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## When We Reach the Law

Reggie Mills

Father Tom has been having headaches lately—sharp, stabbing pains behind his left eyebrow and eye. They materialize with a frequency that's weekly at least but often more like daily, lasting for hours and penetrating in waves. These things can be diet-related, Tom knows, but his diet has not changed and his diet is not poor. He is a trans-fat-free man, a caffeine-in-moderation man; he avoids dairy for reasons not just related to his lactose-sensitivity. He is not a man of gluttonies or excesses and yet here are headaches that will not stop.

Father Tom looked for his cure, but the usual remedies—blood thinners, vasodilators—didn't help relieve the noise. For a while if a headache appeared then that was that. He'd wake in the middle of the night, his head shooting; he lost sleep. Then one Sunday Father Tom discovered something weird. It was mass and he was at the altar pouring wine, and that's when a headache came. He didn't have much option but to power through, so he drank the chalice and came forward to give communion. But then, standing up there, as swiftly as the headache came it was gone. So now Father Tom knew the antidote was wine.

He tells himself that this is not an excess but a release. He does not think he's weak of will; sometimes he is simply not strong enough to hold the world in his hands.

Father Tom is attending a minster conference-retreat being held in the next town over. He doesn't think of ministers as being academic per se, but still there is a level of discourse among them and every so often they hold something like this.

The conference is a one-day thing at this hotel banquet-hall, starting first thing in the morning and scheduled to go until late. Now they've finished the early-morning section of the talks and there's a break. There's a little podium-stage up top with a few rows of seats arranged in front of it. Father Tom and everyone else are getting up from listening to the last talk. Since there are priests here from all over, the organizers had reserved a

whole block of rooms in the hotel for this night and the one previous. Father Tom's planned room-partner couldn't make it, so he's one of the few attendees with a room to himself.

The music they've just started playing for the morning break is some mix of chamber music and smooth jazz.

Father Tom has many friends, each of whom is a vital part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

One is Father Daewon, who was a minister for the Korean-speaking Christian church parked up in one of the little neighbourhoods around the way from Father Tom's church, and who was allowed to have a family of his own in accordance with his denomination's regulations, which is not like Father Tom's. Father Daewon would invite Tom over to dinner with his family, and because this is not something many of the other ministers did, it told Tom that Daewon was a true blue friend. Daewon had two children, a little boy and a little girl, and it brought Father Tom joy seeing them, so he appreciated his evenings at Daewon's highly. It brings Father Tom joy seeing other people's happy families. Inevitably, Father Daewon moved away to a different Korean-speaking church in a different city, and though Daewon and Tom have emailed once or twice since then, they are too far apart now to have dinners any more.

Daewon is not in attendance at the conference-retreat.

Back at his parish living space Father Tom lives a modest lifestyle, staying in the small one-bedroom residence conjoined to the church. There's a living room and a kitchenette and a single full-bath. He doesn't own a TV. He spends most of his time on the couch or in bed going through his trusted hardbound King James Bible with the deckled edge and the multi-coloured ribbon page-markers. On weekday evenings he might spend some time with his shortwave set to the 88.1 The Crux talk hour. He also has a laptop computer in the off-chapel office, which he has access to whenever he wants, but he tries to limit his use of this to email and keeping up with news of the church.

The only other thing he really uses the laptop for is to upload short stories to his blog.

He tells this to the man named Father Lars, who has just asked Father Tom what it is that he does in his free time while not devoting himself to the love of Jesus Christ.

—The stories are about contemporary Christian-American life, Father Tom says.

—How unusual.

Father Lars is holding a little plastic cup of berry-blue Jell-O from the table at the side of the room where all the little cups are arranged by flavour—grape, cherry, lemon, apricot, &c. By this time of the morning the back half of the banquet hall is horded with standing minsters, all of them in their black-collar clergy-shirts with the white-plastic inserts.

—I write the stories and then post them online—at least one story a month. My hope is that they will help people find guidance.

Father Lars puts his plastic cup to his mouth and sucks up the little shot of alcohol-free Jell-O.

—They're about usual stuff, but with a religious flavour, you know. Like about if you're at the deli aisle and you can only eat chicken but all they have left is pork.

—I've been there.

—Or if you find yourself in a barbeque restaurant on a Friday, you know.

—It's a struggle.

—I wrote one recently, actually, kind of inspired by the Book of Job, because in my story the main *character* is called Job as well, see. His employment as I've imagined it is working as a contract carpenter at a construction firm. And he's always getting himself into all sorts of hijinks because of people mispronouncing his name, since whenever someone says *job* he's unsure of if they're mispronouncing *Job* the *name* or if they're actually just saying *job*.

They look at each other, Lars and Tom.

—I had a lot of fun with that one, Father Tom says. It becomes quite comical at parts, I find.

—How zany. I just watch Netflix.

Tom has the tiny blue elephant stamp on his left hand to indicate that he already grabbed a blackberry fusion Jell-O cup earlier, the stamp so that the organizers can keep an eye on who might be giving a bit too much into temptation.

Father Tom stands at the door at night and asks to come inside. There is a dinner party here, he was told, that he was invited to, that he would like to be a part of. He has the invitation in his breast pocket, a small envelope with the thick letter stock insert. His name is on the front of the letter,

*Father Tom.* The date and the time are correct and so here he is. He looks at his watch to double-check. 6:55 p.m., exactly five minutes early.

The man's face behind the glass just looks.

Father Tom says again that he would like to come inside. He has rung the doorbell and knocked. There is the front door to the house on the quiet street, the door black, and there is the small vertical pane-glass insert to its right, tall and just wide enough for a face to fit. And here the man's face stands and looks. Father Tom has the bag in his right hand with the red wine and the cinnamon babka. He prepped a one-liner on the way over about the bottle being water when he dropped it into the bag, Jesus intervening in one way or another. He thought this wit would be quality. The man's face behind the glass is middle-aged, expressionless. Standing there in the house's foyer, his gaze at Father Tom doesn't waver.

Father Tom tries to push the door open but it is locked. He looks at his watch, 6:56 p.m. He takes the envelope out of his pocket to re-check the invitation. The date and time are correct, as is the address. He asks through the window again if he could be let in. The man just stares. It is approaching 7. Punctuality is important to Father Tom; soon he will be late. His arm holding the wine and babka is growing tired. Out here is getting darker. He looks at the man's eyes through the window. He stands there and he waits.

There is the brass figure of Jesus up at the front of Father Tom's chapel, hanging on the cross above the altar, looking down with its sideways face at the pews below. Sometimes, when Tom cannot sleep, he'll come down here through the vestibule to the rows and rows of seats with his good old deckled-edge King James hardcover and sit or else lie on one of the hard, wooden pews, the poured-concrete floor like the smell of Pine-Sol and saltines. He comes here and he looks at the brass face of Jesus in pain and, with his head on the hard King James's cover, this sometimes helps him sleep.

The chairs they have for sitting at this conference are brass-legged with red-fabric seats and straight backs and this has become very apparent to Tom's lower back after a morning's-worth of sitting. The talks have been okay so far, a lot of the speaking ministers' faces familiar to Tom. It is now lunchtime so there are tables of sandwiches and salads laid out, along with stations for coffee and tea and cookies. There is a baseline level of murmur from the additive sound of all the voices.

Tom is standing in a tight circle-crowd of five priests, him included. He's been listening as they talk.

—The confessions at my parish have been killing me recently.

—I feel like there are so many more sinners these days.

This gives rise to general accord among the group.

Now Father Tom joins. —I've learned that there's a special way you have to go about confessions to stay sane.

—How's that?

—Well, you kind of have to learn to listen without really listening. Almost do it unthinking. You know when you've done it so many times that you already know what to say before you hear the whole story?

A few of the priests nod or say Mhmm.

—It's kind of like that. You can really exhaust yourself otherwise. There are times when you do something that you can't let yourself be conscious of.

Father Tom now realizes that the green tea in his hand is hot and that he should've insulated it with another paper cup.

Father Tom is also friends with a boy called Christopher who is an altar-sever for Father Tom's parish. On weekends, when Christopher doesn't have too much homework, he'll sometimes come by the church to ask if Father Tom needs help with things such as mowing the lawn, touching up the chips and marks on the white picket fence, rag-buffing the brass Jesus statue at the top of the vestibule until Father Tom can see his own face in it, &c. Even though Father Tom can sense that the boy is told to come to help out by his parents, who as Father Tom knows are very pious people, he feels that the boy has goodness in his heart. When the boy is finished with his work he will come in and knock on Father Tom's office door to tell him he's done, and Father Tom is sure to offer the boy a Coke as a reward. Then Father Tom and Christopher sit together on the couch in the little seating area of Father Tom's office and chat about life and about God. These meetings have been occurring with lower and lower frequency in recent times as the boy's weekends have been becoming more preoccupied, but he is still one of Father Tom's good pals.

Father Tom waits outside the door all night. He tries looking in past the man in the window but sees no activity. Besides the foyer lights, the rest of the house is dark. But he was invited to a dinner party and does not want

to be rude. His arm with the wine and babka feels sore and weak. He is getting tired—it is almost his bed-time. He has to go home and get some sleep; he will try to contact the dinner party's host tomorrow and apologize for his absence.

So he leaves the front door with its window's man. When he is some houses down the street he looks back and sees the man still there, his eyes trained towards him.

Before Father Tom goes to sleep he double-checks his calendar against the invitation and confirms that the details are correct.

The next day he has a lull between errands and he goes back to visit the dinner party's home. The street is as quiet as it was the night before. He gets to the front door and stands on the porch and knocks. There is no response. The man is gone from the pane-glass window beside the door and the foyer light is now off. He knocks again, this time louder, harder, and still there is no response. He waits, knocking intermittently, for another five or so minutes, but without avail he leaves the house on the street and continues on with his day.

Friend #3 for Father Tom is the boy Peter who was training as to-be priest some years ago, prepping for his holy orders, and so who, for a period of two weeks, was staying at Tom's parish. They shared the modest living arrangements, the one-bedroom split-level, the single full-bath with the poor ventilation. The living room served as Peter's personal space, the three-seater couch his bed. Pete and Tom would spend evenings discussing issues, problems, and difficulties they had. They shared discourse, rational thought. Tom would cook meals and then after meals he'd break out the box of room-temperature caffeine-free Diet Coke so that he and Pete could each have their little daily dose of moderation.

There is the afternoon break and then they reconvene at 5 p.m. for the buffet dinner, and during this time there's another block of speakers. The ministers in the audience hold their plates in their laps, listening to the talks. One speaker gives a presentation about the quality-of-life benefits of condoms, and Father Tom feels he is pretty convincing.

Then after the block of talks they turn the house lights down and a DJ sets up on stage, the chairless back-half of the hall turned into a dance floor. The priests all stand and gather around this area. The side-table where they were serving Jell-O cups earlier is reappropriated as a punch station.

Tom comes over to the punch bowl to get a cup. The punch is just virgin cranberry cocktail. There's a line of ten or so priests. Tom waits his turn.

A Nirvana song comes on and the priests on the dance-floor start jumping up and down, fists in the air.

When Tom is close enough to the punch-table to pick up his own red plastic cup he realizes that the man in front of him is the speaker who talked about the condoms. He tries talking to him.

—I thought you made a good case, Tom says, near-yelling to make himself heard over the music.

The man looks at him.

—Level-headed. Tom makes a gesture where he holds his right hand out flat.

—What? the man says, filling his cup with punch.

—Your presentation. The condoms.

—Oh. Thanks.

The man's cup is full and he moves to the side to give Tom access. Tom goes up and grabs the ladle. He becomes aware that he can't remember the man's name.

—Though I have to say that it was more of a thought experiment than anything. An exercise.

Tom fills his cup.

—Naturally. And of course I surely won't be using any anytime soon.

The two of them share a laugh.

Then they are grinning at each other. Tom turns his head towards the crowd, not sure what he is scanning for.

Nothing catches his eye.

