to say about language's

insufficiency: "It's idle to fault a net for having holes." Fiction can't get everything little thing about real life, but it also doesn't need to. It catches the big stuff. To quote her further, "Words are good enough."

In addition, "show; don't tell" is most appropriate for writing psychological realism, I believe. This story was part of a larger attempt of mine at the time to escape psychological realism. It is intended, at least, to function differently. I wanted the reader to approach it as a tale about stories rather than as a story.

I heard an argument between two writers in which one argued that fiction existed to give answers while the other advanced the idea that the best fiction asks questions. What's your take on this? More specifically, what do you think "The Pharmacist" does along the lines of answers and questions?

Ethan Canin likes to talk about how the best fiction asks questions that don't have answers, so I'll steal his words, giving credit where credit is due. I hope that "The Pharmacist" does this.

All Driftwood fiction goes through several rounds of comprehensive line-edits. We believe in polishing our fiction to its utmost potential. Could you talk a bit about the process of working through revisions with *Driftwood Press*?

It was excellent. The editors fully invested in the piece, and the story is better for it. I do pine for certain parts of the original, but that's usually the surest sign that the editorial help was not just useful, but necessary.

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

"The Pharmacist" was an attempt to build on some parts of "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" that particularly struck me. Other favorite authors are Dostoevsky and Erica Hunt. If I'd read it beforehand, I'd say that the piece was significantly influenced by the latter's "Coronary Artist (2)."

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

I've been published in *Glimmer Train*, *Oneirocritica*, *Paper Darts*, and have a play going up in NYC this July as part of the Thespis Theater Festival.

Where the Other Begins

Adam Gnuse

You can hear stories about the people who secret themselves away in others' homes. They live in attic corners and crawlspaces, in garages behind old equipment and trashcans. Sometimes, they even have tunnels and secret compartments hidden on the other side of dressers or bookshelves. It's hard to think that the whole time we've been living our lives, they've been living theirs. One couple found a crevice under their bed with the remains of someone who had come and gone: towels, newspapers, the empty wrappers of snacks that hadn't been in the house since their children lived there. Some find names to call them: ghost kids, lurkers, rat-people.

*

Outside, the summer heat browns the grass and sets the asphalt steaming. The humidity is a suffocating embrace. As far as can be seen the houses stand, their shadows shifting in the lawns as the sun burns across the sky. Inside, there's the drone of the A/C units, the rustling of papers blown about by overhead fans, the sounds of doors opening and closing.

There's an elderly man who lives alone not far down the road. He's lived in the house for years, and after his wife died, he began to renovate the home, expand it, push it out into the lawn. He's doubled the kitchen, adding an island. He's deepened closets and had a cellar dug down. There's a number of rooms he doesn't go in anymore. Sometimes when he's been reading a book or snoring softly in front of the muted television, the attic door will squeak on its hinges.

His body will pulse, frantic. "I'm still here," he'll yell. "I haven't gone out—I'm still here!"

He shouts to keep the status quo. He knows of others, elderly like him, who don't have many friends or family to call on them. It can sometimes take weeks for neighbors to find out they're no longer living. Their lawns grow long and the mail stacks up, but the neighbors see lights come on every evening and think nothing of it.

*

Some homeowners find nests, like the one tucked that was behind a hot water heater in a basement, containing a pair of men's knee-high rubber boots, a rosary, a half-eaten chocolate Easter bunny. Another, in a closet, had pencil drawings of jackets and dresses and several tightly bound plastic bags of human waste. Another, found in the laundry room of a bachelor's apartment, held a pair of lady's tattered jeans and a sharpened piece of shale taken from the living room fish tank.

One woman swears her ex-husband has become one of them and that he's found a way back into her home.

"I broke up him when he did this," she says. She sticks up her middle finger which ends at a swollen, purple knuckle, and then she swats a mosquito on her neck. "With a hammer."

She lives in the rural part of town, where live oaks drape over the houses and trailers like dark green curtains. This far south in the summer, the sun's out after nine in the evening. But here, under the trees, it's six in the afternoon and already it feels like dusk.

"He told me he'd go," she says, "but you can't trust him to do something like that." She picks at the remains in her ashtray and rubs the grit between her fingers. She looks like she hasn't slept well.

"Sometimes, when it's dark and I'm reaching to flip on a light switch—and I'm using this hand, you see—I swear I'll feel the stubble of his cheek right where the tip of the finger would be."

She sighs. "Makes you wanna scream right till you touch plastic. I flip that switch so hard I'm afraid I'll snap it off."

*

Another young woman is certain she has several of them living in her home.

"You can do almost anything to them, I think," she says, "and they won't say a thing."

She's young, professional, and lives by herself in a condo near downtown.

"Let's say someone's tucked themselves into a suitcase in one of your storage rooms. You know they're in there. There's no sound, no movement, nothing. But you *know* it." She smiles and sits up straight in her chair. She clasps her hands together and squeezes them tightly. "You can kick them.

You can scream at them. Let them know you know. Throw pots and dresser drawers, even.” She shrugs, looks down, and traces the rim of her coffee mug with her finger. “They don’t say a thing,” she says. “Nothing. They never make a goddamn noise.”

When she looks up, she suddenly seems a great deal older.

“Afterward, I don’t look. Even if there was no one in the suitcase, they still heard what you did, wherever they were. They know that you know they’re there.” She nods and folds her arms across her narrow chest. “They’re quiet and they’re quick,” she says. “They can move around your house better than you can in the dark. You don’t have to believe me, and I don’t need or even want you to. Just wait until you find empty Coke cans and comic books behind your armoire. Wait until you find your clothes under your kitchen sink stinking like someone else’s sweat.”

*

In town, there are some who say how, even in small homes, there are places they forget to search. The backs of cabinets. The jambs behind open doors. Once they’ve checked one place, someone easily could be sneaking back into it behind them.

What do you do if you think they’re in your home?

“Your house is too big. You need to limit the space.”

“Check that the bedroom door locks. Check there’s no one under the bed, no one behind the clothes hung in the closet and no one pinned up against its ceiling.”

“Are the dresser drawers deep? Is there someone folded into them? Is there a hole in the wall behind the bookshelf or in the floor underneath the nightstand?”

“Is the lock on the bedroom door secure?”

But even when you believe you are alone, the night is a long time to sleep through. The buzz of cicadas throbs outside the window. The overhead fan beats steadily, its pull chain clinking against the glass lamp cover. Noises in the house can be anything. Nightbirds chirp, and somewhere not far away a dog yelps. Something like footsteps can be heard in the bedroom. It’s hard to know where the imagination ends and the other begins.

*

It can be difficult for many to find someone to talk to. People don’t

want to hear suspicions and paranoia, even if they spent the night themselves hardly sleeping. Up and down streets, the houses loom in the bright sun: stately and dense. Even with the glare cast upon the windows, you can still see through them. Cat faces squint out into the light. Men and women flit by like ghosts, and it's hard to tell whether or not they're real.

Farther down the road, past square, brick banks and stores with reflective windows with security bars, there's the overpass. There, tents are pitched wherever there's shade. Feet in white socks with yellowed toes jut out beneath a tent's flaps. They never seem to move. Sweaty men and women sit on milk crates and fan themselves with folded sheets of newspaper. They stand and stretch, arching their backs and forcing their vertebrae into position with a series of soft pops. They sit back down. When evening rolls in, they're still there.

"I know of those people," says a young man who wears a long jacket despite the heat. He has deep, red sunburns on his cheeks. He leans against one of the concrete pillars of the overpass, and he massages the sides of his neck with his dirty fingers so tightly it looks like it hurts.

"Sometimes, when someone we know here doesn't come around for a few weeks, we think they've made into a home, maybe somewhere dark and cool where no one else knows they're there. Most times, we find out they were just in the tall grass beside some road, where a city worker found their body when cutting the weeds. But there are others I know who've been gone for years, and they still haven't been found. Why couldn't they be inside, alive and hiding somewhere?"

When it's night, the air is as humid and heavy as ever. Along the sides of the roads leading back to the suburbs, the sound of passing cars is more pronounced now. Termites billow around the orange streetlamps overhead. A police cruiser, with high beams on, creeps around the edge of a wooded park. It's easier to pass into the sheltered back yards of suburban houses, where the latch of a gate will open with a dull thump. The reflection of stars ripple atop the surface of the swimming pool. The windows of the bedrooms are lit up like eyes. The trees rustle with the movements of night animals. Somewhere a windchime tones in the stale breeze.

*

An old woman reclines on her front porch in the cool morning air. She balances her wrinkled feet on the pointed hat of a garden gnome.

"You don't have to be afraid of them, you know," she says and laughs. "I don't talk to them. I hardly can tell they're here." She takes a drag on her

cigarette and exhales slowly. She nods. “I’ve lost a lot of people in my life. And if something happens—” She pivots around and points her cigarette through her open door at an overhead air vent, as if someone’s on the other side. “If worse comes to worst, and something happens to me?” She draws a finger sideways across her neck, smiles, and shrugs. “I wouldn’t be very different than a lot of other people I’ve cared about and are gone.” She perches her chin atop a half-open palm. “You know, you can switch ‘em out in your head, too. Imagine whoever’s hiding in there as having the face of someone you remember.”

*

A man insists that his daughter has become one of them. He sits at a bar, hunched over as though he’s about to retch. It’s past sunset, and termites swarm against the neon windows, trying to fly in to the light. Their small bodies crawl across the bar and up the backs of shirts, trickling along skin and leaving an itch that remains long after they’re gone.

“She left when she was thirteen,” he says. “Disappeared. And then she joined on up with them.” He’s older, grizzled, and resentful. Lately, he’s become aware that his daughter may still be in his house somewhere.

“Twenty-six months. She’s fifteen now, damn it.” He squeezes his pint glass so tightly it might break. “When I think of her in there with us, seeing my wife and me? Seeing what she’s doing to us?” His voice drops down low. “It’s something you could lose your mind over.”

Early on the weekdays, the man says goodbye to his wife. He acts as though he’s going to work. He gets into his truck and parks it around the block. Then he walks back to his house and goes into the backyard. There’s a darkened crevice between the shed and the house where, if you stand very still, you can look through the picture window and see almost everything inside, and no one will ever know you’re there. In the mornings, the man watches his wife get dressed and eat breakfast with the television on. He watches her take several deep breaths before she opens the front door, as though composing herself for the world outside. After she’s gone to work, he opens the sliding glass door as quietly as he can. Hardly breathing, he sits in the living room, and he waits. His heart throbs in his chest, and he is almost silent. He waits for his daughter to come out. The house creaks as it heats in the afternoon sun. The A/C unit turns on and then off again. He listens for the click of a closet light, for the sound of a padded footstep. His teeth clench and his heart throbs and he waits, hardly breathing. He waits until he can’t take it. Come out, he says, but the house sits silent. Come out!

Interview

Adam Gnuse

What inspired "Where the Other Begins"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Back in 2013, I was having a discussion with an old friend of mine who was telling of some of the anxieties he was developing while he lived alone. At times, he would hear noises that sounded like someone else was moving through the other rooms in his apartment. He'd even begun to research stories of those people who had lived for years in the attics of other people's homes, who had been caught on videotapes sneaking into pantries for food at night.

Needless to say, this was a thought that disturbed me and left me wondering what each of those small bumps and creaks I heard were that seem to permeate a house when everything else is quiet. It can sometimes be a little too easy to wake up in the middle of the night and imagine that someone is creeping around you in the dark.

What was the hardest part of writing "Where the Other Begins"?

