



# driftwood press

## literary magazine

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## Interview

Kevin Schutt

### **When did you write the poem?**

I wrote this poem over the span of two years. I finished it over the summer.

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

The will to write the poem was inspired by a picture from the Somali famine. I wanted to write a poem that was accessible to everyone but spoke to creativity and how it tends to put one up close and personal with rejection.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

I revise and revise some more. So the revision part was the most difficult part.

### **What is the significance of the poem's title? Did this title come before or after the poem was written?**

The words came together nice. I liked their flavor and the trip the tongue takes when myself or someone else says it.

### **You use a lot of interesting line breaks. Is this categorical of most of your work, or is this poem unique?**

The collection this poem comes from was extremely experimental for me. I wanted to fool around with spacing and line breaks and I'm kind of hooked now. My poems before this collection tended to be more conservative in regards to line breaks and spacing.

### **What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

I liked that it was a newer publication, and the work was on point and of good quality.

# Hidden Force Observed

David Hathwell

Physicists  
have identified a  
force, as yet unnamed,  
that powerfully draws two objects  
together. At last science can explain why  
the common sandal clings and water seeks its own  
level, why pages stick and momentum gathers. Now we know  
why all lines converge except for parallels, whose bond is never broken,  
why crowds assemble but the safest place is here, why the keynote once sounded,  
sounded just once, seizes the ear and holds it against all comers, why there's  
no place like nothing new and if it isn't one damned thing leads to  
another, why before you know it a train a line a vein a flow of  
thought, why where would we be without the classics,  
why theories unify and the thrill of the known,  
why it isn't the journey, it's the return,  
why the one safe place,  
why home.

## Interview

David Hathwell

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

Our affinity for the familiar—the urge to go back, the urge to “home”—seems inborn, but in some of us dangerously, when it takes the form of an aversion to novelty and change. I face this danger regularly, so it seemed a natural subject for a poem.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

Among the challenges (each seemed the hardest at the time): sustaining an inventiveness that finds forms of experience that are apparently widely disparate but again express my notion of affinity; wording and ordering the ideas so that they feel part of a larger, directed, accelerating movement; and sustaining the ironic tone. (If you believe that humor in poetry has to be mordant, this poem is not for you.)

### **Your poem’s structure is eye-catching and wonderfully controls the rhythm of the poem. When, in your writing process, did the idea for this structure arise?**

Finding the structure you see was the last challenge, and a decisive one. (The poem felt close to finished once I found it.) If the poem’s first, short utterance—its point of origin at the left margin—is home, the widening lines that follow are steps away from home, which are then retraced in driving movement back to home. The smaller syntactical units of the second half constrict the freer movement of the first half—I think of their ellipses and solecisms as a sort of heedless scrambling over grammar to get home fast. (The language becomes more abstract at the close—there are no carefully focused images anywhere—so as to promote speed.)

I became a better reader of poetry—a better writer too—when I realized that it’s through form and syntax that time becomes a dimension of the poetry-reading experience. That is to say, sound pattern and sentence form offer the poet precise control of emphasis and tempo, so that the

poem's "events" happen exactly when and where they should. The challenge of using form and syntax as I do in my poem was as much an inspiration for writing it as the challenge of arguing its theme.

**Do you primarily write poetry?**

Yes. I occasionally write prose on literary subjects. I'm a retired English teacher.

**Who are some of your favorite writers?**

I'll name two poets: Elizabeth Bishop, patron saint to novice writers, who makes us believe that we can write poetry, and makes us want to try (though converts may discover that hers is a one-person religion after all), and Richard Wilbur, whose poems are lessons in the uses of beauty in verse.

**Where can readers find more of your work?**

In recent issues of *The MacGuffin*, *Slant*, and *Measure*. My poems can also be found online, at *Cider Press Review*, *Condite Poetry Review*, and *Angle*.

## Prairie Sublime

Genevieve Zimantas

The prairies can do that to you, make you small. Eight months pregnant by the hood of a car with headlights on but there's nothing for the light to catch. Life is big on the outside of the car. It could be like music but even the wind is still. The empty is stoic and the stoic is too much for anyone. More so, when neither of them knows how to fix the belt and they're trying to remember how long it's been in minutes, then distance, since they passed the last station. But topography can't blend the streets so flat, so there's waiting that leaves the skin raw. Exposed to the eyes like the elements. You're too young for this at any age.

## Interview

Genevieve Zimantas

### **When did you write the poem?**

I wrote this poem pretty quickly, in fifteen minutes or so, in late August of this year (2014). I let it sit for a few weeks and then went back to it, cutting it down considerably and preparing it to be read by other people. The whole process was much speedier than I'm used to.

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

This poem was inspired by the prospect of moving to a new province – which I did in September. The idea of putting so much stark wilderness between myself and everything and everyone I'd ever known made me feel vulnerable and got me thinking about inherent human vulnerability and about the road trips I'd taken with my parents as a child. The family dynamic I created in the poem is fictional – I moved by myself – but I think that there is a power in recognizing that vulnerability and in being able to keep going anyways, no matter the situation. Getting from city to city in Canada is an experience dedicated to both the boredom and the magnificent terror of the way we perceive and understand distance. At times, it can be an experience which very much approaches the Romantic sublime.

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

Lots of the original conception of the poem didn't make it into the final draft. Originally the poem was quite a bit longer. I'm especially sad that a line about the “friction of walking between wheat and clouds” didn't make it in. It's an idea I hope to return to.

### **Is nature a common theme in your other poetry, or is "Prairie Sublime" unique?**

Nature is a recurring theme in my poetry. How could it not be? But

I'm trying hard to always defamiliarize that natural world to myself in each poem. I think that I, like many people, have a tendency to romanticize, aggrandize, and render the natural world terrible to myself in turns. All of these sentiments are, or have been, true to my experience at one time or another but there's something real about the natural world beyond me that is permanently inaccessible. That's what interests me most about nature.

**Do you primarily write poetry?**

Poetry is my primary creative outlet but I'm currently completing an MA in English literature so academic prose actually makes up the bulk of what I write. I feel that poetry will always be my first love but I occasionally do write short prose fiction and would like to turn to it more when time allows.

# Terrapin

Tyler Kline

I.

We found it dug into the sand,  
took turns beating it against rocks and chanting.  
Our temple bell broke afternoon;  
we spit each toll.  
Campfire lit our nocturnal selves  
for violent hours.  
King wore the painted-helmet.  
Made subjects touch ember or eat ash.

II.

In another valley  
wild flowers grow senseless and orange.  
Trees are washed and new,  
brilliant after drinking,  
managed by sparrows  
until they land as tattoos.

III.

King snaps a branch and  
calls Plymouth Rock this night.  
Inside the shell we write our names,  
our *real* names. Lie and say  
we've killed something,  
once or twice.

IV.

It is thrown by morning  
and we have become accidents.  
No bite marks, only eyes.

(no stanza break)

Distant flowers catch the shell.  
Their faces explode,  
as the way they are meant to.

## Interview

Tyler Kline

### **When did you write the poem?**

I started writing "Terrapin" early this fall while remembering moments of summers past (this tends to happen while cursing an especially cold autumn day).

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

As boys, my neighbors and I would wade in an especially dirty creek behind our homes. On one occasion, we found a ghostly-white shell on the bank – I've never seen a shell this white – of an enormous snapping turtle. The rest is boyhood.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

The hardest part was the decision to break the poem into strophes. Initially, the poem was divided into stanzas, but when reading it aloud, I wasn't satisfied with the poem's breaks. I decided each part of the poem needed more time to breathe and resonant, like a photograph developing, so I started playing around with partitioning the lines into strophes.

### **The four sections of "Terrapin" are filled with imagery and action that connects them to one another. In your writing process, did you map out these connections, or did the poem come as a whole?**

The poem did come as a whole (as the majority of my drafts do), but I was uneasy with the fluidity and progression of "Terrapin" so I started experimenting with strophes in order for all the physical imagery to be absorbed and understood by the reader. Hopefully it worked.

### **Do you primarily write poetry?**

I mostly write poetry, but I have fiddled with long-prose pieces. They've been sitting in dust for years so maybe now is the time to revive them.

**Who are some of your favorite authors?**

Anything by Matthew Dickman or Tony Hoagland, but right now I'm currently enjoying Connie Wanek, Idra Novey, Franny Choi, Danez Smith, and Devon Miller-Duggan.

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

Other poems of mine can be found in issues of *Rust+Moth*, *Ohio Edit*, *St. Katherine Review*, and *San Pedro River Review*.

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

I was drawn to Driftwood by the quality writing I read in previous issues. I also couldn't help but be captivated by the beautiful cover art each issue features. I had to submit.

from *How the Light Will Pass*  
*we have gardens at the earth's core*

Rob Cook

Hiding in the cunt  
of a hydrangea,  
where morning  
    reveals itself  
    as another hydrangea,

Mrs. Gearhart measures,  
in traumas of handwriting,

the scream stains  
left by God  
    near the rain  
    a flower feels  
    in hell,

gathering that dampness,  
though it is gone,

from a pair of deserted, creek-bed panties.

## A Hurling

Olivia Olson

Of course I tell stories—  
                  “it’s too late,” the cards  
                  kept squawking—  
they’ll tell the truth.

Remember

when I took you  
down by the felled,  
fungused tree,  
straddled it, selfishly  
soaked up the last  
of the daylight—  
                  “too late, too late”—  
til you silkened the spring  
snow? I’m fairly sure  
a poplar grew up  
from that spot—sort of  
gangly but a good  
          kid, a good kid.

I don’t know. I guess a robin.

I dreamt my father’s hair

on fire that night.  
My sisters and I laughed  
and laughed.

That’s the wood thrush, mothering us,  
with the rattling at the end.

That should tell you  
the kind of man  
he was. But, we all  
do our best.

## Interview

Olivia Olson

### **When did you write the poem?**

Last March. The winter had been brutal and persistent and was just beginning to lessen, so the idea of fertility and spring were strong with me.

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

Many fractured things inspired this poem—sex, the woods, magical realism, bird songs, father/child relationships. Some of these things were inspired by my own life, and others I plagiarized from what I saw happening in other people's lives.

### **What was the hardest part about writing the poem?**

Finding a way to make a web of several disparate ideas within the confines of a single poem. I'm still not entirely sure how they're related, but I know that they are.

### **You use a lot of interesting line breaks and spacing throughout your poem. Is most of your work like this, or is this poem unique?**

For a long time, I was fairly consistently writing left-justified block poems, but now I rarely do. Experimenting with spacing and bizarre line breaks has proven to be much more satisfying.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

I Some of my mainstays are Frank O'Hara, Virginia Woolf, and Henry Miller. Lately I've been really interested in Wendy Xu, Laura Kasischke, Jamaal May, and John Ashbery.

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

Yes, I have been lucky enough to be published before. My poems can be found at [oliviapoems.tumblr.com](http://oliviapoems.tumblr.com).

The Good Part  
For Martha  
Emily Hipchen

On days she expected company  
Mother dressed us in socks,  
tied towels around our knees,  
doubled the baby's diapers  
then turned on the stereo. We danced,  
first in her arms, then by ourselves.

The New Christy Minstrels, Ray Coniff,  
*Finlandia*, The Pops dropped automatically,  
one after the other. We rolled and tumbled,  
jounced the baby on our hips, slid  
him under furniture by the arm, the leg,  
his alarmed face a picture of excitement,  
his tiny shirt rucked up on his belly.

In the kitchen she hummed along,  
wrapping her Vienna sausages in bacon  
run through with colored toothpicks,  
folding Dream Whip into Jell-O,  
rolling iced cakes in sprinkles.  
Now and then, she'd come out, hands  
in a dishcloth, to kiss  
the air around the dirty baby,  
who giggled and sneezed.

She washed him in the sink like a dish  
while we licked the bowls clean for her  
and pinched up the lost jimmies.  
The baby asleep, bubbling with milk,  
we waited for our turn in the bath.

When at last her guests stepped in  
on heels that clicked on the clean terrazzo—  
the men sun-browned, crinkled at the eyes,  
the women powdered with Chanel—  
they patted our faces, ruffled our damp hair,  
admired the baby sucking a sweet fist.

The sitter put us to bed, but not before  
our mother, folding up like the pin-tucked apron  
she never wore to work in, sat herself down  
on the shining floor in a cloud of blue gingham skirt,  
the blue the same larkspur as her eyes, to visit.

## Interview

Emily Hipchen

### **When did you write the poem?**

I wrote “The Good Part” as a draft several years ago but came back to it last year and massively revised. I think there may be only a single image in there from the old version. I may have kept just the title, even.

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

I was thinking, in part, about my poet friend Martha Serpas and my mother, whose name is also Martha, and some of the music from my childhood, and finally and most importantly about the passage in the Bible in which Martha is distracted by housework and resentful, while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens – and Martha gets reprimanded. I got to thinking about “the good part” and how to negotiate the base necessities of life (feeding oneself, cleaning, taking care of others) and the impulse to know more, to listen better, to learn and expand the mind, which takes leisure and freedom, to a certain extent, from these things. In a way, the poem is a fantastic amalgam of wishful images. My mother does have blue eyes and I do have two brothers and we did listen to this music as kids. Nothing else is actually taken from my life, however.

### **Is most of your poetry narrative, or is this poem unique?**

Is the poem narrative? I suppose so. I think of it more as an allusive poem.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

The ending, for sure. But none of it was what I’d call easy.

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

Virtually everything in the original conception is gone except the concept itself.

**Do you primarily write poetry?**

Not really. I write creative nonfiction primarily.

**Who are some of your favorite authors?**

Eula Biss, Karen McElmurray, Jane Satterfield, Rebecca Skloot, Susan Orleans, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jill Lepore, Susan Orlean, Marcia Aldrich, Nick Flynn. In poetry, I like Nick McRae, Martha Serpas, Erica Meitner, Jehanne Dubrow, Beth Ann Fennelly, Alan Michael Parker, Rebecca Baggett, Sarah Gordon, Erica Bernheim, Ching-In Chen. But there are dozens of others.

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

Yes. I have a monograph, *Coming Apart Together: Fragments from an Adoption*, which is out of print now but can be had in used form I think pretty easily; my essays and poems have been published widely in literary journals such as *Fourth Genre*, *Baltimore Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Spoon River Review*, and *The Cincinnati Review*.

## Solstice

Chloe Hanson

A blackberry-night, dark and juicy  
We whirl, wind-blown and shapeless  
down pavements that lick our heels,  
devoted dogs,  
and the moon is a tooth  
hung loose in the sky's jaw  
the sidewalk lifts, a yawning tongue  
to swallow us and thread us through  
star-punched holes in the blackness  
to morning,  
where the sun is a bright-eyed needle.

## Internal Bleeding

Kael Moffat

Just before Chet wrapped himself  
and his motorcycle around  
that lamp post, he finished  
one last joint, sighed, lamented  
over pictures he had seen  
of children with distended  
bellies and bare feet, sighed  
again, and confessed he wanted  
to become a priest and devote  
himself to their suffering.

A light rain fell and cars  
lined the murmuring freeway  
like bright exhaust-and-rubber-  
scented rosary beads. We sang  
“For What It’s Worth” and  
“Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,”  
then he headed down the hill.

Plastic confetti littered the crash  
site, along with the pungent  
incense of gasoline. His closed-eyed  
face seemed almost saintly  
in its bruised serenity. The runoff  
in the gutter, swift and ropey,  
was robed in a rainbow and I hoped  
that door had been opened to him.

## Interview

Kael Moffat

### **When did you write the poem?**

Various drafts of this poem have been banging around in my head for quite a while. I'm not a terribly prolific writer, so it's hard to say when this one began brewing. It hit on this version probably last year.

### **What inspired the poem?**

The poem was inspired by my interest in the Christian theme of redemption and by the fact that Christ seemed very kind and merciful to "rejects" of society--I wrote this poem while living in Kansas, where marijuana smokers are still widely considered as such. The young man in the poem is very similar to a young man I knew growing up who was killed in a motorcycle crash, though I don't know whether he was high when he crashed or what his religious disposition was.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

For me, the hardest part of writing poems is extending the initial impulse or image. I greatly admire good haiku and classical Chinese poetry, which tend to be very short, so pushing beyond that first burst of inspiration can be tricky for me.

### **Is most of your poetry narrative, or is this poem unique?**

I tend to either write compact narratives or poems with a clear dramatic situation. I appreciate limited doses of intensely language-driven poetry (John Ashbery, for example), but I prefer poetry that gives the reader a clear moment or series of moments. I prefer poems that most anyone could read and appreciate...a child of Whitman, I suppose.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

Some of my favorite authors would include Philip Levine, Ana Swir, Tzadeuz Roszewicz (both Polish writers), Jane Hirshfeld, CG Hanzlicek, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, and Shakespeare. As far as recommenda-

tions go...I would recommend that readers get ahold of a wonderful anthology edited by Milosz called Post War Polish Poetry. I still come back to that anthology over and over. Also, I still get wowed by John Keats' work.

**Where can readers find more of your work?**

Work of mine can be accessed online at *Outside In Travel and Literary Magazine*, *Weber Studies*, *Dark Matter*, and I have a personal essay available at *BYU Studies*.