Father Tom on the day after begins to think that there must have been a mistake with one of the details of the dinner party. He thinks that perhaps the correct date was one off, so he returns to the house that night. Again in his hand is the bottle of red wine and the cinnamon babka, which he doesn't want to go to waste. When he arrives the man is now back at the door-side window and the foyer light is on, and everything else is the same. He knocks at the door but is not let in. He tries to explain to the man that there is a dinner party he was invited to here but the man doesn't respond. The man stands there behind the pane-glass and stares at Father Tom.

Father Tom waits there on the porch all night again without being let in. Only when it approaches his bedtime is he forced to depart. He finds

that tonight the arm holding the bag of wine and cinnamon babka doesn't get as tired.

He begins visiting the house every night, thinking one of these days must be correct. The man stands in the skinny pane-glass window every evening that Tom is there. He has a white collared shirt and bleached-white hair. Father Tom tries all sorts of explanations to show the man his purpose, but never does he budge. He just looks Father Tom in the eye all the while.

After a few nights of this the babka goes bad, so Father Tom purchases another, but this time chocolate. He shows this new babka to the man, but still he is not let in.

Father Tom learns the façade of the house by heart—its two storeys, its brick walls. There is a large tree in the front of the house that shades the right half of the house from streetlights. Every night the man behind the glass wears his white collared shirt. His face never changes.

Father Tom goes through vanilla babka, almond babka, the highly sought-after fruitcake babka, and still he is not let in. Then it occurs to him: maybe the address was wrong.

So Father Tom begins visiting the other houses as well. He starts each evening by going to the original house first, the one on the invitation, ensuring he's there for 7 p.m. sharp, then he slowly makes his way up and down the other houses on the quiet street. And he finds that these other houses are with their own lighted foyers and faces as well, each looking out at him. There is a dinner party he must attend, he tells them. He was invited. He is already very late. He has sacrificed countless evenings. He wants to attend.

But still he is not let in.

Father Tom has had very many friends in his life and this makes him feel blessed.

Some time ago. Peter and Father Tom are in Father Tom's little living room. There is a single lamp in the corner, the light from it shady and orange. Peter and Father Tom are both drinking caffeine-free Diet Coke.

—Do you ever wonder what if heaven doesn't exist? says Peter.

—I have depended on its existence my whole life. For me it cannot not exist.

—What if you're depending on it and then it isn't there?

—No one knows God's will.

—Would I be happy prioritizing my life around something that then doesn't even pan out?

Father Tom takes a sip of caffeine-free Diet Coke.

—We have this same conversation every night, Peter says. And you always arrive at the same conclusion.

—We are put on the Earth for a reason.

—You think you are correct. Nothing I have said has been able to change that.

—Perhaps.

—Maybe you're stubborn.

—It is possible.

Peter takes a sip of his caffeine-free Diet Coke, slurping. He puts the hand holding the can back into his lap.

Tom finishes his little cup of cranberry punch and then goes to be in the banquet dancefloor's swarth of men for a while. The man who talked about the condoms left to go to the washroom some time ago and Father Tom hasn't seen him since. Father Tom stands in the music, swaying with the mass.

But after a song or two his head starts to stab. He knows he's not dehydrated, and he's not hungry either. The pressure is trying to break free, testing his eyes' strength. He has ibuprofen in his bag in his room but he knows that this won't help. He can't bear the loud sounds for much longer and leaves the banquet hall with the dancing priests. He walks down the hall to the elevator, pressing ↑. The ding of the door's opening ricochets in his head for a second. As he rises, the increased gravity makes his left eye swell.

He goes down the hall to his room, sharp, jagged little pyramids being forced between his skull and his brain with each step. He unlocks the door and goes through, shutting out the hallway lights behind him. He sits upright on his bed. He keeps the room pitch dark. He is afraid that lying down will make the pain worse.

The room is dark and humid.

There is the room's minibar with its liquor minis but Father Tom knows he shouldn't want release. He is not a man of gluttony or excess. A hundred tiny needles try to jam themselves out. His temples are his trial to endure.

He's sitting upright and tired and all he wants is sleep.

The road ahead is long and concrete. It is one path. Don't waver.

Stay.

Interview

Reggie Mills

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

The title “When We Reach the Law” comes from the Kafka parable “Before the Law,” which can be read standalone but also gets incorporated into Kafka’s unfinished book *The Trial*, where the parable really values from the added context. Briefly, the story is about a man from the country who arrives at the Law seeking admittance, but there is a doorkeeper who doesn’t let him pass. The man tries all he can to get the doorkeeper to let him through, but he’s always unsuccessful. We don’t find out what the Law is, but the man is so focused on entering that he spends his whole life in this pursuit. It’s a great story and a quick read, and it likely informs all of Kafka’s work. Analysis is probably outside the scope of this interview, but one of the key features of the story is that the man from the country doesn’t realize his efforts are frustrated. (This frustration is compounded in *The Trial*, where the main character K. doesn’t realize that the parable he’s being narrated parallels his own efforts.) This kind of tireless, blind, and maybe ill-guided pursuit is really terrifying to me, and is the type of thing I lose sleep over. There were a few other titles I was mulling over, some less overt, but when I got to the current formulation it felt really fitting.

**When did you write "When We Reach the Law"?**

Some semi-relevant context: As of June 23, 2017, I’m in my second year of a five-year Ph.D. in organic chemistry, and I’ll be entering my third in September. The way the grad program I’m in works is you can start off pursuing a one-year M.Sc. degree and after your first year transfer all the work you’ve done towards completing a Ph.D. instead. I wrote this piece about a year ago, around the time I was choosing if that transfer would be right for me or not.

**What inspired "When We Reach the Law"? Are any of its themes**

**inspired by your own life?**

The dinner-party scenes in “When We Reach the Law” are basically re-workings of the scene in “Before the Law,” and there’re a few thematic bits from *The Trial* that I’ve worked into the piece too. The idea of unconscious pursuit comes from me thinking about my own life, I guess—the two big things I dedicate myself to are chemistry and writing, and at the time I wrote the story I’d been feeling kind of split and worried that going too far in the wrong direction might lead to regrets later in life and other melodramatic stuff like that. And I thought maybe one option was more correct and would give me the most happiness, etc. I haven’t solved this yet but I think I have an okay balance. Anyways, what happens once in a while in reaction development is you’ll screen conditions to get a transformation to work, and you’ll arrive at working conditions, but what you don’t realize is there’s some metal contaminant from a previous step or from when one of your reactants/reagents was prepared, and it’s actually this metal contaminant that’s catalyzing the transformation—not the optimized conditions themselves. The point is, sometimes there are effects of a certain route that you don’t see if you don’t know what you’re looking for, and the route you thought was correct might actually be wrong, or vice versa, and it’s wrong for reasons that hadn’t occurred to you because you didn’t even know you should be looking for them in the first place.

**Quote a piece of writing advice you actively disregard in your process.**

Maybe “Don’t start a sentence with a conjunction.” On a more serious note though, I don’t think there are any rules I actively follow or disregard; the writing just has to feel real and true.

**The writing here is brilliant at creating an atmosphere of loneliness—partly because of the repetitive sentence structures. This technique is very easy for young writers to misuse. Do you have any advice for them?**

I probably misuse/overuse repetition myself. But I guess in terms of taming it to some extent, the check I use is *feel*. Sentence-to-sentence I have a very rhythm-oriented writing process, so I rewrite and restructure my sentences to where it flows and paces nicely and feels good in my head. There’s no easy trick for getting this right, except that the more you read and write the better your sense of this gets. This is also where having great editors like James and Felicia can really help. Two writers I’m always in awe of for their rhythm are Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy.

**Father Tom's loneliness is so vividly portrayed, yet you never in any shape or form tell the audience that he's explicitly lonely. There's a ton of implied language here. Could you talk a little about writing around the truth?**

Man, I'm just afraid of trying to put explicit "truths" into my writing. I know that the reader's experience of my writing will be very different from my own, and if you try to force emotion it'll come across as false and flat. I do have to say that tone and voice are fantastic and potent tools for representing emotion, and if you use these as your form of emotional communication you can avoid having explicit descriptions that feel unwarranted. I try to have tone and voice reflect my characters in every story. But usually after you've looked at a piece and worked and reworked it for so long the emotional aspects dilute a bit, and so at this point Father Tom's implied loneliness comes across as kind of distant to me, and I don't want to take full responsibility for the implied/reader-effected truths. Honestly most of the implied lonely language is more serendipitous than designed.

**In many ways, this story is about stasis; Father Tom is stuck. How does one write an interesting story about a lack of progression?**

It's a great question, but I'm not sure I have a great answer. I agree that stasis is huge in this piece, but I do think there's some movement, and maybe more than you might find in other pieces. I know that in a story things have to happen, or else it's not a story. But this question makes me think of examples where typical progression-devices like plot are actively avoided—*Waiting for Godot* by Beckett comes to mind right away, as well as writing by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and maybe some David Markson. I think the lesson that I've learned from these writers is that even if there isn't a lot of "stuff" happening in your story, you can still be compelling and exciting if you tell your story in an interesting way, or if you have interesting things to say.

**Do you think Father Tom will ever get through that door to his dinner party?**

Not anytime soon. But I think it's for Tom to realize if he wants to or not.

**Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "When We Reach the Law"?**

Kafka and Borges have affected me as a writer more than anyone else. William Gaddis, Italo Calvino, and Thomas Bernhard are also important

for me, and I think Joshua Cohen and Alejandro Zambra are two of the smartest and most talented people making fiction today. For this story in particular I think I had Don DeLillo and Lisa Moore in mind, and maybe a touch of Haruki Murakami as well.

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

Driftwood's editors are intense, but they're extremely smart and helpful people, and this story is much better because of them.

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

Two of my stories that I'm particularly proud of can be found in *Buffalo Almanack* and *The Impressment Gang*. I also have a postcard piece I'm really excited about which should appear in *Filling Station* in the near future.

## Replica

Stephen Hundley

Rob leaned on the counter at the post office, his Springfield rifle propped by the door and a Confederate uniform on his back. He had come for a stamp. The woman working wore a nametag that read “Janice.” She might have been fifty.

“You born crazy?” she asked him. “Or just dropped?”

“Married into it. Then dropped,” he said. In another life, Rob had been a lawyer who collected Mustang convertibles. As a Confederate soldier without a car, he was less popular. “I give tours for the museum.”

“Mhm.” She put a stamp on Rob’s letter and laid it in a stack. “Your little missus march around like that too?”

“Oh, no ma’am,” Rob said. “She’s working on the railroad.” Janice let out a snort. That was good. It didn’t sound all that bad when you told it like a joke. Rob’s brother, Peter, had been a master joker. This had all been Peter’s thing—all this Civil War stuff. The museum tours and funny clothes and reenactments. Peter, who had lived in a few sections of a remodeled train out in the woods with no electricity and wouldn’t tell anyone how he’d gotten all ten tons of it out there. “History’s mysteries,” he’d say and laugh.

Then Peter died of a snake bite out behind his train and left a wife and a boy, and now it was Rob who loved the wife and raised the boy. Rob, who wore the funny clothes and swapped sass with Janice at the post office.

“Crazy loves crazy,” Janice said, and that was true. It took love to make crazy work. Sarah was in love with the past, because that was where Peter lived. The boy, Johnsey, was eleven and loved caring for the animals—four chickens and a dairy goat. Rob only considered himself half-crazed, but even he was, strangely, in love.

At the funeral, none of the family stood with Sarah. There was a rumor she had treated Peter’s bite at home with honey and prayers. She wore her period clothing, black bonnet and all. Aunts and uncles skirted her like a leper, and you could see she didn’t give a damn. Johnsey wore a rough little suit and held his mother’s hand through the service. Rob began coming to the train with books and salted meat.

Sarah had been receptive to the marriage. She and Rob kissed once at a

party, and again in a car while Peter bought beer. They were young and love came easy. When Peter died, consolation turned to covenant, though Sarah didn't suffer cars any longer and her hair had greyed. And there was the money that Rob had from practicing law. Money that paid off the land and restocked the train and let Sarah continue on in the world she and Peter had entered into some years back.

On the ten-acres Peter bought beside I-16, certain things had to be forgotten. The lunar landings. Internal combustion. Air conditioning, God bless it. The rules of the fantasy were obscure, and Sarah was their keeper.

