

Web Exclusive Interview: Michael Powers



In February's Web Exclusive, "[Lake House.](#)" a couple has retired to a remote location. We know there is tension between them, and between the narrator and his adult son, but the origins and causes of this tension are only hinted at, the way a painting focuses its composition by suggesting some elements and detailing others. Our more detailed image is that of a drone silently making its way across the treetops of this new territory, reporting strangeness, even its own failure, to the lonely man who controls it. We chatted with the story's author, Michael Powers, about confusing knowledge and power, language and communication, and how great literature both invites and resists analysis.

Erin McReynolds: What was the first part of this story to come to you?

Michael Powers: I think most of the stories I write, and especially the really short ones, tend to start with the language itself. Writing the first few sentences of anything is sort of dreamlike for me, in that there's usually no discernible logic to it—you're just plucking seemingly random bits of verbal debris that, for unknown reasons, are floating around in your head.

In a way it's also maybe like improv—I've never done improv but of course there's that famous "Yes, and . . ." rule. Maybe you start with a phrase like "We retired," and you have no idea why that's in your head but you say, "Okay, and?" At least in the first few sentences of a first draft, I tend to follow this rule—though I've never articulated it to myself as a rule before now—that you can't throw anything away, you can only add. Once that first sentence or paragraph is there, it hopefully has its own logic, which will become the story's logic. In the first sentence of this story, there's a certain way of repeating words and phrases, a certain coldness and an odd formality that provided something like a framework out of which the rest of the story grew.

EM: Was it that voice then, that "odd formality" as you called it, that suggested a husband harboring silence and tension and secrets?

MP: I think so. I think what emerged from the peculiar sound of his voice was just this whole pathology of knowledge and power and paranoia—the impoverishment of one's world that comes from believing that all knowledge is a form of power, and that the point of getting to know

someone is to gain power over them while preventing them from gaining power over you.

EM: He describes the neighbors as speaking "with a strange and musical accent," using unfamiliar names for "the simplest and most familiar things." It made me think about people I'd met in Cajun Louisiana, northern New Hampshire, and Maine—places where the language has evolved on its own, remained largely intact and insular. Why is that significant in this story?

MP: Well, one way to answer that is just to say that it makes things happen in the story. It makes that ending possible. I'm fairly resistant to the idea that language has to get out of the way of its own content—that the actual words should never be so noticeable or so noticed as to obscure *what happens*. A story is nothing but language. The language *is* what happens. And so I like to find ways of breaking or interrupting the seemingly natural connection between a word and its meaning, and it makes me especially happy when the act of paying attention to words as *words* can actually structure a story or move a plot forward.

The other answer is that, just as people from different backgrounds have different ways of speaking, we also have different ways of hearing each other. Regional speech patterns sound different to someone from somewhere else than they do to a listener who comes from the same linguistic background—most obviously because the sound of that Cajun or Appalachian or rural New England voice gets filtered through all sorts of prejudices before it even reaches the part of the listener's brain that processes content. My suspicion is that the narrator greatly exaggerates the strangeness of his neighbors' speech. It seems unlikely to me that any population in any part of New York (I actually went to high school in more or less the region in this story) speaks in a dialect so arcane as to be unintelligible or nearly unintelligible to a speaker of so-called "standard" American English. The fact that the narrator hears it that way says more about him than it does about his neighbors.

EM: I loved how exaggerated the foreignness of their speech was to him! It appeals to the imaginative child we bring to all our readings, who is ready for everything to be fantasy, as well as the parsing adult who's going, "Ah, that means he's too disconnected from people to understand them." It seems that "great" or lasting literature invites both wonder and analysis. Is language the best way to get there?

MP: I think what you're getting at is that art at its best both invites and resists analysis, and that wonder arises in the tension between the pleasure of analysis and the recognition that no amount of analysis will ever be quite comprehensive. Literature to me is any act of language that produces this tension.