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

What drew me to Driftwood Press was the samples I found on the website: work that was not bombastic, that seemed genuinely interested in connecting with the reader more than showing off the cleverness of the poet.

## Propeller

Katherine Stubblebine

Your airplane part ribcage,  
fire escape ego,  
lollipop fortitude,  
your  
    split-pea-soup.

Doorknobs and demons,  
treasure troves of purpose,  
threatening followers  
with heated lamps  
and road house carnivores.

Convince my mother,  
    convince my rabbi,  
        scare me into oblivion.

## TUNNEL

John McKernan

Dynamite at a distance oozes a sort of calm  
A shimmy sliding through boot and bone

Towards the brain's soft bloom in the skull

Empty space counts for everything here  
One side of the tunnel meeting the other

A deer in the shade of an oak lifts an eye up

Then bows again feeding on grass from mud  
A rumble deep in the earth with the words *Come Home*

## Third-Shift Waitress Named Sandy

Mark Schoenknecht

She sits at his booth  
During a cigarette break,  
Smoke drifting from her lips  
And vanishing  
Like sea foam scattering over a beach.  
“Sandy,” he says,  
“You have the perfect name  
For a waitress.”

She rubs some crust from her eye.  
“I always saw myself  
Becoming an actor,” she yawns.  
“A Sandra Bullock or something.”  
She folds her arms on the table,  
The coarse uniform  
Grating against her breasts.  
“It’s never too late,” he says.

She sees through his bullshit,  
But smiles anyway,  
As if she were a glass bottle  
Filled with the sound of moving water,  
And he was standing on a shoreline,  
Throwing her  
As far as possible  
Into that jewelry of ocean.

## Interview

Mark Schoenknecht

### **When did you write the poem?**

It was written in April 2012. I remember the idea coming to me as I was riding on the subway in Dorchester, MA, where I lived at the time.

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

While my schooling was important in shaping my ideas about literature, I like to think that my real literary education began in the booth of a truck stop in Bridgeport, MI. I would meet up with a friend there three or four nights each week to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes (though I've since quit), and talk—with the talk often centering around whatever books we were reading that week. We got to know a lot of the waitstaff from hanging out there so often, and the interaction described in the poem has its origins in those relationships.

### **Do you primarily write poetry?**

Yes. Though I've experimented with other genres, I've found poetry is the most effective one for expressing my imagination and helping make sense of my experiences. I'm also attracted by the way the poetic composition process tends to be more receptive, providing a space to cull images and phrases from the writer's subconscious, which in turn can lead to moments of revelation or self-discovery. I don't mean to suggest that prose doesn't do this—I've just found, through personal experience, that poetry excels at it.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

I've been especially inspired by the work of Jack Gilbert, Hayden Carruth, and Robinson Jeffers. Diane Wakoski also writes poetry I greatly admire, and has been a tremendous personal influence.

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

I have two poems forthcoming in the Winter 2015 issue of *2River*.

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

A mistake. But a happy one, it turns out. I was trying to find issues of the now-defunct *Driftwood Review*, whose poetry editor, Jeff Vande Zande, has been a favorite author of mine since I took a fiction writing class with him several years ago. I stumbled onto your website in the process, and was impressed by the quality of the writing and artwork I found, so I decided to submit some poems.

## The Statue

Bill Buege

The trail of grain led out onto the prairie,  
where the lads had improvised a shelter,  
let the storm proceed on schedule as storms

are apt to do. The inept leader punched himself,  
*What a shit I am.* The young men spent the evening  
masturbating. Their leader watched, greedy

for the youth he once held lightly as if  
youth were nothing more than time rolled  
tight into a ball. Made of drizzled drops

of iron, the trail of grain could not be eaten.  
No birds would peck away the seeds.  
Masturbation involves motion, change,

conclusion, as does thought. The sculptor  
froze them in the act. The grain spilled off  
the plinth; the lads held steady, poised; the sun

hung in the Kansas sky. All went well until  
barbarians drove in from Wichita, knocked  
crooked the penises, failed to knock them off.

Interview

Bill Buege

**When did you write the poem?**

I wrote the poem a couple months ago.

**What was the hardest part about writing the poem?**

It flowed pretty well, but I did a lot of editing to get it into the shape I wanted. I started with this funny picture of the statue I describe located somewhere outside a small Kansas town. I got the idea from an abstract sculpture a friend of mine built for a small town in Illinois. No one understood it at first, but later got to like it. My imaginary sculpture started out as super-realistic and shocking, but was accepted by the small town folk. I thought the idea of barbarians from Wichita was funny, thinking of course, about the barbarians who came through Greece and whacked off the penises and noses from the famous Greek sculptures.

**Do you primarily write poetry?**

I write a lot of poetry, but also occasionally write a short play or a short story.

**What authors do you recommend?**

Just now I'm reading a couple novels by Denis Johnson. I also like the novelist Richard Powers very much. Poets I like: Mary Jo Bang, Louise Gluck, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, Cavafy (very much), John Berryman, Emily Dickenson, Chaucer, etc. Guess I'd recommend Kenneth Koch.

## Back Home

Sonya Plenefisch

Back home, my neighbor is talking to walls again.  
This is not Gilman's yellow wallpaper,  
and there's no one creeping behind.  
She talks to the paper – the plaster – the piping -  
until her voice reaches the weatherboarding outside.  
There's a bowl of Winesap apples  
going sick and soft on her end table,  
skin peeling back like yellow molten roses.  
She turns the oven light on like a prayer candle and forgets to season the roast.

## Interview

Sonya Plenefisch

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

The allusion to Gilman's story obviously points to one source of inspiration. I suppose the poem is in part also inspired by my own life – around the time I wrote it, I had just moved from Ohio to Cardiff, after spending another prior three months working on the east coast away from home. While I still associate positive feelings with home, I at the same time feel rather like I've grown out of this place that raised me. In a way, the neighbor and her surroundings acts as a foil to my own leaving as well as personify the fear I began to feel regarding the idea of getting stuck in one place.

### **What was the hardest part of writing the poem?**

Tying ideas and lines together with a holding rhythm so they read well has always been a weak point of mine – most of my poems begin with just one or two lines with a highly specific rhythm or mood that then has to be matched with the rest of it that comes later. If not done properly, it reads in an incredibly disjointed and obnoxious manner.

### **Is the theme of home, and conversely being away from home, a common one throughout your poetry, or is "Back Home" unique?**

I suppose, yes, the theme of home is quite a common one throughout my poetry. I've spent quite a lot of time dwelling on the concept of "home" itself, and whether home acts as a physical place or something much more nebulous and undefined. As someone moving onwards with life and reaching the age where the idea of home changes and begins to splinter and split off from the base of family and the place I grew up, I suppose this idea has become more prevalent in my work.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

A hard question to answer, and the answer changes by the month. Currently, though, I'm digging Cormac McCarthy, James Joyce, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac.

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

I would highly suggest the work of both Billy Collins and Zachary Schomburg to anyone and everyone.

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

Most of my poetry can be found at [shppoetry.tumblr.com](http://shppoetry.tumblr.com), as well as on the *Words Dance* website and in past issues of *Clover*, *A Literary Rag* and *Epigraph Magazine*.

Weeds push us

Wendy Scott

to the street. Corner neighbor chopped  
his foxtails and johnsongrass  
a week ago, first time this year.  
Caught a fine. Left the stalks in piles  
on the sidewalk. Travels for work.  
Don't think he wants us here  
beside his house. Empty Strawberry Crush,  
Dew, latex glove, Nikolai pint,  
Newports, six garbage cans  
upside down on concrete, upholstered chairs.  
Used to be a couch on that sidewalk  
but they moved, the house, remodeled.  
Woman in a knee-length pink bathrobe  
tweed slippers, talking on her cell  
holding her son's hand  
walks him home from school.  
Three houses with trimmed hedges,  
trellis, potted begonias on porch steps  
one anti-fracking sign.  
Asters blooming still.  
Houses filled with contractors.  
The caution cones beside that curb,  
neon green paint, been there months.  
Yards of thick black electrical wire  
coiled, tied with bows to utility poles.  
The deli sells Hurricane Malt Liquor,  
homemade sandwiches, individual Klondikes,  
*Chicken Cassaroll* with rice. *Must purchase*  
*food to sit. Two beer maximum.*  
The dog groomer lives behind  
his shop with the bottle redhead.  
(no stanza break)

Their front porch the store,  
they sit above the yard at night,  
on their wooden fire escape.  
Voices audible but not words,  
iced tea or wine  
dinner on a folding table.

## Interview

Wendy Scott

### **What inspired the poem? Is there anything unique about your writing process?**

I live in an urban neighborhood that is suddenly in large-scale transition. Odd juxtapositions fascinate me, which is one reason I love living in the city. One sunny fall day I took a meandering walk and noted intriguing images. Over the months that followed, what started as a huge list of impressions took the shape of “Weeds Push Us,” a single stanza poem with a bleeding title. I chose both the bleeding title and the single stanza form because an unbroken cascade of images is how I experience my neighborhood, and, quite frankly, how I experience most things when I pay attention to them. When I start a poem, I often write down dozens of images and then have to pare and pare to create the poem.

### **Where can readers find more of your work?**

I am glad and grateful that “Weeds Push Us” has found a home with *Driftwood Press*. Anyone interested in reading more of my work can find my book, “Soon I Will Build an Ark,” on the *Main Street Rag* website.

Aujourd'hui

Jason Half-Pillow

Mom is dead. The guy out at the home called and said she died today. I didn't talk to him. My supervisor did and he told me - that she died today. Then he apologized and said it was yesterday. I said what the fuck? And he quickly corrected himself and said, no, I'm sorry, she bit it today - yeah, it was today. Sounded to me like he wasn't sure, but I had to take his word for it. I guess if I had really given a shit I would have vowed to myself to ask one of the geezers out there if she actually died yesterday, but I forgot about the whole thing. He told me they needed me to go out there - they could bury her for me if I wanted - make the arrangements, they had some deal with a funeral service of some sort. I sighed and he sensed I didn't want to bother with the funeral, but he said they said someone has to clear out her room because they've been booked solid for a year now, so they want to offer it to someone on the wait list and get them in there as soon as possible. They know it sounds insensitive but families on the waiting list are very much in distress and getting a room for many of them is a relief on par with something akin to a miracle. He said something to that effect. He said ASAP, if you know what I mean. I asked him why the hell I wouldn't. I forgot to mention my boss was calling me to deliver the news, so no offense was taken by my word choice, which just came out naturally and wasn't really any kind of choice at all. That probably goes for the both of us. I have cleaned up a bit his explanation about how they needed the room, which I ended up helping him make during the call anyway - finishing his sentences and soon the entire explanation, to which he said, "right, right, right...yeah, that's it."

I could hear the usual dysfunction coming through the line. He interrupted our chat several times to correct people who popped in his windowed office overlooking the garage, calling them dumbfuck after his questions and corrections and then getting back on the line to repeat that she was dead and some homo called saying I really had to get up there, and it was a pain in the ass but, truth be told, he didn't give a shit if I missed work to do it in light of the circumstances and all, and I thanked

him for his courtesy and kindness, during which I heard him calling Aroldo a dipshit before reminding him for the umpteenth fuckin' time to lift with his legs. I knew he was standing when he said that and could see Aroldo turning to look not at all comprehending with a fear commensurate with how gruffly the boss yelled but not so with how he actually was and thought Aroldo might never learn. There was something familiar and soothing about his talk, and he told me to get my ass up there pronto, so I wouldn't be too tired Monday when there would be a shitload of packages piled up for me to load. He then said Sacramento is a redneck shithole and I told him I had always seen more blacks and Hispanics at Kings games than Lakers games and he said good for you, and said it's a multi-cultural shithole then, have a nice trip.

I had to ask him to give me the next day off and the next day too; he was hostile because the next day was Friday and the day after that, for me at least, was Monday, so that meant I was getting away with getting a five day weekend counting the day I was making the request, Thursday. I think he was also hostile because he thought the call was over after he said have a nice trip, and I was in agreement with him that would have ended the call perfectly – a point neither of us stated but I intuitively felt to be true. I shared also his disappointment, but it had to be done, considering the circumstances.

He said you'll have to talk to Jim, who we called the Wizard of Oz because he tried to avoid everything and hid out in his office all the time. My supervisor connected me, which for him, was a pretty large sized favor, and I heard him mumbling "what am I? some kind of fuckin' fag?" And then Jim picked up the phone with an irritated sigh. I told Jim I needed the next day and Monday off and he laughed. I said my mom died and he said real fuckin' funny, and I said no, seriously, she fuckin' died today, or yesterday, I don't know, probably yesterday. I don't think even they really know. Anyway, I gotta go up there and get all her shit. Jim said it's already 4:00, meaning, what was the point of going home now since my shift ended at five and he mentioned that he was just then looking at a bunch of packages that needed to be loaded on the trucks, and I just said are you fuckin' serious and he said does the one hour really make a difference? And he mentioned how he kept working his shift when he learned his mother died. I asked if he was asking me to finish my shift today and he said there's only an hour left of it anyway and said again how lucky I was to work Monday through Friday from 9 to 5 – that no one did that any more – and I said neither do I and never have, and then asked if he realized I wasn't even at work, and he said he thought I was in the office with

my supervisor, and I said no, I was at home and he patched me through. Jim's confusion was understandable as connecting someone was not characteristic of my supervisor, who never did anything that he thought had ever been women's work and when asked queried if the person so requesting thought he was a fuckin' fag. Jim relented begrudgingly and gave me Monday off, and he seemed to be clinging to resenting it under the auspices of my still working the traditional days and hours and thus my disappearance really being over the top as far as privileges go.

The drive up there sucked dick. Just a long flat, super dusty section of I-5 headed to Sacramento. There are only two lanes. People were in the left lane going no faster than the right, and trucks suddenly switched lanes more than a few times harshing the mellow I got off the buds I smoked on the way up. I wanted to sleep the whole way there. I swear to God that during one stretch the fuckhead driving the Tyson's truck ahead of me was. I finally passed and flipped him off but he didn't notice. I think he was stoned too. I had drunk some coffee at a rest stop and had to piss, so I was a little agitated.

I got out to the home and the Muzac they play out there made me a little queasy. Some girl with very nice tits didn't know what I was talking about when I said I was here to see Misses so and so, my mother in a real low, solemn voice with a bit of a flirtatious smile. Who wouldn't with her knockers? They weren't gigantic but they were nice. So was her face. She said she was new and looked at the computer and kept asking me to spell it over and over again and said no, not here, maybe she's not in Sacramento but in San or Santa something, and she listed quizzically all the cities nearby, finally relenting to my insistence that I was quite sure it wasn't one of those places, that it was Sacramento. I again said no, she was here, but for some reason not in the computer and asked her how she thought the Kings would do this year. She said she didn't know but hoped they did well. She just moved from LA and said she kind of followed the Clippers because her old boyfriend did and they sometimes went to games together, then said that maybe one time she saw them play the Kings down there. I said probably. Did they have a big Albino looking guy playing center? I could tell she didn't know anything about basketball, so I said the center is always the tallest guy on the court. She said their seats were always really far from the court, so she could never see that well. I asked her if she watched the game on the giant screen and she said she couldn't help but watch it on the court, though it was far away.

"Who won?" I asked.

"Who won?" She asked back and I said the game, the one you thought

might have been the Kings. I was carried away by her beauty, her face now, maybe her eyes had a certain glow or maybe her smile had become inviting, either way, I lost track of the fact that she was just making conversation about maybe seeing the Kings once, so there really was most likely no specific game played that might have been the Kings. I said it's okay. And she smiled a little embarrassed smile and then put on a more professional face though it was clearly a first day expression too. She wiggled in her seat a bit like she was trying to get comfortable and then started peering into the computer screen, like she needed glasses.

A man with slicked back black hair and a tan suit came out extending both hands to grip my one hand that wasn't even extended as I was still leaning on the counter and smiling back and forth at the secretary. He looked more LA than Nor Cal, and I thought of how dusty I 5 had been on the way up here. As he neared, I whispered in mock conspiracy to the girl to Google Kings, Sacramento, Albino, Center and see what she came up with. She whispered back that they took the search engines off the computers, and I asked how she would know what kind of a seizure one of the geezers is having if they can't type the symptoms into WEB MD, and she let out an involuntary laugh. The man in the tan suit had arrived to hear most of this banter and shot her a mildly suppressed, recriminating look.

