

CHICAGO ARTS JOURNAL

In this issue:

*New writing from siblings
in Chicago arts: Magnuses, Brüns,
Foglias, Loewis, O'Reillys*

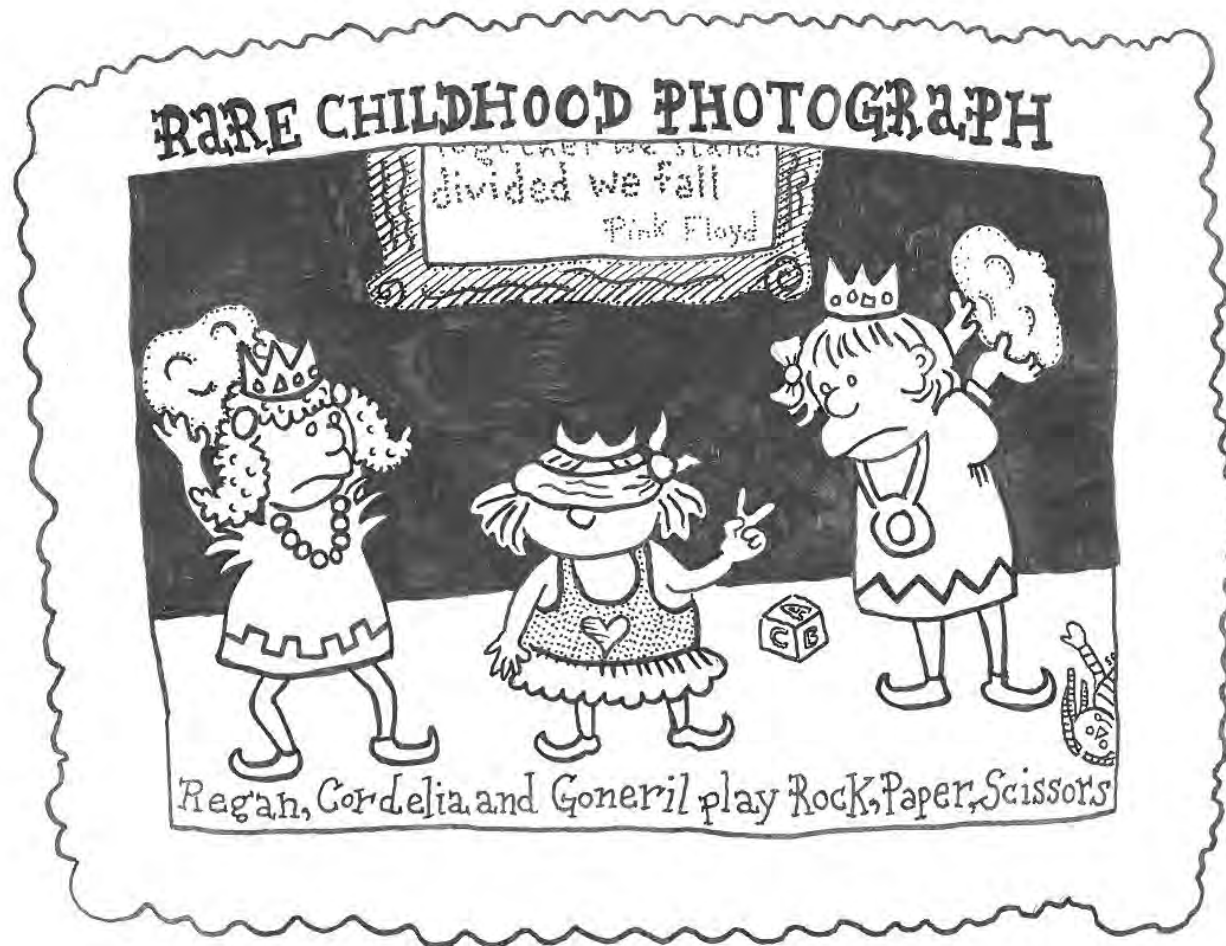
*Reviews and interviews featuring
Bob Eisen, The Ruckus, The Whiskey
Rebellion, Roger Moy, the side project,
Realize Theatre Group, Chris Bower,
Curious Theatre Branch, Write Club,
and Theater Oobleck*

and

Sibling comics by Sue Cargill

Summer 2014

FREE



Dear readers—

You're back! Us too. We've briefly left our inflatable-raft encampment on Lake Michigan to bring you this, the summer issue of *Chicago Arts Journal*. This season, on a lark, we asked a handful of sibling pairs in and around the Chicago arts scene if they would contribute work — relating to one another or not, in whatever form pleased them. The results stunned us: pieces of fiction, essay, monologue, photography, epistle, and reflections of many varieties arrived on our editorial shores like bottled notes. In our "sibling section," beginning the issue, you'll find writing by Laurel Foglia alongside photographs by her brother, Lucas; personal essay and fiction from two O'Reilly sisters: artist-saloonnière Jamie and writer Bridget; new works by playwright Bryn Magnus and writer-performer Jenny Magnus; a collaboration by economist Michael Brün and theatre director Stefan Brün; and letters from our co-editor Carine Loewi and her ne'er-do-well brother, Franc.

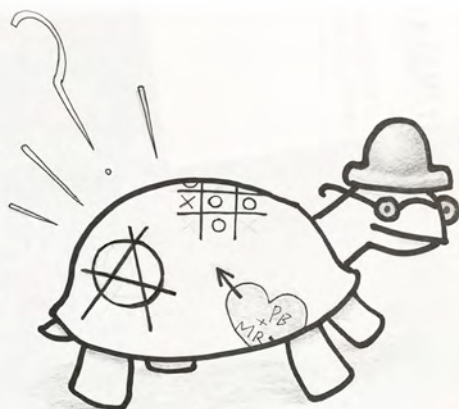
Some of the brothers and sisters featured are far-flung, having left Chicago or never lived here in the first place, but in these family relations we see the depth of talents who have chosen Chicago as a home while continuing to draw on influences from all over.

Our second section this season is a mélange of reviews, interviews, responses and comments. In our two

featured interviews, we speak with Chris Bower — playwright, poet, and curator of the wildly popular Ray's Tap Reading Series; and Roger Moy, guitarist, painter, and longtime Chicagoan, who has recently authored a book on art and recovery. We also offer write-ups on a number of events we and our correspondents around town have had the delight to see in the past few months — on dance and writing, but mostly on our old friend, the fringe theater.

We'll be back soon enough in autumn with our Fall Issue (marking our first anniversary in publication, if you'll believe it), but for the time being we hope you're enjoying the topsy-turvy weather, and getting out to see some shows. As always, if you'd like to pitch a story, lodge a complaint, or just drop us a line of hello, please do so at johann.artsjournal@gmail.com. And now, back to our buoy.

—The Editors



The illustrations appearing on our front cover and on page 32 are by Sue Cargill. The back cover collage is by Dietrich.

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Brothers, Sisters

a sibling section



*The St. Bury family
by the lake, ca. 1930s.
Pictured at left, in hat:
Edmund St. Bury*

Another Project Bites the Dust...

by Michael J. Brün & Stefan G. Brün

Colorado:

Where looking's up and driving slows,
Far above and not long ago
A part of a mountain gave way;
So perched more recently a Lowe's
On the debris arrayed below. ...mjb

Colorado 2:

At the convention of our NEA
in Denver up and far away
A flatland delegate you'll see
who is not parliamentary
forgetting this is not a play. ...sgb

◆◆◆

Have you read and what do you think of the Piketty?

I find it has a studiously non-strident tone, a humble thoroughness: the data is better than ever before, the claims for it (the conclusions drawn with certainty) are less than ever a lesser data collection, before. ...sgb

Just finished it a week ago. It is good but a long read. Shows how a lot of work and a French base of operations can offer something different than what we had.

His writing is good. Mostly, at least in English translation, his wit seems to lie beneath the surface; but every now and then it surfaces for one sentence. For example, suspecting hidden tax havens, he notes that the nation's balance sheets don't balance globally. The debt owed from the collection of all recorded nations seems bigger than the amount due. So he says earth is apparently in debt to Mars.

In another passage close to the end, he wants to remind readers that in the beginning of the twentieth century wealthy people were not feeling threatened by the poor. He chooses the pregnant formulation: a revolution was no more likely then than it is now. ...mjb

I think you might quite like parts of this NEA convention, 8000 teachers, convention logistics & theatrics. Sometimes it's a hairline between democratic triumph and cult wash. The primary ideological divide seems to be this: one side thinks the way to greatest effect is, focus on the most specific School and Teacher related items, protect the profession and offer educational support — while avoiding all larger issues which do not directly speak of the Teacher in the Classroom, or the Educational support. The other side thinks that teachers are being vilified by corporate interests and that it is necessary to counteract the highly funded smear campaign with strategic political positions on the issues of the day and by forming solidarity with other unions and desirable allies, to broaden the base of support for teachers.

The largest democratic, Robert's Rules of Order-using, deliberative body, this NEA convention, has the unique quality, that everyone is involved in education. At its best, this makes for a

politics much more tasteful than business-oriented politics is. At least that provides a different sort of traffic. ...sgb

Do you mean foot traffic or automobiles? ...mjb

I mean political traffic, as opposed to hot air. ...sgb

Sent from an organ of live performance

I will get you for that one. Might want to reconsider that designation of sending apparatus... ...mjb

Considering the effort I put into it, thanks be. Why, pray tell, do you suggest this and to which appellation do you refer? ...sgb

♦♦♦

Off the coast of Albania, the wind must have been moving in the same direction as the ferry. Heat and humidity were stifling my stuffy nose and sore throat, and sweating the rest of me. Then hotels appeared on the distant beaches: must be Greece already. Stefan was sleeping soundly. Much later, we landed at Patras, and began our search for a cheap hotel. This was way back before advance planning existed, or was necessary, although the Greek language was already around. We ended up in a basement room somewhere. It was past ten at night; I conked. Stefan went to hunt up dinner. Using only hands and feet, and no Greek, he returned with retsina, ouzo, sausage, bread, cheese and olives. I was instantly cured.

Next day, we went out, had a great time and completely lost our hotel. We considered recovery strategies short of door-to-door census, and managed to get into an argument. This we had hoped to avoid. After several unharmonious years, the trip was a chance to see how well we could get along, and had been so far so good.

M: "Let me figure this out; I know the Greek letters."

S: "Yeah, but you don't know what the words mean."

Not much to say after that; and surprisingly, indeed nothing was said. Success. Not so much in finding the hotel, though. That took another hour and a half. ...mjb

♦♦♦

My response to all the excitement surrounding births and deaths was decisively formed by a school paper Michael wrote when we were both very young. All I remember of it now, is that it bemoaned the fact: When we are born there is a great to-do and everyone acts as if this is such an important event. This recurs when we die. Big ceremonies are held. Families dress up and act the part of a big event. Between these events, however, wherein life occurs, there is no such recognition. What would a society be, who celebrated as of greater significance, the life between, than the terminal demarcations of birth and death? ...sgb

A Voice for the Soul of the City

by Jamie O'Reilly

Part I: *Story, Hot Dish and Reaganomics*

It was fall of 1987, during the Reagan years. The others unloaded the hatchback outside an elementary school in southwestern Minnesota. I stayed behind, trying to scratch something in a brand new notebook, before the baby and her 5-year-old sister woke up. I had nothing. No well-wrought reflections or anecdotes of life on the road as part of an agitprop acting troupe, preaching a gospel of need versus greed.

Certainly nothing poetic or profound. I secretly resented my “holier than thou” duty to the message, and feared drowning under its weight.

“It’s not mine.” I said out loud, choking on the words, and closed the notebook

Glenda tapped the window. “Rehearsal.” I lifted my still-sleeping daughter from her car seat, balanced her on my hip, and took her older sister’s hand. We followed Glenda in. The others warmed up on stage in a 1940s era rinky-dink gymnasium, with torn Virgin-Mary-blue draperies framing the proscenium, its back wall displaying a *Go Panthers!* banner in faded maroon and gold.

I handed the baby to a plain-clothed nun signed-up to babysit, and joined the others on stage. I sang a verse of my solo, a song about an overworked factory worker, a single mom who can’t make ends meet. We practiced the finale together and went to the rectory next door for a nap before the performance.

It came about rather naively, this traveling trunk show. After graduating from DePaul’s music and theater schools in Chicago, I offered my singing services, and my then-husband offered his acting skills, to a Catholic social justice organization whose mandate stemmed from the anti-war movement, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, and liberation theology. My husband Tom and I wanted to keep our post-college activist fervor stoked, and thought we could do some good in the world.

“Between the Times,” the script that followed, was Tom and his brother Paul’s, modeled on Studs Terkel’s *Working*, and based on testimonials from the US Catholic Bishop’s 1984 Pastoral on Economics. Our small, mixed-race cast (working under Actor’s Equity contracts) sang about the right to work, and polled audiences Phil Donahue-style about the church’s accountability for keeping its employees impoverished. I sang about the feminization of poverty, and bread and roses.

We went from Fargo to San Antonio, asking people about their jobs and paychecks. Heard about the loss of the family farms and steel plant closings. The pastoral was disparaged as socialist propaganda in this myopic era of “recovery” after Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement, before manufacturing all but left the states, pensions and overtime disappeared, and before two wage earners in a family was typical. We got a fair amount of attention in Catholic parishes throughout the states, the Chicago Cardinal’s communications award, and even sang an appearance for Pope John Paul’s visit to Texas.

The Minnesota show that night went off okay, with the audience half-heartedly standing at the end. Sister returned the baby to me, and we went downstairs to the potluck held in our

honor in the church hall. Casseroles of beans and bacon, scalloped potatoes and macaroni and cheese, and local hot dish specialties lined the tables.

"The creamed peas and ham is mine," a plump, white-haired woman told me as I shook her hand.

"Try the jello for the girls" she instructed, eying my plate, then squeezing the baby's cheek, while her sister burrowed into my skirt.

"We're *so* glad we didn't have to cancel," She continued. "We've all had a terrible flu this week. A terrible flu. I didn't think I'd make it."

By the time we reached Iowa City the next day, the girls were both sick with fevers and vomiting. We sought out a clinic. The doctor prescribed *antibiotics* for the stomach flu, cough syrup and Tylenol.

"And find them a place to sleep," he told us firmly.

"That would be the car", I thought.

"We're driving back to Chicago tonight after the show." My husband said.

"This is your WORK!" My husband said, when I told him I was done with the road.

"I'm staying home. This is not *my* work," I replied.

"I married a singer, not a housewife," he retorted.

Part 2: *The White Fire, the heart of the matter*

"But when I speak of 'the white fire' I mean more than music. I mean the creative faculty, the spirit. I don't know why it is that

something catches us, every one of us, and throws us back. Life swamps and rolls over us ... but the next generation, (that is you.) You have it, my dear. The white fire is in your hands."

—from a letter by Mame O'Reilly, 1925

Some call it selective biography. The anecdotal stories you're raised hearing serve as a reasonable source for who you are, presumably fulfilling your need to know from whence you came. But they are fragments: the people. The places. The culture. The religion. The cities. The universities. The parishes. The deeds done. The things won. The tragedies. The losses. Humor and adventure. The languages spoken. *And the work done*. Nobody inherits a whole picture. It is your story to tell.