Rob spent twenty years as an Atlanta bachelor, swearing up and down that a '67 Stang would be his baby forever-and-ever-amen. And yet, here he was: wifed up and raising Peter's boy. And it was worth it. *The boy* was worth it. He was worth wearing Peter's uniform, and if Rob had to cut his hair Lee's-army short and spill fake blood once a year in a grey coat, hell, he was worth that too.

So Rob moved into the train and took Peter's job at the museum and sold his Mustangs to a series of old men and a sixteen-year-old with tissues in her bra.

Janice had a school photo on her side of the counter, pocket-sized and framed in steel. The boy in the picture had a gap-tooth grin.

"Does he go to school in town?"

"He's grown," she said. "But he did." And then, after some time: "Played the trombone."

Rob paid for the stamp, and the bell on the door rang high when he pushed it open. He moved across town in the heat of the day with the Springfield slung across his back, honks splashing like gutter-water from cars on the road.

From afar, he saw Sarah hanging the wash. Johnsey and Duchess, the goat, sat in Rob's old black Mustang—the one he couldn't bear to sell. The car was parked in the woods some ways from the train, hidden behind a small hill and covered by a brown tarp so Sarah could pretend it didn't exist. To speak of it was taboo.

"Get that goat out of my car," Rob said.

Johnsey pushed Duchess out of the open door. He had the tarp rolled back so that the long nose of the Mustang was showing. He had the roof down too, and the sight of the boy behind the wheel of the old black car brought Rob joy in the hot of the afternoon.

Rob held the goat by the snout and tugged its head around. The goat

licked at his hand like a dog. He brushed some mud off the Mustang's passenger seat and sat down.

The boy had his hands on the steering wheel and was tracing the lightning path of a crack in the windshield with his eyes.

Rob passed Johnsey a Moonpie from his pocket and began unwrapping one of his own. They ate in silence. Rob swept some of the dust from the leather dash with the side of his hand and frowned.

"She's mad today," Johnsey said.

"What for?"

Johnsey was working his tongue around his mouth, chasing marshmallow out from behind his teeth. "She found your watch."

Rob passed the boy his water canteen, a replica steel thing. "Your watch," he said. It had been Peter's watch. Rob had given it to Johnsey a week ago. "Did you wear it out?"

"Only to church, and on my ankle. There was a sock over it. She saw the lump."

"She has it?"

"Yes, sir."

Rob looked back towards the train. He could see smoke rising from the cook fire, thin and grey. "Best get back then. I'll talk to her tonight."

Johnsey clicked his tongue for the dairy goat and Duchess came around to his side of the car. He dangled his hand out and pulled the goat's horns. The goat nipped at his fingers and let out a little bleat. The boy bullied the goat and sat in the car. "Can we see them?" he asked.

Rob looked to the smoke again and heard no one coming. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the glovebox before passing Johnsey a picture of Peter and a dog. There were about fifty pictures in all, and Rob had been showing them to the boy one at a time to kindle the mystery—to draw out a life.

"What'd he name that dog?" He said it "dawg."

"Wasn't his dog to name. Was our neighbor's dog. Sue."

"Sue."

Peter was thirteen in the picture and sat in an old rocker with Sue between his legs. She was a silver-haired Golden with no teeth left. She'd gum your hands till you cried.

"Johnsey!" Sarah called from the train.

Rob whistled and Johnsey passed the picture back in a hurry. Rob locked it up. The two of them covered the Mustang and walked up the little rise to the train.

Sarah had a stew going over the fire and was poking at it when she saw

them coming.

Rob pecked her cheek and sat next to the fire on a cut log stool.

“Chickens,” Sarah said, and Johnsey walked out to where the coop was kept. “We had some trouble this morning,” she said when the boy was out of sight.

“I heard. The watch.”

“I told you about giving him things like that. It confuses him.”

“It was Peter’s.”

“I know that,” she said, still stirring at the stew. Chunks of tomato and meat roiled in the pot. There was sweat on her brow and splatters of red broth on the apron she wore over her day-dress, and she stirred on without meeting Rob’s eye.

Rob stared at the fire.

“And what’s that on your breath? That sweet.”

“Rock candy.”

“Lie.”

Rob pulled a blue stick of rock candy from his pocket. “This one’s for my boy.” He stood and brushed the hair out of Sarah’s face. A pink stick appeared from behind her ear. “And this one’s for my wife.” He gave her little kisses until she relaxed her angry, pursed lips, and then he kissed her good.

“Did you send the letter?” she asked. There would be a reenactment in a week at Kennesaw Mountain. It was the only time Sarah would stand to ride in a car, and she penned a note to Marcy Dean every year asking for a ride in her “coach”—an extended cab Ford.

Rob had fought and died twice now. You had to lie down in the grass when you died. Lie down and bake in the sun. The first year he fell to musket fire. A grey-haired veteran had patted him on the shoulder, saying, “You’re down, son.” Last year, a Union cavalry officer slid a blunted saber across his chest.

“I did,” he said.

She sighed and took the stewpot off the fire, her hands wrapped in heavy cloth.

Rob held the door to the train, and Sarah stepped inside. When Johnsey poked his head around the end of the train, Rob raised a thumb.

When dinner was through, Sarah laid in the passenger car to read. The library was groomed with zeal. Tonight she cradled *Moby Dick*—published in 1851.

Rob and Johnsey went out to walk. To “check the snares,” Rob said.

“Do you still want to go tonight?”

“I do.”

Rob carried a lantern and walked with the boy into the woods. Duchess followed, and they shooed her back twice before Johnsey tied her to a tree.

“I’m sorry about the watch,” the boy said when they were some ways from the train.

Rob saw the purple lines of the switch behind his knees. “She beat you some?”

“Only some.”

A lump formed in Rob’s throat. Those whelps were his doing, and Sarah was not one for “some.” She was an all or nothing kind of girl.

“Probably deserved it.” He poked the back of the boy’s head and watched him stumble over a root. “I’ll get it back. We’ll keep it somewhere.”

A light flickered ahead through the wood and brush, and the man and boy made their way towards it.

“You loved my pa a lot?” Johnsey asked.

“He was my little brother,” Rob said.

“Do you love ma too?”

“Yes.” Rob dimmed the lantern to a flicker and stowed it behind an azalea hedge. “Hush now, and watch if you want to.” They hid themselves in a stand of pines. Ahead, a television set flashed inside their neighbor’s trailer. The old couple that lived there were watching cartoons. *Pinky and the Brain*. It was their Sunday ritual. Sarah had brought the couple a yellow cake once, years ago, and said they were dull. Well, look at them now. Holding hands and drinking clear liquor and yucking it up like little children. A bit of Rob panged for her to see.

Too far away to hear, Rob and Johnsey did the voices themselves.

“What are we going to do tonight, Brain?” Rob asked in his best Pinky.

“The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world,” Johnsey answered in Brain’s dry voice. They laughed.

They made a new story each Saturday night, speaking for the mice. Tonight Pinky and the Brain were discussing the ethics of eating squirrel—what with it being in the rodent family. This lined up nicely with the science chapter Johnsey was working through. He was homeschooled—for “quality and accuracy alike,” Sarah said.

When the show ended, the old couple switched off their TV set. The man left the room, and the woman lit a cigarette.

Rob and Johnsey walked back in a weaving path, their night vision ruined by the flashing of the television. Johnsey held Rob’s hand.

“Do you want to go to school?” Rob asked.

“I am.”

“With other kids. The public school in town.”

“Ma don’t want me to.”

“She *doesn’t* want you to, and I’ll talk to her.”

Johnsey was silent. He walked ahead of Rob and held the lantern with both hands, waist high.

“You could play sports. Soccer or football. You could play in the band.”

“She doesn’t want me to. Don’t say nothing. Don’t say anything at all. I like doing school here.”

Before they were in sight of the train, they heard Duchess bleating. She came plodding up to them through the dark, the chewed-through rope dangling from her neck.

Rob kissed Johnsey on the head and sent him to bed the goat down for the night. Then, he washed his face in the cedar-wood bucket outside of the train, enjoying the smell of the water and the woody sweetness of what dribbled through his lips.

Inside, Sarah was asleep.

The master bedroom was built in the shell of the train’s caboose. Lace curtains hung for privacy’s sake. Rob slipped beneath the sheets. He would have to be careful, he thought. They’d talked about the school before. That was old beef. And there was the watch to get back. So he would be careful—put a little sugar on the spoon. He laid a kiss in the nest of her hair, down for the night and unbound.

“Hm.” She smiled, eyes closed. “Traps?”

“Bare, but set. What do you think about Johnsey going to public school?”

Too much.

“Not yet,” she said, and then, “I read something about the goat in my almanac.” She turned to face him in the dark. She had been stewing on this. Stirring it around.

“Not yet, but when? I think it’s time, Momma.” He kissed her cheek.

“Not yet. I’m worried about the goat.”

“Yeah? She seems fine. Do you have the boy’s watch, dear? I’ll keep it for him. Keep it out of the way.”

“The goat’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” They were whispering back and forth.

“She’s the wrong breed. I told that snotty Jaffords woman that I needed an Angora goat, but this thing, she’s getting huge.”

“What do you mean? Pregnant?”

“She’s French Alpine. They milk better. Get bigger. Flat haired. Angora’s are curlier. I’ve been waiting for her hair to curl up, but she just keeps getting bigger.”

“So?”

“So it’s wrong. French Alpine didn’t come until 1900. Dead wrong. Damn Jaffords. I’ll have to sell it at the reenactment. Or trade.”

“The boy loves that goat.”

“I know it,” she said—mournful and everything. Mournful and resigned and cold as stone, like a sad statue.

“You can’t sell it.”

“It’s wrong. Like the watch.”

Rob sat up in bed. “You didn’t sell the watch.”

“No.”

“Where is it?”

“Gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone. Don’t nobody need that watch. A soldier couldn’t buy that with a year’s pay.”

“Well, I’m not a soldier again until next week. Where did you put it?”

Rob stood from the bed. She had taken things before and made them “gone.” He walked from the room, naked save his underclothes.

“Come back to bed.”

He stepped outside and dug in the ashes of the cook fire with a stick until he found it, the leather burnt away and the face blackened. The glass was all busted. The fire wouldn’t have done that, but Sarah could have. Sarah and a stick.

She slid open their bedroom window. “Come back to bed. We’ll talk.”

Rob threw the watch against the train car, and she slid the window shut. “Christ.”

He walked back into the train and sat in the passenger car. He pulled a tin of whisky from beneath a seat. At the end of the room, behind a pane of glass, was a manikin dressed in Peter’s infantryman uniform—the one only worn at ceremonies and reenactments. Rob pulled from the tin and glared at the doll-soldier in his brother’s clothes.

Peter had collected the pieces. The coat and trousers were high quality replicas, costing several hundred dollars. The belt buckle was genuine. Peter found that with a metal detector. He’d soaked and scrubbed it until the brass shown like a gold tooth. The hat, though, was the real treasure. An original, it sat atop the manikin, cocked to the side as if the cloth man had

just thrown it on as he jogged to muster—perhaps fastening the brass buttons of his coat as he went.

Rob raised the tin to drink.

Johnsey came padding in from the next car.

“Back to bed,” Rob said, and the boy went as quiet as he came.

Rob looked down at the mud on his feet. The ash on his hands. He raised the tin again. “Some life, Pete,” he muttered. The uniform stood sentinel behind the glass and said nothing. “Some wife.”

Rob got up with the whiskey and stepped to the glass. He opened the display door and took out the hat. He smelled the wooly stink of it. A loose hair stuck from the fabric and he held it up to the lantern burning nearby. Blonde. Peter’s. He put the hair in his pocket and the hat on his head.

He went outside to drink with the goat.

“And wasn’t Johnsey right?” he said in the hay-shed. “Don’t say nothing.” There hadn’t even been a chance to fight about it. Too busy bailing out crazy.