"You're here to tour our facility?" He asked taking my hand and then dropping his voice a whole register to tell me I was facing a difficult decision which they had no interest in influencing one way or the other but simply wanted to give me all of the information I needed to make sure it was the best possible one. I said that I was here for my mother, and he went on about the mother-son relationship being the most important of all, and I interrupted to say she was already a resident. His demeanor changed very abruptly and he went behind the desk and made for the keyboard and the girl just moved a little bit out of the way. He leaned forward and asked her name, both of his bony dark veined hands sitting on the keyboard like a concert pianist in the dramatic moment before striking his first notes. I said we'd already tried that, and he said let's give it one more shot, maybe there was a typo; I gave him the name and he typed it in and said no one here by that name. I suggested he try again, and he said no need for that and came around the desk to the front and asked if perhaps she was going by her maiden name and said a fair number do these days. I said I didn't think so, but it might be possible. There was a moment of silence and he asked rather impatiently what her maiden name was, and I said I didn't know. She was Italian, so it was the same as

her father's. And his name? I called him Nonno, but I think that's just Italian for grandpa. He looked at the girl whose features were Mexican or Central American, light skinned Mestizo, and asked how you said grandpa in Spanish. She said abuelito, and he and I both shook our heads, which meant that neither of us thought Nonno was Italian for Grandpa, and he went around to type in the same fashion the word Nonno in the computer, which yielded nothing. I said it was probably his first name, but suggested he make sure to type it in with two n's; he said he'd done that, so maybe they should try with just one, which he did quickly and said no and stood up fully still looking at the computer screen as if it had just barked at him and kept looking at it as if she was in there somewhere and he was disappointed that the machine was unable to assist in our search. I said it was most likely his first name, that he was a pretty informal sort, so I wouldn't have run around calling him by his last name, and mentioned that I had only the vaguest memories of him breathing into an Emphysema machine in his apartment in Hayward and patting me on the head whenever I ran in being chased by a cousin. If I got there soon enough, he would motion for me to hide under the bed near his feet without pausing from breathing into the machine, which I did, to no avail. I think he ratted me out, motioning to the floor with his eyes as the vapors went through the ribbed tube of the machine.

He asked where I was coming from and I said LA, but that I was from the Bay Area originally. He asked what I did down there, and when I told him he said that he had called an office of that same company just yesterday, a most unfortunate duty that unfortunately comes with his job, and I asked what was that, and he said he had had to tell someone their mother had died.

"This was a very unpleasant call," he said. "I couldn't reach the young man and had to leave a message and the guy was obviously eating and there was a lot of noise on his end and he kept asking me to hold on a sec, first so he could find a pencil, which broke, so I had to hold again so he could find another one and I heard all sorts of rustling and then I heard him say 'let me have that pen behind your ear' and some argument with the guy who wouldn't give it. And I kept hearing engines starting and roaring. I knew the man would pass the message on gruffly if he did at all, and I kept insisting that I should call back to delivery it personally, in a more suitable setting, and he said this is the only setting we have here, this place is a fucking madhouse at all times, you want soothing and all peaceful try calling a funeral home, now what's the message, I'm a busy man...it was awful."

“But you got the message through...”

“That’s the thing, I really don’t know. I never heard from the guy and can’t bring myself to call again. I would have called his home number or cell but the home number we have is old and disconnected and we don’t have a cell, so I don’t know.”

“Strange...”

“Not really, unfortunately. Not everyone is like you. A lot of people just bring their mothers here to get rid of them, then lose track of them entirely. I make my fair share of calls to dead phone lines.”

The girl behind the counter smiled strangely, in a kind of weary affirmation to say that was true, that’s what people do, and I assumed that she must have worked in a home down in LA.

“All the way from LA?”

“It sounds strange but it’s more typical than you think. We cost a lot less and the distance between there and here is a good excuse for the children not to visit. A lot come from the Bay Area too. Some from Napa. You’d be surprised how cheap rich people can be.”

The girl gave me the same look, only this time raising her eyebrows and nodding, a kind of believe it or not but that’s really true look on her face. She was very cute too, charming I guess you’d say, with a different expression for each thing the guy said.

“They’re not like you,” he said.

“I’m from LA...”

“Yeah but you’re different. I can tell. I’ve done this a long time and you can always tell.”

She nodded.

I told them I would go call my brother. I didn’t have one. I invented him to get out of there with the idea they had of me fully intact. He invited me to use the phone at the desk next to the girl. If only I had a brother to call, I would have done just to get close to her and finalize our flirtation, but I didn’t, so I said my cell is just out in my car and I had another call to make too and the air would do me good. I also said I didn’t know his number – it was in my cell. And they both nodded in recognition. I didn’t come back.

I took the following Monday off, so I had five days off work. I went to my boss with a sob story about family in Sacramento being devastated by my mother’s passing and there being an aunt up there getting on in years who really needed my help because she had broken her hip and had come to rely on my brother from Vegas helping because he was always there visiting mom but wouldn’t be any more. I had to step up, I said. I

asked for a transfer to Sacramento, and he seemed put off by it, but not too much. Every day new applicants came in and he was holding one handful of resumes and tapping the other on a pile of freshly penned applications, so he said he'd call their office and see what they could work out. Sacramento was a hub of sorts, so they had a job and the transfer went through.

I called the girl. Someone else answered, an unpleasant sounding woman's voice you'd expect to hear if you called a middle school. I didn't know the girl's name, so I said I was looking for a girl that worked there and gave a physical description, from which she ascertained that I liked the girl and thus informed me that this is not some kind of pick up bar. The phone sounded to be ripped suddenly from her hands and I heard the distinct voice of the cheery man in the tan suit saying I am very sorry about that, how can I be of help, and I left the line silent thinking for a while of how I would ask for the girl's name and avoid the topic of my mother and my disappearance that day when I had promised that I would be coming right back and even waved in a way indicating so when I looked back from the open doors of the marble floored exit opening up on the fine circular driveway and the fountain of an alabaster angel spitting a perpetual stream towards the blue Sacramento sky. I half expected someone to bring my car around.

## Interview

Jason Half-Pillow

### **When did you write “Aujourd’hui”?**

I’m not sure. I think I may have started around September 2014 when I was living in Perugia, then finished re-writing it after I moved to Vicenza. My computer files say the earliest version was in October of this year, but that was just last time I saved the first version.

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

I wanted the title and the first few lines to allude to the opening of Camus’s *The Stranger*, one of the best opening lines ever, “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I can’t be sure.”

I think I started with “Maman” but switched to “Aujourd’hui” because the story is set in day to day work environments – the Fed Ex or UPS place where the character works in LA, the highway between LA and Sacramento where dazed truckers drive, and then the Old Folks home where a new girl is working reception and the guy running the place is there to greet and drum up business with prospective clients. Anyway, I messed around with the first few lines for a while and figured “today” in French was the best title. It is also in French because the guy falls in love with a girl, so the language of romance is apropos, and “today” hints somewhat at the “*carpe diem*” theme in the story too.

The whole idea was a little bit like calling a story “Call Me” and having the first line be, “Ishmael had enough of his Fed Ex Job and decided to join the Navy, which was so easy to do in San Diego that it could almost be called hard to avoid instead.” I guess that story would have to have something to do with Blondie and Richard Gere too.

### **What inspired “Aujourd’hui”? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?**

The setting in California is and the kind of rootlessness I have moving around a lot too. The work scenes are to a degree, though my experience

with work is actual farce. In fact, a fellow teacher and I one concluded sitting in an Italian police station to answer charges of having slandered a fellow teacher that farce is the highest form of realism. In the end though, my real life work is much less romantic in its dysfunction than the work scenes in this story.

In the end, though, I think the major themes of the story are historical and intellectual – the character makes an existential decision, though it is really driven by romantic, perhaps lustful, impulse. These themes you discover as you revise and hone the work – finding them in there is the inspiration to get the story chiseled down right. California and the west in general are kind of existential settings. I have a, perhaps faulty, memory of having read that John Gardner’s *Grendel* was in large measure a reaction to *The Stranger*.

### **What part of “Aujourd’hui” was conceived of first?**

The premise was first. The idea was to try rewriting *The Stranger*.

### **What was the hardest part of writing “Aujourd’hui”?**

Writing is very easy for me as long as I don’t think of getting something published. Once I start doing that, all kinds of censorious voices start creeping in and things grind to a halt.

I was aided in avoiding this by starting the story as “an experiment”, just a writing exercise, something I could take or leave. Perhaps there is some irony in me sitting down to rewrite the Stranger feeling so indifferent as to where it would take me. The hardest part of writing is always knowing which voice is censorious and which might actually help me better craft the story.

Generally, though, the stylistic and thematic choices present themselves clearly when I revise the story, and the technical parts take care of themselves. Another hard thing to do is set stories aside and not submit them right away. I am thinking of adopting as a rule that I must wait two months before submitting a finished story.

I always have to guard against expanding a story too much, too.

### **Do you primarily write fiction?**

Yes, more or less exclusively. This is something I have in common with the White House press corps and Macroeconomists.

### **What is your creative process? Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

I just sit down and write or rewrite. Truth is that I think coffee has a lot to do with it. I drink a couple pots of espresso first thing in the morning and get too jumpy to sit still.

I am a diabetic and often my morning blood sugars are high, so I have to wait until my insulin takes effect before I can eat, and in the intervening time I drink coffee and write. That is where my process comes from, though it is probably best to call it a “habit”, not a process. I can really only get things done in the morning. After I eat, I need to go exercise so my blood sugars don’t go through the roof. I also have a lung condition that I manage with bicycling and have to ride a lot to keep it, and my diabetes, under control. I am generally good for nothing after I eat lunch upon my return. Really, the first three hours after I get up is my only real window of potential productivity. Computers have really changed the writing process, so that writing and revising are things I do more or less simultaneously now.

### **Why did you settle on this structure and writing style?**

I think it just is my writing style, though it might be better to say it is one among many writing styles. I think I have a few voices and the one in “Aujourd’hui” is one of them. It has in it my futile aspiration to somehow say it all in one sentence and to do my best to approximate the impossible, namely, writing of many things going on simultaneously. Ultimately, I think my central characters are always under siege in one way or another, and, of course, that never comes from one single source. I recall Jose Saramago lamenting in one of his novels that the writer can never convey two things happening at once. By necessity, writing requires things be put in some order.

Therefore, if we distinguish between fiction and non-fiction by saying non-fiction tells us something as it actually happened, then all is fiction because things don’t actually occur in narrative order, at all.

In most of my writing, the narrator or the principal characters are under constant mental siege. If I had to characterize the style, I might call it psychological slapstick.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

I don’t read all the time. I go through periods where I might read more than others. Truth is, I have hardly finished a book in five or six years. For every full book I read, I leave at least seven or eight unfinished. In my reading life, though, I have had many favorite writers: Jose Saramago and Mario Vargas Llosa are two that always come to mind. I have

probably read more history than literature, though. I have no idea what “Aujourd’hui” is like. My guess would be those who like it have a predilection for the irreverent. All told though, I try not to recommend authors or books, or worse, give people books. This is a kind of “don’t do unto others” thing on my part. Reading is not for me some kind of unmitigated joy that transports me to other worlds or opens me up to new thresholds of metaphysical perception.

I think my real problem is simply my diabetes; my blood sugar fluctuations are such that it is hard for me to ever relax enough to get lost in much of anything. Writing is an exception, as is cycling – I think that is because those activities ward off the physical sensations from my diabetes. Maybe they release counteractive chemicals. Anyway, those are really the only two activities I can do for a prolonged period of time with any kind of consistency.

I think my first person narrators are a lot like the first person narrators of Chinua Achebe’s novels – both navigating, with some anxiety mixed with some anger and resentment a dangerous, politicized, social milieu – just unsatisfied enough with their current lot to risk whatever comfort it has. They move through constant dysfunction in worlds marked mostly by distrust. His characters also engage in futile rebellions and do so from a much more ambivalent and compromised position, clear to the reader, and not entirely unknown to them.

### **Where can readers find more of your work?**

“Aujourd’hui” is actually the first work of fiction with some depth and complexity and serious literary merit I have ever had published. I had an essay in the *Iowa Review* that won an award for humorous writing, but that was decades ago, and I really don’t think the piece is that good. I had a story in *The Bicycle Review* last spring and have something also in the current issue of *Hobo Pancakes*, a humor journal. Only *The Bicycle Review* piece is literary. It was actually a derivative story too, based on the novel *American Psycho*. I don’t know if it’s that good. I guess I would say, keep your eyes peeled for future stories.

## On the Hi-Line

Nathaniel Lee Hansen

I've been riding on the Empire Builder since 1:30 in the morning; my sister Kara and my brother-in-law Bryan dropped me off in the Spokane station. The coach car is half filled, yet it's more full than the last time I took the train two years ago (during my freshman year) when my parents, my brother Kade, and I went skiing at Whitefish. The train's coffee this morning was scalding and strong, but it hasn't cut through my grogginess. I still have a full day until Fargo.

The train sways into the Whitefish station, and salt pellets dot the cobblestone platform. A horde of people wait, a mass with dark hair. Native Americans. I'm not sure what tribe. High-schoolers. Boys *and* girls. There must be at least sixty of them, each with a duffle bag or backpack, or both. While I examine the crowd, the words that my great aunt Sheila growled at Thanksgiving revisit me: "The only good Indian is a dead one."

I excused myself from the kitchen table and, suppressing myself in the entryway, my legs wobbled as I muttered every curse word and insult I could; I spoke none of them when I returned to the table. Outwardly composed, inwardly seething. See, my first college boyfriend, Richie Dog Eagle, was Native American. Lakota, to be precise. From a reservation in South Dakota. Our relationship, unfortunately, lasted only seven weeks. Unknown to me, he was cutting so many classes that he was failing all but one. I only knew that he was struggling with some classes. Then, without warning, he simply up and left. I stopped by his dorm room one November afternoon, and his roommate told me he moved out earlier that morning. Richie. The nicest guy and the best kisser I'd ever dated (before or since). I've never told any of my family members, not even Kade (more out of fear that he'll slip up and tell Mom or Dad), about Richie.

Over the crackling intercom, the conductor announces Whitefish will be a fifteen-minute stop. I'm so ready for fresh air—the six hours of recycled and heated train air have dried my sinuses and throat. Plus, the December air will wake me up for my long day. Over 450 miles remain

across Montana. Then all of North Dakota.

Outside I encounter the yelling, laughing, and jostling as the group of young Native Americans begins boarding the train. I can sense their excitement, and I wonder where they're from, where they're headed.

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The train rattles into Cut Bank, the ache in my head reminiscent of the late nights of a finals week not long ago. The car is, fortunately, fairly quiet. My grogginess, a kind of fuzziness, feels worse than before. A trip to the snack car for more scalding coffee is necessary if I'm going to make it through the day.

Across the aisle, a young Native American couple is asleep—his head against the headrest, mouth open; her head against the shoulder of his black parka, her arms clutching his arm as though she were a little girl clutching a favorite stuffed animal to her chest. I make my way to the narrow stairs at the center of the car, wishing I could just take a shower, more to cut through the grogginess than anything else.

When I open the restroom door, there's a wild mass of bare skin—a boy and girl, a loose pile of clothes on the small floor, lots of exaggerated breathing, bodies pasted together. I slam the door shut. Trying another restroom, I find it empty of people but reeking of cigarette smoke. Beer cans, as well as the top of a glass bottle, stick out of the garbage can. I check the bottle—empty. Not that I would drink any. I do have only two rules for drinking: one) not before noon & two) not from anyone else's container or glass.

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The laughing and the exaggerated footfalls are what first catch my ear. Then the *hey* and the *watch out*. Two Native American boys stumble down the aisle, clearly plastered. I turn up the volume on my iPod, allowing the mellow music to distract me.

Suddenly, one of the boys plops down in the vacant seat beside me. Grinning stupidly, he tries running his hands up my arms. I shove him away. "Cut it out," I say, my words louder because of the music's volume. Beer, stale body odor, and bad breath are overwhelming. "Get out of here." When I shove him again, his friend pulls his arm.

"Sorry," the friend says, though from his slurring of the word, I know that he, too, is just as drunk.

The car door opens and they exit, the fast clacking of the wheels on the tracks abruptly louder and then quieter. *What just happened?* I glance at the young couple. They're unfazed by all of this. The girl holds the boy's hand, and he's skimming one of those used car shoppers that convenience

stores always have in the metal racks beside the registers. It lies across the gray plastic tray.

“Are you guys a part of some school group?” I ask, pulling my ear-phones from my ears.

The boy flips a page and looks up, but not at me. “We’re all going to a Job Corps training site.”

“Where at?” I wrap the earphone cord around my iPod and tuck it into my side coat pocket.

“Wolf Point. It’s the middle of nowhere.”

I kind of know what that means. After all, I grew up in Ellis, Minnesota, but I also know that the Hi-line towns are the definition of *nowhere*.

“For part of our Christmas break we get off the rez,” says the girl, her words crisp and efficient. “Thank *God*.”

That’s something I haven’t seen before: a reservation. In my time together with Richie, I wanted to go home with him some weekend, to see if the stories I had always heard were true: abandoned cars, dogs loose everywhere, every house the same design. Plus, I really liked him; I wanted to meet his mother, grandmother, and three younger sisters. That had never happened, although I’d certainly listened to his complaints about life there. He told me there wasn’t much to see on the rez, that the drive from Aberdeen down to the southwest part of the state was boring and I wouldn’t like it. I guess I can’t understand why we never went. In the two years since then, I’ve wondered if his family would have reacted negatively to his dating a white girl who fulfilled the stereotypes: fair skin, medium-length blond hair, blue eyes, *mostly* slender.