I grew up the ninth of fourteen, singing musicals and protest songs, in a too-small house in a too-small town. My Dad was an anomaly, a classical actor and director. My Mom, a retired opera singer, directed musicals in our hometown of Crystal Lake. She cast me as the leads. When the big kids and Dad were around, it was all theater talk, all the time. This continued into the '90s with most people I came across. DePaul, the music school I went to, had a kind of forsaking-all-others drive they pushed, too. But buried-down-deep, my theater elite DNA was doing battle with another side of me. It's the side I most identify with today: the cultural artist.

Part 3: *From the Place I was Born*

You shall bring forth your work as a mother brings forth
her newborn child.
Out of the blood of your heart.

—Chilean Poet Gabriela Mistral

I wanted something of my own. I spent ten years reading mostly women writers. I wanted to write. I had no idea where to begin. My Mom gave me the *Diaries and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*, the 20th-century German Expressionist. Kollwitz survived two world wars, staying in Germany and capturing the grim reality of war in etchings, drawings and sculpture. Her thoughts on motherhood and the notion of birthing art as from your core struck a deep chord in me. Her story of bringing her grandson Peter (lost in World War II) back to life in the sculpture of a boy, the final step being making him smile, changed my head around.

“Motherhood and art is a starting place,” I told myself, poring over the diary, “Start there.”

And so I did. The Chicago Cultural Center was founded in 1992. I served on the Board of the Friends for five years, as it transitioned from library to “The People’s Palace.” I produced some great work there.

My first solo performance, *From the Place I was Born: On Mothers as Artists*, premiered at the Chicago Cultural Center during women’s history month, March 1992. A simple collage piece, it had snippets from journals, poems, and songs, some of which I wrote, some written for me. The accompanying photo series by Tamara Staples showed objects of motherhood and childhood

encircling portraits of my daughters and me. The first person tone of the project suited the work emerging in the performance scene, merging music and art. It was tame by all standards.

The ‘90s in Chicago arts were the place to be. In 1992, my siblings Beau and Kate O’Reilly opened a club — the Lunar Cabaret — on Lincoln Avenue. Ira Glass did his first work at the Lunar. Loofah Method, Betty’s Mouth, Bob Eisen, Theater Oobleck, so many solo artists. Beau’s Rhinoceros Theater Festival of new work began at the Lunar.

And I had a place to try out new material for an intimate, discerning and open-minded audience. I created three pieces with songwriter Michael Smith, who’d written the music for Steppenwolf’s Tony-winning *Grapes of Wrath*. We called our shows folk-cabarets. There was *Pasioness: Songs of the Spanish War 1936-39* (sung in 6 languages, in 1997); *Scarlet Confessions* in ‘99 and in 2000; *Hello Dalí: From the Sublime to the Surreal* (with Beau and Jenny Magnus in the cast). It was a musical revue about songwriters and painters, with stunning projections of works of art, designed by Sam Ball from Northwestern, years before the form was de rigueur. *Dalí* was later a box office hit at Victory Gardens, won a few awards, and was unlike anything they’d produced before or since. I included Kaethe Kollwitz in the show.

Part 4: *Finding my Roots*

“The story in Auntie Mame’s letter may give some clues to some of the reasons for the presence of the artistic talents in all branches of the clan; talents in music, art, literature and the appreciation of

them all, have appeared again and again through each generation. May they continue to grow in the family history.

—from *Memoirs*, Dorothy O'Reilly

Parallel to preaching social justice on the road was my concert career and immersion in Irish folk songs and singing the parlor songs of the late 19th century, featured in my 1984 vocal debut at Orchestra Hall. My lyric soprano, modeled on my Aunt Dorothy's lilt and clarity, with a little Jeanette MacDonald, suited the turn-of-the-century, songbird/Old World style. I was pretty good at singing the material. And I had fans!

Concerts around the city and on radio with my band Jamie O'Reilly and the Rogues and high-profile luncheons for the Chicago Irish American politicians led me to the Chicago Historical Society. They were producing *A City Comes of Age: Chicago in the 1890s*. In April 1990, Tom Amandes and I brought *A Season and a Time*, the story of the O'Reillys, to the Historical Society.

I pitched the idea and started research. I found a cache of old letters and artifacts in an archive housed at the University of Illinois Library, and more at the Newberry. The O'Reillys, I came to see, were a vivacious clan of Bohemians: newspapermen, writers, poets, activists, musicians and theater-folk. They were all singers.

They came to Chicago at the end of the 19th century by way of Joliet, Illinois, and were originally from County Cavan, Ireland. Along with many first-generation Irish immigrants, Grandfather James helped build the Illinois-Michigan Canal in Lockport, IL, and then was a founding member of the electrician's union.

Among my grandfather James' siblings was his brother Edward "Tex" O'Reilly — a newspaper man, rodeo rider, mercenary

soldier, and the subject of Lowell Thomas's biography *The Greatest Living Soldier of Fortune*, as well as his own autobiography, which features him in a kimono with students of the O'Reilly School of English in Osaka, Japan. Their sisters, Mame and Nell, were labor union organizers. Mame was also a teacher. She was strong willed, a pronounced atheist and a Fenian. She came with Margaret Haley and a crop of single Irish women to Chicago from Joliet, Illinois, and started the Chicago Federation of Teachers.

Younger sister Nell was a dancer and a poet, and one of the first students of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There are photos of her modeling at the School, smoking a cigarette, wrapped in an embroidered shawl, long black mane billowing over her shoulders. I knew Nell's husband, Irwin St. John Tucker, as "Uncle Tuck" growing up. Tuck was a newspaper man to start out, an Episcopal priest, a wood carver and one of the Chicago Five, who refused service as conscientious objectors in World War I. He had a life sentence overturned. Tuck and Studs Terkel were great friends. He loved being in the society of orators, and frequented Bughouse Square.

Part 5: "A Voice for the Soul of the City," Conclusion

By my definition, I am a *cultural* artist, meaning: I possess a natural talent. I have a love of life, language, and the humanities, and I seek to make a place for creativity of the individual in society. A generosity of spirit has saved many a vulnerable artist from the tenacious grip of the critic within when they work with me. I offer community in which to thrive, and smarts about managing the terrain.

I found my voice and created my own legacy. It is from this optimistic view that I started Roots Salon. It continues the century-old salon tradition of the O'Reilly clan. An excerpt from my Aunt Dorothy's memoirs tells of my Great Grandmother, Mary Ann Murphy's home, in what is now Humboldt Park, where the O'Reilly Salon tradition began:

"I remember the charming, interesting people who came to the old house singly, or in numbers, drawn by its spirit and fun-filled parties; There were musicians, poets, newspapermen, artists, lawyers, Socialist leaders, teachers, and all manner of gifted articulate women and men. People from the four heavens and the four hells... Friends of Nell and Mame's — including political refugees fleeing the Czar — who escaped to the US after unbelievable hardships." (From *Memoirs*, Dorothy O'Reilly)

Roots Salon began in 2006, answering a call from Chicago artists seeking more intimate venues. Located in my home in Lincoln Square, events at Roots are word-of-mouth happenings. I present music, visual art, poetry and theater, with caroling at Christmas, a monthly Women's Salon, and the Roots Fest in August. People make fair donations at the door and it goes to the artists. To date, Roots has showcased as many as 120 artists.

This year, Roots expanded programming with *Rekindling the Salon*, an artist retreat and soiree I am hosting in August at the historic Lakeside Inn and Studios in Lakeside, MI, in a collaboration with HotHouse. I am also producing ancillary programs at St. John Episcopal Church in Old Irving Park, who approached me about bringing the Salon model there. October 24-

27th will bring the *End of Life/Afterlife* Series for the October Arts Festival, co-produced with St. John's. The series is also an offering for Chicago artist month, with its *Crossing Borders* theme. Highlights of the October Arts Festival are a juried art show, an ofrenda-making workshop in honor of Day of the Dead rituals, and "Epitaphs & Apparitions," a theatrical reading with music.

The *End of Life/Afterlife* series is dedicated to the late Susan Wayman.

Part 6: *Poem, "Ofrenda for Susan"*

In the window of my dining room is an ofrenda for Susan
I made it on All Soul's Day with a friend who knows about these things

What we put there that you gave us

Picture of us on the wagon with our apples and my girls, you smiling

Glass bead from Christmas

Art deco perfume bottle filled with what you called fairy dust

Your mother's ginger jar

Greeting cards — birds, dancing woman, others

Brocade purse from India

The wooden fruit and little bread you gave Nia when she was 7

Bathing woman painting that reminded you of the hot springs

Romeo and Juliet cigar box

Step stool with the little door you gave Nia when she was 11

Wormwood sleeping goddess from our Canada trip

20 tiny paintings of Lake Michigan in one picture poster,

done at different times of day and year from the same beach
The Fellowship of the Ring from the trilogy you gave Meg before
anybody else did

The vase you gave Meg and Alex for their wedding
The card with a Rumi quote you sent them that says:
“Lovers don't finally meet somewhere, they're in each other all
along”

What we bring to the altar

Our Lady of Guadalupe folk-art mosaic, made from my mother's
ironing board
A new book of Rumi's poems Willem sent when he heard you died
Willem's photo of a New Orleans streetcar
The maple leaf my sister Beth Ann brought when she heard you
died
Skulls and skeletons and statues and vases of marigolds
and a withering bouquet
Gold clothes draped with one of Virgin Mary blue
over a white cloth Aunt Margaret gave when she heard you died
Two white vigil candles, like the ones you bought in Greektown at
Easter Time
3 gold candles in silver sconces that drip
2 brass lovebirds
One painted cross from Guatemala

What you left me with
a severed conversation
a broken heart

You don't
just move on — not when it was your best friend

What you do is
you get frightened
you get lost
you get lots of unanswered questions
you get mad

Then
you seek compassion

And Then
you learn to separate out what is *yours*
and what was *theirs*
what is good and what was rotten

And Then
you say good bye

And Then
you keep pieces of her in your heart
and in your house

And Then
you summon-up the best of your friend
on an autumn day when the leaves dance in mourning at your feet
and you walk down the street with her voice in your head
“Doncha' know?”

Littopia: Modestly Proposed

by Bridget O'Reilly

Though the sun had come up, the town was dark with low clouds that clung. As I walked to meet friends, I was trying to recite to myself as many fog images from books and poems as I could remember: Eliot's cat creeping 'round corners, and the mechanical elephants of Coketown mucking up the sky as Bounderby passes, his cloud of bombast adding to the thickening of it. A damp, drizzly November in my soul. Cloudy skies today and the poor boy won't ever make it to the lighthouse.

As I reached the town square to cross over to the coffee house, I saw one of the edicts, which had been nailed with small tacks to a telephone pole that stood like a neutered tree in a town whose phone lines had long ago gone digital. Posting the sign, in the physical sense, was no doubt a jab at the digital community's adoption of 'post' for their own, just as 'twitter' was no longer used to denote the utterance of short, little sounds, like a bird. It mattered not to the Reader crowd that the mass of ignorant souls got all the intellectual jabs, puns, or hidden messages embedded in their actions. They refused, at all points in the process of creating the 'marketing message' for the edict, to dumb it down. ("If they don't get it, fuck 'em. Perhaps they should read a book!" their press spokeswoman had famously said on Jon Stewart a week prior to the release of the Reading Proclamation.) The posted edict read: "The ERP Era is upon us! Each citizen has thirty days to report to his or her Educator to accept his or her assignment. The new

Literary Rule will be strictly enforced. Violators will not be tolerated. VIVE LE LIVRE!"

The French was a nice touch — just to piss off the DEPs. The Digital/Electronic Party was not an altruistic campaigner for all things digital. They had been accused of funding organizers of small-town book burnings, including piles of *Les Miserables* volumes. This protest was in response to a Federal government order to tax all information received via the internet, while all information received via paper or radio (yet another lobby — radio being a 'pure medium') became free. (*Les Miserables*, it turned out, received a record number of downloads on Kindle the day the law passed, hence its targeting in the book burning.)

Under the new Reading Laws, it was required that all wireless connections be tied to a bank card. Even if a Starbucks or a library offered its clientele free wireless, the internet itself was no longer free. The exception was Search (for obvious reasons, and because the legislature didn't want to look too much like a dick), and because Google had a huge lobby infamous for strong-arming members of Congress into passing legislation that leaned in its favor. Search 'Congress mafia' in any search engine other than Google — due to anti-trust laws, they do exist — and you will find them listed, without the insertion of the word 'alleged' in the search results at google.com. In fact, the censorship of the term 'Congress mafia' was the first ever in the history of Google, outside that problem with the Chinese government censoring results at google.cn in the mid-2000s.

The surcharges resulting from the so-called 'ASCII Law' were computed via an ever-marching string of ones and zeros that

crawled, like a NASDAQ ticker, across the screen whenever a page loaded. Upon opening a piece of data, the ticker would stop. If it stopped on a ONE, a fee of one cent was assessed; if on a ZERO, no fee was assessed. The fees, in other words, were a slap on the wrist, a punishment doled out randomly; but the digital powers that be deemed them a hostile act against a populace that was now taking in most of its information via digital means. A spokesman for the DEP said that the “tax, which was unfair at its core and impractical in its execution, was, like all acts of Congress in recent memory, levied by a stodgy, out-of-touch coterie of old white men in Washington, living like dinosaurs in a world they couldn’t comprehend.”

The approval rating for Congress had been sinking since the Wall Street vs. Main Street crash and bailout debacle of the mid-2000s; unlike the economy, it never recovered. The days of mutual respect and the power to negotiate with the opposition were gone. Hatred, acrimony, and the manipulation of the public were de rigueur. Americans no longer believed those elected to higher office were our best and brightest. Quite the contrary. Among ordinary Americans, a conspiracy grew up about who controlled the tick count. Some claimed they could hack the ASCII crawl to weight the stops at zeros. Others simply did not care. The fees became like a utility tax to them. They continued to read digitally as they wished, slugging down barrels of it, as New Yorkers did during the attempt to ban high fructose corn syrup drinks over 16 ounces in the second Obama administration.

This brave new world was an attempt to return to the old one, when people still read books. The enforcement would no doubt prove problematic. It wasn’t a literacy issue. The government had

eradicated illiteracy in the U.S. a decade earlier. When the U.S. ranking in knowledge of World Literature sank to an all-time low of 27th in the world in 2015, the new Office of E-Literacy, which had been charged with putting a laptop in the hands of every elementary school-age child in America, took a massive hit in funding. Like the Toys for Guns programs of the 1990s, families were instructed to return their government laptops to their local libraries in exchange for books. Many refused. The National Guard was sent to homes to yank laptops out of the hands of bewildered 7th graders, while supporters marched down Main Streets carrying signs reading: “E-Literacy is the new IL-Literacy! FUCK THE INTERNET. READ A BOOK!”

