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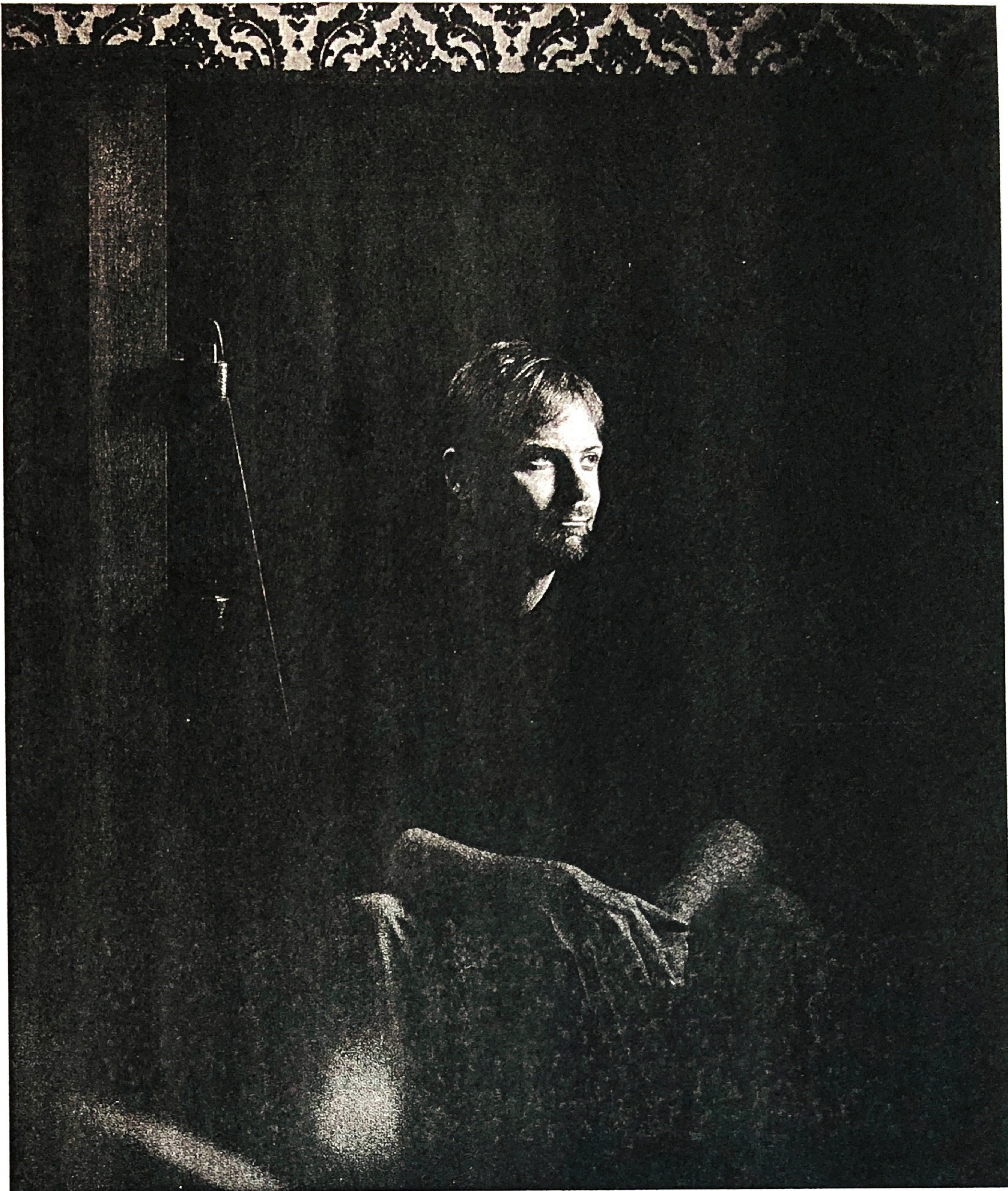
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"Between" the Lines

An acclaimed short-story writer's debut novel delves into the dark shadows of Houston's toniest 'hoods.

| By Dan Oko | Photography by Alexander Aleman |

Texas-based author Andrew Porter grew up in the small town of Lancaster, Pa., a happy kid, in a tight-knit family—which he takes pains to say is *nothing* like the dysfunctional one in his new buzzed-about debut novel.

A deftly paced social psychodrama out this month, *In Between Days* is largely set around Houston's Montrose and Rice Village neighborhoods, where Porter lived in the late '90s. "Is this family like my family? The answer is no," says the 40-year-old writer, a tenured professor at Trinity University in San Antonio and graduate of the esteemed University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. "My parents have been happily married for 50 years. I have a sister, but she was never kicked out of college."

By contrast, *In Between Days* tells the twisted tale of the Harding family, led by Elson Harding, a hard-drinking, formerly successful architect. In the midst of Elson's divorce from his wife, their college-age daughter Chloe returns home under mysterious circumstances. Secrets are soon revealed—amid well-known inner-Loop institutions such as Brasil café on Lower Westheimer and the West Alabama Ice House.

The anticipation for the book owes much to Porter's acclaimed 2008 short story collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter*. Those stories—some of which are also set in Houston, a city that the author sees as wide open with possibility and imaginative loam—won the Flannery O'Connor Award for short fiction. Critical raves compared Porter's expressive style to the late Raymond Carver, one of the writer's literary heroes.

Readers worldwide soon also fell for the handsome, happily married Porter, whose wife Jenny Rowe teaches freshman composition at Trinity. His stories have been translated into many languages, including Korean and Bulgarian. Shifting away from the first-person point of view of his short fiction, writing a novel featuring changing perspectives of different characters offered new challenges. "My approach was much more linear," he says. "But I didn't have an outline, and had to keep rereading it."

His creative strategy paid off with a stirring page-turner, part Chekov and part Hitchcock. And if the book isn't exactly autobiographical, the author does draw on true experiences. Chloe's boyfriend wants to be a film major, just like Porter was as an undergrad at Vassar before he found his voice in writing class. Moreover, his descriptions of H-Town society and geography are spot on—whether imagining the lives of Montrose rent boys or detailing architectural one-upmanship at Harding's fictional firm. "While world-class visionaries like I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson were putting up skyscrapers downtown," he writes, "Sullivan & Gordon was building three-story mansions for oil executives in River Oaks."

It's all a ways off from where Porter is now. He recently entered a new chapter of his own real-life saga, welcoming first child Charlotte last year. And yet he's not about to let a little happiness get in the way of his penchant for staging strange fictions. "For me," he says, "the excitement of writing is getting at the perspective of people outside of myself."