“So how about you? Why are you going through this nothingness?” the girl asks.

“To Fargo. I was visiting my sister and brother-in-law in Spokane.”

“That’s a long trip,” she says before turning toward the window, which I take as a signal that our conversation is over.

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I promised myself that I would wait until after Shelby to order some warm food from the snack car. Sure, I have granola bars, pretzels, a bag of M&Ms, bottles of water, and two Mike’s Hard Lemonades, but warm food is always a plus, especially in winter traveling across this cold, desolate land. Having ridden before on the train, I know how you crave food and snacks, even if you’ve eaten something an hour earlier and you’re preoccupied with a book, music, or a conversation.

The door separating my car from the next one slides back, and I enter that space where the cars join. I cross the threshold, hunger pressing me

forward. What I observe is shocking even to me, a college junior. It is somewhat like the platform all over again except some are playing cards, one couple is rolling around (mostly clothed) on the floor, some are throwing a football back and forth. Garbage everywhere. Crushed chips, wrappers, bags, cans, bottles. They've trashed the place. I breeze through to the stairs that lead to the snack counter.

When I finally return to my seat, carrying a paper plate with a micro-waved cheeseburger as well as a bag of plain potato chips, I notice an unpleasant pungent odor.

"What *is* that smell?" asks the woman in front of me.

A man's voice. "The toilets. I heard those Indians plugged them up with cigarettes and other stuff."

I think of the observation car, as well as the restrooms. I can't rule out the possibility.

"It's awful. I wish we could open a window somehow," the woman says before coughing.

"The train'll stop in Havre, but that's a good hour at least."

I try to let the smell of the warm cheeseburger overpower the scent wafting up from the center of the car. I also decide that after I finished my lunch, I'll wash my hands in the restroom of another car. Maybe they haven't trashed all of the restrooms.

The intercom crackles, and the conductor asks for everyone's attention. "This train is non-smoking," he says, the words carrying frustration and barely restrained anger. "If you are caught smoking anywhere on the train, including the restroom, you will be dropped off at the next station stop. Also, the legal drinking age does apply on all Amtrak trains. If you are caught drinking anywhere on the train and you are underage, you will be dropped off at the next station stop. Lastly, any passengers not obeying crew member instructions will be dropped off at the next station stop. Thank you."

Apparently, things are worse on the train than what I've experienced.

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I wind my way down the narrow stairwell, one of my coat buttons making a high-pitched squeak against the metal walls. My feet almost sound hollow on the short, contoured steps. At the bottom of the stairs, the luggage racks are jammed with every size and color of bag. In the middle of the car, where there is an entryway for the side doors, sits a young Native girl. Knees to her chest, forehead on her knees, she's petite in her jeans and tan coat. Through the silver door's small rectangular window, the snow-covered fields are the stark scenery.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, bending over.

The girl peers up at me with one eye and shakes her head. Her black hair swings back, partially covering her face. She must be fifteen or sixteen, at the most.

“What’s wrong?” I crouch like a catcher. Little beads of sweat cling to part of her cheek. At this level, the scent of alcohol is all too obvious.

“I’m gonna be sick.”

This isn’t what I signed up for by buying my ticket. “Here, let’s get you up,” I say, taking hold of her arm.

“I’m too tired,” she says, her voice faint. Then she groans.

And bracing my feet, with one arm now around her back, I pull up with all my might and she hardly has any legs to stand on. All her weight, no more than ninety or a hundred pounds, is against me, and I nearly topple backwards.

“C’mon,” I say, half dragging her to the first door, hoping the restroom is empty. It is. She manages to lift the toilet lid, and I hold her with one arm, rubbing her back as she wretches. It’s a sound I can barely stand.

“I’m done,” she mumbles, so I reach around her to press the flush button and to close the lid.

I tell her to sit. She falls onto the lid, somehow remaining upright. I take some paper towels—thank God there are still some—and dampen them with water. “Here.” I pat her sweaty forehead with the cold paper towels, brush her hair from her cheeks so I can wipe them.

“I drank too much.” She says it as though it is a discovery, a revelation. Maybe it is.

“I guess you did.” There’s no point in lecturing her. “You feel any better?”

“Kinda, yeah.” She adds an *I’m sorry*.

“You should eat a little something,” I say, pretending I haven’t heard her apology. “I’ve got some pretzels up in my seat. They’re tame.”

She simply nods. I pull her up, and we struggle out of the restroom and climb the stairs.

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Alicia, the girl I helped, is asleep beside me; the old blue blanket I’ve brought covers her. She managed to eat some pretzels and drink some water before saying she wanted to rest, wondering if she could stay in the seat next to me because the car isn’t noisy. She reclined, and after I gave her the blanket, she fell asleep. The couple watched the whole exchange—I could tell—but they said nothing.

When the train pulls into the Havre station about a half hour later, the smell of the car much worse, I see the border patrol in their black jackets, and two sheriff's deputies in their two-shades-of-brown uniforms. Four men wait on the platform, one of the deputies talking into the receiver clipped to his shirt pocket. The couple across from me points at them.

I rise, resting one knee on the seat for a better view. As the train crawls to a stop, I brace my arms against my seatback.

"They're getting on the train," the boy says.

The girl replies, "They're going to find 'em. They always do."

"Probably so," the boy says.

From the corner of my left eye I detect movement. The deputies. The dark brown hats. Standing in the middle of the car. One walks away from me, the other toward me. The deputy has the standard deputy look: mustache, wide shoulders, sharply ironed tan shirt. He pauses a couple rows ahead of me, loudly delivering his question. "Any disturbances in this car at all, folks?"

"Just two drunk Indian kids stumbling through. I heard some were fighting in another car," a man's voice responds.

I glance at Alicia—she's asleep.

The deputy reaches me. "Has anyone bothered you, miss?"

I turn briefly toward the couple, and then I see the deputy scrutinizing both them and Alicia. I hear my great aunt's stupid words, and I bet this deputy thinks the same thing. I remember how Alicia said she was sorry and how I wiped her face with the damp towels. I think of the first time Richie kissed my neck, my body straddling his. His cheek smooth, his lips moist. Late at night in the study lounge on the fourth floor of my dorm, the lights off, the windows open, the wind bringing in the fine rain. Where is Richie now? Back on the reservation? Drinking? Doing meth? Dying? Dead? Two years later and I still have no idea.

"Miss, has anyone bothered you? Have you seen anything suspicious?"

All three people are watching me—they're waiting. The deputy's brown eyes seem too small for his hulking body, and then his eyes change to a dull gray, the color of my great aunt's eyes.

"Nope," I say confidently. "Nothing at all."

The sheriff walks past, and I gaze back at the couple, meeting the girl's eyes. I can feel them searching me, seeing inside me. And in that moment—as the faint crease of a smile begins on her face—some tacit understanding passes between us. I'm positive that she knows why I lied, even if I can't quite articulate it myself.

## Interview

Nathaniel Lee Hansen

### **When did you write "On the Hi-Line"?**

I wrote the first draft in July 2009 and wrote the next drafts over a two-year span.

### **What inspired "On the Hi-Line"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?**

I salvaged the train ride premise from an abandoned novel I drafted in 2004. The group of high school kids has autobiographical elements from a time my wife and I rode that very route. Marshalls did come on the train.

### **What was the hardest part of writing "On the Hi-Line"?**

Writing first-person from a young woman's perspective.

### **Which part of "On the Hi-Line" was conceived of first?**

Not the theme, that's for sure. I hate to admit it, but I rarely, if ever, think about themes in my stories. I just try to write a story that will engage readers from beginning to end.

### **Do you primarily write fiction?**

I divide my writing time as follows: 65% fiction, 25% poetry, 10% nonfiction.

### **What is your creative process? Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

I write most days, and I'm never short of ideas. I write first drafts of stories on yellow legal pads before I type an "official" first draft that I promptly print out and file away. The draft sits in a folder for several months before I write a second draft.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors? Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?**

Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Louise Erdrich, Donald Barthelme, T.C. Boyle, Ron Carlson, Sherman Alexie, Rick Bass, and Ann Beattie are my favorite fiction writers. I won't risk making recommendations though.

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

*Whitefish Review*, *The Cresset*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland*, and *South Dakota Review*, to name a few. *Spoon River Poetry Press* published my chapbook, "Four Seasons West of the 95<sup>th</sup> Meridian", in 2014. You can find out more about my publications (including links) at [plainswriter.com](http://plainswriter.com).

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

The quarterly format, for one. The cover art, for two. The aesthetic, for three.

Poof!

Lauren Walden Rabb

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is my pleasure to be at this symposium honoring one of our greatest artists, Marx Shepherd. Let me begin at the beginning, for those of you unfamiliar with our relationship.

I was Marx's dealer from 2014 until his death. I remember well the first day I saw his work. It was raining, and this dripping young man, just out of college, came running into my Chelsea gallery with a painting under his arm.

Did I say painting? There are those who would argue with that.

He demanded to see me, and the receptionist, poor girl, was too flummoxed to argue. So out of my little office nook I came, to find this young man placing his work on an easel. It was a landscape, and quite a good landscape, although not being a representational gallery I was just about to tell him to take it away again, when he suddenly said, "Watch this!" and without more ado, proceeded to put his index finger into the painting and move the paint around.

"Voila!" he cried. The landscape had changed. A tree was larger, a hillside shorter, the sun now brighter.

I had never seen its like, and while I was still too amazed to speak, he declared,

"I have invented moveable paint! This landscape will never dry... The new owners may play with it all they want. *They can collaborate with the artist.*"

Well, there it was. A truly original idea. And frankly, just what was needed in the 2020s. For those youngsters out there, let me remind you of how it was back then. Abstraction was a century old, representational art had been dying for a century too, all the envelopes had been pushed. There was nothing left to do, and yet this young man had found the next movement. Changeable art.

I signed him on immediately, and for the next few years we happily sold hundreds of "moveable paintings." You may not know that most collectors are frustrated artists. This concept of collaboration was irresist-

ible to them. I would have been perfectly happy if Marx Shepherd had never done anything else.

But of course, that's the businessman in me talking, not the art lover. An artist has to evolve.

In the meantime, other artists had picked up on his idea. There were soon moveable sculptures, collaborative drawings, and, perhaps biggest of all, changeable collages. Art and patron had completely merged. Marx's eyes began to glaze over when anyone spoke of it.

Marx announced he needed a hiatus, and I let him go. He went off to Germany, to think, and while he was away art took an interesting turn. It became rather dangerous.

First, there were the moveable paintings with embedded razor blades. Patrons were not amused. We all remember the lawsuits, although no one was actually injured.

Then we had a series of Russian roulette assemblages. If you touched them the wrong way, they might fall apart. Or release an unpleasant odor. Or shoot you, as in the case of the artist Derek Wiley, and his "hidden gun" works. A very foolhardy notion, to my mind, although again I note that no one was actually shot.

It was all quite disheartening. Clients were running away in droves; very few had the stomach for it. The historical galleries picked up business. It looked like it might be the end of contemporary art.

And then Marx came home. His eyes glowed; he danced around the gallery like a little boy; he was beside himself. And yet he held nothing. I waited in breathless anticipation for him to present the next Marx Shepherd idea.

And when he did, it was brilliant.

I'm talking, of course, about the Disappearing Paintings. Or "Poof!" series, as it's come to be known. The concept was simple, yet fantastically dramatic. Paint a painting that one day would just, poof!, disintegrate.

He had been a busy boy in Germany. He'd invented a paint with a life span of between two and ten years. At the end of its indeterminably scheduled lifetime, it simply blew up in a puff of dust and fell off of the painting.

Yes, yes! Incredible, isn't it? And, like everything else Marx did, so well thought out. He had toyed with the idea of a *gradually* dissolving paint, but that had no theatrical appeal. No flare! This would be an event — a painting and a happening — all rolled into one. He correctly foresaw that owners would spend their years with the painting in breathless anticipation.

I immediately saw the marketing potential. It would not be as signifi-

cant if Marx began turning out droves of Disappearing Paintings. No, this had to be a project only for the elite. We decided that he would produce twenty paintings, no more, and that we would begin taking orders right away. In short, we set up an auction situation, with all of the world's biggest collectors competing for one of the twenty.

The frenzy that surrounded this cannot be over-exaggerated. Collectors flew in from Europe, Japan, Russia and the Middle East. They begged me to reserve one; promised me, literally, millions; claimed not to care about the subject matter at all. Just the guarantee that the painting would, someday, go poof. *That* we could guarantee.

Of course, for the lucky few who bought one, that was also the rub. Marx couldn't say *when* the painting would disappear. It was a large window — he could eventually narrow it down to a few years — say, three to five — but that didn't calm the nerves of the owners.

Some never left their homes for years on end. There was that sad case of Mr. Jordan, from the Netherlands, who moved his bed into the living room in front of the painting, and didn't leave the house for four years. Then his mother died, and when he returned from the funeral... well, let's just say his wife committed him to a sanitarium not long after.

And the case of Ramona Johnson, a schizophrenic with a flare for the romantic, who vowed to kill herself the day her painting was no more. Her husband and children, unable to dissuade her, finally donated the painting to the Metropolitan Museum to keep it out of her sight. As fate would have it, Ramona went surreptitiously to visit the painting, and was hit by a car while crossing Fifth Avenue. She was killed instantly, and that same day the painting did indeed go poof.

However, I can report that quite a number of owners had the satisfaction, and great luck, of being right there when their painting dissolved. And not all the near misses were a source of despair. One family in Nevada consulted an astrologer for the exact date of their painting's demise, determined to make the event a celebration. They staged a party. Nothing happened, so the party continued. Days stretched into weeks, weeks into months, the party went on and on. Finally it became clear that the astrologer was a phony, and the last of the guests went home. The next day the painting decided to dissolve. They called back their friends, and danced around its ashes.

The ashes. How many debates in university lecture halls, and on television talk shows, were over those ashes? What to do with the now non-painting with a pile of dust on the floor in front of it? Sweep up the remains? Toss or keep the bare canvas? Recycle the frame? Or keep every-

thing exactly as it had become, as a shrine to the painting, or as an altogether new work of art?

On this, Marx was silent. His silence infuriated critics and patrons alike, yet he wouldn't commit. Did he care? We'll never know.

I suppose I must comment on the wagering. It's true that too many people lost money trying to predict the exact dates of disintegration. The betting in Las Vegas was unprecedented; I understand it set some sort of record. Marx was somewhat horrified, somewhat amused. And anyway, what could he do? He'd created this Pandora's box — he'd set it upon the world — and he could only stand by and watch the myriad ways that humankind dealt with it.

The last of the Poof! paintings disintegrated in July, 2038. Marx Shepherd never lived to see the end of that era, for as we know he died in 2035 of a rare form of leukemia (a side-effect of his work with chemicals? we'll never know), with six of his works still left to dissolve. It was more than the end of a great artist, it marked the end — the final, true death-knell — of painting. What more could be done? What innovations remained? There was naught but to go back to earlier forms of art, and take renewed ownership of them.

I understand that art students have tried to re-create Marx's formula for disappearing paint. It has never been duplicated. Perhaps one day someone will discover its secret, but the question one must always ask is, what for? It's been done. It's only mimicry to do it again. No true artist would want to.

Marx Shepherd. Let us never forget the artist who brought us to the pinnacle of contemporary art, and then left this earth.

And now I'll be happy to answer your questions.

## Interview

Lauren Walden Rabb

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

Titles always come easy to me. I think my brain works like this – as soon as I determine the premise, I create a title and that makes it something I have to write. If I don't give the idea a title, I'm not ready to write it.

### **What inspired "Poof!"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?**

I've worked in the art world for most of my career. It is very meaningful to me, but also hilariously funny when you step back and think about it. It often seems like a real-life example of "The Emperor Has No Clothes" when you ponder the vast amounts of money that people will spend for paint on a canvas.

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

Originally I had a brief introduction where I explained when and where the "remarks" were being made, but another author thought it was unnecessary, and ultimately I agreed.

### **Do you primarily write fiction?**

Yes. I have three published novels (two traditionally, one indie published this year), as well as other short stories that have been published. I often write about art – I'm fascinated by the contrast between how incredibly moving and life changing a work of art can be, as opposed to how ludicrous the art world can be.

### **How did you come up with the idea of disappearing art?**

I was talking one day with a friend of mine who's worked in the art business as long as I have, and we started talking about some of the most

bizarre conceptual art, and about the theme of “painting is dead,” and I put the two together.

**How did you decide on the structure for your story?**

Figuring out how to tell a story is the most fun part of the process! In this case, it just seemed natural.

**Was it difficult to tell a story through a lengthy speech? Why did you decide to share your narrative in this form?**

The advantage of this form of narrative is the ability to not only tell what happened, but to get one person’s perspective on it at the same time. I knew the story would work best if the reader got to the absurdity of the whole thing through the eyes of someone who didn’t think it was absurd at all.