The dilemma had not been a lack of ability to read, but a lack of will. I was imagining the punishment for violators of the new book laws: like students in a detention study hall, they would be forced to report on successive Saturdays to their local library, sitting on old oak chairs to write, long-hand, on yellow legal pads with a #2 pencil, Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The sentence was community service to one’s self. My hands were cramping as I thought of it, recalling the rote penmanship exercises of my mother’s Catholic childhood: a nun’s ruler about to slap my knuckles for daydreaming in the middle of a confusing sentence. If I could only get to Yes.

When the ERP order was officially announced, as with most government orders, it was ignored until it no longer could be. With the edict out this morning, we were now in the final thirty days of ‘free’ reading; or, more precisely, the freedom to not ever read.

“It won’t be like *Handmaid’s Tale*,” Willa said, as my friends gathered around the telephone pole, reading the edict. “You know, like when she goes to the ATM and can no longer access her own money. Has to ask her brother or father now.”

“Virtuous maidens forced to conjugate a book to make more baby books,” Dillon joked.

Dillon was the low achiever of the group, but he got credit for knowing Atwood. His attachment to me was based on an intellectual crush that was unrequited. I kept him around because, as I told Willa and John, “Yes, Dillon is intellectually malnourished; but, unlike the lost generation of no-brain internet users, he is a reader of books and can still be saved.” Dillon was pale, skinny, with a complexion set by microwave burritos from the 7-Eleven choked down with liters of Mountain Dew and a posture built by shrugging. He was a lightweight in all things. His opinion never mattered to the stronger members of our group, but he gave it anyway, as a kind of counter-balance to us, the informed.

“It’s a good thing,” I said. “I myself am looking forward to the ERP Era. It will bring a new age of enlightenment. One can’t spend an eternity on texts and tweets. Who can get through a long sentence anymore? Woolf — if anyone can even spell it right — and Faulkner? Forget it. Stream of consciousness has morphed into digital trails of meaningless nothing. The Moderns are rolling over in their graves.”

My friends and I — sans Dillon — were members of a group of Ivy League twenty-somethings called the Long Texters, who made it a rule never to type a word — via email or text — without spelling it out completely. The Long Texters never tweeted and for

a short-time, before the lawsuit, used to plant E-bombs on Twitter by inserting long words into people’s tweets, rendering their 140-character messages incomprehensible. The most famous of these was an E-bomb we sent the night of her election in 2016 when Hilary Clinton tweeted, somewhat guilelessly: “Bcmg 1st wmn przn hstry z 2 amzg!” The e-bomb had changed her message to: “Becoming the first woman president revenge is best served cold in history. Amazing as proper remuneration for the blue dress, bitches!”

We also made the news for staging a ‘text-off’ during Spring Break 2017. The Long Texters set up a contest between MIT engineers and Yale humanities majors to see who could text faster: those who typed in truncated words, or those who typed full words, long-hand. The theory being that the moment of hesitation to think of the short form of a long word stalled the brain-to-finger message. The meet took place in the Swem Library at William & Mary. In the final round, the Long Texters, using the “Mary Poppins Offensive,” snagged it with *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. Taking defeat graciously, the MIT team accepted their punishment: to wear “Size Matters... I only come in full sentences” T-shirts the Monday after their tournament loss. Dillon was the guy in the T-shirt shop who printed the shirts. Somewhat derisively, I commended him for spelling everything right, but he took the comment as sincere praise and we have been friends ever since.

The Enforced Reading Program was first proposed by a group of educational anarchists famous in 2015 for a genius hack (called alternately a ‘B-hack,’ for Book hack, or ‘P-hack,’ for Paper hack) of frivolous communication among the uneducated. The data

collection had been monumental, powered by an intelligent mania seldom witnessed in history. The group wrote an assessment program called the Reading Algorithm, or RAG, that rated an individual's reading level: 'level' not pertaining to reading aptitude, but reading prowess. RAG was a secret-sauce mix of reading Frequency, Challenge, Comprehension; and, finally, the most tricky to quantify in data terms: Dissemination, i.e., the promotion of reading and the knowledge gained thereof — from information to vocabulary to a deeper sense of the world — within one's own family, workspace, social circle, or community.

The victims of the initial B-hack were the worst offenders: those with the lowest reading level, who avoided reading through willful neglect. If, for some reason, you'd been in a coma and had never heard of a book, then suddenly awoke, you didn't make the list; like Christian converters who give a pass to the elfin wolf-child for not knowing Jesus. But if you were well into your twenties and hadn't read a book since your high school English class while busy building a digital footprint that was Sasquatchean, you were likely to make the list.

There were several tiers to the targeted data pool of non-book readers: newspaper and magazine readers were given a pass, especially if one had a subscription to anything that required a higher vocabulary than *People* or *USA Today*. Anyone who worked at a library or in the field of education — even as a janitor or bus driver — also got a pass for 'reading beneficence.' Crossword puzzle aficionados, though they seldom existed outside of the reading pool, were also given an exemption. There was also a 'proximity to brilliance' penalty for those whose parents or older siblings were highly literate, while they were not. This piece of the

algorithm was called the 'reverse target double RAG,' and it was the part of the code of which the B-hackers were most proud.

The B-hack was orchestrated on such an enormous scale it was first called an act of E-terror. Privacy had long ago been deemed a luxury no government could afford. The post-9/11 Patriot Act and the sharing of cell phone data by carriers in 2013 had been just the beginning. The erosion of a person's privacy expanded to an outright assault. Signal surveillance wasn't fought but assumed. Every cell phone call, every purchase, every trip, every website visited, every social media post, every photo taken was available to be looked at by government agents if anyone cared to look. The paper-hackers were themselves an oxymoron — a group of Silicon Valley engineers who orchestrated, on a single day, a massive walk-out on the digital landscape. On August 26, 2017, this team of only twenty people shut down five of the most influential and far-reaching web giants for a twenty-four-hour period — total digital blackout — and then they themselves went off the grid. Completely. Into the wind. Six months later, from a cave somewhere, with a laptop, they engineered the book-hack, inserting passages from literature into the tweets, emails and texts of unsuspecting "finger plebs" across the country. "Dude, got ckn wngz, mt in 5," became: "Dude, Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. I have chicken wings. Meet me in five."

The artful interruption via literary phrases into the banal conversation of a lost E-generation gave the paper hackers a distinct thrill. They suffered no fool gladly, and they had zero tolerance for the privileged uneducated. In a statement following the attack, Bo Riley, the group's leader, a kind of soft-spoken Julian Assange — with more poetic eloquence and less bull-dog — was, like Assange,

a self-appointed prophet of the belief that, in the absence of right-thinking government, good citizens, even one man, can and should make a difference. Bo said:

“It had become the horror of the modern digital age that a whole generation of young people was entering adulthood without reading a book. These “finger plebs” — so called for their group non-think, the paucity of their ideas, the promotion of a herd mentality that seeks only, and forever, to entertain itself to the detriment of the greater good of society and to the intellectual ruin of his or herself — must be rescued from the quicksand of ignorance in which they muck about, half-drowned. When learning resides solely within the shallow breadth of an internet pipe, whose content is consumed by those with the attention span of a caffeinated gnat, skimming and skimming and never diving deep, it is not only the gnat that suffers, it is the entire civilization.”

Unlike Assange, Bo Riley’s was a benign controversy. As a youth in the 1970s, Bo was part of a group called the Clamshell Alliance that did sit-in protests on the sites of proposed nuclear power plants. The group was organized following Richard Nixon’s promise in 1975 to build 1,000 nuclear power plants by the year 2000. At a now-infamous protest in 1977 at the Seabrook, NH, site that was entirely peaceful, 1,400 protesters were arrested, ostensibly for trespassing on private property. As the crowd had remained non-violent, despite the presence of Billy clubs and

pepper spray on the belts of the police, Free Speech prevented the police from using any other complaint than trespassing. The protesters were rounded up, placed in a local armory for processing, and held for two weeks, refusing bail. Ironically, the authorities thought it fine to serve the group McDonald’s, unaware of the vegetarian, anti-corporate food philosophy of the crowd. On the first night, the guards found an enormous pile of burgers lit up, like a beef bonfire, in the parking lot of the armory. When the trial date came, Bo chose to represent himself in court. As his defense, without introduction or explanation, he read Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax* on the stand, start to finish. Bo comes from a family of actors and singers and has a wonderful tenor to his voice, as well as an enormous charm. The reading moved the judge; and, for the first time in the history of nuclear protests in the U.S., the charges were dropped.

Bo’s B-hack protest impressed someone in the government. He was made the country’s new Ambassador of Books. His first assignment was to come up with “ten tenants” for a country struggling to remain competitive in the global marketplace. True to form, Bo first corrected the assignment, stating: “A. the word is TENETS, not TENANTS. We are not landlords of the book”; and, B. that “It is wrong to aim for competence in a market place. It should be the aim of Americans to be leaders in the ‘global mind-space.’”

It took two short weeks for Bo and his ‘thinkers’ tank’ to come up with their list. The tenets were nailed to the doors of the Library of Congress on March 10th, 2018. They read:

1. Reading is a fundamental right.

2. It is fundamental to the founding of the United States of America that she be a nation of readers: *Litterarum speramus*.

3. The education of its population with the knowledge received via the act of reading is the sacred duty of an informed, enlightened society.

4. The reading of literary works on paper is the truest way to disseminate and discern knowledge.

5. Reading digital text diminishes the experience of art and learning. Just as viewing the *Mona Lisa* in pixels degrades a masterpiece that one should look upon and behold, like a religious experience, with one's own eyes and with reverence and awe, reading digital text is like breathing oxygen through a plastic sieve, rather than in the great outdoors, as Nature intended.

6. Just as we, a nation of individual citizens, became completely literate in 2017, no child past the required national reading age of six years shall be left behind from a life of reading.

7. It is the responsibility of each U.S. citizen — and is indeed a central pillar of American Citizenship — that paper reading be promoted as *primum medium* of the United States, superseding all other media in terms of the dedication to it by her citizens.

8. The great works of literature, including The Bible and other sacred texts, have been given to us by our intellectual forefathers and mothers across the world and throughout time to keep us, as global citizens, full

of knowledge and at peace. (*The addition of "The Bible" to Tenet 8. was, as you might have guessed, insisted upon by members of the conservative Gospel Party, whose members believed The Bible was the only book required to lead a happy, successful life; and was, in fact, not literature, which is created by Man, but the Word of God. After many futile diatribes and negotiations, in which Bo was allowed to keep the indulgently-placed double metaphor about books and the Mona Lisa and the somewhat hostile and extraneous 'plastic sieve' comment in Tenet 5., Bo gave in, with the demand that the phrase 'and other sacred texts' be added in consideration of our non-Christian sisters and brothers.*)

9. The definition of literature, besides that which is deemed by literary scholars to hold merit — academic, cultural, historical, artistic, or otherwise — shall extend to all pieces of poetry, essays, plays or novels, including any written text, published or unpublished, that are not in violation of the laws of humanity, protection of minorities, etc.; ergo, 'hate' literature that goes against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or the Matthew Shepard Act, or any and all laws forbidding hate crimes or acts of discrimination against minorities or any human being. Or excessive or indulgent pornography. (*The 'pornography' mention was tagged on as a last-minute concession. There was no time to debate the merits, or non-merits, of erotica in text for personal or societal edification; or to come to an agreed-upon definition for when pornography is 'excessive' or 'indulgent.'* "For when is it

not?” one could hear a modern-day Ben Franklin quipping. “Pornography in its best form is always both excessive and indulgent.” Let some other government body decide the matter when a publisher is deemed to cross the line. In any case, *Erotica in Text* was to become a voluntary category. As you might imagine, it couldn’t be assigned, and “There would be plenty of volunteers among the bachelor set,” one Congressman joked on the Sunday morning talk show junket.)

10. To wit, we declare: Each family in America shall hold in trust the literary work of one writer. The family shall guard and protect the work of the author with the affection and focus they would spend on their own son or daughter. That work shall be read, copied longhand, learned and studied, explicated, memorized, spoken, and performed in oratory by each member of the family now born and successive generations for ages to come. (*An enforceable definition of ‘family’ would also be left for later. I could see the cases now: “It was an amicable divorce. You see, I left him because his family was literary guardian of Samuel Johnson. What a bore! Think of the children! While my second husband had Proust. Yes, I loved him, but it was no contest.”*)

The Book Tenets were received with much success and excitement and the document was disseminated via paper copies only. Happy warriors, like monks of old, copied and recopied the Tenets longhand until there were thousands. No digital copies were made and any digital transcript forbidden. Finally, with the flush

of faith sending him or her forth into the populace like good disciples, each reader became a copier, who then passed the paper on to the next reader, who copied it, and so on.

“Whom do you want to get?” John asked, as we settled into a booth at the coffee shop. “My family put in early for Shakespeare, but that’s a laugh. They want a RAG score in the millions for that. You have to be in good with someone in the B-men stratosphere to get that. My dad says we’ll get someone small time, like a bad romantic poet from the 1800s. A pond poet. A ‘non-known unknown,’ they are calling it.”

“Speaking of which,” Willa added, “the Diaries of Government Officials category includes Rumsfeld. Shit. You can appeal if your personal hatred of a writer is so great you can’t stomach the material, right?”

As the resident expert on the ERP laws, which I had read in their entirety, I answered: “Oh yes. They covered that in the Affection Clause. One’s affection for the writer must be sincere or the whole program tanks. They have plenty of Rumsfeld fans signing up. In fact, the DGO assignments are pretty much all voluntary.”

One can’t legislate enthusiasm. Bo knew this going in. The grafting of a program whose aim is to support the arts onto a government bureaucracy would be an epic fail. ERP was conceived as a kind of latticework connecting families to works of art. It would require careful consideration, finesse, an understanding of the people. The program would be “nothing if not comprehensive” — so stated the press, which, decoded, was filled with literary terms of speech: *litotes*, in this case. Regarding compliance: “Children (anyone under 18) must follow the lead of their parents”

in receiving their appointed Literary Element: “*Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.*” (Metonymy) “*The taking on of one’s literary inheritance is like the acceptance of one’s family name.*” (Simile) “Okay, maybe not that important. That was just *hyperbole.*” (Bo’s insertion when reciting the press statement.)

Willa recounted how, in the days leading up to the posting of the ERP edict, she had spoken to her Junior High School students, who were bewildered by the impending news of their literary fate. Kelly, a student whose approach to the study of anything began with a mix of procrastination and apathy, and whose cell phone was confiscated every time the class bell rang, had asked: “So, do we need to worry about this?”

Willa responded with her usual informative sarcasm:

“Yes, participation in the Enforced Reading Program is required. That’s why they named it ‘Enforced.’ The ‘Whocaresifyouparticipate’ reading program FAILED. In case you didn’t know, that’s the program you have all been in your whole lives. And, yes, ‘Reading Program’ means you have to read and someone is organizing a program through which you will.

“If you are hoping to be assigned *The Complete Works of J.K. Rowling* or a teen vampire series, think again. If your mother is fortunate enough to draw Keats, consider yourself lucky. At least she will be a happy ambassador for the texts, for ‘A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.’ She’ll give you some easy odes while she memorizes ‘Endymion.’ Would I were steadfast as thou art, then I would have ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ memorized in no time. ‘All lovely tales that we have heard or read.’ Cheer up: there is a line

about a ‘still unravished bride,’ and ‘Bright Star’ has a ‘ripening breast.’”