Duchess chewed at his shoe lace and he pulled his foot away. Rob looked the goat over. She was getting big. As big as a big dog. He got a whiff of her breath when she tried to climb into his lap. Rob pushed her back from where he sat. “She’s gonna sell you to the Jaffords.”

The goat looked at him when he spoke, its alien pupils wide and dumb.

Rob finished the tin. He was a nervous drunk. “I’d sooner eat you.” He let the empty tin dribble onto his fingers, and Duchess licked them clean. “Kid needs to go to school.”

He walked out to the Mustang and groped behind the tires for a key. The galloping horse cut into the head of the spare was worn smooth as the face on a silver dollar, and when he slid the key into the ignition, the old girl fired right up. Rob laid his head on the wheel. The leather was cool. The purr and rustle of the engine worked its way through his skull. He let it run for ten minutes before he staggered back to the train.

“Kid needs to go to school,” he slurred from the foot of the bed, the lantern held high.

“What were you doing running that car?” Sarah asked.

“Kid’s going to school. I’ll drive him there in that car. He loves that car.”

“You’re drunk.”

“We’ll take the goat. She can ride shotgun. Kid loves that goat.”

“Are you wearing the infantry cap?” She stood from the bed and crossed to face him. She stood very close. She began in a whisper: “Peter would never—”

“Peter’s dead!” he shouted. He stepped back from her. “Peter’s dead, and the kid needs school. He needs to be around kids. His best friend’s a goat. Shit, Sarah. How selfish can you be?” She stared at him, so he said it again, softer. “Shit, Sarah.” And then, “It’s too much now.”

She reached up to his face. Carefully. Slowly. She took the hat from his head.

“Sleep somewhere else tonight.”

Rob gave her a weary look. He stepped back out to the passenger car and laid down on the bench-seat. Then he stomped out to the hay-shed. He laid down in the prick of the straw and closed his eyes, the breathing of the goat raspy and even in the dark.

He woke to Johnsey shoving at him in the hay-shed. The sun was terrible through the slat-wood walls. Rob turned his face into the hay, and the musk of it turned something in his guts. The boy shoved at him again, and Rob heaved into the straw.

“She killed her!” Johnsey cried. There were tears running openly down his face.

“What? Who?”

“Ma killed Duchess. She’s killing the car too.”

Rob stood and fell. “What?” He rose again on rubber legs. The door to the shed was closed. He pulled at it and found it locked.

“No, Ma!” Johnsey had his face pressed between the slats.

Outside, Sarah was dousing the Mustang with kerosene, the canister up-ended in her arms and belching out long runs of amber fuel. The leather interior shown in the wet. Something white was slumped over in the passenger seat.

“Goddamnit!” Rob pulled the boy back and kicked at the slats. “Goddamnit!” He missed a kick and fell.

Sarah struck a match and flames leapt about the cab. The smoke was immediate, oily and black. She walked back to the train, clutching Peter’s hat with both hands, and for a flash Rob saw that resolve in her face again. That indifferent resolve she wore when Peter was being lowered down into the Earth and there was a six-foot gap between her and Johnsey and any love at all. Rob could see she didn’t give a damn. He sagged against the slats, saying her name and watching her pass him by. The sight of it burned out the middle of him.

Rob sat down with the boy and laid an arm across his shoulders. “Easy, son.”

The train door slammed over the crackle of the Mustang, and Rob imagined Sarah replacing the hat on the manikin's head. She would set it just as it had been, cocked just-so to the side. She would polish the gleaming buttons and smooth the trousers. She would pass her hands over the fabric and, in her own way, mourn the goat—maybe even the car. She would look around their empty home, thinking of Peter and the perfect way he married the old world to the new, and perhaps she would lament, then, that she had taken Rob for a lover. Rob, who was not Peter. Perhaps she would lament Johnsey just the same. They were, the both of them, imperfect replicas.

Rob gave Johnsey's shoulder a squeeze. "Your pa loved that dog. Sue," he said. "He buried her."

Johnsey dug his hands into the straw. "It was the neighbor's."

"They were away. I was home from college, and your pa was watching her for a little money."

"How did she die?"

"We thought it was her gums—the way she was crying—but she was just old. Your pa laid on the laundry room floor with her. We had an old wire brush that she liked, and Peter ran it through her fur so she wouldn't cry. He must have brushed her all night long; he had that silver hair stuck all over him. It was all he could do. She passed in her sleep, and Peter wouldn't let anyone touch her. He was just a little older than you."

"What did he do then?"

"He made her a little grave in the woods. He slept. I took him bowling. You know your pa couldn't bowl for beans." Rob pulled the boy's hands out of the straw and studied them. "You've got his thumbs," he said. "You're doomed."

Johnsey laughed.

## Interview

Stephen Hundley

### **When did you write "Replica"?**

I initially wrote the story for a course at Clemson, Keith Lee Morris's fiction workshop. A lot of the early edits, questions, and reactions came from undergraduate writers (and, of course, Keith).

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

I think the title changed with every draft. I have a great time naming stories and generally shoot around a good many in the draft stage. They can be a great tool for reflection—trying to narrow down what the story's focus is while you're still digging up the bones of the story, to use Stephen King's illustration. For this story, I considered "Burn Out," "What's the Time?" and "The Replica Man." I think we made the right choice.

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

I was enrolled in a course at Clemson that dealt heavily in Civil War memory (a lot of Faulkner). The professor told an anecdote that involved taking his family to a local reenactment. There were some colorful characters, one of which inspired Sarah. I started to wonder what her home life might be like. Things snowballed from there.

### **What was the hardest part of writing "Replica"?**

I often struggle with withholding information or "teasing" readers. Initial drafts of the story left a lot of my frontline readers and editors asking: "Why would they live like this?" and things of the like. I was worried the answers would be too big for a short fiction piece, or perhaps run too deep for me to explain at all.

### **Which part of "Replica" was conceived of first?**

Oddly for me, the characters came first here. Sarah, in particular, was based on a woman attending a reenactment—she was heckling and jeering passing Yankee reenactors.

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

“He went outside to drink with the goat.” I really enjoyed the goat in this story. I had a good laugh more than once.

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

Tons. Especially scenes concerning and taking place at the reenactment. Initially, the story was built like a ladder leading up to the battle. With each draft, it became clearer that the story wasn't so much about the reenactment and it had become a distraction.

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

I've been listening to a good deal of new music this year—new to me, that is. Sturgill Simpson has been playing more often than not during my writing sessions this spring and summer. I also think a fair amount of Tom Waits (*Rain Dogs*) and Merle Haggard shaped “Replica.”

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

I wouldn't say so. Like many authors, I like to begin with a central image or character and let things develop from there. It amazes me a little every time a full story materializes. I have a friend who calls that being a gardener rather than an architect. I like that.

**Quote a piece of writing advice that guides your process.**

A professor of mine, author Nic Brown, sometimes advises holding staged conversations between characters to help develop ideas. It's a fun way to get to know your characters. Put them in a new document and ask them point blank: “Why did you do this?” “What do you want?” You can learn a lot, and then transfer that consciousness back to your story. This was especially helpful in “Replica,” where the “why's” of the story seemed so vital.

**Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "Replica"?**

Without a doubt, Raymond Carver. I've been reading everything of his that I can get my hands on. George Saunders and Ron Rash also played a

role. I'll be focusing more on them over the summer. I still feel like every author I dig into changes me significantly.

**One of the more enjoyable aspects of this story is the ambiguity surrounding the characters' motives. It gives the reader a great deal of speculative freedom. There will, however, always be readers who want to know the "why" behind a character's actions. That said, how aware are you of your characters' motives?**

Initially, I wasn't very aware at all. Characters and character reactions came first, and motivations much later. Again, it reminds me of the Stephen King illustration of "uncovering" preexisting characters and stories. Even when I knew what Sarah or Rob would say or do, I couldn't answer the "why." It took a good many drafts, reflection, and even dedicated exercises to uncover the motives.

**Talk to me about that Mustang, as it obviously plays a pivotal role in the story. Were you more interested in its literal value in the narrative or in its symbolic implications?**

The symbolic implications, for sure. Cars are important. They remind us of freedom, of course, and independence. Mobility. The Mustang in "Replica" also operates as an avatar for Rob's passions, past and lingering, as well as Johnsey's future and connection to his father. The Mustang's destruction burns bridges, further stranding Rob and Johnsey.

**Your writing has a fairly distinct Southern quality. As far as qualifiers go, how do you feel about being described as Southern?**

I enjoy the classification. I was raised in Georgia and the Carolinas, and I love my home. Many of the writers I enjoy most are often called Southern. Likewise, I very much enjoy writing that has a strong sense of place. My favorite example of this is not from a Southerner, but John Muir's non-fiction—his essays and letters concerning Yosemite and the Sierras. If I can capture or portray a piece of my home or places that have meant something to me in a piece of writing, I'm pleased. It's a nice way to revisit places of comfort or personal magnitude. A way to take pride and share.

**This is your first publication. What advice would you give to other emerging writers still working towards their first publication?**

Getting in touch with other, more accomplished, writers helped me turn the corner. As a writer, finding talented friends and editors to help you make the most of your drafts is vital. If anything has changed in my writing

recently, it's been meeting talented men and women who've already walked the walk—generous, wonderful people with highly trained eyes and ears. That, and immersing myself in quality short fiction.

**Good dramatic writing often skirts with melodrama. What were the difficulties you faced in tempering the dramatic scenes—especially those centered around the boy, Johnsey?**

Children have always been difficult for me. So often when I'm writing from a young point of view, I find the dialogue hokey. I wanted to portray an extraordinary situation—a tragedy, here. On one hand, it makes sense to react to a situation like the one “Replica” ends in with sobs and cries and dramatic action and dialogue, but then again, it always felt false to me. Strained. Wooden. In the end, I tried to trust my ear and balance that with plausibility. It may be true that most children would just scream and cry through the entire scene, but this isn't just any child—he's a character.

**Likewise, arguments are also difficult scenes to pin down without coming off as overdramatic or crowding your writing with exclamation marks. What advice do you have for other writers attempting to write realistic arguments?**

The arguments I've always enjoyed reading are hyper-realistic and minimalist. Cut out the grandiose lines, and you may find distinction in the honesty of brief, bitter attitude being exchanged between characters—perhaps if they argue like real people, your reader will believe them.

**Several of our editors thought the heart of the story was the relationship between Johnsey and Rob. What do you make of their relationship?**

One of co-conspirators. Their bond feels, to me, less father-son or uncle-nephew, and more akin to prisoners walking around the same yard. For Johnsey, Rob is the link to another world, opportunity that he's aware of, and his father. For Rob, Johnsey is the reason he's left his old life for his current one; he's his best friend and chiefest love. Still, their relationship is given meaning and context by their shared relationship to Sarah.

**This story seems easily expanded; the premise is almost ambitious enough to be the premise of a novel. Have you ever thought about expanding this work?**

I have, but there are several other projects that I'd like to pursue first—including some of novel length. I think Rob, Sarah, and Johnsey need to

rest for a while before we see them again.

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

I was extremely impressed and only briefly daunted by the level of time, energy, and expertise that the Driftwood editors poured into this piece. Every draft got better, and when I thought I had the end-all-be-all, the line-edits came back, and I got back to the grind again. It was tremendously rewarding, and I hope it shows in “Replica.”

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

Outside of undergraduate journals in Georgia and South Carolina, this is my first publication.

**What are you working on now?**

I’m currently polishing and expanding old drafts—one concerning a dead dog and a murder in the low country, and another that focuses on a man who deactivates landmines on Ossabaw Island, just off Georgia.

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

The press’ reputation for a strong editing process was a big draw. Most of the published work seemed comparable to the things I enjoy writing. I’m also a sucker for the author interviews, which I’ve always enjoyed thinking on.

# The Source of Light

Mark Heydon

Girl was a whole lot pregnant and not in a good way, not in a planned-it-all-out sort of way. Luckily for her, the bulge wouldn't begin for a couple of months or more, or so she figured, so she had a little cushion of time before she had to make any commitments to it, the bulge. That gave her the day, the week, the time for reflection, response, or whatever. And October was a whatever month, neither summer nor winter, just both.

