

## Downdrift: An Eco-Fiction

**Johanna Drucker**

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Humans “imagine every adoption of their behaviors to be an advancement. I see it otherwise, as downdrift, the seepage of traits across species.” So posits the Archaeon, the 3.8-billion-year-old creature who narrates Johanna Drucker’s *Downdrift*. With no little disdain, this unicellular bit of genetic code monitors the animal world’s behavioral adaptations in response to humanity’s psychic toxins.

As the Archaeon watches, animals across the globe are infected with human emotions, a toxic disease resulting in behavioral change at a cellular level. Like any adaptive response, this change isn’t instantaneous, but, once begun, it is inevitable. Inhabiting all of these complex organisms, but nevertheless its own being, the Archaeon rides the evolutionary wave, delivering commentary as it dips its distributed consciousness into various hosts’ bodies. At the center are two particular felines—a Boston house cat named Callie and a lion from Africa’s savanna—who are compelled to seek each other out amid the changes within and around them.

Downdrift change is accelerated beyond anything the Archaeon’s long memory has seen before, leading the organism to posit that it’s not genetic mutation but a cultural phenomenon that’s transferred socially. Established early, this framework allows Drucker to plumb human social behavior in satirical and terrifying ways.

Sentient slime molds with their first crush won’t take no for an answer. Certain adult baboons pander to juveniles and mimic their behavior. Various small rodents engage in competing industries, vying for supremacy in fashion and adornment. And without the pressure of survival to provide basic drives, interspecies laws have made virtually everyone a vegetarian.

Laughing or crying, Drucker skewers the current cultural moment in a novel extrapolation of epic proportions. Taken to the furthest extreme, *Downdrift* is dogged by an urgent need to understand the difference between the domestic and the wild, measure it, and recalibrate its implications for survival.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (March/April 2018)

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