“The proper education of our young people often includes brilliance tinged with sexuality,” Willa told us.

In the doling out of assignments, literacy ‘chits’ could be earned and appeals to the ERP Board could be made, but ordinary book enthusiasts or patrons of the arts would be competing with the book-elite, who would never let the literary giants fall into the hands of a lesser family. A kind of litocracy of the intellectually high born was running things behind the scenes at the Office of Assignments. Although Bo Riley’s intentions of Tenet 10 were altruistic, in truth, the implementation of the plan had quickly become political. Despite the totalitarianism at work, Bo remained true to his pledge to get America reading again, and for that, extreme measures were required. “Every idealist,” he wrote in an editorial in the New York Times, “works in less than ideal conditions. We ask that the American people accept their assignments in the spirit in which the Enforced Reading Program was conceived. If reading for you is like eating spinach, well, listen to your Mother. She knows what is best for you.”

“I have it on good authority that we’re getting the Sonnets!” I whispered to my friends, conspiratorially (one of my favorite words to long-text).

“What?” John protested. “How in he—”

“Well, you know my great, great grandfather was dean at Princeton. And his father endowed the university library. That kind of pedigree can’t be ignored. We put in for any Shakespeare; we weren’t picky. Very magnanimous of us. Our family’s RAG

score was through the roof. It nearly broke the machine, but we let them pick. The Linney-Bells, who give millions to the Kennedy Center, they insisted on “Romeo and Juliet.” What hubris! We don’t even have to participate in ERP. We got a Fine Arts Exemption; but, of course, my parents were dying to be part of it. The volunteerism among the book-elite has soared.”

As is her wont: to sing anything to make a point, thereby rendering her victims powerless in debate due to the heavenly angels flying out of her mouth, June began singing a madrigal:

“April is in my mistress’ face. April is in my mistress’ face. And July in her eyes hath place. Within her bosom is September. But in her heart, her heart, a cold December.’ Thomas Morley. Early Madrigal. Synecdoche. Who’s getting the songs?”

“Show-off!” Dillon whined. “Molly’s house got Emily Dickinson — how’d that happen?”

“It’s a matter of heritage,” I answered. “Her father’s an actor and has memorized half of Shakespeare, and her grandmother, at 90, still runs a poetry group. She has a BA in English. You, Dillon, could never even come close to that. Your mom’s what they call ‘White Paper-Trash.’ She’s been chain-smoking on the couch, watching soap operas and paging through *Us Weekly* for centuries. She’s a RAG hit if ever I saw one. Your house doesn’t stand a chance of getting anything better than a dime store romance novelist. Trash for trash. Maybe if you teach your kids to read more than comic books, you could be guardian someday of an actual book.”

“Shut up!” Dillon barked. “My dad said they used to get high and read Wikipedia just for shits and giggles. He learned a ton of stuff.”

“Yes,” John added. “But that’s an E-hit: ‘Knowledge gained via tertiary sources.’ Prime source info is all you can use to improve your RAG score, so get crackin’.”

“Harry’s mom is part of the ‘The Bible Is God’s Literacy’ movement,” June said. “I saw them marching in front of the Trader Joe’s on Sunday. They don’t want to be forced to read anything but Jesus. Harper Lee? They’ve never heard of her.”

“The RAG mind police know this,” said John. “It’s an unspoken rule that religious zealots get authors and titles that have been banned.”

“Right,” Willa said. “That crazy lady who would volunteer at our school and yell at kids for reading books that had witches in them: she’ll get Anne Rice. I mean, shit. Rice may or may not be great literature, but their family might get stuck with vampires. Forever. Poetic justice, I guess.”

“Well, Vampire novels do have a resurrection theme,” John said, smiling cleverly.

“And homophobes are in for a bit of ERP reforming as well,” I said. “Remember that lady we saw with the anti-gay sandwich board in front of the Subway last week? ‘A Rose May Be a Rose, But a Lesbian Is a Sinner.’ I’m sure she’s never even read Gertrude Stein.”

We Long-Texters were particularly intolerant of an ignorant bully. “They couldn’t even get their signs right,” I said. “I saw one

that said, “Alice B. Toke-Less,” which is some kind of anti-marijuana thing. Let’s mix issues and see what sticks.”

“Disinformation feeds on itself,” said John. “Their protests are proving the need for the program. ‘I don’t need ERP. My bigotry teaches me all I need to know to remain a bigot.’”

“Yes, pretty obtuse for an ignoramus. The partner board was ‘Gertrude Stein Was a Carpet Muncher,’” I joked. “They got lots of honks. Too bad. The B-men are gonna give ‘em hell. They’ll be teaching their kids how to spell ‘Melanctha’ the rest of their lives. It will take them a generation just to learn the text.”

“Dude, it took me a generation just to learn that text. Gertrude Stein was difficult and impossible on purpose,” Willa said.

“Ya. Probably. It’s regional, too,” I added. “The South wants Faulkner — one of its own sons. But it will be families across the Midwest learning about Yoknapatawpha County.”

“Everybody in the South wants *Gone with the Wind* or Elvis,” said Dillon, who’d read that fact on the Yahoo news crawl that morning. “They had like ten thousand requests or something, for Margaret Mitchell. Instead, they’ll get Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Bigger Thomas over Rhett and Scarlet.”

“Nice attempt, Dillon,” I said. It’s true that the ERP spooks are in no mood to sugar coat these assignments, but Bigger Thomas is the protagonist of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, based in Chicago. For Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, you can just say ‘the Invisible Man.’”

“Right. I know,” Dillon moaned, again defeated.

“It’s a war of the minds and it shows no signs of relinquishing any time soon,” John said. “A bunch of women in Des Moines started a letter-writing campaign refusing any book, despite its

literary merits, that had a rape or incest in it. Even the false accusation of a rape. That’s gonna hit Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Faulkner, Nin, Shakespeare. The list goes on.”

“Well, ‘Titus’ isn’t for school children, but rape is as old as Zeus. There is no getting around it,” I said.

“Refuse a passage on masturbation and you lose Anne Frank,” said Willa.

“Right,” I said. “You lose the entire experience of adolescence. That was Bo’s whole point. The scuffle that is going on with the swaps and the appeals and the denials is part of the game. People are talking about literature. Did you know that to write an appeal, you have to list three reasons why you don’t want your assignment? And six reasons why you want your new request. And they can’t be from Wikipedia. You have to actually open a book.”

“Yes. You have to read the book you are refusing to read in order to make an appeal. Nicely, done Bo,” John said cheerfully.

“But who is getting the songs?” June asked again.

“Musical theatre, folk music, Gospel — so much of it is being included in the Written Text and Iconography category for cultural and historical significance,” Willa answered. “Seriously, there could be some Elvis. So much of what he sang became part of the vernacular, he has to be represented. The Presley Estate has first dibs and is requesting that they, personally, pick the Elvis families. Ambassadors for the King, they are calling them. Volunteers are in the tens of thousands.”

“There’s that guy who has memorized every word of Sondheim. He’s on YouTube singing for twenty-four hours like a Broadway filibuster,” Dillon added.

"It takes longer than twenty-four hours to sing all of Sondheim; but lots of people have done it," June said, scolding Dillon. "Musical literacy is its own kind of responsibility. Get it right."

"Sorry," Dillon shrugged. "Didn't know."

As we left the coffee house and the group began to disband, I picked up a copy of the edict that had fallen and blown, like a little pennant, across my feet. "Call me when you get yours!" I yelled after my friends. Families across America were standing by their mailboxes awaiting the letters containing their assignments. Like children on Christmas morning, they hoped they had been good enough to get something great. "Just give me a nice baseball autobiography. That would be perfect!" Mr. Every Man was saying, eyes to heaven. (That he would get Ben Jonson's comedic play from 1598, *Every Man in His Humour*, would be the literary god's inside joke.) Those who no longer had mailboxes, due to all their communication occurring online, had put out old shoeboxes marked with their names and street addresses with a Sharpie. A rock was used to keep them in place on the sidewalk. Bo Riley loved this. Terry Gross, interviewing him on NPR this morning, had asked him if he was trying to create a literary utopia.

"Well," Bo answered, "You know, Thomas More, in the 16th century, supported the education of women. He also suggested that a man and a woman see each other naked prior to getting married — to see what they were getting before signing on to a lifetime of sex. I am not promoting that custom," he joked. "But, yes, if one were to pick a utopian form, or condition, I would choose to live in a society where people have a high level of literacy in the meta

sense, literature awareness, passion, and an intimate knowledge of books. Paper books."

"And what do you think of the rocks in shoeboxes? People are calling them the 'analog, retrograde mailbox.'"

"Poetry is already in motion," Bo said. "The rock in the shoebox reminds us of our shared history: from caveman to the printing press, rock and paper are elemental to who we are. Let the games begin!"

Peripheries // Laurel F. Foglia

Pipi has a sweater on and bread in her hand. Her face is clean. They are American nomads, she and Didi. I know Didi is a good mother.

*Father's spirit in the Son- of the Father Spirit
COMMUNISM- all for one 2/13/08 end of the world as
we Brave New World 3'=1 yard 5280'=1 mile I feel fine
Peace on Earth George Orwell 1984 Animal Farm He
who controls the oil controls the world Droughts have
begun Our Doomsday's Today NEW WORLD ORDER
Technology Net Web... I know what's written on the
blackboard. I know Cora has a piece of chalk. I know
she dropped her head onto her upraised arm. I know
Cora and her family live in the desolate thick of
Tennessee timberland. I know they dress as
Mennonites, though they are not. I know they live
Plain but haven't always. I know Cora's father just
fired the teacher who lived with them for a decade on
the farm. Tired of the dogs barking, he said. I know a
farmhand scribbled over the blackboard. I know Cora
is trying to circle her teacher's notes.*

I know Cora is a better shot than her mother. I know she likes this photograph because it makes her look tough. I'm sure she loved my brother. I know Cora's father predicts economic collapse. Past peak oil, banks will fail first. All assets, he says, should be in gold and land. I know Old Order Mennonites call them cowboys. The government leaves all of them alone.

Peach-colored flesh on the belly and haunch makes the carcass of this black bear look human. That and how gently it laid down its paw.

I know Mason built this cart and tanned a hide for the harness and reins. I know he forged the pitchfork and carved its handle. I know cut hay has to dry on the ground before you can pile it up around hay poles. I know that a stack of wet hay will ferment from the inside, releasing enough heat to set the stack on fire. I know Mason is not moving back to the land. This has always been his life.



Soon after Lucas spread the first stack of prints across our parents' kitchen table, I began trying to write about his photos. I tried to give them language and to pull language from them. In varying iterations, I described the images and provided context. I wrote over photographs or omitted them.



What compels me now is not the narrative or the subject matter, but the fact that I approached the photographs again and again.

I was still finding my way through college when my brother outfitted his van with a futon bed, a lockbox for his cameras, and a summer's worth of granola. He was a year out of school and his wedding photographer uniform was a poor fit. He began at the home of a naturalist in North Carolina and from there, traveled throughout the southeastern United States photographing people living on the edge of society and off the grid. The project spanned the next six years.



At one point the images stirred something green and bitter in me. Why didn't he just take pictures of me and our parents and grandparents on our family farm? We heated with wood. We planted and canned and bartered like homesteaders. But I do understand why we weren't his subjects. We were out there, but not all the way out. We lived like this on Long Island, a place that defines suburbia.

Writing about the photographs was a way for me to negotiate our relationship. I was not trying to see through my brother's eyes, I was trying to see my brother.



What surfaced were the peripheries: His subjects living on the fringes of society. Our family, a step off the mainstream. Our farm in suburbia, the edge of the city. I saw my brother as an outsider to his own project, necessarily a visitor, studying a part of the world and his own work from the edges of our upbringing. I saw the two of us, as siblings, as artists, on each other's periphery, in parallel but not always at pace, appearing most clearly to each other when we are both in motion, approaching and re-approaching some point of inquiry.

I kept returning to the photos out of a fascination with how an image shifts when I learn the circumstances of its moment of capture. Because it must. Because minds are also eyes.



I kept writing the photos because the story is not simple. These are not disconnected people; these people see disconnection as the problem. In context, the images resist representation, point just to the side of depiction, hoping a viewer will follow the gesture and keep wondering.

I kept writing the photos to put my brother back into them, to recreate the affect of his encounter. I see how careful he is, how deliberate a wanderer, both of us drawn to incongruities and intersections.

I kept writing as a way of thinking about writing, and about accuracy. I was trying to fill out an image with language to make the photographer more apparent. But is language more or less subjective than a photo, more or less stable and reliable? It is around these questions that I keep circling now. Are texts and photographs equally insufficient, equally mediated? I keep writing the photos to keep probing, to see the commentary in them, to see my brother in the commentary, and myself in the process.

Photographs // *A Natural Order* // Lucas Foglia

Didi and Pipsissewa, Virginia 2010

Homeschooling Chalkboard, Tennessee 2008

Rita and Cora, Tennessee 2007

Bear, Poisoned by Neighbors, Kevin's Land, Virginia 2008

Mason, Kentucky 2008

Dear Sister

by Franc Loewi

Hello sissy,

I know that you needed something sooner than later for the Journal but what do you want me to say? That I think this is a good way for you to spend your time? That there aren't more important pursuits than writing, like anything with me: hiking, drinking, lip-synching to Johnny Hallyday or, better yet, Grace Jones? We had fun when we were young, remember? You were a tomboy, and I was, well, a boy. Two of us jumping off high things and shouting *whew!* on the way down. You broke a tooth that one time, and I cried because I thought it was my fault. I don't have anyone to do things like that with anymore, which is fine, because the Swiss don't ask many questions, and don't like broken teeth. The door to my apartment opens right out on the river; I'm always river boarding. River boarding is almost as good as ecstasy on the first date.

I like being alone, but I would like to do things with you. Are you still dating your lab partner, the one with the bird eyebrows — Tracy or Travis or whatever? I thought Tracy was something, really cute, I'd say juicy but I know how much you hate that word. So, here it is, and I really didn't write much of anything, surprise surprise. If your people don't like it, you can write something else and put my name on it. I give you permission.

I just thought of something. Like a raw thought, just out of the fridge, snappy. Do you remember when mother caught us napping

together and said we should stop that, that it wasn't right? She got very red in the face, looking like she wanted to break something. Well, sissy to sissy, I think she was wrong. What harm was being done? It was warm there, with you, with us — mother was so cold, so abrupt with her feelings. There and gone. It was probably jarring, or traumatizing, to be yelled at like that, for both of us.

The last few lines were probably worth writing. I'd start over with just them, but I don't think I know what else to say. You write about it. You might have the sentences for it, the language. You always said that the best line of any American poem was Lowell's: "I myself am hell, nobody's here." And when you said it you'd laugh. Why did you do that? Because I was there, too? And Anne and Léa? Was it hell? Do you still think it's that funny? Well, Lowell wrote that poem for his friend Elizabeth (I looked it up), and I am writing this letter, whatever it is, for you.