**Who are some of your favorite authors? Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?**

I love long, complicated, Victorian and Victorian-style fiction – which hardly anyone writes today, and which even I don’t write! That’s why I love Charles Dickens and Marcel Proust as much as Donna Tartt and Charles Palliser. Readers who enjoy “Poof!” will like Michael Frayn’s “*Headlong*” (fiction) and Richard Polsky’s “*I Bought Andy Warhol*” (nonfiction), as well as my recent novel, “*The Rise and Fall of the Trevor Whitney Gallery*” – all comedies about the art world.

## Bodies in Motion

Justus Humphrey

From the back row comes a loud squeak. A large man—not one of my students—lowers himself into a chair. For a moment, I wonder if he’s a spy, sent by the hiring committee to observe my class before they determine whom to interview for the elusive full-time position. But in a threadbare sweater, paint-spattered jeans and heavy work boots, he doesn’t look like a colleague. Instead of a notebook, a laptop, or even a phone, he lays on his desk large, fleshy hands. Graying blond curls bypass his ears, grasping at the delicate fuzz that floats about his neck and cheeks like cotton candy.

“What was I saying?” I ask the class.

I scan for eyes turned up, away from phones or notebooks or the floor, and find Megan, a sophomore with pink streaks in her blonde hair and a tiny crimson piercing, whose occasional sparkle distinguishes it from the freckles that also dot her nose. “You were saying bodies at rest stay at rest and bodies in motion stay in motion.”

“Right,” I say. “Unless acted upon by an outside force. This was a simple experiment. Measure the angle of the ramp, the mass of the marble, the height of the table. Plug in those numbers and calculate to make your prediction. You know the outside force of gravity will pull the marble down, changing it from an object at rest to an object in motion as soon as you let go. There are no other outside forces to worry about. It will roll in a straight line at constant velocity. You should be able to predict exactly where it will roll off the table and where it will land on the floor. So why did every group need three or more attempts to make the right prediction?” No one responds. “I’m asking a serious question here. I don’t understand what went wrong.”

Adam’s hand drifts up and hovers near his ear. I never saw students like him back east. He has a positive attitude but doesn’t comprehend basic principles. His father and grandfather worked at the auto plant, as would Adam if it were still an option. I scan the room for another hand. I wonder if the stranger in the back is a displaced factory worker consider-

ing a return to school. Since no other hands rise, I call on Adam. The boy lifts his baseball cap and runs his fingers through his prematurely thinning hair. “What about friction, though? I mean, we—our group—we kind of thought maybe we should adjust for that? Isn’t that an outside force?”

I grip the lectern with both hands and close my eyes. “As I said last week, friction isn’t an issue on this scale.”

Adam looks at Megan as if in apology. She sits up straighter and raises her hand. I nod.

“Mr. Wertham? I thought Adam had a good point. In our group, we remembered what you said about friction *with the table*, but we thought maybe *air* friction would make a difference, like maybe what you said was kind of a trick. That’s why we didn’t get it right the first time. And the second time, I think our marble hit a piece of lint or something.” She and Adam swap grins.

I never imagined these two on friendly terms. She is taking six classes to complete her Gen Eds before transferring to a university in the spring; he is retaking three classes he failed last year. She smells like cocoa butter; he smells like cigarettes. When they joined the same group for this experiment, I assumed it was because they were among the only teenagers in a room full of students who sacrifice time with their kids and spouses to sit here and pursue their dreams of escaping lives as beauticians or security guards or cashiers to become nurses or police officers or paramedics. For a moment I see the vivid image of Megan and Adam in bed, her round young body clutching his bony shoulders. She’s a body in motion, and he’s an outside force. She could go far if she doesn’t get weighed down.

I turn to the rest of the room. “This is basic stuff, people. I’m not trying to trick you. There isn’t some conspiracy to prevent you from succeeding. I *want* you to do well.”

Books and pens slide into bags. “I guess we’re out of time today, but remember—” Backpacks zip and chairs squeal against linoleum, drowning out my parting comments to pay attention and follow directions.

I shuffle together the take-home quizzes, slip them into my canvas satchel, and scan the chalkboard for an eraser. When I can’t find one, I use the flat of my fist to smudge out my notes. They don’t fully erase; the ghost of the word “inertia” lingers as I turn around. Only the stranger remains, growing larger with each step as he makes his way to the front.

“Dr. Wertham?” His voice is like his beard, wispy and more suited to an adolescent than a man his size.

“Not technically.” I sling my bag’s worn strap over my shoulder.

“Edward Wertham?”

I nod and envision him handing me divorce papers while saying, “You’ve been served.”

“I’m Dan Moore. Danny?” The left edge of his lip quivers.

“I’m sorry? What’s this regarding?”

He looks over my shoulder at the chalkboard. “I know it’s been a long time, but . . . Danny? From Monroe? We went to school together.”

I squint and subtract twenty years from the big man’s face, erase the lines from his forehead, crop the loose mane, and raze the beard. “Danny. Wow,” I say. “Hi.”

The tic at the edge of his lip becomes a broad smile. “Eddie! It’s good to see you.” His callused paw engulfs my slim right hand.

“Did you move back to town?”

“Passing through. My dad died. Lung cancer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It turns out that—do you remember Ryan? Jacobs?”

I nod. Like many of our classmates, Ryan never escaped this town. At least I got out for a few years, though I’m not sure which fate is worse.

“Ryan’s working for his dad’s funeral home now and helped settle my dad’s stuff. I asked if he knew what you were up to. He said you taught here. A professor, huh?”

“Sort of.”

I consider dropping my bag at my office before leaving campus, but I prefer not to reveal the fifty square feet I share with four other adjuncts, so we stroll to my car and I deposit my bag next to the booster seat in back.

On the drive, we pass plywood boards instead of windows, and I apologize for the fast food wrappers on the floor by Danny’s feet. We park in a nearly empty lot and walk to a café where Danny and I once bought ice cream in the summer, sat on the curb outside, and raced to see who could finish his cone first. Danny always won while I wound up clutching my forehead in pain.

Inside, Danny asks how my parents are, and I ask about his mom. They’re all fine. He tells me about moving with his mom to the city and how he’s lived there, off and on, since then. I show him pictures on my phone of my daughter and wife. The next two minutes summarize two decades. I talk about the famous universities where I earned my degrees and taught in graduate school. I highlight the projects I worked on and my specialization for my dissertation. What I tell Danny can be found on the CV I shop around each semester. I don’t tell him the dissertation is unfinished or about losing my fellowship or that my wife’s pregnancy led

us to move back here to live with my parents while we try to emerge from mountains of debt. Those details I keep to myself.

As we wait for sandwiches, Danny says, “Professor Wertham,” emphasizing the title. His thick fingers drum on the table. “I always knew you’d go far.”

I dig with my thumb at a corner of peeling wood grain laminate to reveal aluminum covered in gold glue. “What are you up to these days?”

“I manage apartments. My mom and I went in with my uncle to buy a building. This was back when the banks were desperate to loan money out. I run the place. Steady work now that nobody can afford houses of their own.” He pulls a business card from his front pocket and gives it to me.

Daniel Moore  
 Moore Apartments  
*Moore Space. Moore Service.*  
*Never Believe Less is Moore!*

I tap the card against the table. He pulls a strand of hair from between his lips. The frayed cuff of his sweater exposes a dark line on the underside of his left wrist.

I point. “A tattoo?”

He slides his sleeve up. Nesting inside a ragged circle is the letter *A* in a pale blue font that looks like miniature graffiti.

“Anarchy?” I try to sound approving, like I’m hipper than I look in my tie and sweater vest.

“Yeah. I don’t know. A buddy did it for me a long time ago. Laser removal’s expensive.”

I tug at my left earlobe. “I had an earring in high school. I don’t know if you can still see the hole.”

Danny squints across the table. “Never pictured you with an earring, man. You were . . .”

“A nerd?”

Despite the graying beard, his smile is the same as when we were seven. “What did your parents think?”

“They were glad, actually. I was hoping to impress a girl. It was the first sign I might not spend my whole life in my room reading comics.”

He laughs and bounces in his seat. “Man, I always loved your parents.”

My mom was convinced the Moores couldn’t afford to properly feed such a tall boy, so she made especially hearty dinners whenever Danny slept over. And my dad loved challenging Danny to one-on-one basketball

in our driveway. “You in town long? You could say hi.”

He pulls his sleeve over his wrist. “Heading back tonight.”

Our sandwiches arrive; we eat mostly in silence. Then, for something to say, I ask when he got the tattoo.

He sets down his sandwich and stares at the backward letters painted on the inside of the café window. It’s dark out. We can see our reflections better than the outside world. “I was in prison.”

My ears begin radiating heat. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

He waves away my embarrassment. “Don’t worry. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know what to say. You’re doing so good. Wife and kid. Professor. It worked out different for me. And it wasn’t nothing serious. I never killed nobody.” He tugs on his beard. “Drugs. But I’m on a new path now. I been clean almost ten years.” He knocks on the tabletop, which responds with a clang. “I guess that’s not wood.”

I consider telling him I smoked pot in college, or that I disagree with policies that send drug offenders to prison alongside violent criminals, or just telling him the truth about my life. Instead, my phone starts vibrating, clanging against the table, so I say nothing. A picture of my wife lights up the screen. I hit the ignore button and put the phone away.

Danny says, “Do you remember that science fair in seventh grade? Right before me and my mom moved away?”

Though I haven’t thought about it in years, it’s easy to recall. We did one of the quintessential science fair projects: running mice through a maze. Gandalf, my albino mouse, was purchased at a pet store on my eleventh birthday. But Danny’s mouse, Crackers, was different. The previous summer, Danny had found in the back of a cupboard a nest of abandoned baby mice, their mother surely killed in one of the many snap traps spread throughout the house. Three babies had already starved, but one kept squeaking. Danny placed him in an old goldfish bowl and fed him milk from an eyedropper until he was big enough to eat seeds. Not even the most musophobic individual could deny that—with his miniscule body, shining whiskers, and velvet fur—Crackers was adorable.

When the spring science fair approached, we knew what our project would be. We hypothesized that Crackers’ wild birth would make him a tougher competitor since he had already survived perilous struggle. I designed the labyrinth, and Danny constructed it in his woodshop class. For almost three weeks we met at my house each day and ran the mice through the maze.

On the twentieth day, I brought Gandalf and the maze to Danny’s house since he said he had something to show me. We went to his room,

and like a magician pulling aside the curtain to reveal his assistant has disappeared, Danny opened his closet door and exposed an intricate series of tunnels leading from Crackers' goldfish bowl up and down through loops and curves to the aquarium we'd found the week before at a garage sale. The tunnels consisted of interconnected toilet paper tubes and paper towel rolls, some of which were taped to a broken Hot Wheels ramp. "It's like yours," he said. Mine, purchased at the same pet store as Gandalf, was a professionally manufactured habitat of multicolored translucent plastic tunnels, but I was never as happy with it as Danny was with his cardboard construction.

We sat and watched Crackers climb in and out of the tubes. The tunnels featured a number of forks, some doubling back to the fish bowl and others leading to the larger aquarium. When Crackers disappeared inside a tube, we couldn't see which path he took, so we tried to track his movements and predict where he would emerge based only on the sound of pin-sized claws scratching against cardboard.

We played with this new construction for half an hour before running the mice through the maze again. Then, frustrated that Gandalf and Crackers both took longer than ever to complete the maze, I logged the scores and took Gandalf home.

That night I was doing my algebra homework when Danny arrived. Fine veins forked across the whites of his eyes. His nostrils were pink and raw. When I asked what was wrong, he reached into his windbreaker and pulled out a folded napkin. Inside was the bent body of Crackers, a dribble of dried blood on his nose.

Danny wiped his eyes and told me that while his family ate dinner, Crackers chewed a hole through one of the cardboard tubes and escaped into the main house. At this point I imagined the worst. Danny had hinted before about the cruel father who sometimes emerged after a few drinks, and I envisioned that brute stomping on his son's pet as it scurried across the kitchen floor. The truth was less dramatic. Crackers had simply stumbled into the same kind of trap that had orphaned him months earlier. In a snap, he had been transformed from a beloved pet into another dead pest. We buried Crackers in my back yard in an old matchbox.

For the science fair, we had no option but to compile the data as it stood. I wrote a four-page analysis, documenting our hypothesis, how we conducted the experiment according to the scientific method, and our inconclusive results. We pasted the pages and some photos onto posterboard to display with our maze.

After we turned in our report, but before the awards were announced,

our science teacher, Mr. Henderson, pulled me aside. He told me he was impressed with how carefully we documented our research and compiled our data, but he doubted a student like Danny was capable of such good work. He wanted to know if Danny really helped or if I let him attach his name to my project. I insisted Danny and I had both contributed, and Mr. Henderson shook his head. "Let me give you some advice. I know you two are friends, but don't let someone like Danny Moore weigh you down. You can go far."

I tell Danny I remember that science fair. He says, "That's the only *A* I ever got." He reaches under his sweater to pull something from the breast pocket of his shirt. His fist unfurls to reveal a wrinkled blue ribbon with gold letters declaring "First Place." His other hand travels to the back pocket of his jeans and removes a three-and-a-half by five-inch photo, which he tosses on the table. Two kids on the edge of puberty smile proudly in front of their poster board display. I pick up the photo carefully, even though it is old and worn and a heavy crease down the middle divides Danny and me.

"My dad still had those," he says.

I set the picture down. Danny swivels it to face him, stares for a second, and returns it to his pocket.

I pay the bill when it arrives, and Danny insists on leaving the tip. As we walk to my car, I ask if he wants to return to campus with me. He kicks a rock, which ricochets off a two-hour parking sign and into a pile of leaves. Illuminated by the streetlight, the leaves are the color of dried blood. "I have to get to the Greyhound station. My girlfriend needed our truck today. Her kid has a thing."

I hit the button on my keychain to unlock the driver's side door. "You want a ride?"

"Couple blocks. I'll walk."

"It was good seeing you."

He bobs his head. "You too."

"Hold on." I open my car door and dig around in my bag. I tear a strip of paper off a student's quiz, write down my school e-mail address, and hand it to him. "Drop me a line sometime."

He folds the paper and puts it in his back pocket with the photo. "Say hi to your parents for me."

After I leave the parking lot, I quickly pass him, but a moment later I come to a red light. Danny reaches the corner as I wait. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and see my wife's picture again. The traffic light turns green, and Danny and I wave to each other once more. He

lifts a long leg and strides into the crosswalk.

I hold the phone, my thumb hovering between the red button and the green. My foot remains on the brake. I consider the evening and the weekend ahead of me, wondering whether any quiz in my stack of grading will deserve an A, whether Danny's bus will take him safely home without incident, whether my wife will read a bedtime story to our daughter and fall asleep in there again instead of coming back to our bed. I wonder what Danny's apartment building looks like and wish I'd asked him whether he lives with his girlfriend and how old her kid is and what the "thing" is that she needed their truck for. A recital? A science fair presentation? I wonder whether tomorrow, to celebrate the successful completion of the "thing," they'll all go out for ice cream and race to see who can finish first. I wonder whether Danny will win.

My phone comes to rest in my hand, and the screen turns dark. Danny reaches the other side of the street and continues in a straight line. The traffic light changes to yellow and then changes again to red. I remain inert.

## Interview

Justus Humphrey

### **When did you write "Bodies in Motion"?**

I started this story over ten years ago. I was twenty-five and in graduate school, studying writing. I continued to work on it for a long time, bringing it to class workshops and revising it. After some encouragement from professors and additional revision, I started submitting the story to journals. It got some positive comments from editors, but it didn't find a home anywhere. I continued to revise, but somehow I could never quite get it right; the ending in particular was always tricky for me. Recently, I pulled the story out again after not looking at it for a couple years. I still liked the basic story and thought it had potential; also, I'm a better writer now than I was when I first worked on it, so I revised it again and finally got it to work.

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

A title can be really important—adding resonance and an additional layer of meaning to a piece—which is why I find it really difficult to come up with a good one. I had several different titles for this story. The title for many drafts was “Gandalf and Crackers”; I still kind of like that title, but it may lead people to think it's fan-fiction. For a while, the title was simply “The Science Fair.” At one point, it was “Mouse, You are Not Alone,” which is a variation on a line from the Robert Burns poem “To a Mouse” (the line came slightly before the famous “the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men” line). It was only in the final revision that I came up with the idea of “Bodies in Motion” being a central motif of the story and also the title.

### **What inspired "Bodies in Motion"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?**

In some ways, the story connects to my life, but in many ways it doesn't. I actually did a science fair project as a kid with a friend where we

ran a mouse and a gerbil through a maze. I was an A student, and my friend wasn't, and the scene in the story where the teacher pulls Eddie aside and asks if Danny helped really did happen to me. But I'm definitely not Eddie. Eddie is a father and is in a problem marriage; I don't have kids and am in a great relationship and getting married in a few months. Eddie never completed his degree, lives with his parents, and can't land a full-time job; I have a degree, live with my fiancée, and teach full-time at a university. But the big idea of how lives go down paths we may not predict is a big theme in my life. When I was young, I expected adult life to be somewhat easy since I was always good at school and had a relatively easy time up to the point when I finished college. But it turns out that being a good student and being a successful adult are very different. Today, at this point in my life, I'm a much happier person than Eddie is in the story, but I've shared the struggles of how life often turns out different from what we hope or predict.