The boy, the instigator of the problem, had already gone south, south like in San Berdoo, probably, or maybe Riverside. In any case, he was not coming back and that was a relief for her, sort of like getting into a bad night of drinking but, thank God, the guy's gone by morning so she didn't have to sit there and watch him swallow down the last four of her eggs and runt end of toast while he told her again all about how he was going to get his shit together and make a lot of cash all the while showing her his molars and the dripping egg yolk in the back of his mouth. She'd heard a lot of guys' stories and they seemed like a pattern. Too many faded checks in their worn out plaid shirt, she thought.

So, how'd she get pregnant? The grand conclusion? Probably genetic. Her mom, too. Young. Had other plans. Then June arrived. Etcetera, etcetera. Same ol', same ol'. Families beget families, always in the same ways, always with the same suspicions of "Why's this happening to me?" when nobody did anything to deserve it. It was all very annoying, she thought. So, she figured she was just surfing the continuing forward edge of a family tradition. There was never any actual beginning to this tradition, just a continuing flow and now she was at the front of it. She could handle it. But there were suggestions, even in her own mind, that this being preggers when she didn't really want to be wasn't quite ignorable. There were implications, implications about her. She ought to explore it, she thought. Research it. Get to the bottom of it. It was something she needed to do.

So, there she was, in the kitchen, in the late afternoon, sitting backwards on the kitchen's single, hard wooden chair, her face to the window, saying—stating—that it was time to take inventory. It was time, i.e., to know

what she was dealing with and figure out where she sat vis-a-vis this moment in her belly and her own ability to cope. This was, she admitted, a potentially hard shove through that door into what she considered to be an adult lifestyle. She acknowledged the shift. She acknowledged the potential *other duties as assigned* of such a future. What was she going to do?

And don't think it's easy to figure out, she said to herself. Don't think it's easy at all.

First off, she was a girl, an only child, notably named June, named after her mother's own summer trist. (Her assumed-to-be father told her about this little detail of her life when she became fifteen years old, let her know not-too-gradually while they were sitting on the front steps of their house after her birthday party, told her because he wanted to set things right, to be sure she was starting out life with the truth lining her pockets, which was better than money, he said. No, he wasn't her father, he said. *You could say I am your stepfather.*)

Her mother, who trusted and accepted no one else's ideas but her own—particularly when it came to how other people ran their lives—had once remarked about June's untimely birth as unacceptable and unnecessary and inconvenient. This mother of hers marked off her own personal timeline with labels that kept track of her progress through life. She had a car named "May" and a cat named "August." She'd once said she'd always wished she'd had a son born in April. "For the record," she'd told June. "For the record."

So, for a girl who was more or less living off her own record, inventory came easy. For June, life pretty much came down to the sole, solid object of school. But just barely. She was just barely getting herself to the classes she could tolerate.

A little self-pity here. Earned self-pity, she would say. Pity, not so much for the effort she had to make every morning to pry herself out of her apartment, into her car, drive to school, and into the mess of looking for free parking, but for the sharp ache and dull pain of having to sit in a molded plastic seat in a psych class that she never missed because it was easy and made sense without too much reading outside of class. That took a lot.

And pity, too, for suffering the surprised and condescending faces when she walked into her English class, an English class she made once in a while just because she thought the professor was easy on the eyes and funny in a put-himself-down kind of way and she got some subterranean bodily thrill out of imagining him discovering her during some class discussion, locking his eyes onto hers suddenly because of something she said in class like how

hard life was.

The two of them would hit it off really well, of course, especially after she'd show up one day later during his office hours and, shazam, there'd be a "Joycean epiphany"—as he called things that surprised him—when he and she discovered that they had all sorts of things in common. She couldn't exactly name those things they'd have in common but left the specifics to the moment's particular version of her daydream. Different conversations fluttered through her imagination each time she let it go. It was meant to be, she thought, even though she knew their romance was the result of the serendipity of the college's online-scheduling, that it was all by way of an algorithm's chance selection, but that made it especially intense and divine. It was too much. Truly. There was no need for her to imagine any extra details.

Except, in truth, it never happened. She never talked in class and she sure as hell hadn't gone by his office during office hours because all she could think to talk to him about was why she'd missed so much of his class. She had no reason to miss so much class except she just didn't make it. Girl was pathetic in that way, the get-things-done sort of way. And she knew he wouldn't want to talk about her being preggers, either. Men don't. They'd rather have ice cubes dropped in their crotch than talk to a pregnant woman. She admitted to herself that hooking up with some men was not going to happen. Professor English was one of them. "Not happening," she said to herself.

She hadn't gone to either math or bio since the first week.

It seemed being pregnant was bobbing to the surface of her life like some big, unavoidable floatation device that sure didn't look like any kind of a life preserver.

She leaned forward, cupped her chin in the palm of her hand, and rested her hand on the back of the chair. Frowned.

Suddenly, pregnancy sparked a tinge of holy discomfort in her chest: A self-righteous meditative moment arose in her in which she lifted her head up to the light pouring in from the kitchen window and cried out, "Why am I pregnant?" This was, to her, not a matter for the awkward aviary-and-apiary talk, but a matter of some—again, the English instructor's words—"metaphysical debate."

"My god," she said out loud, drawing the syllables out so they sounded like a full groan. "My god!" she said again.

She did the math:

Life is subjective. Objectivity is impossible. One cannot step outside one's self to escape subjectivity. One cannot dive into objectivity without

bringing along a load of subjectivity.

Therefore, she thought, being pregnant or un-pregnant is really a matter of personal opinion, a question of interpretation, a metaphorical choice. Pregnancy is, frankly, an abstract concept. Did pregnancy exist? It depends.

Where to start? She would begin by cleaning the apartment. June stood quickly and walked from the kitchen to the living room and tugged twice on the cord next to the picture window. She closed the blinds. No one walking by outside could look-see inside. It was default cleaning. Was the apartment clean or messy? Her choice. It was all concept. It was up to her to decide. She looked around. Her roommate, of course, would not agree. Her roommate was pretty cool, wore hoodies, ran tats up and down her legs and arms like flags, but she had her irks, and June's not cleaning up after herself was one of them. Her roommate would eventually return home, so this was not a question that could be postponed for long. Dropped blinds was temp cleanup for solitude. Cleanup for her mind only. Objectivity without conflict.

June went to the couch, fell back, and stretched herself out like a gigantic fish.

A fish. Not a whale. She felt like a fish. Big and floppy and with a tiny minnow in her belly.

A minnow she'd earned, by the way—the side result of a classic catch she'd pulled off right under her roommate's upturned nose when her roommate swore it couldn't be done. She hadn't even known the guy's name. Al or Ed? Anyway, he was south in SoCal now. And the circumstances weren't exactly pretty or romantic. These four or five guys had shown up late and this one seemed set off from the others, kind of shy or haughty, she wasn't sure which. She'd met up with her roommate in the kitchen and they'd both giggled themselves into a bet that she couldn't cut him out from the others and get him into bed with her that night. Her roommate promised a fifth of vodka as her side of the bet because, first, she wasn't interested in competing with June (as if she could) and, second, her roommate was a virgin and, third, her roommate thought June was too homely to get a guy like that into bed. So it goes, she thought.

Of course, her roommate wasn't any kind of a prude or anything, and June'd earned the vodka but her roommate still had to pay up, which June was afraid to bring up because she still hadn't decided what she was going to do with the minnow. She knew enough not to drink if she was pregnant. To drink or not to drink?

Depends.

She really needed to decide what to be.

This was not simply a choice of lifestyles. Or a choice of morals. June knew that and understood that. A kid was a non-stop extra. How would June share her life with a kid?

It was an epic economic, practical decision. She needed to decide because when her roommate discovered she was pregnant, it was going to be too late. It was going to be a tub of trouble then. More like lightning and thunder. Who was going to move out? Who was going to have to find another roommate? June knew this roommate was not going to go in on a deal with a roommate with a baby. Girl-in-the-hoodie roommate was way too selfish for that. She'd made the move-in deal for two women. No kids. No pets. Period. It was an obvious deal breaker. No kids, no pets.

No kidding, it was time to purge.

And just how did one go about doing that? This sudden thought arrived with an introductory ripple of panic in June's chest. She sat up, twirled the braid of her auburn brown hair between her fingers, tried to think about it. Then a second ripple—that cold, sharp hint of what this all could mean but not sure what this absolutely did mean and, worst of all, not too certain of what to do if she figured out what it meant.

Give the minnow back to God, she thought.

Trouble that. June was not religious. God entered her head looking like her stepfather and he sure as hell couldn't use the kid any more than she could.

The purge was the only certainty, the only certain response with a certain result. But no one ever talked about the purge. The purge might be that open, sparkling clean, slightly artificial but legal option for any woman who already knew where to look for the purge, but June was a first timer. Where did someone look to purge? What was a beginner supposed to do? Where was she supposed to call? What friend could she hit up for the secret number? None of her group had ever even whispered about curing pregnancy. It was a taboo topic. About sex, they talked. About the purge? Silence. Whack-job conversational taboos, she said to herself.

And she sure wasn't about to crawl over to her family doctor who had been seeing her since she was six and ask him where she could get a cheap abortion which—oh, yeah—it costs bucks and it suddenly occurred to her she had no money and there was no chance in the world she was going to go to her parents, to God-stepdaddy and not-so-unbewildered-mom, to ask for umpteen hundreds of dollars or however much it cost so she could carve out grandma's grandson or granddaughter from inside her daughter's body. How much did a purge cost?

So, practically speaking and with practicality's concomitant despair, June

imagined for a moment that she would go off and live in the woods, have the baby and then walk herself out of the woods, fumbling and tired and looking awful after spending months eating wild berries and drinking out of streams and making diapers out of dead leaves. She could do that at least. There were alternatives.

Seriously. She began to think she ought to just have the minnow. Swallow hard. Do the term. She'd learned about the push-and-shove placenta thing from her aunts, heard them talking in the kitchen when she was still too young and still too pre-monthly and still too pre-knowing when it would have been better to leave the room. Aunt stories. Always ugly. Competitive ugly. The Olympics of Ugly. They made pregnancy sound like the hammer throw. All windup, sweat, toss, and thud.

She'd need to think about that.

June's mind drifted, floated. She stood up, went back into the kitchen to the sink, pushed herself up on her toes, and pressed her face against the plate of the window glass. A cloud was just then passing by near the horizon, drifting aimlessly across the bottom of the otherwise blue sky. Below her, despite flattening her right eye hard against the sheet of glass, the most she could see were the tops of a few houses and the city pool, rippleless and clear, sticking out from behind the Safeway a block away.

June drew in a deep sigh of claustrophobic air. This is it, she decided. This is it.

She imagined the minnow, her minnow, floating in a vat of amniotic fluid. Deep. Comfortable. Primordial.

Alone.

June then imagined herself swimming, breaststroke to breaststroke, alongside the minnow. She reached out her hand and blew it a kiss. The minnow turned to her, smiled, and then butterflied ahead, into the distance of the chromosomal pool.

It was at that moment that June, looking from that small kitchen window, saw what only the truly hopeful, the truly desperate, the truly June-like could see: June saw the light.

June decided it wasn't her fault. She hadn't wished it, so how could she be responsible? It was pregnancy by chance, coincidence. It had nothing to do with her.

It wasn't much of a light. But faced with the dilemma of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy along with its accompanying challenges, responsibilities, and impossibilities, June figured she was lucky to get the light she got. She wasn't going to give it back. Besides, the decision would get her out of the house. It would get her out of this jam. She could have her cake and

minnow, too. June was ecstatic. She could start all over again, start with the purge, start with a good cleaning out. And this no-fault innocence was good for whatever she decided to do. She felt relieved.

“Time to go,” June decided. Time to take the minnow out for a walk, take the both of them back to where they belonged.

So June, who moments before had been standing stiffly at the sink in her apartment simultaneously pregnant and un-pregnant by whim, put on her jacket, opened the door and, with the determination of that only the truly distracted can know, left the apartment. Why? To follow the warming glow of purpose. She had seen the light and, as a moth is attracted for uncertain but deliberate reasons to the light, June was in a hurry to go.