I never was as smart as you, Carine, but I do get to live in Switzerland, so nah-nah on you. Visit soon?

Your sissy

Are You Still Talking?

by Carine Loewi

Brother.

Thank you for such warm greetings from your burg — the bear city, fair Verona of the north!

Have I told you lately that I hate Bern? I hate Bern in the same way I hate Manhattan, and I hate Manhattan deeply. In Bern and in Manhattan, I feel like I'm stuck in the painting with the oxbow in the river, and maybe the light is just so and there are cows and swishing grasses, whatever, but I'm all hemmed in by a ribbon of water on a weird, crowded finger of land, and I want out.

The one good thing about Bern is the statue of the monster eating the children. Remember when we used to eat our meatball sandwiches under that statue? If I could camp under that statue, pray to that statue, draft a new city constitution with that statue, I would maybe live in Bern. Otherwise, Bern is the pits. According to me, Bern is the Gary, Indiana of Europe.

But I'm glad you're happy there. I'll come visit if you move back to Nice.

I'm sorry to disappoint, but I have no recollection of the incident you mention. A nap? I was always in a nap. Most of childhood is a blur of naps, and cookies. What I do remember is that time we visited America in autumn and we insisted on doing the Halloween activities with Henri's family there. Remember, you wanted to dress as David Niven, after you saw him on the old TV show at home? And you wore your little grey suit that you got for

Léa's baptism, and I slicked your hair and drew a pencil mustache on you? You were dashing, Franc, but all the neighborhood parents thought you looked like John Waters. We didn't know what they were talking about; we just kept yelling "Bonbons, bonbons!" and skipping down the street. Henri's mother did not enjoy this. Henri had dressed as a cowboy.

If anyone scolded us out of our cuddling at naptime, it would have been Léa, who as you know was then and remains today something of a cold fish. I do remember spending a lot of time on your bed when you weren't there, when I was home sick for two weeks (which happened at least once a year, at my insistence): my feet stuck off the end of the bed and the blankets always felt damp, but your room had that big window looking out on the field, and when I ran out of magazines I'd just stare out, into what seemed like a foreverescape of nothing. Just grey, and quiet; invisible wind. Of course there were geese, there were snails stuck on stone walls, there were patches of gorse, small rabbits, the old school building; but for a long time I didn't want to see them. It felt much better to see nothing there.

But enough about me. (Another reason I can't live with the Swiss: they don't appreciate a good jag into personal melodrama.) I wanted to give this a siblingly symmetry and quote Elizabeth Bishop here, but I'm stuck on Frank O'Hara, who must also have been talking about me: "Negligence, too, was her tour de force." Which is to say, I'll try to write more. Keep well, Mister Niven. You are a lovely creature.

Deine Carine

In Which Remorse Only Inspires Disgust...

by Jenny Magnus

I saw a listicle recently, 5 top regrets people had on their deathbeds.

I didn't even have to read it to know quite well what it was going to say.

But I read it anyway.

Because I can't *not* read all that shit. I can't *not* read it.

I'm pretty sure there is no good reason for that thought.

I know that there are so many other worthy things to be doing at any given moment.

Yet I feel compelled, I desire to know, I wish to be apprised of the things I am surely doing wrong.

I wish to spend the 5 minutes it takes me to read that list, reading that list of practical, self-evident things.

So, first of all, to prove to myself, reassure myself even, that all the stupid things I waste my time on will end up biting me in the ass at the end.

I will say to myself, "why oh why did I watch all that TV?"

Though I don't think that was on the list.

"Why didn't I go outside more? What was the point of all that resting? And what about the sex I haven't had? Shouldn't I have spent my time pursuing that? Instead of looking at the internet for so many hours?"

I wouldn't have seen that listicle if I wasn't spending all those hours looking at the internet.

And some of the other regrets on that list are haunting because you can't even know if you'll regret them until it's too late.

Did I love my child enough? Did I help other people enough? Didn't I spend too much time whining and complaining about the unfairness of my plight?

And one of the worst regrets of all: did I waste my life entirely, imagining I was contributing my own small bit, when in actuality I did next to nothing to better the world? That in the final analysis, I only took, and didn't give?

And full stop worst case scenario, that I was thinking of it all wrong anyway, that I should have *only* focused on what I could get for myself, and all the literal decades of thinking and worrying about whether I was a good person were utterly pointless?

Because in the end, you only have what you *did*, and that is all that you *are*?

And goodness is an illusion invented by capitalists and religions to keep us from our feral, unproductive truths?

And I could boil down my most truthful, happiest, most fulfilled moments to a fairly small window after childhood and before I grew a conscience, that has, now that I am thinking about this, choked me, and rendered me impotent and harmless?

When I had the potential for real impact, even if that impact was harm?

Because maybe one of the top 5 regrets I will have on my deathbed will be that I did so little in my life, so concerned was I about not harming others.

And there's no way to know any of this until you get there, and you don't want to imagine hastening that moment any.

Because that will be at the end, and even though it's only a question of when, not if, you don't want it coming along anytime *soon*.

Even though I *can* see it. Coming.

Visiting

by Bryn Magnus

Finding the toaster is hard.

Unfamiliar sparse countertops and drawers with only curly straws or a single knife.

Not like at home where the toaster commands the operational center of the kitchen, cuckolding even the microwave.

It is too embarrassing to call your host at work while you are ghosting around her home and ask about the toaster. Especially since her husband just left her for his soulmate who he met at a poetry workshop.

The kitchen is a finite space and methodically opening every drawer and cabinet for the third time only deepens the mystery.

Does the air conditioner breezing next to the stove cloak the toaster's whereabouts in dual purpose disguise? It does not.

A careful perusal of the packaging reveals that this bread is not self-toasting. Also there is a butter dish and jars of jam in the fridge — evidence of beloved hot slots.

Holding up two slices of multigrain I attempt to find the appliance by Ouija Bread Slice Positioning. The spirits are not with me.

Of course I know where I should be looking — the only place I haven't looked, but I can't believe the toaster would be stored in the pantry so I ignore the intuition.

Much like my host must have ignored the intuition that her husband was a louse when he initially cheated on her and then did it again after she epically forgave him and took him back and even after that was willing to tighten the stitches on her heart for his pitiful male humanity one final unfaithful time until he met his soulmate at the poetry workshop.

Who has sequestered the toaster in the pantry? Wrapped in its own cord and tucked onto a shelf next to the blender and the mixer? Blenders and mixers are marginal appliances enabled for the loneliness of the pantry. The toaster is not. It is a social appliance that starts the day with you and even sometimes ends the night when you are peckish for crunch and heft.

It may be that the turmoil in her life demands that my host avoids carbs. Or it may be that her lousy husband rejects crumbs as transference for his own crummy behavior.

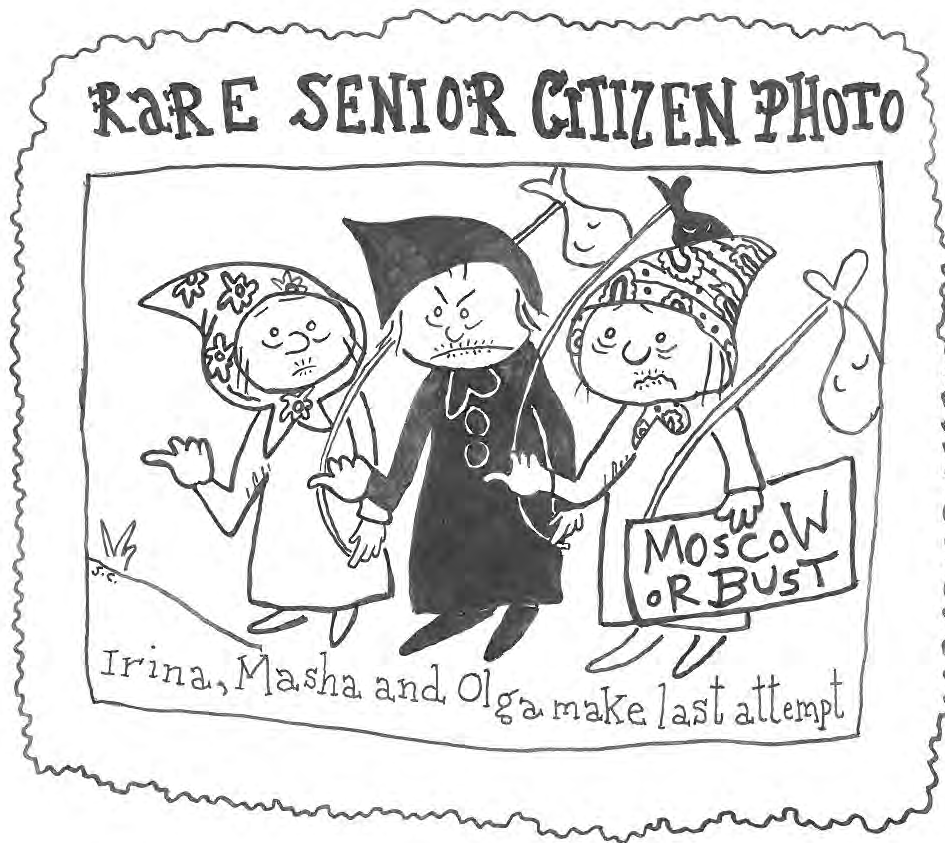
Placing the toaster on the sparse countertop, I lower two slices into the heat. I unfridge butter and jam. I undrawer a knife. I uncabinet a plate.

The science of the smell of fresh toast: 2-acetyl-1,4,5,6-tetrahydropyridine (caramel), 2-furfuryl methyl disulphide (roasted coffee, sulphurous cooked meat and liver, onion and garlic nuances), 2-acetylpyridine (corn-like with a musty nutty nuance), 2-furfural (almonds).

What is the art of the smell of fresh toast? Comfort? The complexities of this wounded home cannot be comforted by science, or poetry, or toast. For now the great appliance goes back in the pantry. But the crunchy deliciousness in my mouth promises a day to come for my host when the heartbreak will soften and the expression 'soulmate' will not make her gag.

Things We Saw, People We Met

views and interviews



Notes on a Performance: Bob Eisen at the New Links Hall

by Jayita Bhattacharya

Homage¹ I

Another woman comes from behind² — again scooting onto the stage.

There is someone sitting now — where minutes ago they were — captivating me.

The woman in orange has five shadows.

A dance of silent suspension.

Limbo³

touch me don't touch me

touch me

again

I cover my face, he covers his face

I writhe, he prays

¹ So strange that this piece is titled *Homage*, as the pieces preceding are in so many ways an homage to the man performing this last and the space — which was originally another space but is now a concept that has grown to be more than just about a place and is instead a community of artists helping each other's work grow. (How appropriate, in this sense, that performances this evening included veterans like Bob Eisen and Bryan Saner as well as the Dmitri Peskov's *Tales Told By an Idiot* — which originated from his LinkUp Residency.)

² This is Kristina Isabelle. I won't realize it until a minute or two later when her partner enters, but we are now in the next piece.

³ A duet. Choreographed by Dmitri Peskov in collaboration with Paul Christiano.

my head no my gut no my head no my gut no my my
head no my gut no my head no my gut no my my head
no my gut no my head no my gut no my my head no
my gut no my head no my gut no my my head no my
gut no my head no my gut no my—

Homage II

And here is Bob Eisen.⁴

A duet. Now I see this is another dance altogether.⁵

They play adults and children all at once.

A play on posture.

"Come on and fight!"

(But then she comes. She wasn't supposed to actually come.)

[] vs. []⁶

I just discovered this ground and it is bad.

this is my hand after the ground:

one arm in chaos, the other bound in

fascist rigidity. this is the new normal.

a dance about arms (though it doesn't mean to be)

⁴ I of course have heard of Bob Eisen for years — both in connection with Links Hall and as a dancer and choreographer. Until this performance I had never seen him perform. And yet here he is, performing at the new Links Hall for the very first time. In India, this would be considered a momentous and spiritual event — the guru coming back to give his *aashirbad*, or blessing, to the new space by performing there.

⁵ Such a seamless transition that it is invisible to the audience. It seems an extension of *Migration*, end and begin, respectively, in conversation with one another. *Migration* ends in the stage being literally swept clean for the dancers in *Homage*.

⁶ In his own words: "(Blank vs. Blank)" — an improvised solo by Damon Green.

back to limbo – is a place of straight lines and arms
following arms.
back into the ground. stuck into it.

Homage III

The effort to reach and move across the ground — again. Friction
is a motif of the evening.

“C’m’here, take my hand.”
(He does.)

Tales Told By an Idiot

A man. A chair.
Tranquility like corpses.
Wake me up by touching my feet—
 “It’s time. It’s time.”
“It’s better if I walk. No. It’s better if I sit.”
“My teacher said when I recite poetry my accent
almost completely disappears.”
He quotes Auden: “Let the more loving one be
me.”
And again: “We’re all stars, to disappear or die.
I should learn to look at an empty sky.”

Homage IV

Symmetry is not required to attain an other kind of symmetry.
Another dance of chaos arms — except these arms know *exactly*
what is what.

A modern dancer not afraid of expression.⁷

Fidgety, manic, into stillness suspended.
(What *is* that disarming expression?)⁸

The lights will blinker or tinker and someone will call you back.

Migration⁹

A woman trapped behind a chair. No eyes just
mouth.
White.
Man worms his chair in. Door shut. Toes wiggle.
Worms in on fists.

She lifts the chair enough to show her eyes. Effort.
Another, hunched. Chair on his head, in his mouth
like a bit. She is now suspended, an overturned
crucifix.

⁷ There’s an expression Bob Eisen has. This is not a thing that is usually remarked upon first when writing about a modern dancer. And yet. It’s his expression that captured my full attention. He is a modern dancer not afraid of facial expression. Which is remarkable in itself to me, a dancer who was admonished for years to lose the facial expressions I’d spent decades cultivating as a Bharatanatyam dancer. In modern dance, we are to use the body to express, not the face. Using the face is a cheat. Or so I was taught. Bob Eisen acknowledges his face as part of his body and lets it dance too. And watching his face as he dances, the joy of his movement is amplified. It’s not that he’s smiling – although sometimes he is. It’s that joy isn’t hidden. It’s in his whole presence.

⁸ “I think it’s the look of having perpetually lost his keys”, says J. Bivens. Yes, that’s it!

⁹ A performance and meditation on journey and shifting perspective, curated by Bryan Saner.

He (the worm) suspends himself from the pipe and
climbs to the ceiling.
Slide down slow.
The singers hammer the air.¹⁰
What was meditative becomes a grade school
assembly of muttering children. The singing has
stopped, whispers continue. Now they come to
sweep — the ones in white.

Fidgety, manic, into stillness suspended.

Ends hopping in circles.

Homage V

Grappling that might be combat or a slow dance or an embrace.

Then the fight outside. Vaudeville now.¹¹

He returns alone.

Now she drags him, all melodramatic.¹² Hilarity.

He offers the tape recorder. She takes it, walks off.

We still hear music in the distance.

He is left sitting.