I wanted this to be more than a simple ghost story. I wanted to go after the psychology of people who would genuinely come to believe that there were others hiding away in their home, even if they had no proof to support it.

Who would they expect to be hiding in their house? What drove them to think this? Was it from trauma, or from grief, loneliness, or anxiety? It was difficult to get into the minds of those people because, honestly, it wasn't a simple thing for me to let their fears go. There was more than one time, when writing this piece, that I jumped up from my seat when hearing the heavy thud of my house's A/C unit turning on.

Many of these vignettes give the impression that the characters may or may not have people living in their homes (though the characters

themselves are certain they do). In some cases, they become obsessive or paranoid. It feels, at times, like the possible existence or non-existence of shadow-people is a stand-in for a lack of closure, or an uncertainty in regards to grief—particularly at the end. What was your intention in leaving this open-ended?

In horror movies, I've always found that the moment I'm most likely to lose interest is when the monster is finally revealed. Don't get me wrong, I'm still frightened by the monster—oftentimes annoyingly so, especially for the friends and roommates who expected to watch a movie without having someone audibly moan and chew on his knuckles beside them. But the big reveal of the monster is the moment when the movie becomes more of an action movie to me, instead of an exploration into what we are afraid of. In a way, I think fear is a lack of closure. I think there's something exciting to fear that comes from a piece of fiction, and I don't want to seal it off just yet. My dream is that somewhere a reader of this story hears a noise in her house and, for a one moment, imagines, "What if?"

You do some really interesting work with perspective here. The story opens in second person, but then it pulls back into a distant third. How do these point of view shifts reinforce your themes—the blur between the self and others?

I remember it was important, when writing this story, to strive to write it in a way that the form was as unsettling as the idea behind it. I know, for me, that when I'm alone at home and hearing noises I might stop and wonder, "Is there another person here, or is that person just a part of my imagination, just a part of me?" I like second person because I think it makes for a puzzling, disembodied protagonist (the "you" in a second person story never really is you, so who is it?), but I didn't want it to be too overwhelming. Like the characters in the story, I wanted the reader to feel implicated in this fictional environment and to ride the boundary between knowing and not-knowing whether to trust one's suspicions.

It seems, at times, as though these stories all take place in a single town or area. Is this the case? And if so, is there a bigger, underlying story here?

When I was writing this, I was spending a lot of time in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I think I always had that city in mind as I was working through these vignettes. There's something to the heat and humidity down there, the air pressure maybe, that can make you feel when lying down in bed like something's sitting on your chest.

In my experience, there aren't people secreting themselves away in others' homes down there. But, you know, who really knows for sure?

All Driftwood fiction goes through several rounds of comprehensive line-edits. We believe in polishing our fiction to its utmost potential. Could you talk a bit about the process of working through revisions with *Driftwood Press*?

I think it's pretty common misconception that a writer is the sole, well, writer of a piece of fiction. In my experience, each story I've completed has been the product of a cohort of friends, writers, and editors. *Driftwood Press* is a magazine that values the revision process of the pieces it publishes. My story is a stronger one for being published here.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "Where the Other Begins"?

Brian Evenson's short story "Windeye" is wonderful, moving, and deeply upsetting to me. When writing this, I strove for something similar to how he writes of the very difficult realities of grief and loss through metaphors of the domestic supernatural.

Lucy Corin's *Everyday Psychokillers: A History for Girls* is a novel about obsession that I come back to time and again. I love how her young narrator insistently catalogues certain micro-narratives until, eventually, they threaten to spiral out of control and take over her life.

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

Later in 2017, I'll have stories coming out in *New South* and *The Wisconsin Review*. I've also been fortunate to have some flash fiction published in online magazines like *Guernica*, *decomp*, and *Gambling the Aisle*.

Vitus on the Eleventh

Jim Meirose

Vitus thanked the Gods each Friday that his pure white horse, Sandy, never got spooked when the others working the detail behind them started pounding the nails into the inmates who had been brought out from the prison to receive their final punishment. Vitus himself was spooked by the pounding for the first few weeks until he found ways to black it out, push it out, and hold it away. Thank God he had been given the job of sitting on horseback, facing away from the sequence of ugly things his prison control unit did each Friday. His only job was to sit still and silent, holding his staff—the one with the fancy little creepy sliver of silken red flag at the tip—and face the Friday afternoon crowd of townspeople across the road and keep them back away so that his detail could do its job. Crowd control, the officer had told him, when he'd been called in for reassignment. Crowd control is very important. Crowds are dangerous. Crowds can get ugly, especially on Fridays. You know the reason why Friday is special and tough to manage—but you can handle it, Vitus. You're good with people. You're best for this job. Crowd control, yes—crowd control will be you.

Thank you, sir, thank you—rest assured I will do my best.

Oh, I know you will. I know.

So, here sat Vitus, on another Friday just like the previous dozens and dozens, sitting sweltering under his heavy leather uniform, facing another Friday noisy filthy-mouthed crowd of civilians with nothing to do but come and see the ugly things the prison detail did every week. His job did not require him to take a full bath at the end of the day, to wash off the stinking stains of blood brains and entrails he'd be covered with if he had to do what the men behind him did. He just poked people in the crowd once in a while with his flagstaff and shouted to them to keep back, while the other soldiers did the ugly dirty work of hammering and grunting and struggling and groaning and crying behind him. Vitus thanked God he did not have to watch. After the first few Fridays, he got to the point where since he couldn't see it, he could pretend it wasn't really happening. One bad thing remained, though; when the hammer blows nailing the inmates down began, the hard sharp pounding wrapped him tight, jarred him to the bones,

and was the one thing that he could not ignore or escape. After struggling with this for many weeks he managed to come to feel that the hammer blows weren't really real; they were just pounding on something outside him someplace that really didn't exist. The hammer blows became things just flitting through the air; little stony rocky flying splintery hammer blows of nothing. For a while, he counted them; that was a start, but most Fridays there would be no real rhythm or sense to the hammering when there were multiple prisoners to process. Then the blows just made wild rhythms coiling about him that no human could ever keep track of. Silently he sat, at last blocking it out, and on this Friday as on every Friday, the hammering came from a distant place: outside the window of his bedroom where he lay there a boy in his bed in the summer, his sweat-soaked sheet thrown crumpled on the floor, waking at the touch of distant hammering someplace where something new was being built. Always in the summer there was something being built, and the pounding of the distant building starting after sunup came through the screen. The rooster at the nearby farm would crow as it did every day, signaling the boy that it was time to swing up and around and stand by the bed awake, his bare feet pressed to the floor ready to walk forward and bring himself one more day closer to being a man. The crowing rooster made the last full-stop to the long dreary sentence of hammer blows that had flowed on and was at last now over. But the rooster was taking too long to crow. The hammer blows also were yet to start. And the crowd that he and Sandy had to keep back began stirring, and the horse's neck began craning to see why an argument had just broken out among the soldiers standing around the prone waiting inmates.

Only five nails? barked the officer in charge. Why do we only have five nails? Didn't you count them out back at the place? You mean to tell me you only got five?

—oh, boy. That new recruit has fucked up again. Fucked up big time!

Listen, said the peach-fuzzed recruit—don't raise your voice. I was in the shithouse, and it was taking longer than I thought, and it made it worse that every three seconds somebody came banging on the shithouse door to tell me come on we're leaving. I had to rush, I got so nervous—I had to go bad, and you got me all tense! You were rushing me! I don't like to be rushed on the pot. I get nervous, and can't think or count when you rush me on the pot, especially when my stomach's not right! Why does everything have to be in such a damned last-minute hurry?

Wait, wait, wait, quiet—so are you saying that this makes it right for you to make up lost time after you finally shit, by not stopping to count out the correct number of nails? You let us walk five miles under the burning sun

to this place, and then we find out that just because you were too stupid to count out the right number of nails, we have to send someone back to the prison to get four more fucking nails? Huh?

No, no, no. No kind of game. I—

Put your damned helmet on, soldier, said the officer, thrusting out a hand. Be in full uniform when you talk to me!

Yes, sir—I am sorry, sir, but it's very hot.

Don't I know it! Sweat then! That's what hot means—sweat!

So anyway, Cap, said an older lower voice from off to the side—what are we going to do?

Oh, who the hell knows?

As this argument continued, Vitus kept on poking the guys and gals in the quickly gathering unruly crowd of spectators hard in their chests and bellies to keep them back. The crowd really was all worked up today—all yelling and surging and shaking big fists—and then, it hit Vitus; the crowd was larger and noisier and angrier today for a reason; he had heard a rumor that one of the prisoners today was that famous holy guy that'd been wandering around for a few years stirring everybody up, saying crazy things, and gathering big crowds of followers that made all the people living in town angry at the noise and yelling and chanting that roared up whenever he happened to wander through town. Yeah, Vitus knew way back then, when he had heard all the sniping and grumbling, that this was how the guy would end up; grabbed, locked up, and shut up. Case closed. The government always wins; you can be holy and right, you know, as in dead right. Fuck with the government and the other big shots, and one day they'll come for you. Being holy won't help you, and your followers will melt away like snakes slither-sucked down a hole in the ground that would immediately seal over like it'd never been, and that will be that. Fuck with the government, and you'll stand before a judge and he'll tell you you're just a number now and your life is over. He'll put you down for the next group to get dragged up the hill on Friday. Vitus wanted to turn to see this guy too, to stretch his neck and steal a peek, like anybody would do to see anybody famous or anybody who actually went so far as to get their picture in the paper for anything at all, but, then again, what is a paper? Have papers been invented yet? I don't think papers have been invented yet, no, but, if they had, he—

A huge breaking ocean wave of a rock-hard loud voice abruptly washed over him now, silencing his musings about what a paper was and slamming to nothing every voice from the surging crowd. The wave flowed over, into the deep silence, saying, Hey, soldiers! Listen! What's holding this job up?

The crowd is getting ugly, plus there's going to be thunderstorms. Just look at that sky off there to the east. I am not going to get drenched because you guys are slugs. I won't be drenched today. What's the holdup? What gives?

It was the Chief, the big guy in charge of everything, who'd been wakened off his hammock and told there's a big problem up the hill. His words passed through Vitus, jerked up Sandy's head, and flowed strongly across and over the soldiers and prisoners, causing the crowd to rumble up a clamor, saying yes, yes, they too wanted the answer. Vitus sensed that if the answer did not surface soon, the crowd would jump him and swarm all over and go by to overwhelm the whole detail, ripping Vitus from his horse and enveloping the prisoners and soldiers and even the big fat Chief himself, and slowly rip his entire detail to slimy bloody shreds until the big question was finally answered. Vitus held them back, though; he was good at this; he was very, very good. The detail boss belted out the answer to the Chief, saying, This asshole recruit here didn't count out enough nails. That's the holdup. I had nothing to do with it though. Nothing at all—I swear to the gods—

What? screamed the Chief. Which of your crew of idiots did this? Which asshole? I see several who meet that description perfectly here!

Uh, eh, it's—it's this one here, like I said. The recruit.

So why did you fuck up, son? barked the Chief.

Sir, I—I just forgot to count them, I just grabbed a handful and ran to catch up.

Catch up? What do you mean, catch up?

I had to shit, sir. I've got this problem you see, it's—

Okay, okay, enough. I'll talk to you later. But anyway, tell me. How many nails do we have? How bad is this problem? Why is it gumming up the whole works?

We've got five, sir.

Five? My God, what idiots. You brought five! Explain how you'll do three prisoners with just five nails to fasten them up?