She met her roommate on the stairs.

Roommate didn’t look good, had her hood up, looked like a fun house mirror reflection of the Taj Mahal. In her left hand, she was carrying a brown paper bag of Safeway swag, the familiar white, yin-yang “S” inside a scarlet oval printed on the side. A cylindrical bulge of a vodka fifth pressed against its sides. She was on her way to pay up, June thought. “Figures. What goes up, also goes down—usually at the same time.”

Nonetheless, it was time, June decided, time to slip her roommate the indelible truth. She held her up her hands, hunched her forehead, gave her roommate a “Guess what!” shrug.

“I’m pregnant,” she said.

Her roommate looked at her, stepped around, looked back, said “Bummer,” and continued up the stairs.

Ignored by a hooded virgin, June thought. What could be nastier than that? She shrugged again and watched her roommate ascend the stairs.

In a momentary and final taste of what could only be called a nostalgic pause in her meant-to-be quest, June stopped and gave herself a last look from the height of the final step. There was nothing to see. The parking lot was empty. The courtyard was empty. At a distance too far even to be exciting, an ambulance siren started up and then drifted away. June bravely gripped the cold metal of the banister, assayed the air with her nose and took the final step down. For the first time in her life, June started forward, on the flat, towards where she wanted to be.

The pool gate was unlocked (Who swims in October?). She crept to the edge, touched in her toe, pulled it back. This wasn’t going to be so easy, she thought. But the calling had called. The light had come. She just wasn’t pleased by its timing.

She waded in, felt the cold water crawl up her legs, belly, and chest. She felt it hug her neck and arms. She felt it seep between her legs. “That’s the

trouble with men and liquids,” she said to herself. “They just go all over the place.”

June, too, began to go all over the place, to settle in, to dissolve, to let herself go. It wasn't too bad, she thought. She let the water take her where it wanted her to go. She didn't swim. She didn't need to. Her coat, shoes, and hair swallowed in water like dead sea sponges. The girl sank quietly, horizontally, functionally. “Can't fight city pool,” she said to herself. “And there's no chlorine smell here at the bottom of the pool. That's a plus.”

She trusted the water, became one with the water, owed the water her best fish. And the water seemed to know what it was doing. The weight of her clothes pressed down on her back, tugged her lower, then rolled her over until she was facing upwards in the belly of the pool, facing upwards towards the brilliance of the light above her, facing upwards through the water-filled sky, facing upwards alone with her minnow. “Good timing,” she said to herself. “I can still see the light.” Just then, her shoulders tapped the bottom and then her heels. She opened her wide fish mouth and let the fluid flow in.

Under that soft blue sky, June dissolved into the light.

## Interview

Mark Heydon

### **When did you write "The Source of Light"?**

I thought I'd written it just a year ago, but looking back, I found notes from 2014. The notes were, of course, scattered. The story must have been writing itself somewhere in the back of my brain for a couple of years.

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

Though I often use working titles to mark changes in a story's focus as I rewrite, "The Source of Light" was there from the first.

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

As I recall, the opening sentence, "Girl was a whole lot pregnant and not in a good way, not in a planned-it-all-out sort of way," came to me after a class in which a student introduced herself in casual "girlfriend speech" and the woman sitting next to her was pregnant. I suppose the two bodies combined in my head between the classroom and my office. I often hear voices in my head and listen as the character tells his or her story. Often, I have no idea what they are talking about till I can sit down and listen—away from others.

### **What was the hardest part of writing "The Source of Light"?**

The hardest part was maintaining the voice while trying to clarify what June was thinking. As a character whose principal problem is clarity of thought, June didn't help me much in figuring out what she was thinking. The voice, which is not purely June's, seems part girlfriend and part counselor.

### **Which part of "The Source of Light" was conceived of first?**

The conflict of reality versus imagination, objectivity versus subjectivity,

emerged first. Strangely, I was reading *Einstein's Dice* and *Schrodinger's Cat* by Paul Halpern when the problem of “what is reality” refused to get out of my head. It seemed to feed into June’s dilemma and, in the mind of person like June, that could be a dangerous place. As Schrodinger asks, “Is the cat alive or dead inside the box?” Depends. Does that work with pregnancies, too?

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

The opening sentence. It seems go off like a gun and rip through all that follows.

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

Quite a bit. I was reading Alan Lightman’s *Einstein's Dreams* at the time and the story started as a much more science-based work. There was a good deal of quantum science-philosophical discussion that fascinated me. The story, at that point, could have been titled “The Source of Reality.” I took it out and then pared down suggestions of spiritual-religious possibilities (I didn’t want this to be a story about abortion, pro or con.), although I think June would have welcomed a miraculous intervention. As it was, I did leave homage to Schrodinger’s cat (“She stepped over the dead cat sleeping at the bottom of the stairs.”) until the penultimate draft. Then, regretfully, I had to kill the cat.

**Do you primarily write fiction?**

And non-fiction reflections on what come to me as random topics. I admire the writing of Brian Doyle (His recent passing was a serious blow to me). I shy away from calling my non-fiction “essays.” The word sounds dry and pretentious. I rarely attempt poetry. In the past, I wrote often about technology and education, but have given it up. I had begun to feel like Steve McQueen watching the blob flowing down the street at me and not knowing which way to run.

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

I often find myself wandering about San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I’m easily bored and am constantly on the look-out for anything new, challenging, stimulating—anything that will physically and emotionally shake my complacent view of the world. Film, too, inspires me, but I prefer the clarity and insight of Fellini to the deliberate ambiguity of Lynch.

Strangely, though I like music, particularly the minimalism of such composers as Philip Glass and Terry Riley, any sound is a distract while I write. I have to seal myself from the rest of the universe. I suppose it's part of needing to hear those voices as clearly and loudly as possible.

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

Actually, my greatest liberation was discovering that I am not unique, that I write pretty much just like everyone else. I doubt there is an obstacle that I've encountered while writing that other writers, great and small, have not encountered. We're all reinventing the narrative wheel as we write. I suppose it's the literary equivalent of that old saying, "We all put our pants on same as everyone else, one leg at a time." Somehow that comforts me.

**As a male writer, were you at all apprehensive about taking on pregnancy, especially in such a psychological style?**

This was a problem, especially as I am a coward. But I needed to work through the character's dilemmas, to try to understand them. I admit I leave it to the editor to decide if I "have agency" but also leave it to the character to claim that legitimacy.

**The story obviously has a robust philosophical underpinning. Were you to peel back the veneer of narrative and character, what thinkers and ideas would we find?**

One of the first that comes to mind is George Berkeley, the Irish philosopher, who (to borrow Alan Lightman's paraphrase) "argued that the entire cosmos is a construct of our minds, that there is no material reality outside our thoughts."

**You do a great job of creating sympathy for a character without resorting to any cheap tricks or gimmicks. When you think about characters that have earned your sympathy, what do you think is the trick?**

My first concern is that I treat June with respect and do not judge her. I don't agree with her final decision, and I certainly don't care for her logic, but her situation of isolation, pregnancy, and lack of self-worth is an experience that I have to visit vicariously. Her "return" to the amniotic fluid of the pool is, in a sadly self-destructive way, a noble act, an effort to reunite herself with a sense of personal value and purpose. That she recognizes, faces, and deals with such fundamental human questions deserves respect.

**What do you make of epiphanies in short fiction?**

Dangerous territory. I actually think of June's "epiphany" as a sort of anti-epiphany. She certainly doesn't "see the light" as the narrator says in any clarity or rational way. It's almost as if the epiphany gets in her way of rational thought—much as I tend to think epiphanies do in short fiction.

**Being primarily interior, "The Source of Light" is very voice-driven. Talk to us about some of the difficulties in tempering this voice.**

I found, after the initial draft of the story, that revision had to come in layers. First the plain "what?," then a bump up of descriptive metaphors and phrases, then a rephrasing in the voice. It was surprisingly easy to find new tangents and they begged to be included, but most were either irrelevant or obscure. It was also hard, with such a subjective voice as June's, to describe her experience with accurate, descriptive phrases that had her irrationality but maintained coherence of story. There is a fine line between "irrational" and "irrelevant," it seems. Often a phrase would appear on the page and I'd have to figure out if it was my mind concentrating on June or my mind trying to escape her.

**Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "The Source of Light"?**

Authors with strong voices are my favorites. Faulkner, Borges, Hawkes, and Diaz are four who fascinate me. They not only have distinctive language in their stories, but their stories draw the reader deeply into center of the human experience.

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

Exhausting, but absolutely necessary—the sort of "Pay attention" admonitions that I crave. The downside to writing is that it is such lonely work and quality mostly depends on the writer's experience and awareness. If a writer doesn't have such experience, or if the writer is lazy and is willing to just push a piece out without polishing it, the piece terminally fails. Many of the initial suggestions I suspected before I first sent the story. In a series of back and forth revisions and critiques, often very granular, the story was polished into not just a better story for me but one that enhanced the points I'd already thought done, good, and acceptable. Exhausting, but absolutely necessary.

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

Two stories that, I believe are still available online are “Murdo, By Southwest” at *Black Fox Literary Magazine* and “Down from Cabin 8” at *Lost Coast Review*.

**What are you working on now?**

I’m struggling with a novel set in the Congo. I spent a little over three years living there and it’s time to go back, at least in writing.

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

I read the comments on your “critique” webpage. The promise of an honest review and critique was too much to pass up. And, I might add, it was just what it said it was—and better.

## Sledding with the Dead

Michael Foran

Into the open space  
the smallest boy head back  
mitten'd thumbs struggling

to find the ends of glasses  
so thick you could see the stars

Launched by the two girls  
the color blending but stark  
against the snow of the hill

The sled, a round shield  
banks hard along the stone  
wall between patches of earth

exposed like early wounds  
but already scab-like

From the sky the dead stones  
feel like braille dots spelling  
one long word

## Interview

Michael Foran

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

I finished the poem in 2015.

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

The poem was actually inspired by three things. Several years ago, when my daughter was around five or six, we were passing a cemetery and she said, “Daddy, look at all the dead stones,” which surprised me, so I wrote that down in my pocket notebook. Years later, my son had a vision problem that went undiagnosed until he was almost five, and as a result, needed a very thick lens, the kind that bulge in the center. He was sledding with his now older sister and her best friend on a hill, and the girls grab the ends of his sled and launched him down the hill. A few days later, I passed an older cemetery built up on a hill and could clearly see where someone had been sledding. Finally, after years, all the piece came together and I wrote the first version draft in one sitting.

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

The hardest part about writing the poem was deciding to exclude the actual word spelled out by the “braille dots.” The easiest was writing the poem once the pieces came together.

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

When I wrote the first draft, I had already pretty much pared it down in my head. Much of the work centered on stanzas and line breaks. It’s a pretty short poem to begin with.

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

It is. Much of what I write has some connection to actual events.

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

For me, observing and listening are central to how I create a poem. They often begin with just one overheard word, phrase, or observation. I may sit on a fragment of an idea for years, which is why keeping many, many notebooks helps!

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

I enjoy the poetry of Michael Casey and many of the poets that came out of the Vietnam Conflict era. Doug Anderson is another. I also enjoy reading Sharon Olds and David Harris. Fiction favorites include Raymond Carver and Jesse Miller. In class, we recently read John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, and I was surprised at how well the book resonated with students.

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

A couple of poems were recently published in *Plum Literary Journal* and *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors* (volume 4). I have a poem coming out soon in *The Ocotillo Review*.

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

I came across one of the digital versions and really enjoyed the content and that the selections included more than just poetry and fiction.

## Loss

Kyle Ross

The new hollows that the flu  
had carved from my moon face  
were so enticing I wanted to dig craters,  
sharper shadows, and then, out of nowhere,  
I was walking three miles, then six, then nine,  
on an infinite loop, a narrowing Möbius strip.

Eventually any viewer gets bored  
watching the loop of a figure eight;  
then the eye gravitates to the intersection  
where the figure debates both  
its unity and its collapse.