Wait which arm is which?

Optical illusion of arms.

She returns — tape recorder + stool.

¹⁰ So far migration causes giggles and talking on stage. The giggles and talking — that's us. We're on what was the stage.

¹¹ It's the theatricality of his presence, as well as hers, and the theatricality of the choreography — these struck me most, perhaps. Since it is not a "play," it's not tied by convention to have narrative or character development in a linear form. Rather, characters can emerge and dissipate throughout, as can narratives. The form of dance allows for modularity, fragmentation, in a way that this audience might be more prepared to accept than a conventional theatre audience. It's thrilling that the dialogue, the relationship, between these characters, happens outside of language.

¹² Anyone else hear the theme to *Jaws*?

Round and Round: a sexfarcetragedy

Review by Charlotte Hamilton

In May, two friends and I went to Prop Thtr for the final night of the Realize Theatre Group's production of *Round and Round: a sexfarcetragedy*. Well, one friend and one boyfriend, who used to be my sort-of boyfriend, who used to be my friend, sort of. I'm not trying to overshare, just doing some foreshadowing.

Round and Round was written Jenny Magnus of Curious Theatre Branch (originally staged in 2001), and directed by Zarinah Ali of Realize Theatre Group. This is a play in the same vein as one of those jaunty and mildly confusing Shakespeare comedies where everyone is running around pretending to be other people and cooking up schemes, all in the name of true or not-so-true love. With characters such as "Woman" and "Old Friend," *Round and Round* is clearly meant to be an exploration of human relationships, independent of any particular storyline or time period. In the director's note, Ali says she invites the viewer "to chuckle reminiscently, laugh obnoxiously, or bitterly curse us for reminding you of your ex, or even worse, your current situation, as we present our take on the torture of love: Human kind's eternal plague and ultimate savior."

The set — designed by Ali and Taryn Smith — created the feel of a "round and round" (or sort of triangular) format, with three of the characters each having a space/room of their own—two on either side of the stage, and one in the middle of the balcony above. The "Woman," played by Manya Niman, presumably the "sex" part of the sexfarcetragedy (at least, at first — later, everyone's roles get mixed up and passed round and round), relaxes stage left in a chaise lounge. The "Old Friend," played by Linsey Falls, hangs out near an upright piano, and presumably

represents "tragedy," with his unrequited love for the Woman. Up top, the "Honest Man," played by Mike Krystosek, sits at a chair and laughs at everyone, initiating the "farce" part of the action. And winding through each of these stations is the "Young Friend," played by Tyler Nielsen.

It is our Young Friend who gets things started by making the Woman an intriguing offer: in spite of her feelings for him, she will act with "restraint," no matter how loving or desirous he acts toward her. Basically, he wants her to play hard to get — advice that many modern daters are told will help them attract and keep a mate (at least the Young Friend is honest about his wish for dishonest communication). From this point, things get twisted and turned around, as each character consults other characters for advice, help with schemes, and anything that will keep them from talking to each other honestly. Between various scenes, we hear the voices of two "Interlocutors," played by Brandon Gelvin and the play's director, Ali. They ask questions like, "Did you fuck him?" and the characters answer differently, depending on mood or point in time.

The language, the costumes, and the set of the play gave it an old-timey feel. For an embarrassingly long period of time (like ten minutes), I was convinced it was set in a brothel — that the Woman was a lady of the night, the Old Friend played the piano for entertainment, and the Honest Man was the manager, overseeing everything from his perch above. That's all I'll say about it, because neither of my audience companions agreed with me regarding the brothel angle (but I maintain that this is a viable interpretation!). After the action got going, it became apparent that nothing was quite linear, and that the specific storylines of these characters were tangled and unclear. The old-timey feel gave way to a timelessness, of patterns that have been repeated over and over again in human relationships.

The ebb and flow of the scenarios represented in the play echo situations that many of us will face in our lives — the unrequited love that goes away when requited, the subtle power plays between lovers and friends, and the confusion of figuring out how to communicate honestly. Although these themes resonated with me, I still felt there was something missing from this production, something that would make it about more than the well-documented territory of human love and relationships. Later, I read about the 2008 Curious Theatre Branch production of *Round and Round* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which was set on a giant lazy susan designed to look like a rotting wedding cake.

But of course.

How could I have not known that what was missing from the play was the representation of the passage of time by a rotating, rotting wedding cake? Realize did the best they could with a space that, presumably, didn't allow for construction of a giant lazy susan, but there was still an element of movement, of the round-and-roundness of life, that fell short for me. There were moments that felt weighty with emotion, yet overall, there didn't seem to be much at stake for these characters (no matter how universal they are meant to be).

Overall, *Round and Round: a sexfarcetragedy* did make me think more closely about the power and deception underlying all our relationships, as well as desire and attachment. It was a fun, thoughtful romp through the world of lovers and friends—one that might make you mildly suspicious of your own lovers and friends, but nothing that can't be cured by an after-show snack.

Round and Round: a sexfarcetragedy ran at Prop Thr (3502 N. Elston Ave.) from April 25—May 17, 2014. It was written by Jenny Magnus, directed by Zarinah Ali, and performed by Linsey Falls, Mike Krystosek, Manya Niman, Tyler Nielsen, Brandon Gelvin, and Zarinah Ali.

Questions for Roger Moy

We have lately been intrigued by the funny, surreal paintings of Chicago artist Roger Moy, and when we heard he had a book forthcoming about art as therapeutic practice in addiction-treatment settings, we wanted to know more. Roger kindly answered a few questions about the intersections of art, habit, life and work.

Chicago Arts Journal: Your recent publication, *The Art of Recovery*, is a book featuring artwork made by people in recovery centers. What were the roots of this project?

Roger Moy: A little over three years ago, I was approached by the head of a local drug and alcohol treatment center. They wanted to start offering art therapy sessions as part of their treatment plan. I was very familiar with this particular facility, having gone there to begin to deal with my own addictions. My degree is not in art therapy, but being a working artist with a teaching background, along with my empathy for the clients, landed me the job.

After my first session, I was astonished by the strength (often disturbing, sometimes humorous) of these drawings. These drawings could be useful to others who assume their situations are unique. A book was the simplest way for me to share that idea.

CAJ: How did you develop your process for working artistically with groups? What sorts of exercises have you found most fruitful?

RM: Reflecting on my experience in treatment, I tried to come up with an approach that would have been useful for me. I tried to

keep in mind the fragile, confused, and just plain frightening state of mind I'd experienced.

I did some research, looking at what real art therapists do, and found one exercise particularly useful for any kind of recovery-related therapy. But I also realized that these therapists provide interpretation, and in some cases, answers. I do neither. If there's anything therapeutic in the sessions I conduct, it's the necessary simplification required in translating thoughts and feelings from head to paper. This simplification can sometimes clarify what's going on upstairs. It works that way for me! This also allows the "artist" to answer their own questions. There is also a lot of discussion in these sessions, beginning with a drawing and always migrating to thoughts or emotions.

I came up with several exercises that I continue to implement (modified as appropriate). But sometimes, after reading the room, I'll toss those and improvise. My personal favorites are: "How ya doin'?" and "Where would you rather be?"

"How ya doin'?" is a cartoon format with a talk bubble and a thought bubble above a large empty space. The question, though ubiquitous, is generally a harmless and meaningless social device. The odds of the asker being more interested in how they're doing than you are probably pretty good. The talk bubble allows you to fulfill your social obligation with a simple "Gee, swell," and be on your way. If, however, you chose to reply honestly, "Well, I'm in treatment for my heroin habit, and yesterday was a bitch," my money's on the asker disappearing halfway through the word "treatment." Thus the thought bubble. The big empty space below is for the "artist" to represent themselves... somehow. Some chose the self portrait, some, symbolism, some, the strength and beauty of living line.

"Where would you rather be?" is simply that. Spending your day in a treatment center is not at the top of most people's "to do" list. Being bombarded with information from counselors, medical staff,

et cetera can be overwhelming (especially when you're not feeling your best). This exercise, while providing a bit of a break, is also a chance to be honest, or not. The results tell me that EVERYBODY likes the beach! Honesty? Some clients do choose to depict work situations, spiritual settings; and some depict their desire for the substance that got them to treatment in the first place. Honesty!

An honest response is the only thing I ask for in any of the exercises, but I'm fine with never knowing if that's what I get.

CAJ: We know that you also work as a musician and a painter. Could you talk about your role in this project as a curator or shepherd, rather than as primary maker of the works?

RM: My painting is a very self-absorbing experience, so it has no place in these sessions. Playing music does. When I play in a band situation, success comes from the ability to listen, contribute something that serves the music. If my approach is, "look what I can do," I shortchange all involved, as well as the music. In my art therapy sessions, I try to listen and react, and not expect others to live in my world.

CAJ: Are there educators, social workers, or other artists whom you would cite as models for the work you are currently doing around art and recovery?

RM: Jeff Zacharias, the President and Clinical Director of New Hope Recovery Center, comes to mind immediately. Jeff didn't hire me, but he has been very supportive of my somewhat unorthodox approach. I've known and/or worked with a lot of people in this field, and, just like in any field, some affect me more than others. Jeff has a very inclusive approach and is open to all ideas.

I know several artists and musicians who are living in recovery, and the fact that they exist and live useful lives is inspiration enough.

CAJ: Art as a therapeutic practice is sometimes met with the criticism that it provides more therapeutic aid than insightful artwork. What are your thoughts on this subject?

RM: I'm not sure whether this question puzzles me, or just gives me a chuckle. A lot of the people I work with haven't been asked to sit down and draw something since grade school, or perhaps an "easy" elective choice sometime in their education. Sometimes this request is treated as an enjoyable, relaxing outlet, sometimes like an appointment for a root canal. Of course there are artist, writers, and musicians in treatment, but they don't enter treatment to have a one-man at the MCA, or open for the band of the month thanks to art therapy. If that happens, I doubt my sessions played any part. Therapy refers to helpful treatment. If I can provide a little of that, that's plenty for me. As for the drawings, have a look and call 'em what you want.

CAJ: What books, films, themes or ideas excite you lately? Anything we should investigate?

RM: My reading varies from trashy to great fiction, punctuated by nonfiction, where I run the risk of learning something. I loved *True Believers* by Kurt Andersen. It talks about history and locations very familiar to me, in the voice of someone my age. I'm still mourning the loss of Elmore Leonard, but wouldn't be surprised if he figures a way to drop a new book every so often. My nonfiction includes historical (World Wars I and II), biographical, and technical. Movies? *20 Feet from Stardom* and *Muscle Shoals*. Period.

Something that everybody but me has already investigated: Computers! They come in handy for making sketches without wasting materials or getting paint-filthy.

CAJ: In your own art-making life, does your work as a painter influence what you create as a musician, and vice versa? Do the different media share themes or tropes?

RM: Yes. I need to pay attention to what the work is telling/showing me. In my visual work, I always start from a sketch, but once I make a mark, the work starts directing me. Sometimes in a whisper, but mostly it just screams. I embrace the "happy accident," as it generally leads me in a better direction.

Having previously mentioned my approach to music, I will point out a huge difference between the two disciplines. In music, I love and shoot for economy. I like the empty spaces. In painting, I suffer from a severe case of horror vacui. No explanation, but that's fine with me. Both activities result in a state that reminds me of why some people meditate (I imagine).

CAJ: You have lived and made work in Chicago for a number of years now. How have you seen the arts scenes change, in painting, music, or elsewhere?

RM: I moved from Southern California in 1973 to attend grad school at SAIC. I brought with me a surfer dude/wanna-be lowrider sensibility. Those influences remain with me today. My first apartment was on LaSalle and Division, a few blocks from Cabrini Green and a few blocks from Rush Street. I liked the interplay that existed, and the places I've lived since have all had a similar dynamic. Every good change has a shitty side, and vice versa. I've been in the same spot for 28 years and am always amazed when new people, attracted to this neighborhood for what

it is, move in and want to “customize” it. This falls under the heading: if you don’t like airplanes, don’t build your dream house by O’Hare. Things change when they do.

Music. As long as young people are making music I can’t listen to, bless ‘em. I promise not to duct tape anyone to a chair and force them to listen to rhythm & blues with a four-piece horn section and backup singers.

Art. I’m naturally drawn to referential, well-crafted work. I believe that most art, regardless of its delivery system, is somehow derivative, but I love looking (and sometimes listening) to new work. I never know when I just might “lift and filter.” Speaking of which, it’s great to see The Hairy Who introduced to those unfamiliar with them and their significance to art from Chicago. Plus, I probably lifted something from every one of those guys and gals.

Some Things I Saw Last Month

by Carine Loewi

I went to some shows last month. I don’t have a hundred things to say about them, but I do have two or three things to say about them, and here they are.

Violence, It Turns out, IS the Answer

Write Club at the Hideout

Do you ever think about fitting in? Like, do you try to do it, ever? Maybe you already fit in, so you don’t think about it and you don’t do it, you just *are* it. But when I feel like being a crowd person, a rubbing-elbows person, when I have a little crush on everybody and suddenly want to be near everybody, just to remember what they smell like, out in the world of performance-theatrical-writing things, I will pick up the stick and go see the Neo-Futurists late at night, or The Kates, or a movie that’s going to be popular and everybody’s going to laugh a lot, or maybe I’ll go to Write Club. I’ll go to an event that, through no fault of its own (or, okay, sometimes it’s intentional), feels a little in-clubby — where instructions get barked at you, and regulars seem to know some rules about it, and everybody is really, really excited to be there.

Yeah, I guess that was the thing I wanted when I took the bus to the train to the Hideout to see the latest Write Club a few weeks back. And, sure enough, directly I walked in I saw a few familiars standing at the red-lit bar — which looked nighttimeish already, though it was still pale-denim dusk out — swigging cool-kid bitter beers like summer had already come (it almost had).

The thing I especially like that'll sometimes happen at Write Club is these wild swings of approach: two writers are nominally pit one against the other, but they've taken such different structural or expressive tacks that it's like showing up to a knife fight where somebody brings an orange and somebody brings a drawing of the sun. This was the thing with the first bout of the show, Crash (Stephen Walker) vs. Burn (Sandra Morin). Walker was funny in the crackly, abrasive, stand-upish vein I think of when I picture Write Club in shorthand, and Morin was slow, quiet, lyrical — decidedly not going for yuks. I could feel the crowd really wanting to laugh, rooting around in every sentence for something that could be a joke, riding the fine line between “huh? what?” and deeply interested in the piece's resolution. People got a little bit uncomfortable. I was into that.

She didn't win. It's cool. I'll be all right. The other bouts brought Scott Barsotti (Punch) vs. Jeff Dorchon (Kick), telling respective stories about a pugilistic grandpa and B.K.S. Iyengar kicking students to correct posture; and Maggie Jenkins (Guns) vs. Ian Belknap (Butter), whose pieces involved deep right-wing character play, no safe word, and a fantastically hyperbolic description of a biscuit. I could maybe tell you in more detail about these things (like how, for example, if you create a dialectic in which one side is *anything-in-the-world* and the other side is *butter*, I will literally, in every possible version of conscious life, in string theory, in time travel universes, always list in the synthesis column “butter”) but my attention span is a little bird, and besides, you can probably picture those rounds for yourself. Or just go next time, dummy. (Write Club comes back in September.)