As the chief stood with his hands on his hips, feet firmly planted, waiting for what the answer might be, the dark clouds in the distance were moving in fast. Angry murmuring bubbled up in the crowd. They were all going to get a good hard drenching; but in the space between the question and the answer, it happened; one of those rare moments when all at once, in a teeming crowd, silence slams down all the noise and everything stills, sits, stops, yes; a shocking chance instant when everybody's said what they had to say and no question has any answers. The silence came from high above and crushed down on the entire crowd, all the soldiers and horses

and prisoners too, like a heavy layer of freshly laid tightly mortared bricks. Everyone glanced around like something very special had just happened; in this tiny perfect silently shared instant that stops the world dead and gets everyone's attention, then passes immediately, draining out into the past, causing all the noise to grow up again as if it had gone watering over fields of dying plants, everyone's up and yelling hard again, and though the moment's all forgotten, something lay atop Sandy's thick mane—one name lay there all bright and naked, a simple two-syllable word, up from forever ago: Father out in the sun long ago, working on the brand-new addition to their tiny home, caught sight of little Vitus coming out to watch him work. Father smiled, bent down, and handed Vitus his claw hammer and a single long nail. Vitus! he said, Hey, Vitus—you want to help Daddy? Okay, Vitus, here—hammer this nail in, right there; yes, there. Yes, up there.

Vitus tapped the nail exactly the way Father had said. He tapped lightly, then harder, as Father went on talking, saying, Yes, right, that's the way. See it going in? It's going in! Look, look! Yes, there, right there, son, yes, that's great—

Ah! yelled Vitus, eyes snapped shut, clutching his hand. Red droplets fell from his grip along with the dropped hammer, bouncing across the brand-new floor. Father gaped, bent, and saw that poor tiny Vitus had smashed his thumb—crushed it bloody, actually, and had begun to cry. Young tears and blood spatter and cries all mixed together and Vitus' Mother abruptly appeared, her eyes wide as platters, and rushed to Vitus, fell to her knees, and shouted.

Vitus, what happened? I heard a bang—and then I heard you screaming—God, let me see, oh! Oh, my God, your thumb! What'd you do to your thumb?

She squeezed Vitus' thumb trying to stop the blood dripping as Father stooped with hands out, saying, Vitus, Vitus! How bad is it? Let me see—

God damn you, Daddy! snapped Mother into Father's face, God damn, look at this! Just look what you've done to my boy, Daddy! You were not watching him properly, no!

Just then, Vitus pulled his head up from Sandy's thick mane, blinked, and came fully awake as he always did when sitting quietly under the burning hot sun half dozing with words coming at him through the buzzing of the blackflies swarming all around.

You were not caring about the boy! I can see it! You really don't care!

Tensing, Vitus realized the raving crowd of spectators was much too close now; they were grabbing at his horse's snot-caked pure white snout, grabbing at the reins looping back to Vitus' hands and at the straps of the

saddle, so Vitus jabbed the flagstaff straight down into the crowd and shouted, Whoa, back now! Everybody back, all of you—or I will call the swordsmen over to cut you down!

You were not trying! No, you were not—

Back! Back. Back, I say—but, yes, no, God, what? What, what's that yelling?

You just don't care! Can't you see it, Daddy? See it up in the sky?

Vitus threw his head back, eyes set to the sky from which a harsh new voice poured down, spreading over the hilltop, saying, My son! My God, you must help me Lord! You must help me this day, my Lord, because of what has happened to my son!

Dear God, thought Vitus. Who the hell is that? Where, what, no, but—no, nobody yells down from the sky! Can't be, no, can't.

—oh, Lord God, my son is dying, God help me—

Vitus scratched at the old rough scar on his thumb as he strained to make out what everything meant, a habit that appeared whenever his level of anxiety began rising.

My son is dead. Lord, save me! My son is gone! It may even be, Lord, that my son never really was!

So what, thought Vitus, looking down. I guess they're putting an old woman out of her misery today, along with the others. That has to be who's yelling. Yes, has to be, has to. There's no voices in the sky. It's just an old woman caught up in the system—her voice is really coming from back behind me. It's just the breeze carrying her voice—oh, yes. Breezes and winds can carry voices all over, making them sound like they're coming from everywhere except where they really are. Vitus wondered what the old woman's crime was. He guessed he'd never know. But no one person can know everything.

There! jammed out the big fat Chief. Okay, now, go ahead, do it, men. Start nailing!

The first hammer blow of the day sounded.

—I can't see him, he's not—just let me see him, so he is—yes, yes, my son! My son—

Vitus could not look back to see the irritating mouthy old woman get what she deserved, because he might then see the hammering and the blood squirting hands, feet, and more that he never wanted to ever see, so, all there was to do was start counting the blows and keep counting over the filthy fist shaking crowd.

One—

Next hammer blow. And next—

Two, three—

My son! Please help! They are killing my son!

Next and next and next—

Go in and get the iodine and gauze, I say, Daddy! Go run and get it while I stop up this bloody crushed thumb. Don't you hear me, don't you care, wake up, get moving—iodine and gauze right away, damn you! Iodine and gauze for what you've let happen to your son!

The thoughts that come at such times often make no sense; there's no choice but to think them, though, on a day threatening thunder and lightning on top of the misery of everything else.

Four, five, six—

Lord God, my son!

Seven eight nine ten—

There! cried the Chief. It is done. You did good, men!

Iodine and gauze, you fool—

By God, yes, you did really good.

—for your son's bloody little thumb.

Vitus needed to count no more because the hammer blows had been done and counted and now were gone again until next time. The old woman's voice stopped after a while, too. Thank God they shut the old crone up; thank God the last door we all must face had slammed shut over her, forever; but it wasn't really slamming. It was just thunder—look at the sky. Thunder is coming to scatter the memory of her voice and what she had said into a hail of dozens of hammer blows, way too many to count. The crowd gasped gaping past Vitus as the Chief's voice came from a hole in the silence as a bullet comes from the tiny hole in the end of a gun barrel.

They'll be swinging in the wind a bit, said the Chief, because you stупes didn't bring enough nails—thank God we had rope to sling them up. Which way we do them doesn't matter. Either way the job is done. Good work. Now—that thunderclap was too close, let's move, boys!

Yes, let's move, the day is over—hail, Caesar!

Vitus nodded his head in agreement and took his finger off the scar on his thumb. It was so silly to touch it. As soon as he noticed he was rubbing the scar, his first instinct was to pull away from it like some hot stove or burner hit by accident. And so the job got finished in time for the men and the townspeople to take cover from the drenching rain, and when Vitus got home, an irresistible urge struck him to quickly eat a slice of dry white bread, deliberately making sure to avoid washing his hands first. After all, a man's hands don't soil if all he has done all day is wave a flagstaff in the air from atop his beloved mare, Sandy; yes, indeed, Sandy was such a very good

horse that Vitus knew he was very lucky to have. Vitus sat down by the horse, and they became again, exactly the same; one more day gone past them again, one more spent nodding, blinking, and dreaming the passing time.

Interview

Jim Meirose

When did you write "Vitus on the Eleventh"?

In mid-2016, as a break from working on a novel, I pulled down a chapter from the novel and massaged it into what became "Vitus on the Eleventh."

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

No, because the POV character in the novel chapter was Vitus, and the scene was the eleventh Catholic station of the cross.

What inspired "Vitus on the Eleventh"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Only in that I went to Catholic Grammar school and the nuns had us in church every day, and all the things that I was introduced to by the nuns and priests has ever since been very magical to me.

Which part of "Vitus on the Eleventh" was conceived of first?

It actually sprang out of the larger novel I plucked the story from. The novel's main characters are an old woman and her middle-aged son both suffering from Nihilistic Disorder, which is defined in the DSM-II as: to him, if his mother is not in clear sight, she does not exist; and, to her, the same is true of him. The chapter the story fell out of is one where she is praying in a frenzy to the eleventh Catholic station of the cross, for her son's return. And, though she does not know it, each station on her wall looks out to an alternate reality, within which random individuals have visions of a "window in the sky" opening up and the voice of an old woman screaming down for her son to be returned. "Vitus on the Eleventh" is from a chapter with the POV of a soldier named Vitus, who is part of the detail attending the executions of the prisoners to die that day, and is distracted during his activities by this strange yelling from the empty sky.

What other mediums have influenced your work? How?

Music, primarily. Also silly satire like MAD magazine, Superman comics, and all kinds of short videos on all kind of topics; plus, let's not forget real life and many hours spent reading non-fiction as a child (like the whole world book encyclopedia, books on the occult, and interesting books about real-life mental disorders and other conditions). Spending a lot of time fishing and hunting etc. as a boy also played a role.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

The short answer is that there is a continuous flow of ideas and visions that is always there, like a river, and when I go into the writing zone I dip into the river and ladle out whatever happens to be flowing by at the time. I have no control of what is flowing by at any given time I sit down and start to write. I no longer think what will come at me from the river. The flow decides what might be a story, or a chapter, or whatnot.

What challenges did you face in writing a story so closely tied to Biblical times?

It didn't seem challenging to me. The only misgiving I had was that whoever I might submit it to would see the religious references, and then reject the work thinking it is a religious tract. There is no such intention on my part, but I know there are those that knee-jerk react in the negative whenever they see something in print or online that even mentions religion. It's like they've got some chip on their shoulder that causes them to immediately react like that. People like that are all over. But that's the way they choose to be, and to me that is okay.

Why did you decide against using quotation marks for dialogue? Could you talk a little about the other stylistic decisions that were made for "Vitus on the Eleventh"?

I just decided one day to drop the quotes, as I had seen others do. Quotes also make the pages look very ugly. I actually never make stylistic decisions. What comes at me comes. I try to make it what it wants to be.

Let's talk about violence. One writer said that "Violence peels back society's thin veneer of manners." Flannery O' Connor believed that violence exposed her characters' true essences. What function does violence play in your work?

Violence is just one of the many things life throws at us. To leave out violence from something inside a person's head would be very unrealistic.

“Vitus on the Eleventh” is written in stream of consciousness. Could you talk a little about the differences between stream of consciousness and auto-writing? What measures do you take to stop yourself from auto-writing?

Every couple of thousand words, I always go back and go over what I’ve done and do a quick critical edit. That helps to keep things down to earth. There’s a heat you get in when first drafting that you need to be careful not to kill. You just learn when to let the flow take over and when to go back and weed out the stuff that’s lousy or doesn’t fit.

Also, you should know the basic structure and point of the story you are trying to detail before setting down even one word. Without that it’s automatic to veer off into the twilight zone of baloney.

At one point, you use an anachronism for comedic purposes. Did you think this would be a risky move? The story, despite its subject matter, has plenty of jokes throughout. Finding a good balance of comedy and drama in literary fiction is difficult for many writers; talk to us about the difficulties in finding that balance.

I have no good answer for that. It just comes out funny sometimes, serious others, etc. There’s never any intent on my part. It’s just putting down what is appropriate at the time.

All Driftwood fiction goes through several rounds of comprehensive line-edits. We believe in polishing our fiction to its utmost potential. Could you talk a bit about the process of working through revisions with *Driftwood Press*?

It is rare to find an editor in the small press scene today that operates that way. The process is simple: round after round of successive edits going back and forth between writer and editor. It’s the right way to operate, but in this modern world of rush rush rush, it’s rare to see it done properly.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced “Vitus on the Eleventh”?

I enjoy Beckett, Joyce, Burroughs, and the rest of the beats, and the modernists/postmodernists in general. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* was something I stumbled on as a boy. It was so different that it made a deep impression.