Find me that equation, that point of escalation,  
the climax whose falling action  
was a cloak being slipped over me.  
Soon I became a funhouse mirror,  
I was sand in an hourglass,  
I was a body bubbling up to the surface.

Rocky bumps in my sternum,  
the grinning swoop of ribcage,  
last resting place of clavicles—  
all sweet protrusions made bitter  
under her discovering hands  
just before she asked me how  
have you not fallen apart?

## Interview

Kyle Ross

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

I wrote “Loss” when I was composing my senior thesis in poetry at Allegheny College this past winter and spring. For my thesis, I wrote a poetry collection about modern queer feminine identity, as told through the lens of self-portraiture.

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

While attempting to compose this self-portrait through poems, I realized how deeply my identity was tied to my body. My body was going to have to be in this collection. So I thought about the relationship I was in with my body during that time. At that time, I was attempting to recover from severe dysmorphia and disordered eating. I wrote “Loss” as a means of working through the escalation of my disordered behavior.

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

The hardest part of writing “Loss” wasn’t actually writing it: instead, the hardest part of writing this poem was the thought of somebody else reading it and knowing that I was struggling. This is a barrier that I have struggled with my entire life. I wrote my thesis with a professor that was very familiar with my writing, and he often told me that to be a successful poet, I was going to have to learn how to talk about myself. So that—the act of revealing—was the hardest part.

### **What was the easiest?**

The imagery. I wanted to pack as many images as close together as possible. I wanted the poem to sound like bones rattling.

### **Is this poem categorical of your work?**

Yes. Much of my work, since I got past the barrier of not wanting to talk about myself, is about giving insight to my personal experience. I do this in my work because I want others that are going through similar things to feel that there is a voice that they can relate to.

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

Four years. I have been writing stories since I was nine-years-old, but I started formally writing and studying poetry during my freshman year of college.

**How would you personally define poetry?**

Have you ever been walking home from work, on the same route you've always taken, and suddenly your surroundings look completely different to you? They don't look foreign, but you're just aware that you're noticing the things you never noticed before? That feeling is the same feeling that I get when I'm writing a good poem, and that's how I define poetry—as a moment of new sight.

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

Sharon Olds, Adrienne Rich, Lauren K. Alleyne, Matt Rasmussen, Li Young Lee, and Edward Hirsch.

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

My poem "Fawn" was published in the latest issue of Pittsburgh's *Collision*.

P = (P.x,P.y,P.c)

Danelle Lejeune

Flesh tensed and burned under my fingertips,  
Following the curves and lines of laughter.

Benoit Mandelbrot whispered one morning,  
"Beautiful, damn hard, increasingly useful. That's fractals."

A never-ending pattern, a prison of lines and edges.  
How do we become unstuck?

Fractured, a spiral break, deep into bone,  
Rarely an accident and hard to ignore.

My arm aches sometimes when the morning  
Is damp and cold, the line of the canyon carved deep.

I dream Benoit lifts my arm and kisses it,  
Tenderness fades back into the tea steam.

Car doors slamming, gravel dust, blood.  
How can the patterns go on and on?

## Madonna

Rachel J. Bennett

*There can be nothing...better than to follow nature.* – Caravaggio

Where his hand bridges window & time, see how mine  
holds. I feel silk & squirming. Even then I knew

he was too warm to be a god, but I loved him  
like a god. I've found that having a face is both

lucky & not. Before, I moved unseen through  
the crowds—invisible—& my mind spread like honey

across time. But to be seen! In the city, a falcon  
approached to understand me as I'd always wanted

to be understood. In the city began the sublimation  
of me into light. So I loved that man for giving me dirty

feet. We tried to save each other, him and me, me  
in a crown for every feeling time buried. When night

in the chapel resumes, see how I'll thank anyone who  
doesn't insert another coin, clasp their hands, or speak.

## Interview

Rachel J. Bennett

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

I wrote this poem in Rome in January of this year.

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

I'm currently working on what I hope will become a full-length collection of poems related to Marian devotion as it applies to modern perceptions of women, mothers, power, self, etc. It's interesting thinking about Mary as a real person, and how so much of who she might have been has been stripped away by patriarchal doctrine. This poem is ekphrastic in that it indirectly responds to two Caravaggio paintings in Rome, *The Calling of St. Matthew* in San Luigi dei Francesi and *Madonna di Loreto* in Sant'Eustachio.

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

The poems in this collection are sonnets, and using a form provides both constraint and freedom. I threw this poem out for a while because I thought it was too overtly about Mary and might turn off secular readers, including myself. But there's something tragic about the character of Mary that keeps me coming back to her. She has become so central to so many throughout history but is given so little voice of her own. She is a cipher, and I'm trying—as I think Caravaggio tried—to find out what she might mean to herself.

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

The poem does not differ in major ways from how it originally came out, but I've made a lot of tweaks to the language, played with the form (within the sonnet form), and changed the title. I also played up more the contrast between seeing and not. There are many benefits to being seen, but also to being invisible, and I'm not sure the poem resolves the tension

between the two.

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

I think so. It explores somewhat philosophical ideas using language that I think others would say is characteristic of me, and it has a sad undertone. I also like the occasional epigraph. What does it mean, in this case, “to follow nature”? What does it mean to Caravaggio, and what does it mean to Mary?

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

I jot down phrases and images all the time—often on my phone—and then sit down to distill them. My poems usually emerge as complete drafts, and then I rework them over time, being happy with them at first, then changing or discarding them.

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

Natalie Diaz, Djuna Barnes, Kevin Young, Thomas Hardy, Juan Felipe Herrera, Michael Dickman, Patrick Kavanagh, Dorothea Lasky, Bob Hicok, Carl Phillips, Gertrude Stein, Rae Armantrout, Emily Dickinson, James Tate, F. García Lorca, etc.

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

Evidence tells me, in the form of a notebook from when I was seven or eight, that I’ve been writing poems since around then, with early inspirations including trees and cats.

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

You can find me at my website ([www.racheljbennett.net](http://www.racheljbennett.net)). And my first chapbook, *On Rand McNally’s World*, is available through *dancing girl press*. I have a second book coming out soon relating to video game landscapes, computer programming, and love.

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

I admire your cover art as well as the fact that you remain a print journal. I enjoy many online journals, too, but I think it’s important to hold poems in your hands from time to time.

true story

Betsy Johnson-Miller

we had to walk in the dark    between two garages    to get to the lake  
that had leeches    as long and thin as bacon    I remember the clot  
of geese by the dock    the one goose    suddenly    on my mother's head  
I don't remember how long    it held her    under    I watched  
like it    was on    tv    my mom's hand flapping flopping grabbing  
the snake-like neck    I don't remember any goose hissing woman screaming  
child crying or drowning    that night in dreams    as trains carrying dead trees  
lumbered past

## Interview

Betsy Johnson-Miller

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

A couple of months ago.

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

Every time my writers' group meets, one of us brings a prompt. The tallest amongst us sets the timer on her phone for ten minutes, and we all scribble away. A couple of months ago, the prompt was to write something that alternated between these two sentences: "I remember—," "I don't remember—." This is the memory that surfaced.

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

The hardest part was getting the reader as fully there as I was in that moment—figuring out what details I needed to include to make that happen. Conversely, what did I need to leave out? In other words, what might have mattered to me but was not as important to the reader or to the poem?

The second hardest was settling on a form. Originally, this was written in long lines that were end-stopped, but after much trial and error, going with unpunctuated lines that moved quickly felt like the best way to go.

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

In its original form, I kept the "I remember/I don't remembers" at the beginning of each line. There are still a few of them in the final version, but it felt better to limit them and let the images do the work, instead of being tied to a refrain that could get tiring.

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

It is in the sense that I do my best to reach for the startling image and stick with simple but intense diction. However, it's more prose-y than some

of the things I write. But the story—as it happened—felt like it needed to remain in the forefront, and so the poem led me toward a more narrative place.

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

If my writing friends had to pick out a tattoo for me, they would probably make it a pair of scissors. Take this poem for instance. When I first wrote it, it was at least twice its current size. Whenever I am looking at my friends' work or my own, I often think, "Okay, what's the chaff? What can be cut in order to make things as stark and striking as possible?"

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

Kay Ryan is a particular favorite, especially when I can't find my way in to a poem I'm trying to write. Her poems—which tend to be small—manage to be light and dense at the same time, and she fills them with image, sound, and a profundity that both astounds and inspires me. Her surprising diction often jars something loose in my mind that opens the gate, so to speak.

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

Twenty-five years ago, I quit seminary because of a faith crisis. I've been writing ever since.

## Nest in the city

Daniela Matei

a milky condom  
the night gripped  
high risers and  
rusty scaffolds

the broken shafts of gallows  
poked holes  
bridges crisscrossed  
cranes sheared  
the frost iron  
beams trespassed and  
six floors below  
taxicab doors gasped  
I remembered

how lost  
my arms circled your chest  
from behind my knees pressed  
on the hassock  
of your calves  
my mind in suspense  
Christ on the cross  
forgotten

## Interview

Daniela Matei

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

I wrote this poem about a year ago, during winter in Chicago.

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

I was adjusting to life in a big city, to the new shapes and sounds, the brightly lit nights, the uncomfortable and frosty space.

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

I usually write in a single take, which does not come easy, but carries the tension of the poem through. I spent some time afterwards re-working the syntax and carefully selecting the nouns and verbs to make the alliterations work.

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

The title did not make it in. I changed it several times until it captured the essence of the poem.

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

In some ways it is a good reflection of my writing style, as it builds slowly with a restrained tone. It is also different from my prior work because it is anchored in the present. Many of my other poems attempt to reconstruct the past and explore the flux of memory.

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

I never found writing poetry easy or predictable. I am a bilingual writer and I live between two languages. I usually research the topic I am writing about, making notes about specific details. Sometimes I use a dictionary. Visual imagery usually brings the poem together. I have difficulty detaching

from the poem until I feel it is finished. I continue to revise over weeks, sometimes months, tweaking small details.

**How would you personally define poetry?**

I think of poetry as a space.

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

I like many of the Eastern European, and particularly Romanian poets, such as Mircea Cartarescu, Cristian Popescu, Radu Vancu, Caius Dobrescu, whose work influenced me as I developed as a writer. Some of the American contemporary poets I resonate with are Louise Gluck, WS Merwin, Charles Simic, and Billy Collins.

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

I have been writing poetry for almost thirty years, but inconsistently. I published a bit in Romanian literary magazines and I published a book several years ago. I have a “day” job as a scientist, which is very, very different and keeps me entertained in other ways.

## Cherry Blossoms

Jacob Fidoten

He told me I was sitting  
comfortably, and we  
would both be better  
off naked, less compressed.

I'm ashamed of my comfort  
in letting animals watch  
while I fuck, but I only  
just learned how to sleep  
in a pair. For spring break,  
we went to the museum where  
I made my own dog tags.  
Looking through the humid  
synapses of pink, I saw Jefferson  
coughing out curled light.

I've always been afraid  
of having a confrontational  
posture, even when I buried  
an acorn and swore I grew  
a tree. Indetermination  
is effortless; comes natural.  
I buried more things  
but they wouldn't manifest.

She saw it before I did:  
condensation on my jaw.

## Interview

Jacob Fidoten

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

I wrote this poem sometime around late March or early April of this year, not too long before submitting it to Driftwood. It was one of those poems that occurred very quickly in its composition, which I find usually means it needed to be written.

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

This poem is an amalgam of experiences from many different periods of my life. The central imagery of cherry blossoms in bloom comes from a family trip to Washington, DC in middle school, which is also where I went to a museum (one of the Smithsonian branches) where I made a set of dog tags. This is a rare poem in which nearly everything in it is a narrative detail from my actual life.

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

The hardest part of writing this poem was probably just allowing myself to recount these experiences without too much poetic embellishment. As I said before, this was one of the poems that came out very quickly and naturally, and as such I had to avoid tampering with it too much.

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

It is a lot more narrative than most of my other work, which tends to be more abstract and experimental. This seems to be the direction I am moving in, though, so I expect more poems like this to be written in the future.