Jewboy and Grosbeck

Theater Oobleck at the Hideout

I kept my seat at the Hideout for the next thing of the evening, which I was also looking forward to: the third of Theater Oobleck's

four shows at the Hideout — all different, all part of a June residency sort of deal there. I find it to be a very nice genre, the summer residency. It's a company we like, and we get to see their smiling faces several times, doing this and that, singing songs, saying words, and it doesn't have to be a fully realized and fleshed-out play, it's just some stuff they're doing now. You hear me, Chicago fringe theatricals? Rent out some bars. I will come see you.

This night's show was Jeff Dorchon (returning to the very stage where minutes before he had stood, Write-Club victorious, the blood of a literary foe creeping beneath his fingernails) and David Isaacson, reprising their roles as Jewboy Cain and Marty Grosbeck, respectively: a folksinger and a nebbishy talkshow host, meeting for one momentous live interview. The piece seemed to be mostly improvised, and the most interesting thing about it, for me, was the difference in performative angles adopted by the two men. Isaacson, as usual, was arch, funny, and highly stylized as Grosbeck, a flop-sweating schlemiel in the vein of Johnny Haymer's hack comic in *Annie Hall*. Dorchon, by contrast, was all left-coast cool, in no rush to answer questions, wearing a crocodile-skin yarmulke and looking for all the world like a surfer on a wave of Xanax and beer. After an introduction in which Grosbeck outlined the peaks and tumbles of his own flagging showbiz career and wondered over the exploits of the long-disappeared Cain, Grosbeck brought out Cain and they had a strange, rambling conversation for an hour or so, mostly about Cain's whereabouts for the past years, punctuated by Dorchon-as-Cain noodling out a few songs on various guitars at stage right. It was a funny little thing to see, two guys doing characters seemingly from different worlds, nearly always at a conversational crossways, and while I didn't think they were quite “on” improv-wise, I was charmed in watching them do it. A fine fare for an almost-summer Tuesday night, I say, Oobleck.

The Strange

The Ruckus at the Athenaeum Theater

I also caught The Ruckus's production of Jenny Magnus's 1998 play *The Strange* at the Athenaeum, reprised for a few weeks after its initial handful of shows at the end of the Rhino Fest this winter. I missed the Rhino production, but sources say this one was much the same, staging-wise, with one actor switched out for another. The play is a quick two-hander for women, with a simple set and a simple setup: a bed, a door, a window; a sleeping girl-child, a woman who stumbles in drunk. They talk. Lather, rinse, repeat. And it's a troublesome, slippery piece; to my ear, the play never really lands on an answer to the dark questions it raises. The woman fucks with the girl's head; the woman comes back and by chance meets the girl, who is now fucked up just as the woman was; the woman comes back again and finds the girl fine, but the woman herself is once again fucked up. Is it a parable about addiction? The poison of our thoughts on others? The impossible task of changing for the better, and staying that way? I walked out not quite knowing what to think about the world, which is perhaps the art of the piece.

The Ruckus production plays certain sequences for little laughs, and some parts (several protracted dream monologues) with a heaviness that feels unnecessary and slows the play down. But they didn't clutter it with big sets or costumes or props, and that kept it mostly down to its clean bones. Stevie Chaddock Lambert, who switched in after the Rhino run to play the girl, was a convincing innocent in the beginning, a physically-adept thrashing adolescent in the middle, and a perhaps-too-knowing teen by the end of the play; Julie Cowden, reprising her part as the woman, used her low voice and earthy presence to good effect, playing quietly into the deep dread of the self that permeates this work.

But setting the particulars of this production aside, I think *The Strange* is a good piece for a company to keep in its back pocket — simple to stage, small to cast, brief and thoughtful. Take it on the road, take it to a festival, take it to a living room. It's by a Chicago playwright — and a woman playwright, even. Yes, I'll take more of this sort of thing.

BLOOMSDAY 2014

by Lin Su-Zhen

1. GENERAL INFO

Ulysses is a book and *Ulysses 101*, an adaptation by the Whiskey Rebellion Theater, is a “feeble attempt” to get you to read the book. In this review, I will tell you how it went as someone who does not attend many plays, nor know much about James Joyce.

2. CONTEXT

The warm, grey evening of Monday, June 16, turns out to be the perfect day to learn about *Ulysses* because it is also known as Bloomsday, the day in which the entire book takes place as we follow Leopold Bloom, the protagonist, around Dublin. It was also the final showing of this production.

3. PRECONCEPTIONS

I walked over to the Logan Arts Center, a stately but not plump, tall building with a low-lit & clean & spacious interior where the performance was said to begin in the café and then involve a seven-minute walk — quest? — as a group to a second location, which was kept unnamed, for what I thought was supposed to be a surprise. I wondered about this movement of the audience and what kind of participation was in store for us. I was intrigued.

4. BORED TANKA

Arriving early
Waiting by the window for
a friend to show up

Should I try reading sparknotes?
Why am I yawning so much?

5. MIGRATION

More people appeared in the café close to 7:30 p.m. and after attendance was taken, we all followed Alexis Randolph, who led us with a Starbucks cup held up outside and across the Midway Plaisance and into the Classics building on 59th and Ellis and then — surprise! — into Classics 110, a large room frequently used for guest lectures, conferences, and staff meetings, with *no air conditioning*.

6. START OF CLASS

A chalkboard, a podium, and rows of chairs: the room was now prepared to look and feel like a stuffy college classroom as we shuffled in, but I was more disappointed than convinced by the space. I was already having a hard time breathing properly, and soon they were going to close both doors. As my friend and I took our seats near the back, I leaned toward her and said:

—This setup reminds me of another play where these two professors get caught by their students having sex on the lawn or something and it causes controversy on campus so in order to apologize and save their jobs, they each discuss what happened through lectures about William Blake. The man talks about *Songs of Innocence* and the woman talks about *Songs of Experience*. It was really good. It was made to look like a classroom, too.

—What! my friend said. When was this? I like William Blake!

—Oh, oops... I said. This was last year, but I think they do multiple runs. I'll let you know if it comes back.

8. HERO ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ HOME

Ulysses is a reference to Homer's Odysseus, about a hero finding his way home. That is the gist. For all of us.

7. "THIS BOOK IS FOR DEDICATED PEOPLE"

The Professor, played by Greg Peters, is bald and bearded, with glasses, a golf polo, and a speedy ramble, who entered & talked & tossed a stack of maybe ten copies of the syllabus to be passed around, which I was curious about but never got to see because there were not enough ☺.

A couple of Students, Rachael Miller and Isaac Samuelson, were whispering and laughing to the side, obviously not paying attention while The Professor wrote the numbers 1 through 18 on the board, to stand for the episodes in the book. Each number was erased as the play went on to signify the end of that episode.

8. CHARACTER LIST

- a. The Professor calls up a few Students from the class to go to the front and read/perform the characters from the book. This reminds me of high school when my English class had to do this for *Macbeth*.
- b. James Snyder is Stephen Dedalus in a black trilby hat and vest, a sensitive dude who is in his head all the time. His mom passed away not too long ago and he is having a crisis of faith. Romantic, sad, teaches history at a boy's school but doesn't seem to like it. He reminds me of some dudes I know.
- c. Alexis Randolph is Buck Mulligan, rowdy in a loose white button-up. May have played other parts, too. Can't recall.
- d. Isaac Samuelson is Haines, and Blazes Boylan, and an anti-semitic citizen. His button-up short-sleeve appears to have a floral print design. I can visualize him as a member of the Montague family in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.
- e. Rachael Miller. Took me a really long time to catch on that she was Molly Bloom.
- f. David Fink is late. He is the T.A. for the class and plays Leopold Bloom. Is he supposed to look like Charlie Chaplin?

9. MINOR DETAIL HAIKU

Throwaway, winner
of the Gold Cup Horserace will
be my new mantra

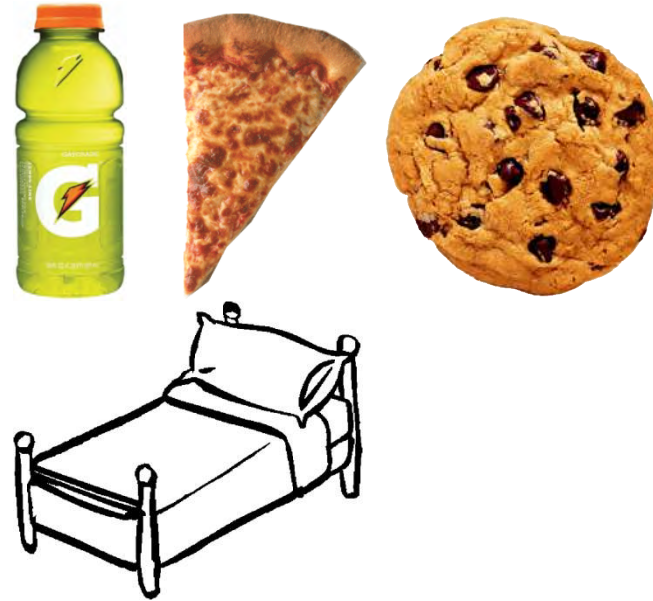
10. INTERIOR MONOLOGUE EXCERPT #1

There is a lot of dramatic dialogue... Why is everything so exciting and spoken so quickly? How are we supposed to process the insightful stuff they're supposed to be saying? Aaaaaaaarrrrrggghh. I guess this is a common feature of theater. Lol, like everyone making fun of "that slam poetry voice." Hmm, I should write constructive feedback for this play. Like it should try to challenge itself to be 60 minutes and migrating the audience should be a part of the act. Or maybe I should just pay more attention? Is that the problem? What IS my problem?? Why don't I get it? Maybe I just don't get James Joyce? But so many writers I like are compared with him so it's not the intensity or unfriendliness that I wouldn't be able to get into... Maybe it's because I don't know any Irish history, which is why I always stop at the dinner table scene right at the beginning of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*... Oh, I know... It's because I tried to read it by myself instead of taking a class? Hmmmmm... I need water. That's impressive, though — the whole cast is not only seemingly fine with the room being hot and uncomfortable, but they are still memorizing all their lines. I can't even memorize my favorite poems anymore. How do people remember all their lines and deliver it for hours? How many times did they rehearse? Do they just forget all their lines as soon as the show is over? Nobody stood up to go to the bathroom yet. Because they're so dehydrated, there is no pee within them. If I think about my nausea too much, I will be seriously nauseated. I have to stop. When is the intermission? I can't believe we're only a little over halfway through. Siiigh-----
-----ghghghgh

11. YAY ~ INTERMISSION ~ YAY

A breath of air. A Snickers bar. A drink of water. A chance to run away.

12. INTERIOR MONOLOGUE EXCERPT #2



13. THREE KEY FACTS

- Time and place written: Trieste, Italy; Zurich, Switzerland; Paris, France; 1914–1921
- Date of first publication: Each episode was serialized starting in 1918, then published as a novel in 1922

- Setting (time): 8:00 AM, June 16, 1904—approximately 3 AM, June 17, 1904

14. POP QUIZ QUESTIONS

- Why were women committing suicide for Leopold Bloom?
- Why is Stephen Dedalus always a little drunk?
- Who is that baby that was born?
- Who is the beautiful doll that Leopold Bloom masturbated to?
- What does Hamlet have to do with this story?
- Is Bloom's entire journey about going to a funeral?
- Who is Mina Purefoy?
- Why is there an "interrogation sequence"?

15. ANSWERS COPIED FROM MY FRIEND

- It was a fantasy of his. Illusion of grandeur.
- His mom died. He said a poem and didn't pray.
- That was a baby from that woman who was in labor forever.
- Beautiful doll is a representation of the ideal Irish white woman.
- The absurdity of life. Also, Cliff Notes says Stephen is Hamlet.
- The day features a funeral, but it isn't about it.
- Wasn't she the woman who was in labor?
- That was that racist ignorant guy asking Bloom a lot of questions because he's Jewish.

16. FINAL EPISODE #18 FINALLY HAPPENING

The lights turned off. It is the moment we have been waiting for as we watched each episode get erased from the chalkboard like students watching a clock. Rachael Miller stood like a tableau vivant looking romantically dead. I am no longer sure which character it is up there but Bloom is slowly... slowly... pushing a lamp and cassette tape player around the room, and we all listen to a recording of a sad, eerie monologue.

17. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Ulysses (poetry) by Noah Black
Let It Sink (zine) by Jim Joyce

18. GOING HOME EMOJI



The Whiskey Rebellion's Ulysses 101 ran from May 30—June 16, 2014. The text was adapted by Jessica Wright Buha and Aileen McGroddy, directed by Aileen McGroddy, and performed by David Fink, Rachael Miller, Greg Peters, Alexis Randolph, Isaac Samuelson, and James Snyder.

Questions for Chris Bower

We at *CAJ* have for several years followed the work of Chris Bower — poet, playwright, and curator of the Ray's Tap reading series, a semi-annual late-night event beloved for its wit and dark humor. Here we ask Chris about artistic process, collaboration, and formal considerations within performance.

Chicago Arts Journal: You've been making work in Chicago theater for ten years (that we know of). How did you start?

Chris Bower: Beyond some pretty standard exposure to theater as a spectator and reader as a kid, I had never even thought about writing a play. Before I started graduate school, I worked with the now sadly defunct band The Bitter Tears to put on a late night musical at The Trap Door and basically I wrote scenes to act as bridges between songs and it was a ridiculous ordeal and we had no idea what we were doing. It was called "The American Dream: Macho Breadcrumbs" and it was exhilarating to be a part of a live show, to see actors perform my lines, destroy my lines, often making them better. When I went to graduate school, I had the opportunity to meet Beau O'Reilly and take his "Down in the New Chair" class that involved writing a play that was to be actually performed. He set it all up; we had actors and directors working on our plays and it was terrifying, but we put on a show and I became immediately enamored by the whole experience. Since then, I have been in love with theater. While I have slowed down my production in recent years, I am still very much involved in the

theater world in Chicago. I am part of a company now called Found Objects Theatre Group with Kevlyn Hayes, Matt Test and Mark Chrisler, and while we are not producing full seasons, we are doing the work we want to do. While it was never my first love, it is something I will never get over. I am always comparing putting on a play to a summer camp I never was able to go to, something I imagine being as beautiful as it is temporary, something that is everything until it is nothing.

CAJ: You work as a poet, a playwright, a fiction writer — what determines the form when you develop new writing?

CB: I just write stories, am constantly making up stories, and they go through lots of different formations before they end up where I think they are supposed to be. Form, formality has always made me laugh and I naturally try to subvert things, break things because it makes me happy, because I know I am going to put it back together wrong and it's going to be different. It's going to sound like a cop out, but honestly, I wait for people I trust to tell me when they think something is in the right place.

CAJ: We have enjoyed many installments of Ray's Tap, the late-night reading series you curate, originally at the Avondale bar of that name and lately at Prop Thtr. How did that series begin? Is there an organizing principle behind the writers you invite to read?