### **What was the hardest part of writing "Bodies in Motion"?**

Trying to figure out a satisfying ending was the biggest challenge. I remember a professor in grad school telling me that the story was about ready to publish; I just needed to adjust the ending. That was in 2005. There have been many variations on the ending between now and then, and it was only a few weeks ago I think I got it right.

### **Which part of "Bodies in Motion" was conceived of first?**

The starting point was the premise: two kids from different backgrounds working on a project together; for one of them, it was the academic highlight of his life, but for the other, it was one among many successes. I thought of how their lives could go down different paths after that and what it might be like if they met up again as adults. Many aspects of the story and characters changed over the multiple drafts. For instance, Eddie was originally an English teacher, which was simply because I am an English teacher and that seemed easy to write. Eddie was also more successful in the first drafts, which seems strange to me now because I think of Eddie's struggles as central to what the story is about. Basically, I had the original premise of the two childhood friends meeting, but most of who the characters are and why this interaction is significant only came about through revision.

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

Basically, the bones of the story (childhood friends meet many years later and briefly reminisce about a childhood science fair) are the same, but the flesh of the story is almost completely different from the first draft.

**Do you primarily write fiction?**

I focused on fiction in graduate school and worked primarily on novels at that time, but in recent years, I've become more interested in non-fiction and have started dabbling in poetry too. I still aspire to write fiction, but I spend less of my writing time on it than I used to.

**What is your creative process? Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

I usually start without a clear concept of what the piece will be when finished. I may have a character or a scene in mind and simply explore from there. Once I have a draft with a basic story, the real work begins; the central feature of my process is revision. I have some pieces that were twenty pages in first drafts that are close to ten in later drafts. I have pieces, like this story, in which characters completely change from rough to final drafts. And when I work on a piece over a period of years, my new life experiences help with revision, too. For instance, Eddie is an adjunct at a community college. I was an adjunct for a few years and drew upon some of that experience in later drafts of the story. Danny was originally unemployed rather than managing apartments. I also changed the setting. Originally, I placed the story in my hometown in Arizona, simply because it was something I knew, but I changed the setting to the rust belt because I felt that would add resonance to themes about the American dream and how plans don't always turn out as we expect. It's through revision that I figure out what the story is about, what I'm trying to say, so I go back and work on integrating the themes once I know what they are. I try not to get too married to small details, and I work hard to continue polishing.

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

I've been published in a few journals, including *[PANK]* online and *Bayou Magazine*. I also have a personal essay in the book *Atheists in America*.

## The Proffer

A. Joachim Glage

On no fewer than ten occasions between the years 1971 and 1978, near the west edge of the French Quarter in the city of New Orleans, in the Queen Anne Ballroom of the Hotel Monteleone, a mysterious and very tall man named William Blake—who was not wealthy and also of no relation to the poet (who had no descendants anyway)—was host to a sumptuous and well-attended celebration which, for reasons we shall explore, came to be known as “Story Night.” These parties of his were so lavish, so full of splendor and champagne and dancing women—and so far beyond his evident monetary means—that Blake swiftly became one of the more irresistible subjects for the local gossip. For while mysterious men do often reside in New Orleans (in the French Quarter in particular), and are for that reason not so very exceptional in and of themselves, nothing gets people talking quite so much as the spending of mysterious *money*: for how could he afford to throw such parties anyway, this seemingly-ungifted man whose subsidized lodgings off of Iberville were rumored to be little more than a cubicle, and who on most days could be found looming on Royal Street like a drunk (though whether he actually was a drunk has never been verified), standing mute and almost motionless while sighing at the music from sidewalk performers or else smiling foolishly at the sun, his big bony teeth flashing white, and he always in the same pale-gray and wide-collared suit with so much powder underneath that he smelled like a clean diaper even in the hottest of Louisiana afternoons? And for what purpose did the well-to-do and elite of the city fawn so sweetly upon him for the favor of an invitation? For indeed most of his party guests were rich and powerful, though a few of them—street hustlers, drinkers, scenesters, pimps and whores—were only notorious.

The mystery was deepened by the fact that William Blake, in addition to being financially humble and reeking like a well-loved infant, was also one of the more fearsome-looking men in the city. He was just shy of seven feet tall, had awkward long limbs, wide shoulders and a short neck; and with his miniscule ears and his hair cut close and his smooth square

chin his head resembled nothing better than a box, the broad front surface of which so deeply absorbed his face that, but for the eye patch he wore, you might not notice right away he'd been disfigured. The discoloration of his flat cheeks was subtle, after all, caused by what looked to be a smattering of old burns mostly healed; but if you got a better look at his "good" eye—the uncovered one, the eye that fixed you in its solitary gaze when he clasped your hand and pulled you close—you knew it at once: something awful had happened to that face. The eye, with which he could still somehow effectively see, was engorged and hideous, bright white with a fleshy black iris. Like a prune hatching from an egg. It gleamed at you, and, if you ever got close enough to shake that giant's hand, you probably recoiled a little and looked away from the eye. Even your two eyes together were no match for it.

What unwholesome thing lay wet beneath the eye patch, hidden from view, even the gossips in the French Quarter dared not imagine.

The rumors and hypotheses engendered by the mystery of Story Night were abundant, and they differed tremendously from each other. Among the most frequently whispered were the following three.

***A Face Full Of Oil.*** According to some, a perfect-faced Blake had been working as a dishwasher in The Hunt Club at the Monteleone—though back then it was still named The Men's Grill—when the head chef, after experimenting for several days with recipes for Mediterranean sea bream, began to suffer the hallucinatory effects of ichthyallyeinotoxism; at which point, wielding a skewer in one hand and a fish head in the other, he began to defend his kitchen against a platoon of monsters only he could perceive. Several cooks and waiters were poked or slashed before Fred Forstall, the general manager of the hotel (who happened to be holding a business meeting in the dining room at the time), heard the commotion and burst into the kitchen. The afflicted chef, mistaking Forstall for a bugbear, quickly seized a pan full of sizzling oil from the stove and hurled it at him. Accounts vary as to what precisely happened next—William Blake may have leapt, or stumbled, or been there all along—but every version of the story has him somehow insinuated between Forstall and the hot pan of oil, which Blake took full in the face. According to the more colorful telling of this legend, he never once cried out, not even as the oil was ravaging his eyes; instead, Blake looked back once to confirm Forstall had not been harmed, and then, without changing expression or even so much as pursing his lips, seized the chef and disarmed him, hold-

ing him to the floor until paramedics arrived.

Forstall was a principled man and was grateful for what Blake had done, but he also felt somehow humiliated for having been rescued by a dishwasher. He moreover began to feel an obscure sense of personal responsibility for Blake's injuries (that ambiguous ethics which is "managerial accountability" had long since crept into his conscience and made a home there). Forstall was left with a bitter and intolerable sense of contradiction: every thought or feeling he had with respect to the incident seemed at once to turn back into its opposite (gratitude became resentment, personal responsibility turned to corporate aloofness, and vice versa). And though he kept it hidden, this secret turmoil of his only intensified over the next few months as the full extent—and the permanence—of Blake's disfigurement became clear. Eventually Forstall resolved to expunge the conflict from his mind once and for all, and the solution he settled upon was to throw an extravagant party in Blake's honor, a lavish event which would allow Forstall to express not only his gratitude, but also his superiority, to William Blake in a single grand gesture. And since Blake had no friends of his own (at least none who were not unsavory), Forstall instead invited every local bigwig he could think of. The party—though Forstall would not have predicted it—proved to be such a smash, and earned him the favor of so many influential people, that he decided to make it a semi-regular event, from then on with good ol' one-eyed Blake as the "host." Blake was even permitted to invite some of his own friends from the seedier parts of the city, and strangely enough they blended well. It became known as "Story Night" since the tale of Blake's courageous sacrifice would be recounted each time, usually by Forstall but sometimes, on very special nights, by Blake himself.

*The Mayor's Ruse.* Others have opined that Blake's deformity was congenital, a result of his mother's angry womb (for such diagnoses are not as antique as you might think) and worsened by an unhappy use of forceps (Blake had been a giant even as an infant, or so the story goes, and was extracted from his mother only with difficulty). Those who hold this view also typically subscribe to the thesis that "Story Night" had nothing to do with Fred Forstall but was instead the concept of mayor "Moon" Landrieu, who, having been elected in 1970 primarily on the strength of economically disadvantaged black communities, found himself somewhat unpopular with the local business interests. The mayor, who wanted very much to hasten construction of the Louisiana Superdome (for which legislation had already been passed), and who also had designs

on a riverfront promenade, thought it would be wise to ingratiate himself to the New Orleans investor classes. With that objective in mind he began to throw splendid parties for them at the Monteleone.

But Landrieu was shrewd: conciliation with upper-class folk was not his sole aim. The mayor also was after leverage. The parties accordingly were strewn with spies, photographers and secret microphones, lovely prostitutes who received a generous bonus any time they could lure one of the tipsy but married millionaires into a suite set aside for just that purpose. William Blake, the deformed giant from the Quarter, was the mayor's point man to the New Orleans underworld—the man who supplied the mayor with just the right whores, the skulking men-for-hire and the private investigators in wrinkled suits, all of whom already bore grudges against the rich and could be trusted to report their findings only to Moon Landrieu himself.

A funny thing happened. The prostitutes were so successful at their seduction of not only the male but also the female guests that the parties became like orgies. On those nights, the Monteleone seemed all but a brothel for the rich, which was why people started calling it “Story Night.” The epithet hearkened back to the Storyville of New Orleans's past, to that great red light district, which was abolished in 1917 but which has never really vanished from local memory. William Blake, whose monstrous appearance somehow recalled that older time (and even heightened the sense of sin), became a centerpiece to this renewed debauchery. He was, as it were, the madam of Story Night.

*The Devil and William Blake (and Me).* Naturally there also arose the conjecture that something satanic was going on at Story Night: a diabolical ceremony of some sort, full of lascivious displays or maybe even the drinking of blood, perhaps a human sacrifice or two. For there is that common cast of mind—especially common, perhaps, in a place like New Orleans—which assumes that whenever wealthy and privileged people come together to applaud their fortunes the devil can't be far behind. After all, the perception of great wealth, especially by those who shall never have it but who nonetheless possess an intuitive awareness of the irregular and desultory flow of capital (which, like employment, comes and goes unpredictably), often coincides with the idea of unfathomable *luck*. For why should lubricious money adhere to anyone? What dark and subterranean magnetism makes that happen?

Some went so far as to theorize that William Blake himself was the devil. Others were seduced by a more literary notion: that Blake, having

once conjured the Dark Prince, had looked for too long upon that sinister face and then became like what he beheld. Having been elected by that exchange—marked forever by it—he'd become a conduit to the powers of the netherworld. Hungry souls seeking money or status in New Orleans sometimes sought him out to beg for his favor. Or, as perhaps was the case on Story Night, to thank him for it.

Most of us, of course—for yes, I was a lower-middle-class boy living in that dark city at the time, and I heard many versions of these tales—scoffed at such fancies, even as we remained titillated by the thought of Satan-worshipping millionaires. Our parents enjoyed the idea because it confirmed their suspicions of the moral decrepitude of the upper crusts; we children liked it because we wanted to believe in monsters, even when we knew very well they didn't exist.

We also preferred the satanic explanation for Story Night because we enjoyed yelling things at William Blake whenever we happened to see him wandering the streets of the French Quarter. I don't know how our refrains originated, but I recall that by 1978—the same year that Story Night suddenly and mysteriously ceased taking place—we always yelled one of two things whenever we saw that strange man: “Hey Blake! How's the devil!” and “Hey Blake! Who you gonna sacrifice on Story Night!” He never replied; he offered only that white toothy smile in return.

And of course, we especially preferred the satanic explanation for Story Night after we heard the tape.

Anyone who was young in the 70s and 80s knows just how important the *audio cassette* was to our culture at the time. Concert bootlegs, recordings of our favorite radio programs or of blue comedians, copies of albums: each of these was duplicated countless times, from tape to tape, the quality diminishing with each reproduction, becoming more muted—but also more mysterious—with each new generation. One of the tapes that were circulating through our local schools in the late 70s was an audio recording—or so at least it was claimed to be—from the Queen Anne Ballroom during one of the Story Nights.

I heard it only once. A friend of mine had an older brother, and he and some other older boys made us listen to it one afternoon. They had even typed up a transcript of part of the tape (the only part of it that was intelligible). I recall the awesome ambiguity of it. It was only about twenty minutes long, and it begins simply, with the typical sounds of a party. Music, conversations, laughter, occasional shouts. Then the music dies down and with it all the other sounds as well. A deep male voice begins making a speech. Or rather, it starts to tell a story. The voice speaks gravely, and

yet also in something of a sing-song fashion, almost in the way one tells a fairy tale. No one interrupts or makes a sound while that voice is talking. Then, when the speech is over, there is a long period of silence. No applause, no “Here here!”—just silence. At least three full minutes of it. All you can hear are an occasional clink, a quiet cough, someone clearing his throat. Then, almost imperceptibly, a very low sound of voices begins to swell, moaning in all vowels, like some sickly choir. Like several people groaning in their sleep. It builds and becomes louder and shriller, and also fuller, as though new voices were joining in. Gasps are heard; cries too. Something that sounds like barking. Everyone seems to be yelling inarticulately, though affirmations in several languages can be discerned (*Yes! Si! Ja! Hai! Oui!*). Something that sounds like an old woman wailing as if in the throes of death is suddenly louder than everything else. Then the audio cuts abruptly off.

The older boys explained to us that these sounds were the groans of lust, signifying the commencement of an orgy. My friend and I preferred to imagine (with that enthusiasm for fiction that is proper to pre-pubescent children) that those seemingly inhuman moans were the sounds of demon possession—and that whatever unnatural and fiendish things were to happen at Story Night, they must have been inaugurated by that horrible chorus, by those voices that had surely risen from some hot depth of the earth.

Looking back on it now—and to be sure with a smile on my face—I am surprised that we did not think to combine the two hypotheses into one: Would it have been too fantastic to imagine that, at that precise moment of the night, certain individuals at the party (probably the prostitutes) had been possessed by spirits, *and* that the rest of the attendees were then clamoring—albeit unintelligibly, rapturously—to be among the first to have sex with them? For perhaps there is no sex better or raunchier than sex with the possessed. “Raunchy,” maybe, is not the right word. Rather I should say: Perhaps there is no sex better than sex with someone who knows, and who *loves*, every dirty thought you’ve ever had, and who will indulge you in whatever ways you wish, without you even having to ask.

It’s the *not-having-to-ask* that would be irresistible. That would be the supernatural part of it. That’s also the part of it that would please a devil, I’m sure. Not the sex itself—sex can be of no concern to God or Satan, should they exist—but rather the dark pleasure taken in not having to *speak* one’s desire.

Later that day, I snuck back into that boy’s room with the intention of

stealing the tape. For reasons that remain obscure to me even now, I took instead the transcript of that strange speech which they had written out as best they could. I reproduce it here in full, that story from Story Night, with modifications made only for grammar and spelling.

My friends, you've all heard the saying about slow, cold revenge. The Devil's vengeance, however, is the slowest and the coldest of all, just ask Reeve Ford, Esq., who, after breaching his contract with the Eternal Fiend—a contract Ford himself had very cleverly drawn up—managed to keep hold of his soul by way of the arbitration clause (all the permissible arbiters were already well in Ford's pocket, you see)...*[inaudible]*...The Devil, feeling rather raw at being outmaneuvered, saw to it that Ford would not die: if the mighty Lucifer couldn't have his soul, then nobody would; and in the meantime the Patient One could ponder at length how best to exact vengeance upon this lawyer who'd been quicker than He, and who, much to Ford's own astonishment, now found himself quite immune to death... *[inaudible]*...Ford made the discovery of his new invincibility rather quickly, since he had many enemies already. As it happens he'd been a marked man for quite some time. Someone with the audacity to swindle the devil, after all, will have no apprehensions about swindling other men...*[inaudible]*...and when the attempts on his life began to pile up—always failing, each time more improbably—he knew something unnatural was at play... *[inaudible]*...At first he delighted in his immortality...*[inaudible]*...but once you remove the fear of death from a man, you also remove all urgency from his sense of the future...*[inaudible]*...the need for action wanes...*[inaudible]*... his past falls away too, he is confined, almost exclusively, to the present...*[inaudible]*...a grand inactivity...*[inaudible]*...he napped for weeks at a time... *[inaudible]*...no longer ate or drank...*[inaudible]*...But the natural, restful habits of an immortal quickly become sloth when practiced by one who knows he will die...*[inaudible]*...and in fact there are many behaviors which are truly innocent when done by an immortal but which, when performed by someone who knows his death will come, turn at once into ruthless sin...*[inaudible]*...so that Noble Spirit did only restore death to Reeve Ford, who thus became a monster, and his soul, doomed anew, was...*[inaudible]*...