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

before?

On my website (www.jimmeirose.com).

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I have a large inventory of recently done as-of-yet-unpublished stories that I keep in circulation. As soon as one is rejected, it is either revised and resubmitted elsewhere or resubmitted elsewhere without revisions. This is typically based on the age of the work or what comments I've been given when rejected. *Driftwood Press* emerged from my research into where to resubmit to, as a press that already published work somewhat like mine.

Highlands

Tara Tomaino

Us,
both round and poor and full
of clogged pores in fast food gray.

Some sky heaved above landfills.
A backyard reflected off the tin of your trailer.

I never believed anything more than this memory:
Our erect buds on chests and wetness
under your Jack Russell's paws,
tick-bitten twitch.
We would follow these particulars,
shuffle stalwart and eleven.

Us,
in frail layers,
in muck and mucus,
short legs stretched from Earth's stillborn blues.

Our frozen hips in steel furnaces,
warmth of hangnail fingers
against little bows on panties.

The Hudson a basin for
unanswered prayers.

It takes your name.

Your fat freckles and my cartoon tongue
that clicked like a snap of dried birch
or maple.

November was nothing
more than a label for
how wide the Navesink is,
how hard sand collapses,
how further out of reach the Island would become,

all in my small effort to retrieve
the air we spoke against,
or to capture those belly-up salamanders
that weaved stiff slime through the holes in our shoes.

Interview

Tara Tomaino

When did you write the poem?

“Highlands” came to me as a result of a poetry workshop Carolyn Forché lead during my last residency at Sierra Nevada College this past January (2017) before graduating with my MFA. Our entire program was actually abroad this time (From Lake Tahoe, Nevada to outside Port Antonio, Jamaica), so writing about place was a big focus.

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

The inspiration for “Highlands” is something I’ve be tackling for a bit now. I have this vague sense of a recollection from nearly twenty years ago. I had recently moved to this blue-collar fishing town with a dead industry in New Jersey. My father owned a cramped condo with my stepmother and instead of his children getting put up for adoption (my mother lost custody of us), he reluctantly took us in. I only lived there for three months, but I made one friend during my time there. She lived in a shitty trailer park on the outskirts of town. Her backyard was the Sandy Hook Bay. From there, the Navesink River meets the bay, and one can see a stunning view of the New York City skyline. The themes in “Highlands”, or what ultimately became “Highlands”, include a loss of innocence and one’s inability to ultimately achieve their dreams, despite existing in a small moment when all of this is far from being apparent.

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

Lately, I’ve been struggling with the concept of memories and the possibility of my past potentially being false because of how I choose or want to remember it, not actually how it happened. As I write a lot from my own personal experience, I’ve started to question if I am doing certain memories justice—if I am remaining true to what actually happened and if my own personal truth is valid enough to stand on its own. For some reason, I remember my friend being sexually abused by her father, but only through

small hints and a sinking feeling whenever I try to conjure up this memory. “The little bows on panties” was originally a line meant for this idea, and it may still exist through it anyway, but I think it ended up being just as effective as a phrase to denote our “experimental” friendship at eleven. It’s either all this or sadly, but jokingly and strangely affectional, my anxiety acting up again...

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I wake up every morning and write for thirty minutes straight. I have gladly forced myself to realize that not every line I write is a gem and doing this exercise daily has allowed me to accept this as a part of the writing process. Speaking of gems, as Greg Universe says to his son, Steven, in *Steven Universe*, “If every pork chop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs”. I’m personally a vegetarian, but, hands down, I choose hot dogs over pork chops any day. I take all the imperfect bits of this auto-writing and try to make something beautiful. I suppose imperfections are what create things of beauty.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Charles Dickens, Mary Shelley, Yukio Mishima, John Fante, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, June Valentine, Larry Levis, Osamu Tezuka, and all the other artists, poets, and creators I know I am forgetting.

How long have you been writing poetry?

I still have my diary from third grade sitting on a shelf next to my desk. There’s a doodle of a Vulpix (a Pokémon) in the fourth or fifth entry written about the anime, dated sometime in 1998. So I guess for as long as *Pokémon* has been a thing, I’ve been writing poetry.

How would you personally define poetry?

As I continue this insane struggle to find my “truth”, especially in an age where everyone’s truth seems to be in question, I define poetry as what *you* make it. Poetry for me is not the same for you, nor should it be, but it does exist as the purest vessel for truth.

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

Please read anything (or watch a performance) by Brian Turner, Rachel McKibbens, Ocean Vuong, Laura McCullough, and/or Patricia Smith.

They are the voices of haunting beauty; words that enter and exit impactfully yet in brevity, just like everything we watch blossom and wither. Their words are the truth behind everything we consider life.

Forgive me, all others that I do not mention, but these are the names screaming to me as I answer this.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

Honestly, I was not only attracted to the plethora of writing I've seen featured so far, but also to *Driftwood Press*' inclusion of the underrepresented form of visual art and the combination of story in the form of comics. I am a fan of video games and love my fair share of manga, so complex stories supported with visuals are a huge turn on for me. There are few publications that support this as a valid form of literature and fewer that will take the initiative to publish it. For that, I applaud *Driftwood Press* for being so forward-thinking and being a supporter in *all* of what artists can create.

Regrets
After Mary Ruefle

Kathleen Radigan

I should have been born an egg,
for yolks drool down my cheeks.
A glass cyst, a feather
pregnant with small birds.

I should have been an astronaut
with a moon to veil my mouth.
If I'd been born a highway
would I coil along the coast?
My first breath was a sneeze.

If I wore bangles would my wrists
turn dewy green?
Wishes are stale until they boil.
Wishes are moot in a dentist's chair.

I ought to be an orchard.
I ought to wash your feet with rage.
Shout loud, bang pots.
My president's a rapist.
My rapist is an altar boy.

I am potbellied with dirty nails.
I am a deaf pigeon.

The Presence of a Witch

Wren Tuatha

The presence of a witch
foretells
creativity.

They will wall her off,
hostility and stale habit,
pomp and pealing and protests firing
both ways.

The discomfort that calls
wagons to circle,
elephants to circle,
opens the sky to
eureka.

And the ground under
circled wagons shudders and
stuck places heave and
detach, stone into sand.

The presence of a witch
foretells
someone
will invent a spaceship,
an inoculant,
a script for smashing stalemates,

stone into sand into
dust, gone, almost doubted.

A child on a swing needs a pull
before a push.
The presence of a witch
points out the pendulum,
brings the inhalation
before the ahhh.

Interview

Wren Tuatha

When did you write the poem?

I wrote “The Presence of a Witch” about six years ago. Not long after that, I started to have health issues that effected my brain. One thing I lost was my customary poetic process. I haven’t written poetry in several years but in recent months I’ve been submitting my old collection and working on new ways to write.

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

Everyone knows brave souls who rub against the grain by speaking truth. Most of us play that role from time to time. “The Presence of a Witch” came out of a study of group process. I have lived most of my adult life in Intentional Community (aka Ecovillage, commune, cohousing, etc.) and my partner and I are professional consultants, helping communities have healthy processes (business meetings, listening skills, etc.). This work got poetic and very personal when we were working with a third consultant on the nature of creativity, not in solitary writing, but in the group decision making process. How could we predict and encourage that moment of creativity when the group comes up with the amazing idea that no one brought into the room? We identified several archetypes in this process. The Witch is key. The group member playing the role of the Witch changes from topic to topic, but it’s the person who says the wildly unpopular idea, the suggestion that makes others defensively dig in or attack. I wrote the poem after I played that role in my community. I kept the poem a general exploration of the archetype, not the story of my drama. The Witch brings the magic, which we may like or hate.

What was the hardest part of writing the poem?

I labored to write the fine line between describing an archetype so any reader could know it from their own life, while not giving a group process lecture or explaining Intentional Community.

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

It's categorical in the sense that my poems all come from my collectivist perspective. I don't try to erase my communal sensibilities for consumption by a largely individualist society, although some colleagues have suggested I should. At the same time, I assume my audience is mostly coming from an American, or at least Western, perspective. We make different assumptions and symbols can have different connotations. So I try to bridge cultures. Categorically, I also try to avoid narrative styles in my poetry. This poem celebrates the archetype without telling a story.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

My past process was typical, I think. I kept pen and paper nearby at all times. I'd pull over in traffic or stop in the woods to catch the muse when it was ready for me. I let concepts and phrases brew for months until they were ready. Then I would edit my first drafts over and over. I also had a critique group. I never had a discipline of writing at a certain time each day or doing writing exercises prior to my health issues. Now I'm trying those strategies as I learn to write again. A cornerstone of my process, then and now, is that I use readers. I don't want to get seduced by my own words and I do want to know that my meaning is transmitted.

How long have you been writing poetry?

Well, I won a Young Authors Award in Poetry from Louisville's Courier Journal when I was in middle school. So I guess I've been writing poetry off and on for nearly forty years.

How would you personally define poetry?

This question seems to imply that some attempts at poetry don't achieve it. I think there is a sweet spot, somewhere between cringe worthy inspirational verse and the earnest offerings of MFA students who strain to color within the lines. A film school instructor once said to me, "Learn the rules before you break them." I took this to mean that breaking rules in any art form because one's too lazy to learn them, or just to be contrarian, will not bring the genius. But if one understands why the rules are the rules, then one makes surgical, transcendent choices in rebellion. The example that comes to my mind is early and late Picasso. For me, poetry has to be unexpected, even staggering. And, without trimming away the soul, a poem needs economy. Poetry desperately needs relevance—tell the truth that will grow your FBI file.

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

Well, shucks. Like me on Facebook. I don't need a stalker but I appreciate the rare nod when I hear that something landed. I hope to publish a book length collection in the next year or so, and I'll no doubt promote it there. You could also mention me in your will. More broadly, attend local poetry readings, join a critique group, buy poetry, fund a writing prize... Lift poetry into greater relevance.

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

My work is published or forthcoming in *Canary*, *Coachella Review*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Baltimore Review*, *Clover*, *Antiphon*, *Bangalore Review*, *Avatar*, *Lavender Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Picaroony*, and several others. On my website (HippieChickDiaries.com) I have a "Wren's C.V." page, which has links to all my poems available online. I'm also active on the Poetry Circle website.

Data Collection on Mozart in the Special Education Classroom

Mary Jo Robinson-Jamison

Slow oboe syrup flows over the room.
It changes the air from red to blue. It drops
The shoulders of the worker whose hair was pulled.

Pianists reach through walls and grab the corner
That scrapes our shins. They reach through skin
And cup the meat of our bodies with both hands.

We can learn to float on the skin of sound.
We can feel joints moving under us
As we ride on the back of a great animal.

Music, with its bare hands, bends us
Draws us to the oboe line overhead,
And we remember the strength of grass.

Interview

Mary Jo Robinson-Jamison

When did you write the poem?

I found the poem in this form in my 2012 notes and I changed the title this year. I've tried and failed to write about my job for years. It is like writing about your elbow.

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

My career inspired this poem. For decades, I worked with groups of students whose severe physical, mental, or emotional challenges defy ordinary categories. Professional descriptions of these problems use words that objectify lives and erase names and the moment to moment life of the student's days and the days of the people, like me, who work with them. I was very lucky to be able to work as a music therapist for decades. It was an occupational hazard that my work has to be reported on in behavioral and medical terms. Collecting data on the number of aggressive incidents, duration of eye contact, or decrease in muscle tone were official results from my sessions. The numbers always missed the point and the data was blind to the quality of change that happened in a room when music was presented at crucial times.