EM: This family is estranged from each other, although we don't know exactly why or how—there are references to secrets and failures. The narrator's son has sent, for his birthday, a drone with a camera in its belly. It struck me that youth tends to be more examining and exploratory, like the gift was a sort of protest and plea all at once: *Look at things*. Is that how you see the drone?

MP: That's a terrific way of seeing it, and one that's maybe kinder both to the narrator and to his

son than I'm inclined to be. It's hard to tell from the story what the son's intentions are, but certainly the gift arrives in the narrator's life as a sort of curse. Rather than leading him to look more closely at his world in a healthy way—to get to know his neighbors, or his wife for that matter—it precipitates his descent into even deeper isolation and estrangement (I'm borrowing your word there, because I think it describes a lot of what this story is about). We could say the drone grants him a power that he doesn't really know what to do with. It allows him to see things that aren't his to see—to catch fragments of other people's private lives but without the context that would make those fragments meaningful. Predictably, this only intensifies the feeling of otherness and leaves him more bewildered and more alone.

EM: He should try writing ;). So, the drones keep meeting their downfalls because of birds. The birds, like the neighbors, are these native things so I'm tempted to ask about the relationship between technological mankind and wilderness—will he use wilderness to come to terms with himself and his failures? Do you think he'll succeed?

MP: I love this question, and I hope it's not too pedantic to point out that if we define "wilderness" to mean that which is unaltered by human activity—which is more or less how the federal government defines it for conservation purposes—then we're talking about something that doesn't really exist in the 21st century and maybe hasn't existed since the beginning of the colonial era or even earlier. The point of saying this is just to note that the line of demarcation between the natural and the man-made or technological is always to some degree imaginary, arbitrary, and subjective.

Certainly the birds are emissaries of a world about which the narrator knows next to nothing and from which he feels cut off, and certainly they have this in common with the neighbors. They speak for or enact some force in the world that is inimical to his attempts at comprehension. On the other hand, there really are videos on YouTube recorded by drones as they were being destroyed by birds. It's hard to imagine a clearer illustration of the observer effect than that—the way the device intended to observe the scene instead becomes its de facto center, drawing the action toward itself. All this is to say that if the narrator is looking for some kind of redemption in nature—in what his wife calls "so much life, so different from her own"—I think he's going to be disappointed, in part because the rural environment in which he finds himself really is just as determined by human history and technology and culture as the city he came from, and in part because wherever he goes he has to carry his jaded, alienated human eye with him, augmented by whatever technologies are available.

EM: What's got your interest right now? What are you reading and working on?

MP: Like everyone else, my interest and attention have been largely gobbled up by the unfolding horror-comedy of U.S. politics, and mainly what I'm reading is unreasonable, compulsive volumes of internet articles in a mostly futile effort to understand what is happening. The dilemma seems to be that the current president and his administration already represent this moral and intellectual and linguistic black hole, an emptiness so total that it somehow sucks all surrounding mental energy into itself. So to write fiction about Trump, even obliquely, when everything is already about him feels potentially counterproductive. On the other hand, to write about the world of 2016 and 2017 without acknowledging one of the most visible features of that

world feels like a sort of ignominious retreat. I've been trying to widen my historical view. I've been reading and rereading some of the old stuff. Shakespeare, even! *King Lear*, *Richard III*. Shakespeare knew his egomaniacal autocrats. And I'm about halfway through Ali Smith's beautiful new novel *Autumn*, which lives in the aftermath of the UK's Brexit vote. She has this tightrope act figured out: how to write about a bewildering moment without simply reproducing the bewilderment. More broadly, it's at least a little helpful to remember that, through most of human history, tribalism and violent autocracy have been the norm rather than the exception, and that, nonetheless, some thread of kindness and of attentiveness to truth has somehow been preserved, despite the fact that these have rarely been the habits of power.

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Michael Powers currently lives in Los Angeles, where he is at work on a PhD in creative writing and literature at the University of Southern California. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Threepenny Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Barrelhouse Magazine*.