*Epilogue.* Many years later I found myself back in New Orleans for a literary conference, and had just finished a very boozy lunch with a rather boisterous group of writers and academics. While walking back to the hotel on Royal Street, I very nearly bumped into a man with only one eye and scars on his face, a man who looked to be almost seven feet tall. In spite of the shocking resemblance, I didn't think it could be William Blake; he seemed too young. But, perhaps because I'd been drinking, or perhaps just because that giant had taken me by surprise, I found myself blurting out: "Hey Blake! Who you gonna sacrifice on Story Night?"

The man froze in his tracks. He then raised his face sidelong to the sky—his good eye uppermost, his shape like that of a hanged man—and then after a moment he turned directly to me and fixed me in my place with a strict and focused gaze, the kind of which only a one-eyed face is capable, and with grave authority said the following:

"Contrary to popular mythologies, young man, the devil has little interest in blood or human sacrifices. Instead, should you wish to curry favor with that great spirit of the netherworld, you need only offer him a tale or two. The devil loves stories, you see, especially ones about himself; and if he likes yours well enough, he may do something kind for you in return."

With these words he placed his hand on my shoulder and I felt myself wilt. There was little doubt in my mind that this was the same voice from the tape (though why I should be so sure is unclear to me; I only heard the tape once, and so many years ago at that). He then smiled; his teeth shone. His one swollen, gleaming eye seemed for an instant to protrude further from its socket, as though it would come out at me. He then spun on his heels and continued on his way, humming quietly to himself and smiling inexplicably at the sun.

## Interview

A. Joachim Glage

### **When did you write "The Proffer"?**

When I was in college, some twenty years ago, I wrote some short fiction and even had some modest success with it (publication in the university literary magazine, an award for best short story). But when I went off to graduate school to study literature, first at the University of Virginia and then at Duke, and subsequently when my academic career veered off and took me to law school (after which I became a full-time practicing attorney), I found that I had little time or energy to write fiction. It has only been in the past year or two, after starting up a small business of my own, that I suddenly found myself with a good deal of leisure time—and with it a sudden need to write again. "The Proffer," which I wrote earlier this year, is my first proper short story in over twenty years.

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

For better or worse, I was interested in the idea of a title which only becomes meaningful in the last few paragraphs of the piece. It might not be especially clever, but in this case the title gives the narrative a certain self-referential quality, at least according to one possible reading of it (i.e., this story, "The Proffer," is *itself* the proffer, the narrator's offering).

### **What inspired "The Proffer"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?**

Thanks to some friends who set me up with a place on Royal Street in New Orleans (thank you Laurel and Gary!), I was finally able to spend some time in that magical city (which all American writers love, and not only because of the ghosts of William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote). I was inspired to do some research—aimless research, the best kind—not only into the history of New Orleans, but also into the long life of the Monteleone (that most literary of hotels). "The Proffer" came soon thereafter.

**Which part of "The Proffer" was conceived of first?**

I happened to be re-reading Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*— one of the few works that masters its form while practically inaugurating it— when I was struck by his description of the Dionne quintuplets ("the Quints") as having "sharp black eyes as large as mammoth prunes." The use of "prunes" to modify "eyes" astonished me, even if it was only the size of the eyes that Chandler was describing. I thought I'd try to take the metaphor a little further, and make a character's eye actually *look like* a prune. I came up with an eye that was "engorged and hideous, bright white with a fleshy black iris. Like a prune hatching from an egg." After that, the description of William Blake, a deformed giant looming along Royal Street, fell into place rather swiftly.

**Do you primarily write fiction?**

Yes. For many years, while I was a graduate student, I wrote only essays (and the occasional thesis or dissertation). While I was a lawyer, I wrote only memoranda and briefs. Now, having largely abandoned both of those careers (at least as full-time occupations), what I write more than anything else is fiction.

**What is your creative process? Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?**

I write on an old Remington typewriter. I need the immediate gratification of seeing my writing on paper. Somehow a sentence isn't fully real to me until I see it there, like a tangible thing, imprinted on a sheet of paper that I can hold. Then, after typing and retyping paragraphs and pages many times over, I finally transcribe them into the computer, making new edits along the way. But the real nitty-gritty takes place on the typewriter.

**Who are some of your favorite authors? Do you have any recommendations for readers who enjoyed your work?**

Although "The Proffer" is probably not what you would call an experiment in form, I would say that I am drawn, in a well-nigh intuitive way, to fiction that has little regard for what we might call the norms or priorities of "MFA style" fiction. Naturally no MFA program teaches hard and fast "rules" of writing, but we are all by now familiar with the basic principles that MFA programs typically— typically, not always of course— bequeath to students working with the short story form: Write about people, not ideas; show, don't tell; don't moralize; use adjectives and adverbs

sparingly; the author shouldn't intrude into the narrative; make everything cohere tightly; write in the first person or third-person-limited, etc. The writers to whom I am naturally drawn just don't think this way. They write about ideas; they delight in telling rather than showing; they use rich, effusive and philosophical language; they're didactic; they love to intrude; they revel in fragments and digressions; they know that an omniscient narrator—sometimes a moody one to boot—can be an extraordinary device, not only in a novel, but in short fiction as well. The absolute master of this style of writing, of course, is Borges. William T. Vollmann, who I would say is one of the greatest living authors (and is surely deserving of a Nobel), is another great example. Tennessee Williams's short fiction is also surprisingly subversive in this regard, at least when read alongside today's standard fare.

### **What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

Sending out "The Proffer" for publication was my very first experience of looking for a home for a piece of fiction that I wrote. And I use the term "home" quite deliberately, since that's exactly what you're doing when you're trying to publish this type of creative work: you're looking for a place where it will be in good company, surrounded by good things, read by good readers. *Driftwood Press*, with its fantastic writing complemented by some of the best artwork I've seen in a literary journal, has the feel of being not just a publication but a *home*.

In the Clouds  
Nathaniel Saint Amour



## Interview

Nathaniel Saint Amour

### **How would you describe your aesthetic?**

My aesthetic is heavily inspired by romanticism, but in combination with a lot of saturated color and illustrative elements.

### **What inspired "In The Clouds"?**

This painting is a reaction to the conceptual elements of all my other artwork, making its focus purely aesthetic.

### **What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?**

Each work from this series is created primarily with syringes, which is an inherently difficult style of working. Another difficulty of the work is knowing when to stop, and I am always in a perpetual state of indecision when it comes to the finishing a painting.

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

For "In The Clouds" I focused on conveying an air of playfulness and encourage the viewer to enjoy it simply for its visual qualities.

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

Yes, most of my other works are serious in nature however, and I use this series as a playful release.

### **What is your creative process?**

The painting often times starts as a small sketch, I then apply the paint to the canvas, and once dry add illustrative elements with various drawing tools.

### **Where can our readers find more of your work?**

Readers can find me on tumblr, pinterest, facebook, and Instagram, among other sites. Conversely, they can simply visit my website at:

<http://nathanielstamourart.com/>

**What drew you to Driftwood Press?**

Driftwood Press is a beautifully designed and well-thought through publication, and I am lucky to be repeatedly featured in it.

# Carnival of Emotions on Crossing of Times

Iryna Lialko



# Awakening Forces of Bean Seeds

Iryna Lialko



Gastown #3, Vancouver, B.C.

Allen Forrest



## Interview

Allen Forrest

### **How would you describe your aesthetic?**

I am drawn toward emotion and feeling in art, so I have always used that as a guide to my work. I call myself an expressionist. I have a creative direction I want to go and my style will slowly evolve in different ways as it is influenced by other artist's work I study and admire. Their work excites and pushes me, yet, I always come back to doing it my way. Yet each time my way has stretched a little, bent a little, changed a little.

### **Did you have a difficult time deciding on whether to add a title to your work: "Vancouver, B.C., Gastown #3"?**

No. Something always floats around in my brain while I work, a title or possible titles. It just happens during the course of the work. And this particular title is minimalist and basic. Some titles are more creative and involve humor.

### **What inspires your work: "Vancouver, B.C., Gastown #3"?**

Private feelings and ideas inspire me to want to express them on the canvas. I like to work from a model, to interpret that model in my way. Subject matter changes from figurative to landscape, back and forth, depending on my mood and interest at the time, sometimes on location, sometimes from photographs. The inspiration comes through a need to express. A strong need to create something. The push comes from within. A desire to express my view of something. That something is partly unknown. Through art I try to discover and express that unknown.

When I start a new piece, I do not want to know what it will look like in advance. I do not have a clear vision of the finished painting, just a hint of an interesting idea based on my view of the model. So, I want to be surprised in the end. When my work surprises me, that is a good sign.

### **What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?**

I am a tough critic of my work. I always see where I didn't take it far

enough, or failed to create something I was after. Then again, I can be the worst judge of my work, and have learned to leave things alone sometimes. To step back and say--wait a minute, let's leave that mistake there, it may be more interesting in the long run. Sometimes you get so close to a painting that you can't see it. You can't see what is happening in the interplay of color and light and form. Sometimes it may take a year or two before I can look at a particular painting, one that I was uncertain of, even felt I had missed it completely or gone in the wrong direction, but now, after the passage of time, I say to myself "Gosh, I wish I could do more paintings like this one!" Time usually helps you see things better in your work.

**How do you conceive your work: "Vancouver, B.C., Gastown #3"?**

A drawing may be completed in as little as 20-50 minutes. A painting may be completed in 4-6 hours over 3-4 days, each day as a new layer is added, I walk deeper into the canvas and its subject.

**Was there any theme or idea you hoped to address with this work: "Vancouver, B.C., Gastown #3"?**

Just this: color, light, paint.

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

Yes, but occasionally I work as an actor. I spent many years studying and working in Los Angeles in their theatrical community. So acting is another passion of mine.

**What is your creative process?**

When I create so many of the emotions I am feeling at the time go right into the artwork. The struggle to capture something well is hard and takes a type of detached, yet intense concentration. It can be very tiring. A feeling that part of me is being taken by the artwork and it will require time later for me to recharge. As there is so much energy and feeling going into the paint, it becomes--alive, a living creation. I feel my paintings and drawings are alive.

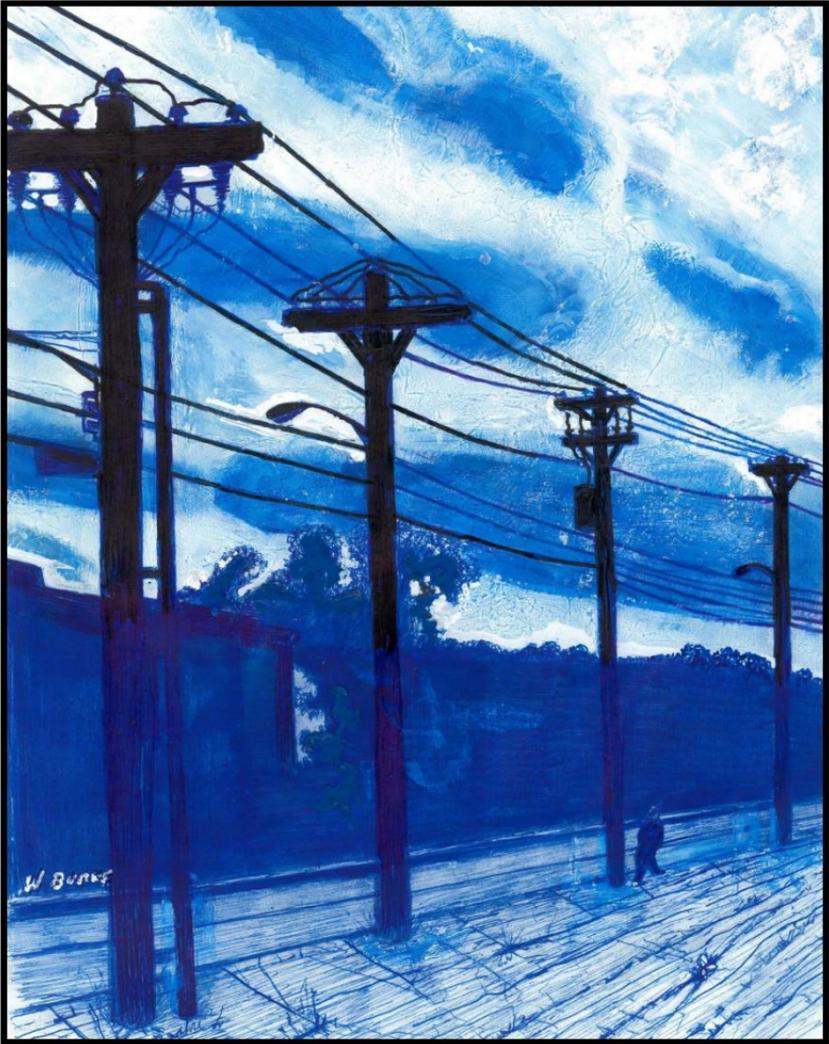
**Where can our readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?**

<http://allen-forrest.fineartamerica.com/>

<https://twitter.com/artgrafiken>

<http://art-grafiken.blogspot.ca/>

The Great Telephone Pole  
Wayne Burke



Barre, Vermont

Wayne Burke



## Interview

Wayne Burke

### **When did you create these works?**

About four years ago I started to concentrate exclusively on drawing, rather than writing, and for the next two years drew almost everyday, and on days I did not have to go to work I would often draw all day long. I filled two dozen notebooks during these two years: the pieces I submitted to *Driftwood Press* are some of the fruit of those two years.

### **What was your inspiration for the piece?**

The phenomenon of nature inspires me: the changes of seasons; sunsets, storms, clouds, mists, dawn, dusk. I'm also inspired by the works of other artists-- van Gogh, A. Wyeth, E. Hopper, among others.

### **Did you have a difficult time deciding a title for the works?**

Titles give me a big pain. They are generally after-thoughts and ones in which I feel obligated to state the obvious: 'The River', 'High Tide', 'Barre,VT'— unless a jokey title occurs to me ('The Great Telephone Pole') which then adds a certain something, twist, to the piece.

### **How would you describe your aesthetics?**

I'm not that concerned with beauty; my chief concern is creating drama, or a dramatic scene, within the picture. In literature, drama results from conflict and emotions; in art it can be created through contrast--light and dark, big and small, far and near, etc.— and balance; that is, the juxtaposition of pictorial elements. Also, as in literature, drama can be brought about by narrative as in pictures that tell or hint at a story. A man walking down a street at dusk, for instance, raises certain questions: Who is he? Where is he going? Where coming from? The observer of the scene gets to answer these questions--thus providing a narrative--for him or herself and to the picture.

### **Is this the medium you're most invested in?**

The medium I am most interested in is writing (poetry). Drawing is something I do as a kind of sideline— something I pick up when not writing, or only writing a little. Though there have been periods of a year or more when I did no drawing I have always returned to it— always it has been a part, big or small, of my life.

**Tell us about your creative process.**

Speaking or writing about the creative process has always been, for me, an exercise in futility because I am prone to wander into mysticism, which is a portal to vagueness and obscurity. I guess there is a process I go through to create but the process is pretty much a mystery to me. Some of the work seems to happen with little conscious intent on my part. I don't mean to imply that I am an automaton, but, during some period of the creative process I lose sense of myself and act (draw) instinctually. And when doing so something good often results— often enough, anyway, to encourage me to continue...The most important thing about the creative process is to begin it— make the first mark on the paper— rather than explain it.

# Wildbirds Among Branches

Dmitry Borshch



ἐμβλέψατε εἰς τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὅτι οὐ σπείρουσιν οὐδὲ θερίζουσιν οὐδὲ συναγουσιν εἰς ἀποθήκας, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τρέφει αὐτά· οὐχ ὑμεῖς μᾶλλον διαφέρετε αὐτῶν;

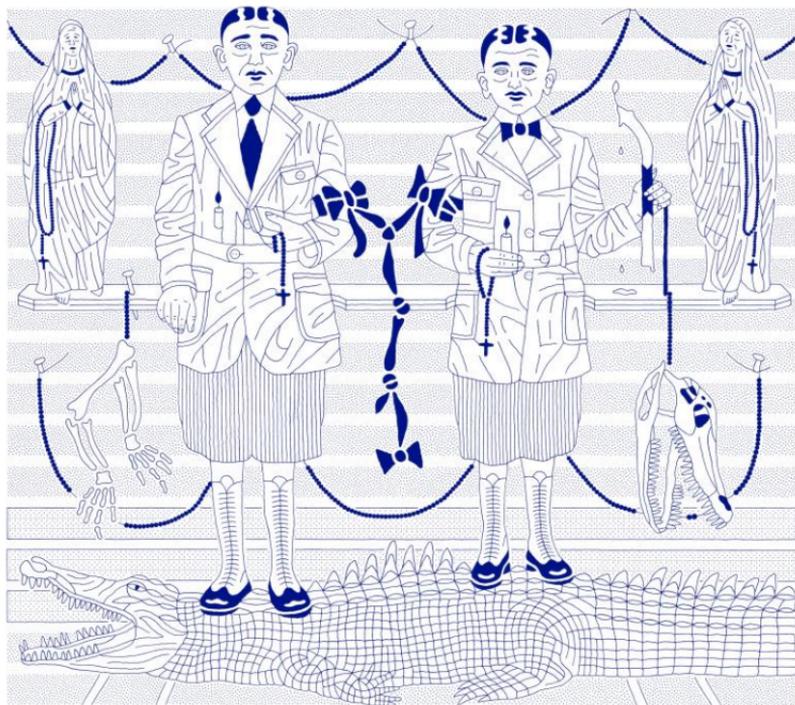
1

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:26: 'Behold the fowls of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?' or 'See how the birds of the air never sow, or reap, or gather grain into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them; have you not an excellence beyond theirs?' From King James and Knox Bibles respectively.