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

The hardest part of writing the poem was seeing the moment unfold without using special education terms. Then I realized this was the whole point of the poem. So the title frames the problem and the body of the poem steps into the experience.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I don't know if it's unique, but hardest thing is to know when to stop going into infinite changes and possibilities. Nothing ever seems finished. More like a poem is left or set aside.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

At the moment: Tracy K. Smith, Jane Hirshfield, Seamus Heaney, Dean Young, Whitman, and Tom Hennen.

How long have you been writing poetry?

I've been writing for almost forty years. Journaling mostly. I'm an old lady now, obviously. About fifteen years ago, I submitted poems to literary magazines and was sometimes published. I've only begun submitting pieces again since I retired from music therapy. Now I try to write something every day I wake up in my own house.

How would you personally define poetry?

I like what Jane Hirshfield says in *Ten Windows* about poetry and transformation. She inspired me to think of a poem as a body of water one enters and leaves changed—or at least wet. Whether it's my poem or someone else's poem, it has to surprise me as I write it and grant me a short glimpse of the extraordinary that somehow leaves me larger than myself. I have written poems of despair and appreciate other's poems that vibrate the shadow side of things, but the poems I love have to grant me moments of delight and explanations beyond the words on the page.

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

My work has been in published about ten different times over a ten year period. Very few of those journals still exist.

Green Mountain Review is probably the exception. My total poetry earnings for the past forty years amounts to sixty dollars.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

I've been searching for literary magazines in which I would be happy to see my work. Journals like this are rarer than the proliferation of new journals would make it seem. *Driftwood Press* is one. The work is accessible and has integrity. I am happy that one of my poems is among those they chose to publish.

Reaved. Theorem

Josh Anthony

I.

a home i don't own. bunk beds i never had a bunkmate i always pretended.
the most shocking graphs are rising and falling. too steady water shouldn't
make you nervous. it does. i show up early. she smokes for exactly an hour.
we grind our teeth on sugar. the newspapers have three different pictures
of the same picture. i forget about the trash in the morning. i wake up on a
f u t o n , s u r r o u n d e d .

THEN

*we watch the masts come to shore. i'm not a pirate or its sword. i count the wood grain
on the floor, the salt in your hair like we always think we can, why do I say that. we
wash up on shore. the moon, of course, the sails, closer.*

II. Blocks

■ dunkin donuts/getting out of the house like an evacuation/i think we
laugh/i can never remember/what the construction worker says to
make/the cashier laugh like she has to./i take a penny from a take-a-
penny jar/to pay for a coffee./turns out it's a tip jar./i only saw pennies./
■ my brother buys us donuts i'm/not complaining, theyre stale, the
chocolate comes off in large chips/they melt on my chin and upper lip./
■ i taste cloves for the first time./he says itll calm me down./i cough
and cough and cough and finally cry./i think he says something./i can
never remember what the construction worker says./i want to say it
rains/i want to say i shake the whole way home./

III.

we lay the mats on the railing, smack the shit out of 'em, breaking that old
futon tatami and you saw little notes of music fall from the splinters, you
swear, you promise again.

I lay in the plastic bottles I've accumulated (FOR FURTHER READ-
ING: I strip off the wrapper of my plastic bottles. I recycle and imagine a
massive fire. I'm scared of what might live on my leftovers).

We sleep like we mean it, you say I laughed all night.

There's something about the 5 hour night that has me

/seeing/ satellites diving catastrophe in the atmosphere.

Something in my eyes has been glooming in the mirror.

I see you shocking the sidewalk with gum on your shoes.

Interview

Josh Anthony

When did you write the poem?

Sometime in 2015.

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

The second part of the poem is inspired by my childhood. The first and third parts are inspired by current events heard and experienced. Yet, shit still breaks and you take the wrong money no matter where you go.

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

Thinking about childhood is a bit hard. Not so much emotionally hard. I just forget that it happened sometimes. In general, all [poetry] writing is hard.

The easiest part was sending it out for publication.

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

There was more to the “THEN” part of the poem, but I cut a lot out because it was too estranged from the poem. I still find that section of the poem strange, but now it’s not so long.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

Unique seems subjective, but this is my process currently: fill a notebook over the course of two to three months, put that notebook under a pile of other notebooks, work up the courage to type the oldest notebook, edit while typing, string sections together, ask for coherence. I’ve taken to calling the glut of notebook I type up “globulars.”

Who are some of your favorite authors?

James Tate, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Tatyana Tolstaya, Murakami, Ben Mi-roy, and Zadie Smith, to name a few. I'm currently reading *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon.

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

After finishing this edition of Driftwood and then telling a friend about it, check out *Gone Lawn*, *Sixth Finch*, *BOAAT*, and *Diagram* for some sweet ass writing that I selfishly say inspired a lot of my work.

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

Slipstream, *Crab Fat*, *Four Ties*, *Fish Food Magazine*, *Gone Lawn*, among others.

I can't stress this enough; making a magazine is fucking *difficult*. I'm deeply thankful to all the editors of all magazines (including Driftwood, of course) for the time and effort they put into reading hundreds of submissions, creating a layout, and publishing (among many other duties). If you get a chance, check out these other magazines and thank the creators of Driftwood when you're done reading.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

Clean website design. Didn't seem gimmicky. Good choice of poems and stories in their issues.

The boy who plays with ghosts

Andrew Luft

pours into people's blanks like he's nothing
more than sketchpad skin converting houses
into castles. There's a girl two houses down, stripping
for an audience of stuffed dolls. Her father

helps himself to the scotch shelf. Helps himself
to her mother. Silhouetted shapes dangle from arms
of cul-de-sac pines, sum up resident lives
in a barely audible *bmmm*. If you go upstairs
you'll see we have a lovely *bmmmmmm*. Here

is where the dead live. The boy flays and bends
in the O of his bedroom's mouth. A neighbor's dog barks
its own backing track. He finds the girl's shape
tangled in reeds of moonlight. *You're gonna regret this,*

she goes. *Nobody actually wants to be
invisible.* The houses line themselves up, one
after the other, in line for a private viewing. It has
all the makings of a scary story, the kind
living children tell stories about, and you've heard

this story before. *A ghost lives up there,*
one child tells another. Maybe the end of a story
isn't like a ghost, but rather a framed picture, adored
atop a mantle, where fire crackles beneath like gentle hands

applauding captured beauty. The sound of branches
caressing windows lulls the street back to sleep.
The girl twirls herself before the mirror—helps herself
to another shape.

Interview

Andrew Luft

When did you write the poem?

I wrote the first draft of this poem back in the fall of 2015.

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

The poem was originally inspired by a conversation I had with my mom about my decision to get tattoos. She's pretty conservative, so the conversation was a difficult one to make productive. This really got me thinking about those conversations we all have sometimes, the kind that feel one-sided, and by the end you start to question if you're being heard or even seen. When I leave these kinds of conversations, I often find myself willing to talk to anyone else who might listen—possibly strangers, deceased friends or family, other people struggling to be acknowledged. I started thinking about this idea of communicating with ghosts (literal and figurative) for answers.

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

The hardest part of writing the poem was finding a balance of narrative and imagery that I was happy with. I write nonfiction and screenwriting as well because I love telling stories. Sometimes I'll sit down and word-vomit a two-page "poem" into a word doc only to realize after the fact that it's essentially a flash fiction piece with no exposition. Then comes the decision of what is this? I want this to be a poem; can this be a poem? The easiest part was coming up with the imagery. I was thinking a lot about my mom and how other folks my age might be having similar conversations. I grew up in the suburbs, so these kinds of angsty, young adulthood images and ideas are always resonating with me—the lull of suburban life, feeling like a ghost, a desire to transform.

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

It was originally really focusing on this idea of tattoos. I likened the human body to a house, and tattoos were the decoration. There was a son character and a mother character, but that began to feel too boring and narrative-heavy. Then I remembered back when I was a teenager, there were rumors that this girl down the street had an alcoholic father. She struck me as someone who found freedom and expression in her escapades with boys, but also probably had a bedroom full of teddy bears. Instead of talking to her mother about what was going on, she would dance and twist in her room. I was watching the show *Twin Peaks* for the first time and was really taken with any scene where a character was dancing in that honest, Lynchian way. This felt more interesting to me than the specific conflict I was having with my mom.

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

Yes and no. Yes because I do write a lot about the suburbs. It's a place that feels like an ongoing social experiment to me. I write a lot about family dynamics, conversations, and the insistence and meaning of silence. But no, because this poem took kind of a fictional turn at some point, which doesn't often happen in my writing of poems. My poems are usually tethered to autobiography.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I really don't think so. I write in the morning; I write at night. I jot ideas down in my notebook or on my phone. I guess the most "unique" aspect of my writing process is that sometimes I love when I can't sleep. If I'm ever rolling around at like three or four AM, I think to myself "cool, I can just write for an hour with my brain half-on, then go back to sleep". In my opinion, I've done some of my best writing around four AM, what some call the witching hour or magic hour, because the rest of the surrounding world is asleep.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Poets: Tracy K. Smith, Terrance Hayes, and Jamaal May. Fiction: Kelly Link and Kurt Vonnegut. Nonfiction: Jo Ann Beard and Steve Almond.

How long have you been writing poetry?

A little over two years.

How would you personally define poetry?

Oh, man. I don't think anything I could say would even come close to any of the wild definitions that are already out there. My definition would probably have the words "automatic" and "jazz" and "dirt" in it, though.

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

First, watch anything by David Lynch. Next, read Terrance Hayes' poem "Instructions for a Séance with Vladimirs." Then, revisit your childhood home in the middle of the night.

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

A couple of my poems are published online at *apt literary magazine* and an essay of mine is forthcoming at *Rum Punch Press*.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

A poet friend of mine from Ohio told me her friend was a fiction editor at *Driftwood* and that they were still looking for poetry for the next issue. So I listened and submitted some stuff!

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

I recently shifted my focus to screenwriting, which seemed like a natural change. It felt like where my writing was heading all along; narrative and imagery always at battle with one another, but quietly working hand in hand. I always have this compulsive need for my poems to have a certain aesthetic to them—something that's pleasing yet eerie to picture.

Three Poems
Adam Crittenden

when in rome

it doesn't matter where you are
spiders always hide in webs
do you fear religion is outdated
spend some time to prepare
for the worst moment in your life
you learn how vulnerable people are
when you watch them eat
the sooner you realize

we are all in hospice

it's easy to get lost

when i die
i want to die with scars

when in rome

there is someone in your life
who only you can see
we all still have one imaginary friend
but we have no idea
which one is imaginary
un bicchiere di vino rosso per favore
i saw the virgin mary on your tongue
remember that your tongue is your tongue

it's fun to walk around and chase graffiti
pretend there is no such thing as this place
someone knew how to turn sand into circuitry
bless our echoes
you're mostly water
and partially ghost

when in rome

the bread's hard this morning
and the cheese and the salami
i said my italian isn't improving
why don't you stop speaking english
i saw online that there is a church of godzilla
she said get off the internet
we leave the hostel to pace rome
in search of the world's best gelati

are my bones made of water
too

yes the snow is gone or never was
so we have nothing to eat on our walk
except our fingernail skin

Interview

Adam Crittenden

When did you write the poem?

It's a bit fuzzy, but I think I wrote these at the end of 2016.

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

I went to Italy a few years back and it was inspiring in terms of getting me to think outside of my normal context. I tend to cope with my own idiosyncrasies within my writing, and these are no different.

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

Being concise—for both questions.