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

Wordsworth said that the origin of poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility”—something that a professor of mine took to mean that one should wait to process feelings for a bit before writing about them. While I do agree that most experiences are better written about after some reflection, I find that I end up with a lot of usable raw material if I write while under the influence of intense emotion. It rarely produces anything immediately usable, but I find that it is good to have a firsthand account of what that experience was like, not to mention that writing can be incredibly therapeutic during times of stress.

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

I could make a long list of writers I really love that would leave out a bunch of other writers I really love while still being way too long, or pick a few that have helped me form the foundation of my own writing style while ignoring the fact that a lot of writers I don't like have contributed just as much to this foundation, but instead, I'm going to take this moment to shout out Shel Silverstein, who was my first favorite poet and will always have a place in my heart. My goal is to one day be good enough to write for children, which I think is the most important writing anyone can do.

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

The first time I ever wrote a poem completely of my own volition was in high school, probably when I was sixteen years old. It was called “Life in Color” and it was a prodigiously angst-ridden piece about a teenager committing suicide. It was accepted by my high school literary magazine, but was censored at the last minute by the dean of the English department. My parents were called and a meeting with the school guidance counselor was arranged. I have been writing poetry ever since.

### **How would you personally define poetry?**

I don't feel like I can say anything that hasn't been said by a much higher-caliber writer in a much more fluent way, but I will try. Basically, I think that poetry is any attempt to approximate a feeling or experience that goes beyond the limits of our language. It will never quite encapsulate what it seeks to describe, but it can give us a better understanding of ourselves along the way.

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

This is the first poem I have ever had published! Please stay tuned for more in the future, though.

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

I always try to look for publications that publish work I can get behind, and I found that Driftwood struck a great balance between narrative and abstract pieces while still feeling very tight in its aesthetic. The well-designed website was also a big draw.

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

If my family is reading this, I'm so sorry.

# The Origin of Palm Readings

Dakota Galvin

See: the alabaster light that my psychic points to  
& says *here is the future* in the palm  
of my hand her knotted fingers  
t r a i

l i n g  
lines that pull comets by their tails, spinning  
them so tightly they forget  
they once belonged  
to the sky.

See: a sparrow, stunned  
mid-flight watching burning  
stars

fall  
from  
their  
nests  
and make new  
homes in war  
zones.

The future is in the fall  
of sparrows and stars

grasp it.

## Interview

Dakota Galvin

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

I wrote the first draft of this poem in early November of 2016. It was for an undergrad workshop during my last semester at the University of South Florida.

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

The original draft of the poem was based on the song *La Vie En Rose*. I wanted it to be about focusing on the beautiful things in life even when life is hard. During the revision process, I wanted to keep that as the main element to the poem with a focus on sort of juxtaposed imagery that's pretty but still kind of jarring.

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

The original title was "and life will always be la vie en rose," but I didn't want to distract the reader with the song by Edith Piaf (or Louis Armstrong or *How I Met Your Mother* or however they're familiar with it). So I changed the title early on and worked on removing the direct references to it.

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

Based on a quick glance at my bookshelf, Ocean Vuong, Sara Kay, Dorothea Lasky, Meg Day, Sylvia Plath, Donika Kelly, Andrea Gibson... But more notably, my mentor Chelsea Dingman. Her book *Thaw* is coming out soon. Her work is just as lovely as she is and learning from her shaped my craft.

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

I've been writing poetry since I was little but I've only recently taken it seriously as a constant part of my life. My grandma has a folder of my work from the third grade. I was really deep at eight-years-old.

### **How would you personally define poetry?**

This is a hard question to answer because poetry—like most art—is such an individualized experience. It's different for everyone. It's different for me almost every time I sit down to write. Sometimes it's for healing, sometimes it's for expression, sometimes it's a voice I can't find to say aloud. It's the perfect combination of imagery, language, and sound. I love it.

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

I'm published, but only enough to be able to count my publications on one hand: the latest volume of *thread: a literary inquiry*, the June issue of *A New Thoreau Quarterly*, issue ten of *Firefly Magazine*, and the 2016 issue of *Pegasus*. I'm excited that *Driftwood Press* will be lucky #5!

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

While looking at different literary magazines to submit my work to, I always look for poetry selections I'd be happy to have my work showcased alongside. *Driftwood* caught my eye immediately. The selection of work showcased is special, and I'm thrilled that one of my poems found a home here. The fact that *Driftwood* is based in Tampa, FL is a big plus too, since that's where I've rekindled love for the craft.

## Phantom Limbs

Elisabeth Sharber

Like my grandfather, they don't know they've died.  
They cramp, tingle, reach to itch damp skin.  
You'd think imagination would choose to be satisfied

or pause in the windowless room between brain  
and body where nerves are translated, reprinted:

*He has moved on to a better place.*

*He lives in your*

(we never see the originals)

Loss is disorienting. To unlearn object permanence  
with puckering hands at the mouth of need,  
peeling through cities like a fugitive  
for pieces of your bowlegged self,  
for a place on the grid that will hold you  
if you stand on it.

I ran to the flatlands just to unroll,  
pull apart my accordion bones,  
pour into the ground's itch for the sky.

I'm not sure how I'll zip my whole self up when it's time to go.  
If we have the power to decide where that is  
these limbs are the body's way of not going gently.

## Interview

Elisabeth Sharber

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

The first verse was written on a plane last year, and the rest of it was written at my dining room table consistently since then.

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

The poem was inspired by the process of moving from DC to the mid-west. I was heartbroken and spiritually vulnerable, and in those times, I tend to be extra sensitive to the effects of the environment. I felt “spread out” in the flatness of Indiana in a way I didn’t in the city. As an agnostic, I’m always looking for hints and clues that point to spiritual identities/experiences, and this feeling of being stretched out (as well as the phenomenon of phantom limbs) certainly hinted to me that there is an identity separate from one’s skin that has its own space.

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

The easiest part of any piece, for me, is the first draft, the first sit-down, which is based on the first line that inspires me. Because this is where I welcome every visitor. I don’t block anyone out. The hardest part is somewhere in the middle, after about two or three drafts, after I’ve shown it to several people and they don’t understand the connection between one moment and the next, meaning I have to add something. Taking away from the poem is easier than adding to it. Because then I have to cycle back through the creative process to find a good connection that maintains the thesis without going on a tangent, and is still not too “grammary” or “sentence-like” (what I’ve been most criticized for in workshops). That part is brutal.

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

Always. I had a lot more “translated, reprinted” messages that didn’t make it in, because even though they dealt with the same theme, they were a totally different example that didn’t fit and seemed random. I also really wanted to include a line about failure that kept swirling around in my head, but there was no way to connect it.

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

Definitely. I use poetry to explore my beliefs about death and spirituality, so everything I write contains ponderings about our connection to the unknown, and the implications of that. In addition, they’re usually inspired by the environment.

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

I’ve been writing in general since sixth grade—stories, songs, scripts, vignettes, and poems. But in college my writing started gravitating toward poetry. As a detail-oriented person, it’s hard for me to have the sustained focus that story-writing demands. Poetry enables me to work on something different every day if I need to, or return to an unfinished work if nothing creative is coming to me. It just fits my unorganized and unbalanced sense of motivation and creativity.

### **How would you personally define poetry?**

Like good film, poetry surprises and entices you with things that you already know. It filters and distills an experience so you can fully process events that you wouldn’t otherwise because they’re either too confusing, or too subtle. Good poetry also connects you with spiritual, scientific truths that seem out-of-reach in the dailiness of living. For example, small details of the water cycle, when explained poetically, can teach us a lot about why we should stay excited about our existence, even if we don’t know why we’re here.

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

My creative writing professor once said I write a lot like Jessica Greenbaum, and at least two people have compared my style to Mary Oliver (I don’t see it though, honestly). Personally, I try to reflect the way Kathleen Graber sets up an ordinary scene and layers it with her own narrative philosophy. I like how she can make a theme so subtle and visceral at the same time. But truth be told, I’m probably far from that.

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

I have also been published in *American Aesthetic* (Spring 2016) and *FLARE* (Spring 2017). But keep your eyes on Patreon, I'm starting my own page soon!

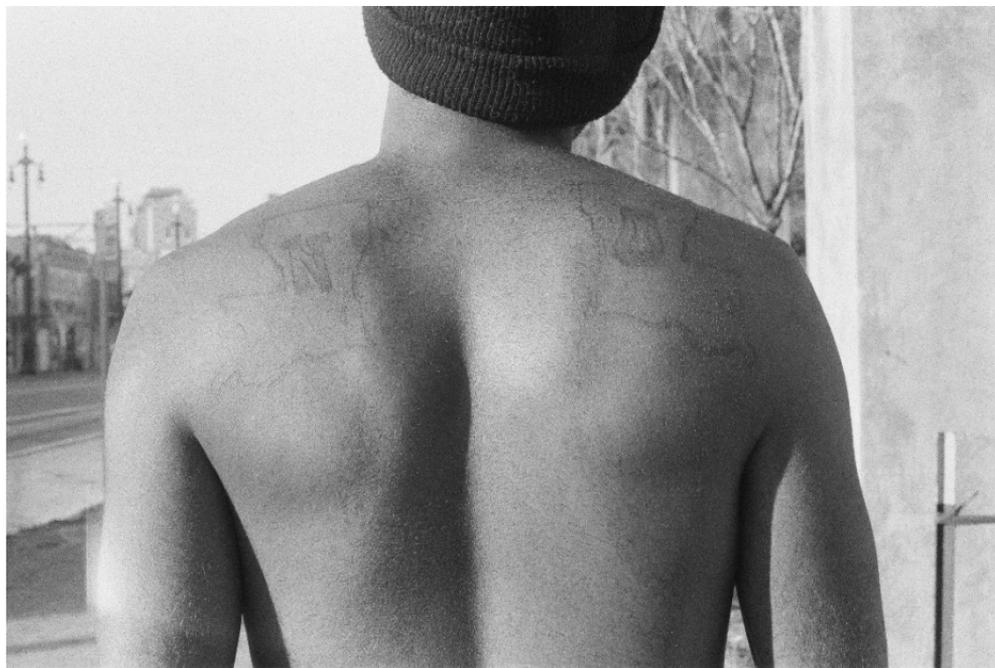
Untitled

Bort



New Orleans People

Jason Kerzinski



New Orleans People

Jason Kerzinski



New Orleans People  
Jason Kerzinski



Untitled

Nicholas J.J. Smith



## Interview

Nicholas J.J. Smith

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

Tenebrous, atmospheric. My aim is to create a prompt—or canvas—for daydreaming on the part of the viewer: to give the feeling that something more is going on than meets the eye but allow the viewer to imagine what it might be. I'm also very interested in the interplay of light and shadow, in geometrical elements such as planes and frames, and in colour.

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

I do not digitally manipulate my photographs in any major way, but I do often crop images and make minor adjustments to contrast and so on. In this case, the image was shot in colour and I converted it to black and white.

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

This is a very busy road in Sydney and I had to wait a long time for a moment when there was no traffic.

### **What camera was this image taken with?**

Olympus OM-D E-M5.

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

When it comes to making work, yes. As a viewer, apart from photography I also spend a lot of time looking at paintings, watching films, and listening to music.

### **Are your other photos similar in subject or focus?**

Many of my images are in colour—and many of them have more organic subjects (e.g. trees rather than roads)—but I think that the aesthetic elements described above run through much of my work and that many of my images have a similar feel or mood.

**What is your creative process?**

I do a lot of walking. Apart from getting me to interesting places to photograph, it puts me in a receptive frame of mind and opens my eyes to my surroundings.

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

There are so many artists whose work I love—it would be really hard to pick a few favourites; I think that someone who enjoyed my photographs might appreciate the work of the cinematographer Timo Salminen.

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

My work has appeared in publications and galleries including *The Adirondack Review*, *LENSCRATCH, L.A. Photo Curator*, *Darkroom Gallery*, *3Elements Review*, *Exposition Review*, *Oddball Magazine* and *F-STOP Magazine*. Check my website, too ([www.njjsmith.com](http://www.njjsmith.com)).

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

The terrific work that you have previously published.

Heroic Actions  
Thomas Terceira



## Summer 2017

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