# The Making of Brothers

Dmitry Borshch



Very Much in Love with No One in Particular  
Elena Botts

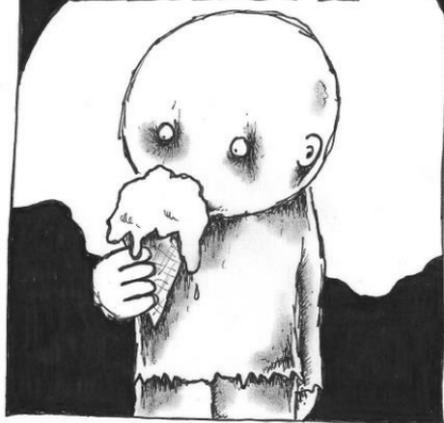


SON,  
IT WAS NEVER  
YOUR FAULT.

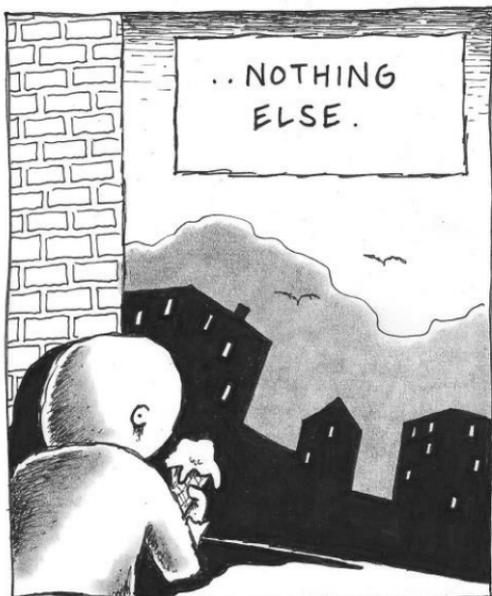


EVERY CHILD  
DESERVES PEACE...

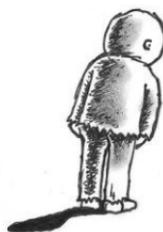
AND QUIET ....



.. NOTHING  
ELSE.



AND YOU'RE  
WORTH



THAT  
ICE CREAM  
TOO...



# I WAS A TEENAGE CONTRACEPTIVE

RYAN KING - WRITER  
PAOLO LIBUNAO - PENCILS/INKS  
CHASI PANGBURN - LETTERER

BUT  
SHOULDN'T  
I HAVE A  
REASON?

WOULD  
IT MAKE  
YOU FEEL  
BETTER?

IT'S NOT  
EASY TO  
EXPLAIN.

ACTS OF  
CREDESCENCE  
RARELY ARE.

NO...

MAYBE.

EVERY TEACHER  
WANTS TO LEAVE  
A LASTING  
IMPRESSION.

BUT  
THERE'S A  
DIFFERENCE  
BETWEEN A  
LETTER OF  
REC'...

AND  
DOLING OUT  
CONDOMS TO HIGH  
SCHOOLERS.

DID I  
TELL YOU  
ABOUT ADAM  
HONEYWELL?





THIS KID COULD BE JIM MORRISON REINCARNATE.

BUT THERE'S NO POETRY IN HIS SOUL.



JUST AN INSATIABLE TASTE FOR INNER THIGHS.



FOR HIM, GIRLS ARE AS SIMPLE AS CONVENIENCE STORE COFFEE.



IF ONLY HIS BRAIN WERE AS BIG AS HIS CHARM.



I'M ON THE PILL.

F'YOU SAY SO.

I WORRY FOR THAT KID.



DON'T WORRY.

IT HAPPENS TO LOADS OF GUYS.



AND THE OTHERS?

SURE. LIKE CLAIRE SANDOVAL.





SHE'S WICKED SMART, ON TOP OF HER GAME.

ALL WITHOUT ASKING FOR HELP.

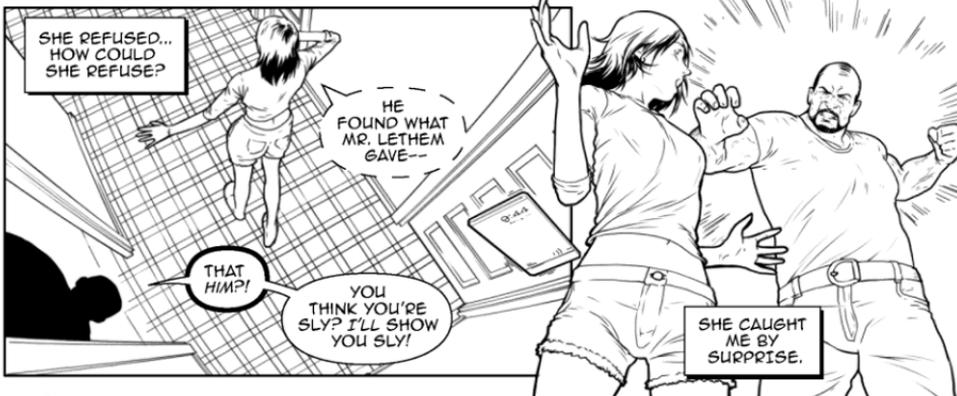
KATIE?! I N-NEED YOUR HELP!

I OFFERED BUMPING HER TO AP ENGLISH.



CLAIRE? NOT AGAIN, FUCK THIS! I'M CALLING THE---

N-NO! DON'T!



SHE REFUSED... HOW COULD SHE REFUSE?

HE FOUND WHAT MR. LETHEM GAVE---

THAT HIM!

YOU THINK YOU'RE SLY? I'LL SHOW YOU SLY!

SHE CAUGHT ME BY SURPRISE.



I SENT HER HOME DESPITE MY DOUBTS. BUT IF SCHOOL DIDN'T MATTER...

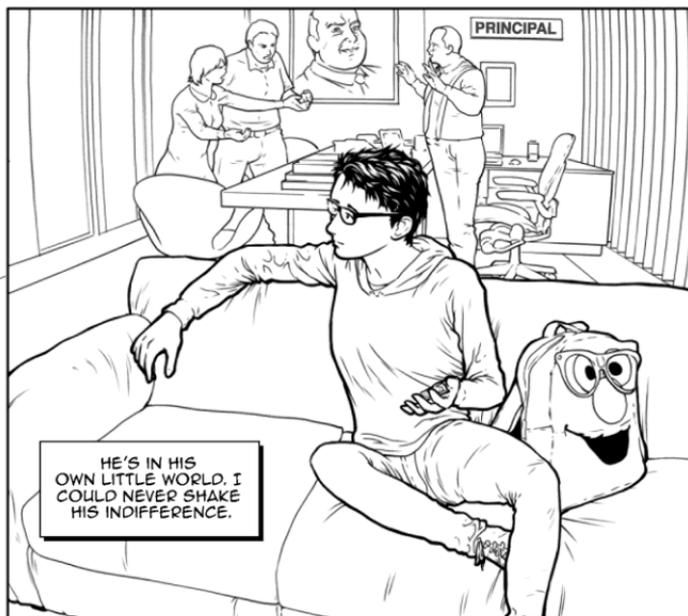
WHAT DID?

P-PLEASE! JUST STOP! STOP!

REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY? HOPE IT KNOCKS SOME SENSE INTO HER?

WOULDN'T HURT, ESPECIALLY THE QUIET ONES.

NOW ANTHONY---



FIGURED HE JUST DIDN'T LIKE THE SUBJECT, SO I ASKED AROUND...

HE'S IN HIS OWN LITTLE WORLD. I COULD NEVER SHAKE HIS INDIFFERENCE.



OTHER TEACHERS RECALL THE SAME DISTANT, ALMOST DISILLUSSIONED TRAITS.

MAYBE A CONDOM WOULD CREATE MORE THAN A SEXUAL AWAKENING. GIVE THE GUY A SENSE OF PASSION.



OPEN HIS EYES TO SOMETHING GREATER. WHO KNOWS?

ALL SOUNDS PRETTY STUPID, REALLY.



YOUR FACE IS STUPID... CUTE AND STUPID. WHO ELSE?

PIRAYAH--

DID I MENTION HER?

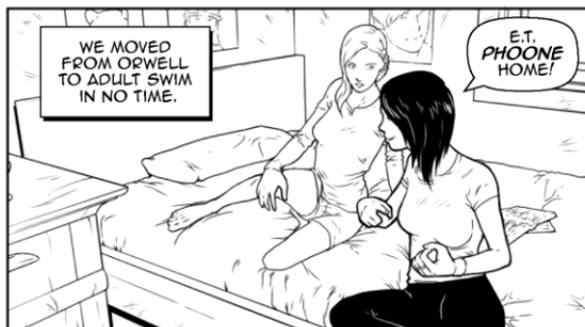


THIS GIRL, SHE'S AT MY DOOR EVERY LUNCH PERIOD.



SHE REALLY MADE A HOME OUT OF THIS PLACE.

HEY, JAY! LOOK!



WE MOVED FROM ORWELL TO ADULT SWIM IN NO TIME.

E.T. PHOONE HOME!



EW, LOOK HOW SLIMY IT IS!

LOOK AT YOU!

HER FRIEND JOINED US SHORTLY AFTER.



AND THINGS FINALLY CLICKED.

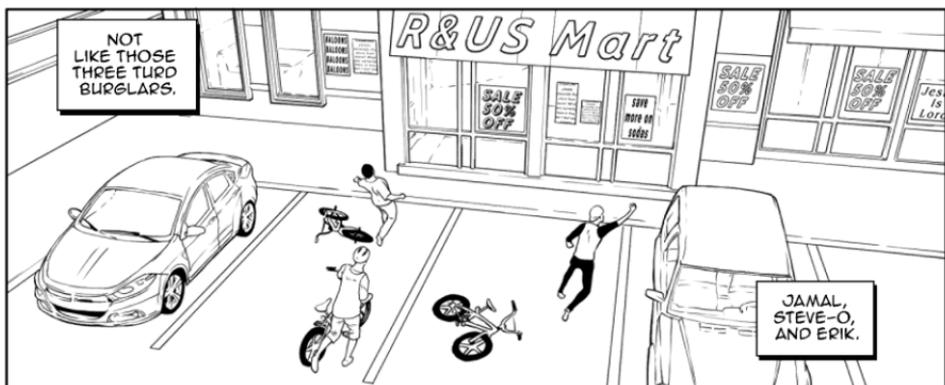


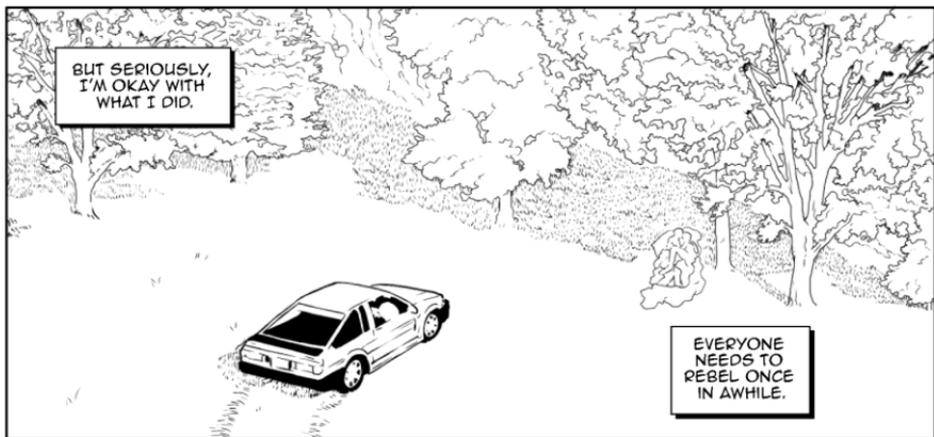
SHE WAS USING YOU?

FOR A TRYST?

WHAT? NO!

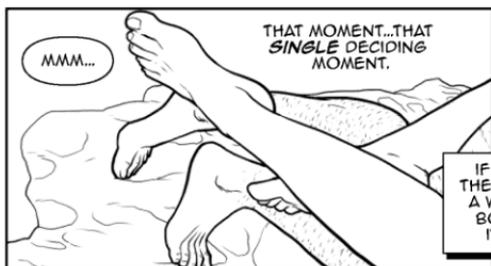
I'M NOT A PERV!





BUT SERIOUSLY,  
I'M OKAY WITH  
WHAT I DID.

EVERYONE  
NEEDS TO  
REBEL ONCE  
IN AWHILE.



MMM...

THAT MOMENT...THAT  
*SINGLE* DECIDING  
MOMENT.

IF ONLY  
THERE WAS  
A WAY TO  
BOTTLE  
IT UP...



AH-  
OHH!



STORE IT  
FOR SPECIAL  
OCCASIONS.

EH!



...

YEAH...I'D  
DO IT ALL  
AGAIN.





Interview

Ryan King

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

No, not at all. If anything this piece was created solely with the title in mind. My mind has a habit of ruminating over small, ephemeral phrases until something casually digests and ekes into my writing. Given my love for B-monster movies of the 1950s, the use of an “I Was a Teenage fill-in-the-blank-here” title was bound to happen eventually. It just so happened I was thinking of contraceptives at the time.

**When did you create "I Was a Teenage Contraceptive"?**

I started the first draft a little over two years ago. Although that original script shared the same protagonist and conflict, it bears no resemblance to the final product seen today. It moved in a linear structure and centered more on the relationship between Aldo (the male teacher) and his love interest, Daisy (the female teacher). The students' lives were completely excluded.

After giving a draft to my EGF (Editorial Girlfriend), she spotted some notes I meant to scrap near the script's end. These notes included back stories about the teens and their various reactions to contraceptives. No matter how much I asked her about the story that was, she inquired more about the story that could have been. Eventually I caved in, trashed the first draft completely, and started afresh.

The new script eventually made its way to the incredibly talented artist Paolo Libunao and master letterer Chas! Pangburn. I couldn't ask for a better team! With their help, the script to final comic took a mere month and a half.

**What was the hardest part of crafting the piece?**

Besides the previous hiccups already mentioned, one of the largest difficulties was deciding on the story's narrative structure. I wanted something that would effortlessly weave in and out of separate points of view.

One day I came across an interesting comic page Brandon Graham posted on his superb comics blog, Royal Boiler:

<http://royalboiler.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/dust.jpg>

The final panel on that page got me thinking, “Wow, this could work as the perfect framing device for my story.” So yeah, I admittedly stole from that comic. It influenced the last panel of pages 1-7.

The other roadblock I faced was writing the main character, Aldo Lethem. Normally I write characters I identify with but in his case, the more I wrote him, the more I disliked his decisions and reasoning (which is probably a good thing for the sake of character variety). By the end, I was completely repulsed by his arrogant, thickheaded demeanor and general naiveté. I hope for Daisy’s sake she realizes he’s an idiot and moves on.

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

At first I meant to stress the importance of contraceptive awareness and sex education amongst sexually active teenagers (which is still a central theme—and is incredibly important to me personally) but the comic slowly developed its own idea. After rationalizing what various teenagers’ natural reactions and responses to contraceptives would be like, I realized the comic’s main idea is closer to the futility of prescribed advice. Especially in the instance of young, rebellious, and obdurate minds like the ones presented here.

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

Most certainly. I’m passionately in love with the written word but realize the unlimited potential prose has when coupled with fine or experimental art. Each year graphic artists discover new methods of storytelling. This intrigues me. As a writer the limitations of writing solely novels or short stories are, well, limiting. Why not add to the mix? Poetry, plays, and librettos are normally creative branches grafted onto writer’s trees. Why not comics and graphic novels, too?

### **What is your creative process?**

Write. Find more time to write. Try to write again. Repeat.

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

You can find my writing in *Hobart*, *Nameless Magazine*, *Bleeding Cool*, *Go Suck a Comic*, *The Yolo Crow*, *The Storyteller* and forthcoming in *Wolfen Jump* and *Zarjaz*. You can follow me on Tumblr (<http://star>

thistles.tumblr.com/) or Twitter (<https://twitter.com/RytKing>).

Paolo's work includes *The Thieves* (Community Comics) and *Armor Quest: Way of the Warrior* (Rising Star Studios). He can be found on Behance (<https://www.behance.net/nplibunao>), and he's also on Tumblr (<http://nplibunao.tumblr.com/>).

Chas!'s writing and lettering has since appeared in Challenger Comics and Alterna Comics. Find out more on his website, (<http://about.me/chasexclamationpoint>), or you can follow him on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/chasexclamation>).

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

I cannot stress enough the importance of my two collaborators, Paolo and Chas! Without them, this comic is lifeless and null.

## Winter 2014

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James McNulty  
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Adam Hardy  
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Emily Hipchen  
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