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

My speaker took over in some early iterations, so I had to trim in that regard.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

Probably not, except that sometimes I need to play a video game to get in the mood.

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

Indie presses and small journals. Read poetry that isn't cookie cutter or stuffy. Have fun with your reading.

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

I have been published before. If you like my work, you can Google me and everything will pop up. Or, just check out my website (adamcrittenden.com) and everything is there. My first book came out with *Gold Wake Press*, so that is a thing you can get.

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

Enjoy it while you can. One day I will wake up and lose my superpowers.

How to Match the Sky

Kendall Hoefft

Sky, like raw, ruddy bones over back lit snow, speaks in tiny sparks—
scarlet pin pricks resurrecting
feathers over campfire.

The boy bathes in fear of her mouth.
When he let go, paper split his lips.

In the exhausted menagerie of voices,
he hums to the wind, asking with a shield;
like metal necks in fire, stretching to be seen.

Interview

Kendall Hoeft

What inspired the poem?

The muse arrived while reading Jamaal May's *Hum*.

Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

This idea: when a relationship ends, even one that very much needs to, the disconnection leads to an inner tearing. A part of you is lost and a part of them attaches. It's the consciousness that there will always be a sense of that encounter's union and intimacy that can never be left behind.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I collect words. Whether I am attending one of my husband's architecture lectures, at the movies, or at my cat's vet, I am listening for interesting vocabulary. I keep my favorites in a little book that I carry in my purse.

I also developed this pseudo-erasure style of composition where I basically begin a poem, and when I need direction, I read others' poetry to find that perfect word, image, idea, or jumping off point that will guide my work.

Or sometimes I will x out another's work madly, and leave all but three or so words on the page and fill in the rest with my own (to give myself pieces of bread to collect along the way of writing). It's sort of, kind of erasure-esque? I erase, then fill in the spaces.

Is this poem categorical of your work?

This poem is special because it was composed by experimenting with and developing that new style of writing process I mentioned. This was the first poem I ever tried writing that way. Since this piece, I have continued to play and write with this technique; but many of my poems are still written through a traditional method of blank page, writing as it comes.

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

Right now, I'm really diggin' Mary Biddinger's *O Holy Insurgency*, Sharon Old's *The Gold Cell*, Lydia Davis' *Can't and Won't Stories* and anything by Sandra Beasley.

How long have you been writing poetry?

Since I was four or five. My mom is a literature teacher and my dad is a librarian and poet. My Dad taught me how to write. I remember, during my childhood in the Colorado mountains, how he taught me to see and feel and write *snow*.

Where can readers find more of your work?

On my Facebook page (www.facebook.com/kendallhoeftpoet).

Have you been published before?

No. This is my first time being published, and I couldn't be more thrilled!

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

Jerrod and I were students together at the University of Tampa's MFA Program. We were both invited to read our poetry at a Tampa-based showcase reading. He heard me read "How to Match the Sky" that night and expressed interest in publishing it.

The Madness of Shell-Shock
in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*:
An Inversion of the Sacred Carapace

Beverley Catlett

Rivers knew only too well how often the early stages of change or cure may mimic deterioration. Cut a chrysalis open, and you will find a rotting caterpillar. What you will never find is a mythical creature, half caterpillar, half butterfly, a fit emblem of the human soul, for those whose cast of mind leads them to seek such emblems. No, the process of transformation consists almost entirely of decay. (Barker 184)

Narrated chiefly through the perspective of military psychiatrist Dr. William Rivers, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* is a commentary on warfare that transcends the realities of death on the battlefield to reveal something far more disturbing and unjust: the resounding experience of those horrors in the human mind. Rivers' patients are the peripheral defects of World War I, the "shell-shocked": sufferers of post-traumatic stress syndrome, survivors of an experience so atrocious, so incompatible with what the human mind is prepared to endure, that sanity buckles under the weight of its remembrance. Within the yellow-lit walls of Craiglockhart psychiatric institution, we see the victims of the war-myth. We see those who enlisted as healthy, young adult men reduced to ageless defects. Their mental illness emanates not from within – not from any chemical imbalance, any error on the part of nature in their physical composition – but from without, from what they have seen and cannot un-see, crimes against humanity and crimes against nature itself. These men have no natural environment, no place in nature – their growth is stunted, psychologically as well as physically, for the injured and amputees. Their age is meaningless, as is their progress: their youth is quenched by disillusion and deformation, their age premature by

their reduction to utter dependents upon a system designed to accommodate their insanity. Their masculinity, independence, and pride are smothered by flashbacks that turn the safest of environments into hallucinatory horror shows; they have no natural place in the world, too ill to fight and too ill to live the comfortable citizens' life.

This is what Rivers "knows only too well": that these men are psychologically warped beyond repair, though they may appear to 'heal' under his care, though they may one day regain their outward appearance of youthful vigor and physical health. As does Burns, in the observation that precedes Dr. River's disillusioned speculation on progress and deterioration, tragically metaphored as a chrysalis opening to reveal a still-born butterfly. Burns is a shell of a man, both figuratively and literally: ever since he parachuted into the gut of a decaying German corpse and received a mouthful of rotting human flesh, Burns has been unable to eat, and thus his emaciation makes him a physical representation of what the "shell shocked" soldier is more or less damned to become. Burns is one of countless victims to the myth that successfully brought about the death, deformation, and psychological decay of an entire generation of young men (indeed, the fact that the realities of Craiglockhart reveal a destroyed "*generation*" of young men is noteworthy in consideration of Barker's title-choice for the novel). *These* are the products of shell shock.

Through Rivers's eyes, we see in each patient that the experience of combat produces effects in the human beings involved that are tragic and unnatural. War, in itself, is unnatural: nature follows an overarching framework of growth, compensation, and *regeneration* – war follows an overarching framework of destruction, death, and degeneration. Barker's evidence of this manifests itself in numerous ways throughout the novel, but the notion of war and nature being inherently at odds with one another is particularly interesting in the novel's various references to shells. In nature, a shell is, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, "the hard protective case" of a living vitality, be it the vital organs of a shelled creature or the shell from which living creatures hatch (Oxford English Dictionary, "shell" n.1). A shell, in nature, is either a source or preservation of life. In warfare, a "shell" is, as secondarily listed by the OED, "an explosive artillery projectile or bomb; a hollow metal or paper case used as a container for [explosives]" (Oxford English Dictionary, "shell" n.2). A shell, in warfare, is either a source of destruction – a weapon – or a preventative container that suppresses said weapon from unleashing its destructive energies until it hits land, thus maximizing the potential of its destructive range.

Before Barker nudges her readers to consider any of the above,

however, she introduces – through a skeptical dialogue about Sassoon’s potential insanity as it is to be presented to ‘The Board’ – the concept of “shell-shock”: a unique form of psychological distress brought on by exposure to the atrocities of warfare. Taking into consideration the aforementioned definitions of the word “shell” as connoted by warfare versus nature, one could surmise – indeed, Rivers seems to, in his disillusioned speculation on transformation and decay – that the “shell shocked” individual is a hybrid of the two. The word “chrysalis” is as pleasing aesthetically, to the ear, as it is contextually, to the mind: an emblem of emergent beauty, the chrysalis is the shell from which the adolescent butterfly spreads its wings and emerges into the world as its fully developed self. The “shell shocked” patient has nowhere to emerge from; the adolescent ‘shell’ that made him victim to the war myth was obliterated by his proximity to death, his mind now enclosed in a metallic, man-made shell of trauma, darkness, and an inability to forget. The shell-shocked patient does not emerge and spread his wings; he does not come-to-age naturally. Rivers’s daily task is to ‘cut’ into him and find a living man rotten as the corpse into which Burns plummeted face first; the shell-shocked patient stops aging just as abruptly and indefinitely as any young soldier killed in combat.

Moreover, to ‘The Board,’ a “shell shocked” individual is ‘insane’ in that they are psychologically and emotionally affected by their exposure to death on a massive scale – ‘sane,’ then, being the condition of a man perfectly at ease with the gruesome and tragic ends of his fellow soldiers. In this, Barker calls into question a major issue with The Board’s definition of “sanity,” a separate thread of inquiry that encompasses numerous aspects of the novel but also can be considered in light of war as a violation of nature: ‘sane’ being the state of the natural, healthy human being.

It is clear from the novel’s outset that the question of sanity, in times of warfare, extends far beyond the walls of Craiglockhart psychiatric institution. Through Rivers, we attain glimpses into the experiences of shell-shocked patients that are beyond any fathomable horror: indeed, to be anything but horrified by their experiences would seem justifiably insane. That shell shock is the resulting condition of someone who was not successfully obliterated by a shell, but is in prolonged ‘shock’ because they witnessed its obliterating effects, suggests that the patients of Craiglockhart are parochial casualties of war. They are frozen, in effect, suspended in the memories of their horrendous exposures to death. They are at the crux of the inherent disagreement between nature and warfare, physically intact (to the extent that they are still alive) yet psychologically desecrated. Their inability to sustain the natural processes of human life is a testament to their significance

as walking, breathing man-made disasters: Burn's' inability to eat, nearly every patient's inability to sleep, the way in which Sassoon and other's' dreams (nightmares, naturally) continue to play out after they wake – are testaments to the fact that warfare is a profound violation of life itself, and the myth of 'war glory' an outrageous injustice to the integrity of the human mind.

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The Mirror that Speaks the Truth

Anna Moskalkova



Interview

Anna Moskalkova

How would you describe your aesthetic?

Nostalgic. Philosophical. On the edge of reality. Romantic and fragile. Inspired by seeing beauty in human beings. Fueled by the urge to answer the question “Why are we who we are?”

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

Not at all. I am persuaded that any image must speak for itself. Title is very important for a book while the image is consumed in a moment and the title is secondary.

When did you create "The Mirror that Speaks the Truth"?

It's one of a series of images that I started in September 2015.

Do you digitally manipulate photographs? If so, how much did you edit this one?

Yes, I do. This image went through several structural and tonal manipulations in Photoshop. The cones were gathered by me and my assistant. We managed to cover almost all the space of the photograph. And we sprayed them with gold paint. However more cones were added during post-production. The image consists of three combined shots of the model's body. And the reflection in the mirror was taken apart on the same spot and added to the image in Photoshop.

What inspired "The Mirror that Speaks the Truth"?

Ever since I was a child, I've asked so many questions about the meaning of life. This series is my effort to answer those questions. It was inspired by my soviet childhood as well as by my unaccomplished dream of becoming a writer.

What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?

The hardest part for me was creating the scene and shooting it. This image is the view from the top. This is always complicated especially when your resources are limited. I do not use wide-angle lens, so it was done with 35mm. We used a ladder that allowed me to be directly on top of the model. Also, the mirror was so unexpectedly heavy.

What camera was this image taken with?

Nikon D800.

How did you conceive of "The Mirror that Speaks the Truth"?

My husband's grandmother lived in a very old rural house in central Spain. Very authentic. Full of old furniture. I love to go to that house and get inspired by the stories of the past. The mirror from the image was one of the pieces that always attracted my attention, motivated me to imagine the stories I could tell if I used it in my work.

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

Yes. As you can see visually the image consists of three layers. Cones symbolize the earth and nature that gives life to human beings who in their turn create art pieces like this mirror. And then it all comes back to the nature reflected. We cannot separate ourselves from the earth and nature. And yet, unfortunately this is how humanity behaves nowadays. We are losing this connection. We consume more than we really need. We are scared to create beautiful art because of the fear of not being able to catch up with those standards imposed on us by capitalistic society. And the list goes on.

What is your creative process?

I start by drawing images in my mind. Sometimes it is a piece of clothing or a unique subject that I come across that makes me imagine the story around it. Sometimes it is a person or a place. At this stage I always ask myself if the image produced is going to address any important issue or evoke certain emotion? My next step is sketching the picture. Then I carefully choose my materials and the location of the shoot. I enjoy putting special effort into styling the shot. The process of choosing one of a kind, many times handmade, pieces. I analyze the light and the color scheme. Only then I carefully choose my model. It is very important for me to work with someone who shares my values. Someone expressive and fragile at the same time. I always go to my locations beforehand. Make a picture without

the model. Analyze the image and decide about the composition.

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

I have so many.

In my creative photography I consider myself a follower of Oleg Oprisco.

In portraiture I am a huge admirer of: Brigitte Lacombe, Annie Leibowitz, Sue Bryce, Victoria Will, Mario Testino, Rodeny Smith, Vincent Peters, and John Keatley.

In fine art photography and visual storytelling, I admire greatly (to name among few): Jennifer Thoreson, Tommy Ingberg, Kylie Sparre, Monia Merlo, and, again, Rodney Smith.

Documentary and Street: Vivian Maier and Gueorgui Pinkhassov.

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

More of my work can be found on my web site (www.annamoskalkova.com) or on my Facebook page and Instagram. I have never been published in any magazine before now.

Breathe
Jenn Powers



Interview

Jenn Powers

How would you describe your aesthetic?

Honestly, it's hard to nail down. I am inspired by many types of art, including mixed media, photography, painting, and drawing. I play with art or I plan my art. When I play, I tend to be free of expectations, and I just create. This is how "Breathe" was born. I love to mix mediums and tools and explore methods to see what works. It's a learning process and each piece is different. When I plan, I'm methodical in my approach, which will span days, weeks, or months. These projects usually involve painting or drawing.

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

At first, I had a difficult time finding the right title. But then I stopped trying so hard. I *felt* the piece and the word "breathe" came to me. I find the title symbolic for how I would feel if I were to physically dip into the photo—to swim, to fly, to breathe.

When did you create "Breathe"?

The photo collage consists of ocean and sky I've seen over different times in my life. I've collected photos over the years and I decided to create a theme involving air and water.

Do you digitally manipulate photographs? If so, how much did you edit this one?

I didn't digitally manipulate "Breathe," but digital manipulation is one of my favorite methods to play around with. My previous publication had four digitally manipulated photos. Regarding "Breathe," I found the simple act of ripping the photos added to the theme of spontaneity—like nature.

What inspired "Breathe"?

The simplicity of nature is what nourishes the spirit. The ocean and the

sky (or air and water) are two of the most important natural elements for human beings, not only physiologically but aesthetically as well. There's something about being by the sea or looking up at the sky on a bright day. It's invigorating and healing. I wanted to capture that essence within the photo.

What camera was this image taken with?

Since the collage consists of photos I've taken over the last five years, I've used several cameras. My most recent camera is a Canon EOS Rebel T3.

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

Yes. Whatever I find myself creating involves some sort of photography. I use photography for collages, mixed media, and digital manipulation. Photography is the rock of my artistic process.

Are your other photos similar in subject or focus?

Some of my other photos are similar, but I have a wide range of methods, styles, themes, and subjects. I paint, draw, and collage. I use water, fire, and chemicals. I take advantage of household items like Brillo pads and rubbing alcohol. It's fun to play around and explore the unlimited options.

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

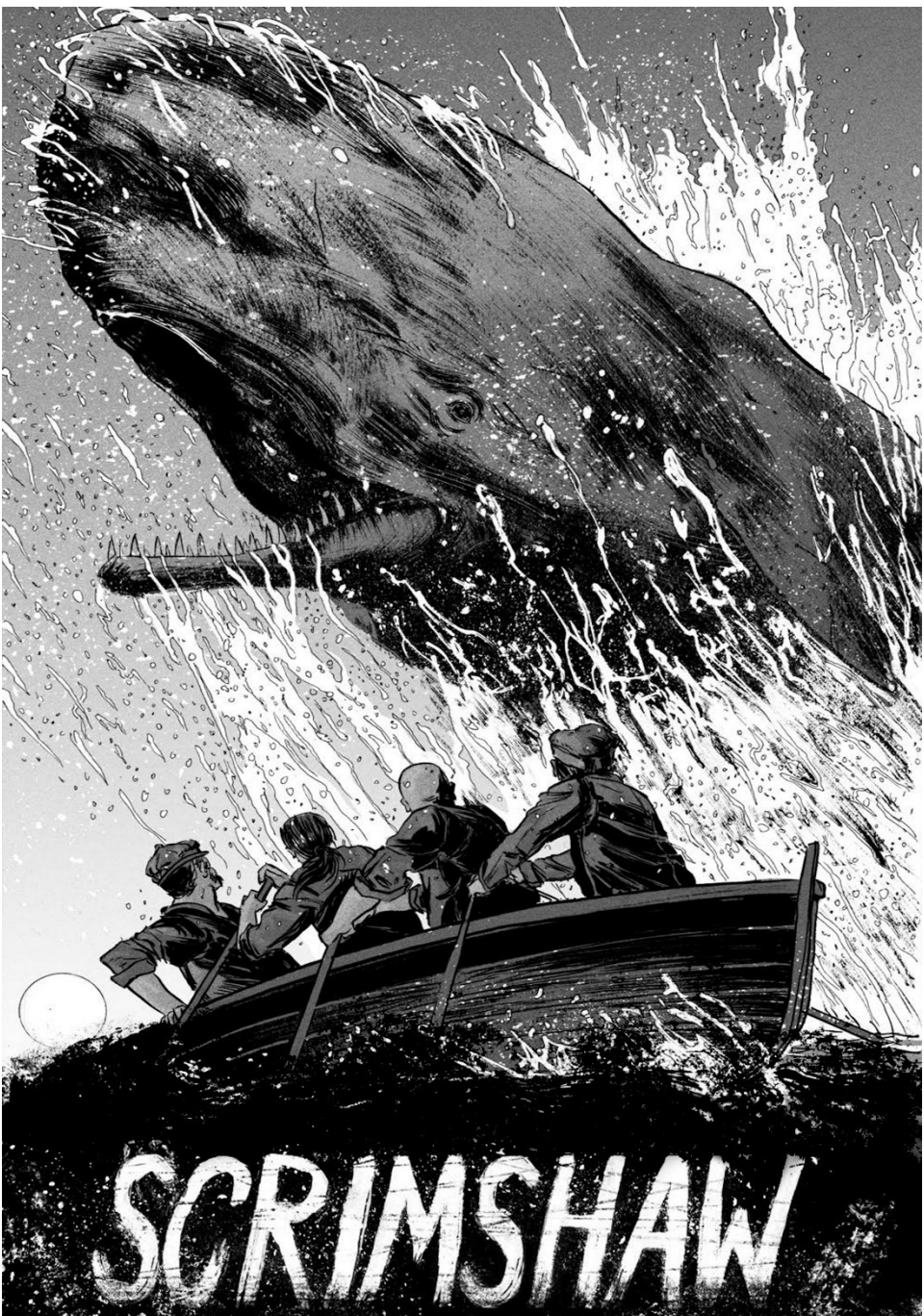
Yes. I have been published in several literary magazines. Most recently, I had work published in *Hayden's Ferry Review* and *San Francisco Peace and Hope*. I have a website where my work is listed (www.jennpowers.com).

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

The aesthetic of artists and writers. The press publishes high quality work, and I wanted to be a part of its legacy.

Free Range
Mary Katherine Marasco

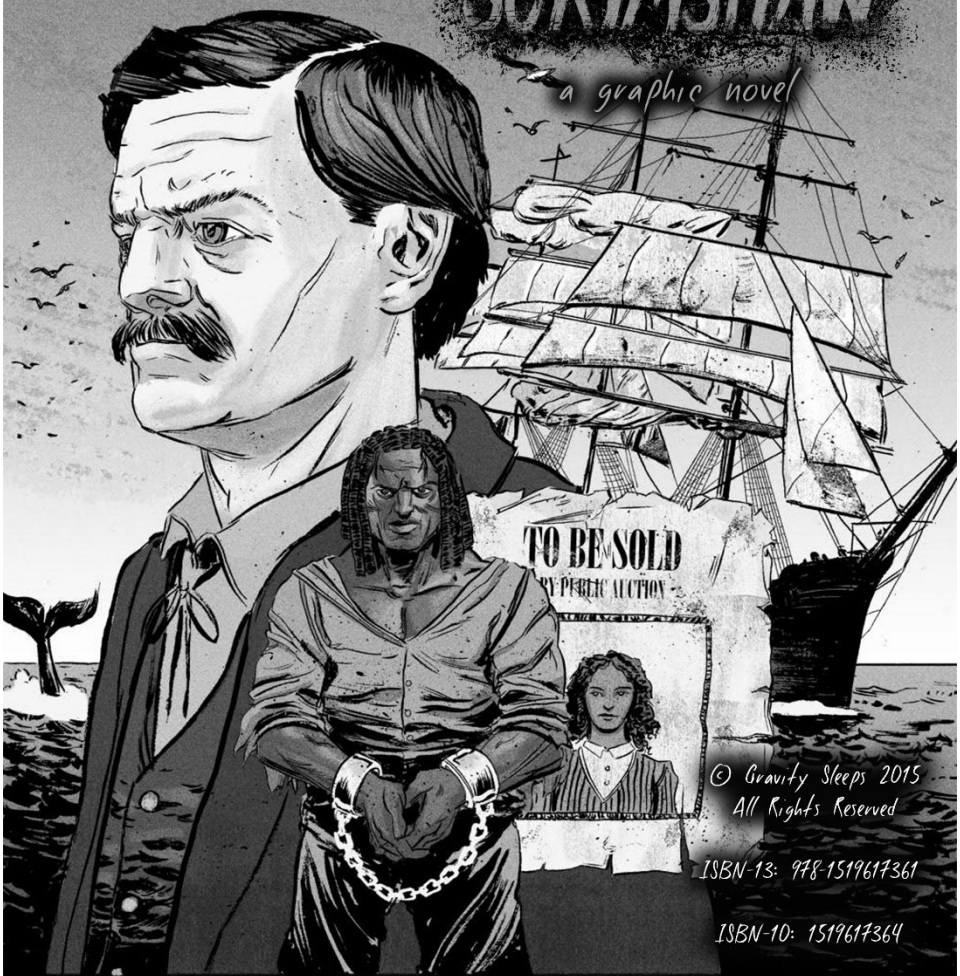




SCRIMSHAW

SCRIMSHAW

a graphic novel



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created & written by
ian ferguson green
wesley wingo

illustrated by
eric scott pfeiffer
ross taylor



PULL BOYS!
PULL!

YOU'LL HAVE TO TASTE
BLOOD BEFORE YOU
SEE IT!

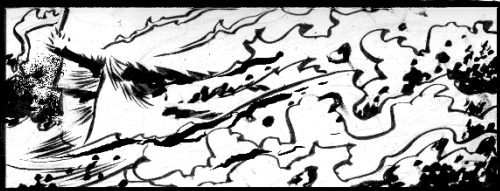
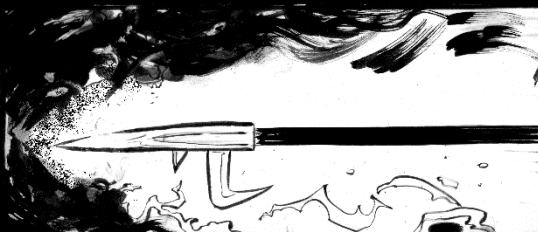






A character with a mask and a knife.

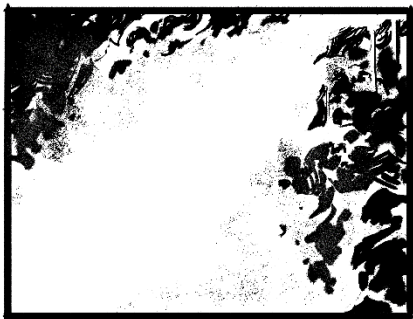
COME ON,
BOYS!
NOW WATCH ME
PLANT A FLAG!



A character in a dynamic pose.

THAT'S
HOW YOU
HANDLE AN
ARGUMENT,
BOYS!













HOW
AM
I?

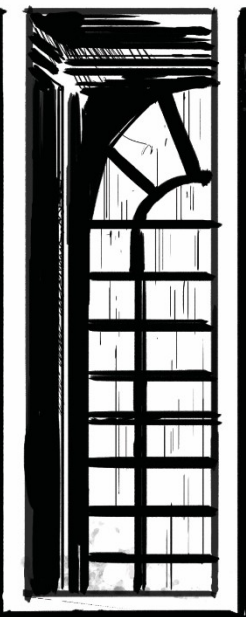


YOU
LOOK
FINE.



OH,
GOOD
GOD





Interview

Ian Green & Wesley Wingo

How did "Scrimshaw" evolve over the course of its creation?

Wesley: This originally started as something Ian and I were working on as a side project over beers. I work in film and video, and was getting a little frustrated at the inability to produce large-budget projects, being, you know, not independently wealthy. And we just started talking about this shared interest that seemed really fun for a continuing narrative, and kept referring to the fact that, you know, a page of a screenplay could cost \$1,000 or it could cost \$1,000,000 to produce, whereas if we kept it in comic bounds, each page of action was going to cost us the same, the only limits being the artists and the imagination. Very freeing. It really allowed us to go anywhere we wanted, wander off into some pretty weird little places and discoveries.

Ian: I came at it for similar reasons but from a different perspective. I was in the middle of grad school at the time and looking for a creative outlet. When Wes and I started talking about the project, it felt like a really exciting challenge. I'd written short fiction; I'd written plenty of academic work. This was something new. Writing completely visually was hard but also, as Wes said, freeing. It's not even quite the same as writing a screenplay. On the one hand, you do get to just go for it because there's no budget to constrain our ideas. On the other hand, everything has to be indicated through action and dialogue. Especially action. The thing has to move. That took a bit of learning, but wound up being really rewarding.

"Scrimshaw" is a collaborative effort. Could you talk a bit about the benefits and hurdles of working together?

Wesley: Very collaborative. Not just between Ian and I but also between our incredible artists Eric Scott Pfeiffer and Ross Taylor, who we were incredibly lucky to get on board as they just lent so much creativity that we weren't even prepared for.

The benefit of Ian and I working together was that we were able to lean on each other's shared interest and storytelling abilities but gain from our

very different backgrounds at the same time. I had worked on one smaller comic before with my wife, and again have been doing sequential visual work in the film/tv space (that's what I do for a living). Ian lent both an academic and well-versed eye to the material and world of the story, as well as this incredible literary quality since that's where his background lies.

Honestly, the most difficult thing about working with this many people on one product was just timing. Getting things moving on a timely basis, making sure everyone had time to write and/or review and/or illustrate in between the usual drudgery of life was an ongoing battle. But, similar to being on the whaleboats, we'd have these long stretches of monotony with little progress, then these little flashes or flurries of activity; and that ultimately got us where we wanted to go.

Ian: Wes and I are very different writers. Sometimes that's challenging—there were arguments about things all the way down to what to name the ship—but, at the same time, these arguments were really good for each of us. As Wes says, I come from an academic "literary" background and I think that encouraged me to sort of over-write some things or get too far away from the visual elements. Wes, coming from film, would really emphasize the need for moments, the need to integrate whatever philosophizing or characterization I would sometimes get lost in into something that feels more immediate for an audience. With that in mind, I think we both agree that the people who really opened the project up are the artists. I still can't believe the work they did. They took the seeds of ideas in our heads—things we weren't really sure were even possible—and turned them into things we couldn't imagine. That took a ton of coordination and, yeah, time. We're all doing very different things so getting the work started took up a lot more time and energy than I think we'd anticipated. Now that we have a sense of it, a lot of that is out of the way, but time and distance will always present the challenges.

To many readers, *Moby-Dick* might assert itself as an influence on "Scrimshaw." Is this case? What else influenced the work?

Wesley: Absolutely, and I'd let Ian speak to that primarily as his background is tied closely with Melville. I really got hot on this subject matter after reading *In the Heart of the Sea* and thinking about what a great TV series could be based on this little island that generated almost all of the wealth of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Not just the guys out on the ships, but honestly the first hundred pages or so of that book about Nantucket itself—the power struggles at home. There seemed to be all this hidden drama and behind the scenes conflict between different classes on the

island itself and it just seemed really ripe for a continuing narrative. Again, we couldn't afford to produce a 19th century epic for screen, so here we are.

Ian: I mean: writing about whaling after *Moby-Dick* is like writing about spaceships after Star Wars. Mark that, it's harder, because, to me, *Moby-Dick* is basically the sacred document of American literature—and I do mean sacred. It's my favorite book and the one I recommend to anyone who ever asks what book they should read on vacation. Nobody ever believes me, but, I swear, it's fun! I could go on about that book (and have, at length, at very great length), but here's the thing: Nantucket is a whole world, full of stuff nobody would ever believe. We got to write so much material just about the lives of the women at home interacting and cultivating community, but also competing in business in a really radical way. We got to write about these rituals on land and at sea that bonded people to each other and to this mission that they saw as, in a way, holy. We got to write about what was, at the time, the most technologically advanced industry in the country, maybe the world. We got to write about human beings really contending with nature and trying to figure out the big existential questions that cropped up there. We got to write horror stories. We got to write about rocket-powered harpoons. Some of that stuff reveals these corners of humanity and society that you wouldn't think it could. Some of it is just cool. I actually think that part of our goal is to open up this world to new stories in the same way that you can write a million westerns. They're set in the same world, and sometimes they play off of tropes and archetypes in really interesting ways, but that template also allows artists to create something that's both referential and brand new. Isn't that what all of our art does? And yet, this world felt oddly underused. We've talked about this as kind of the site where modern industrial America founded itself. There's more than one story to tell there.

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

Wesley: For me the first few pages in this section are dynamite. The almost pure blacks with no definition between sea and sky. Those intense close-ups and ink splatters. Really a mythical quality that Ian alludes to in writing the panels, and that Eric realized as the first artist to jump in on the project. The whole point of this was to take something that I think with examples like *Moby-Dick*/19th century writing often gets short shrift as dry or monotonous, and go: no, these whalers were damn action heroes! These guys were astronauts mixed with hunters mixed with explorers mixed with

scientists who also just happened to spend nine months of their year out in the whale fields risking their lives to plunge the deepest depths to kill and bring back the largest “monsters” mankind knew at the time. Meanwhile their wives and widows and religious leaders and ship owners were back on the island all trying to get an upper hand on one another by whatever means necessary. It’s really fascinating stuff, and those first few pages, I think, really sold it.

Ian: I agree on the opening panels. That black is just gorgeous to me. At the same time, this goes back to something Wes alluded to: there are panels that feel like just a couple of people talking in a room that I find really exciting. That might sound odd but that was part of the fun and the challenge. How do you make a nineteenth-century drawing-room conversation interesting? There’s at least one panel I’m thinking of that comes a little later on in which we get to see a house and follow a conversation through it that, to me, just evokes the fun we got to have on the project. It was something we thought of and weren’t sure was possible, and then there it was. This will get a little English Major-y but I think of Edith Wharton as one of the most exciting action-packed writers out there. And yet, all of the action takes place in people blushing, or holding cups, or looking at wall-paper. Thrilling stuff, right? But it is. She’s just that good. Our artists were able to do that with a few panels and I’m really proud of that.

What tips do you have for artists making comics?

Wesley: Set up a checking account with recurring automatic payments.

Ian: Find a good bar.

How much research went into the historical representation of characters and setting in “Scrimshaw”?

Ian: We had to make sure we weren’t getting too far afield of the whaling technology. That involved a lot of fact-checking. It was important too because the actual technology is fascinating in its own right. It was also really important to be honest to our characters, even as we were trying to present something fun for the audience. We talked about this a lot. Part of that meant making sure we looked into things like fashions and what not. We asked whether a person would wear a certain jacket, for example. Believe me, there were plenty of times when we would write a whole bunch of stuff for a character to wear, do, or say, only to realize it didn’t make any sense at all for the time or the place. Part of the challenge also meant

properly representing the classed, gendered, and racial dynamics of the era. We had to be sensitive there, and truthful. Some of that research happened naturally—it's my academic field, after all—but we put in work because the limitations of the era are actually kind of possibilities. All of that said, there are at least a few characters modeled after, say, musicians that we just did to amuse ourselves. I'll let you try and figure out who.

Who are your comic inspirations?

Wesley: Honestly: *From Hell*; Kirkman (just due to the sheer page-turning quality of a never-ending story like *The Walking Dead*); I love Jason just because of really interesting, funny, depressing plots with a really simple artistic and character style. Though I don't know how much play that has here.

Ian: We're probably on the same page here. I actually thought a little about Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, too. Just in terms of creating a complete world in which you get to tell vastly different kinds of stories.

How did the editing and revision process work?

Ian: Slowly.

To be more serious: I think, at first, Wes and I would hash out ideas and then I would go back and write it all as prose (pro tip: don't do this). Then we'd read it and figure out what worked and what didn't. When we started re-writing it with panels and directions, we'd discover limitations and places where we'd gotten slack. You cannot, for example, have a twenty page scene set in a bar with people just tossing insults at one another, no matter how much fun you have coming up with those insults. So we'd write the panels and then trim the panels. When we were happy, we'd send things to Eric and Ross and they, being the experts they are, would let us know again what needed rethinking. That was another step. Finally we'd sort of work our way to the finished product. So: get drinks and yell at each other, write, edit, rewrite in panels, edit, send to the artists, edit, send back to the artists to make something beautiful. It was a pretty messy process at times but that's where writing lives.

Without spoiling too much, what can readers expect from the rest of "Scrimshaw"?

Wesley: No joke, at the pace we're moving, we've written a general plot for almost 1200 pages, of which we now have 120ish. So... the civil war,

the jungles of Brazil, on-ship love affairs, conspiracies involving the Freemasons, shapeshifting delirium, a giant turtle. Whales getting lit up with kitanas. Rocket powered harpoons. Blood and violence, hell's heart, all that good stuff. Give to Greenpeace, please. Seriously. We don't condone this kind of behavior.

Ian: Two words: talking jaguar. Also, yes: The Sierra Club is your friend.

What's the release schedule for "Scrimshaw"?

Ian: The first volume is complete now. It's our maxi-sized entrance into the world. The more digestible volume two is about to be finished with thanks to Ross. After that, we hope to be on a pretty regular schedule since the volumes are smaller and already written, just awaiting art.

Where can readers find the rest of "Scrimshaw"?

Ian: Volume one is on Amazon now. Volume two will be there very shortly, and you should be able to find us at our website (scrimshawcomics.com).

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Featuring the first chapter of *Scrimschaw* by
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and Ross Taylor