CB: Ray's started in the diviest bar in Chicago. This was not an adorable dive; this was an actually scary place. The owner came in at 10:30 every night and scared away all of his daytime customers

so often it was just him and me, watching *Oprah*. I'd be sipping whisky, grading papers, and listen to him complain. At the time, the Chicago Lit scene was in a standstill. There were a lot of shows but they weren't very inspired; people were reading the same thing at every show, even if it was themed. I decided that I wanted to do a show that was entirely unique and do it in the worst possible venue. The show was underground for a few years because the bar was not exactly legal and once in a while, we would do an oddball late-night show that featured a lot of dark, beautiful, totally original work and we managed to build up a small name for ourselves, a show that, even if it was long, was certainly not like anything anybody had seen before. The show themes — and I hate that word — have always been very specific, and often involved a lot of source material. For example, one of my favorite shows was called *Death in Yellowstone*, and I bought every reader a copy of this book called *Death in Yellowstone*, which was written by an extremely grumpy ranger and park historian who, chapter by chapter, chronicled every death in the history of the park. Each reader was given a copy of the book and asked to focus on a certain type of death. The show, in some ways, read the book and responded to it.

Before the bar closed, I was very protective of the series and had a rule that you had to come see a show if you wanted to be in it. Since I only do the show twice a year now, that is a ridiculous thing to ask of a reader, so my reach is a little wider. I ask people whose work I admire and people that I know won't need a lot of nudging or supervision. I give them material to work with, and most of the time, the shows work out well. The readers, even if they have never spoken to each other, seem to have a connection,

because they confronted the same, often fucking ridiculous material I have given them. Over the years, many of the readers have stayed on as regular “cast members.” Dave Snyder and Matt Test have been with me from the very start, and over the years we have added Mason Johnson, Daniel Shapiro and up until recently, Margaret Chapman was a part of every show. One of our best new additions has been adding the music of Tijuana Hercules to our show. John Forbes and his group of improvisers provide the perfect chaotic energy the show is all about. Also, the continuation of the Ray's show at Prop wouldn't have been possible without the assistance and support of the Prop Thtr and Stefan Brün, whose work and general attitude about art and making theater has been a really important influence.

CAJ: We have seen your work in the Rhinoceros Theater Festival with several companies over the years. How does that relationship come about, and what determines whether your piece is produced by Bruised Orange, say, or Found Objects, or a different company?

CB: While I only really produce work for Found Objects now, I was always what people called a “lone wolf.” I had very close associations with Curious and other companies and would work with people very directly, but I never was an official member of anything. I don't think it was a deliberate choice, but I think it was the right one for me. Over the years, I have enjoyed working with a lot of different companies and learning so much as well as meeting some really wonderful artists. The Rhino Fest was one of the most important things to happen to me and I will always be grateful for all of the opportunities that the Curious Theatre Branch has given

me over the years. They gave me stages to produce work, experiment, fail, learn, and in the end, theater in Chicago, for me, begins and ends with them.

Fringe theater does not mean lazy theater. In fact, it has to be the opposite: it has to strive to be better. Jenny Magnus said something along these lines, and I don't want to quote her but this is what I took away from her about staging: that you don't need a lot of props, but if you have to have a prop, it had better be fucking special. And theater is like that: it's fragile, even when it's rough and tumble; it's right in front of you, but out one door and it's like it never happened.

But to fully answer your question, I have been approached by companies and I have approached them with project ideas, and it has been a fairly organic and positive experience over the years.

CAJ: You have written pieces about some known cultural figures — Robert F. Kennedy, Phil Ochs. What draws you to these cultural-biographical narratives? Is there anyone else you have in mind to write about?

CB: I have always been a big reader and have been obsessed with historical figures over the years, but rarely have I written about anyone that I was obsessed with, because I felt too close to really say anything interesting. Phil Ochs was not someone I was familiar with and I became only interested in him because I found out that he killed himself on the same morning I was born. It was not an important discovery but one that I felt compelled to explore, and it gave me a ridiculous point of entry in which to start writing.

Robert Kennedy was also just a strange accident. I had found a little Hallmark memorial book on my parents' bookshelf and rudely took it, started whiting out the pages with gesso and had planned on writing my own poems in there as a gift for my girlfriend. Because I couldn't help it, I started writing poems in the point of view of RFK, and the project took off until I was creating an entirely new history. Instead of diving into heaps of research, I kept things minimal, stuck to timelines and memories and other people's memories and never felt compelled to be fair. My work is rarely political and RFK was not a work of any significant political weight; it was about poetry as such a weird vehicle of expression more than it was about America or the Kennedys.

For many years, I have been writing a play called *Polish Ghosts* that will be exploring a Maury Povich-style scenario where two children are trying to find out who their real father is and the possible culprits are the ghosts of Casimir Pulaski and Tadeusz Kościuszko. We will see how that goes.

CAJ: Do you have a favorite place to perform? Do the differing energies of, for example, a bar, a theater stage, a living room influence your performative style, and what you choose to perform?

CB: I started off as a poetry performance person but my performance style consisted of me not making eye contact, speaking in deadpan and not being able to stop my hands from shaking. I have always been nervous and never a natural performer, but I have always felt comfortable with my voice. While I did fairly well in the poetry world because I was different in a world that is often the same, the same, it never really was my world. The

literary scene is so varied now, I feel really comfortable moving in and out of spaces. Ray's is where I feel most at home as a performer, and while I often write a lot of material, I rarely use it anymore. I just talk and it feels right.

As an actor, I am not a good one. I have been asked to do it and have been forced to be in my own shows, but I have too much respect for the work of actors to call myself one. It is painful to be on stage and I feel very lost. Every once in a while, I will probably force myself to do it, just to remind me how hard it actually is, so I will be less of an asshole when I am asking actors to do nearly impossible things for no money and... limited glory.

As far as venues for reading, The Hide-Out is my favorite place to read. The Dollar Store was one of my first real exciting experiences as a reader, and I was able to meet a lot of people I still work with today because of that show. The room has an amazing energy and it so great that Ian Belknap and Write Club are there to keep that room alive with more than just amazing music.

CAJ: Are there particular actors or directors you enjoy working with?

CB: It is hard not to feel weird talking about people who are my friends, but my favorite actor in the city that I have worked with is Matt Test. When it comes to my work, I have never worked with someone who immediately seemed to not only understand the humor, pathos and heart that sometimes people have a hard time finding (sometimes even me), but I also have never met anyone who falls directly into the patterns in the language that are not about commas or periods, but something buried in the middle. He

gets it, and it has nothing to do with me, so I get to hear my language performed better than I could ever have written it, and that is a damn treat. Matt is an insanely talented composer, writer, and now a very reluctant actor, so don't ask him to be in your play.

Kevlyn Hayes, who I work with in Found Objects, is an outstanding director, and as an outstanding actor herself, she works with actors so gracefully and honestly that it is a joy to watch. She has only recently started working with me on my plays but we have collaborated for years with other shows and have a wonderful working relationship.

I like to work with stubborn people who care about details and are never satisfied with something that isn't working, and having worked with Matt and Kevlyn a bunch over the last two years has made me really happy that I am a part of a group of people who care about art in a very similar way and are as fearless as they are ridiculous, and as serious as they are hilarious. Chicago is filled to the brim with fascinating and unique performers, and I couldn't be happier with the people I have been able to meet and work with and learn from.

Build Me an Opera: On Matt Test's Rung

by Cecile Goding and John Lake

Prop Thtr, May 31st

*Don't know much about opera
Don't know much epistemology
Don't know much about mythology
Don't know much musicology
But I do know that I love you
And I do know that if you read this review
Well, you know the rest*

Dear You:

At first, I missed you, for you are dear to me. You were the voice in my head, the voice that kept cheeping: *what's going on, who are these people, who's real and which is magical realism and where's the story?* Yes, I heard you thinking, cheeping. As we are old story-telling birds from way back, I could not help but hear you and to join you, grasping at straws to build a nest. But then, you left *Rung* at Intermission and did not come back.

What did you miss? Well, you know me. Don't expect me to place *Rung* in the context of aesthetics, Dada, Lacan's Other, William James, or even Mary Shelley. All I have to give you are impressions. I said "only impressions," but what else stays with us after we leave? Impressions. Probably because my friend John and I have been building our own opera this year, our very first opera, I am somewhat obsessed with the way all the parts come together to make an impression.

The Music. Now the music you liked, you said before Intermission. As did another reviewer I heard on a machine, in

the future. She loved the music. Like you, however, she found the story "obscure." And I have to admit, at first I followed the music. I simply trusted the music. As my friend John is the musician, I will ask him to listen to the music, and to share his ideas. John?

When I listened to an interview with the composer Mr. Test, I was struck by a couple of things:

1. *He said the Surrealists hated music. I was shocked, I tell you! Never heard that! But, the premise of building a human, based on a tape-recorded voice, with organized junk, is a good, "solid" Surrealist idea — so Mr. Test was off to a good start with his Dada right away.*

2. *He described his style partly as "gas, brake, honk." I knew what he meant (though I had to replay it 3 times — I thought it was a German word) but I'd never heard a style described that way. I didn't find his jumps in the music at all jarring. It is true I grew up listening to Cage, Stockhausen, and Zappa, but it doesn't follow that I perceive all juxtapositions as useful or interesting. In the case of Rung, they are. The building up of parts based on fragments of a dream based on some "obscure" emotional need requires shifting around the musical psyche. There are elements of parody and diversion to lighten the mood, so one doesn't usually feel claustrophobic. I did find that the Phrygian darkness in the first section was a little too long (Phrygian is a very minor mode with a note just above the root tone, always wanting to resolve.) That soon changed: lyrical outbursts, dance and pop vocals, and spoken word. The spoken parts were well-placed and acted. The vocal quartets were well written and effective in conveying the cast as part of an organic whole, not to mention they were performed with panache. (This is the first time I've ever written that word.)*

3. *The tenor did indeed, as Mr. Test has attested, go beyond what a tenor can do, but I never felt it was showy or off — it was suited to the character. As the show went on, I felt the quirkiness of the story*

and the music matched very well. I understand the feeling that the story was “obscure” by some, but I’m willing to go with that. Could one say that Rung is like a pop song — say, “Hey Jude,” with intriguing incidental music and an “obscure” story, and sub-title it “Jude the Obscure”? Too clever by half, you say. Fortunately, Rung is not gratuitously clever, but just right.

Back to you, Cecile.

The Workshop. In *A Night at the Opera*, Sir Denis Forman irreverently describes the land of Oprania, which has nothing to do with Miss Winfrey, it seems, but it does have a lot to do with Alice’s Looking Glass. In the production of *Rung* at Prop Thtr, no curtain divided us from Oprania. So as we happened to arrive early, we could gaze at the workshop of Norbert Grover Norquist, our protagonist, without music or movement.

Norbert’s workshop is cluttered with junk, in piles and crates and baskets, yet the arrangement of the junk appears purposeful. Norbert has purposefully categorized his junk. Remember that traditionally, at least, a bonsai tree is not displayed alone. It is accompanied by an accent object — a stone or another plant appropriate to the season — and the juxtaposition of the objects together tells a story.

The Chorus of Voices. If I weren’t already sure I was in Oprania, the appearance of the Chorus, with their ghostly makeup and metaphoric questions, put me squarely behind the looking glass. As chorus, they do not so much comment on Norbert as reveal him. They are the voices in his head — much like the different voices in my head, and, I’m assuming, yours.

Time Traveling. We first meet Norbert by hearing his voice through a tape recorder, sometime in the future, as all recordings (whether as waves or as ink) are meant for the future. It’s clear that Norbert is giving a report, on what he considers a failed project. Later we will meet Norbert in the flesh, in the past, as he

records each experiment. Then, back to the future, when only the voice on the machine remains, when the only other real person (Young Person) appears, in the workshop of the present. Young Person becomes obsessed with Norbert’s voice, and soon attempts to finish the work begun by his disembodied voice on the recorder.

What we want. You say that you want to connect with the protagonist emotionally, that you want to care about what happens to him. I want not so much connection as identification. I too want to build something that embodies one of the voices in my head. I don’t want to be alone with my one voice. Okay, yes, while I do see myself in Norbert, I agree. I might have identified more with a less-insane Norbert. A Norbert not so easy to label as Other.

Messing with the linear. If it took me an hour to situate myself, in the present, on *Rung*’s timeline (symbolized on the set as the rungs of a ladder: *How do we go up? How do we go down?* — an example of Test’s delightful use of wordplay, by the way), well, so what? We gradually assemble the story behind the workshop, literally revealed to us behind a curtain upstage. It’s a story we get in non-chronological bits and pieces, the way a person naturally comes to know another person’s story. The way I have come to know you, for example. And your workshop.

Who’s this “You”? It’s clear Norbert is grieving for someone. While certain lines seem to identify this person as his dead sister, Test’s wordplay broadens the You. As the missing gender, for example. When Norbert invites the Young Person to toast with him, in the future, he says that “The cups were my sister’s.” But I heard, “The cups were my sisters.” For, at first, Norbert molded clay into little birds he addressed as “You.” Then he transforms the birds into little cups.

Art about Art. Yes, I know you don’t like art about art. As do many people. You don’t like art about the nature of art. Or the

essential problem with art, which is how to leave an artifact that will convey your experience to another person in the future. To that I say this: if art illuminates the human experience, then what does art about art illuminate, if not... the rest you know.

When it's Rung. What remains with me now is the final impression of the play, when the Young Person finds the cup of wine left by the absent Norbert, and the two toast across time: *May all the noise that rings in our ears eventually become rung.*

Listen: With you, whoever you are, I don't want to simply get my point across, I want to resonate with you.

Rung ran at Prop Thtr (3502 N. Elston Ave.) from May 30—June 29, 2014. It was written and composed by Matt Test, directed by Kristin Davis, and performed by T-Roy Martin, Jennifer Roehm, Emmy Bean, Chris Schoen, Lucía Mier y Terán Romero.

Edmund and Carine Go to the Theater

This month, our intrepid viewers attended a theatrical double-feature: the side project's concurrent in-house productions of *What to Listen For* by Kathleen Tolan and *Hello Failure* by Kristen Kosmas, with a break for discussion and sustenance in between. They had much to say.

[Edmund and Carine sit in the café, drinking lemonade between the shows and scrutinizing the program.]

Edmund: That script had a lot of good one-liners.

Carine: Some good two-liners, too. I recognized that younger woman, the red-haired woman in the play — I think she was in something I saw a while ago. Maybe *The Feast* at Prop Thtr? She looked familiar. She was quite good.

Edmund: She's a Northwestern student. I don't think I've seen her before, but I liked her. I liked the people in this play. I was interested in the characters. I liked that it was about stuff: that it wasn't about decay and degradation, ennui, carnage — things that are so the modern fringe theater scene. It wasn't about that stuff. And it didn't smirk.

Carine: Right. And it didn't yell anything at us. It seemed un-ironically interested in music and pursuit and thinking, and that's nice.

Edmund: I thought the performances were the right size in that space. Some of them shone more for me than others, but I thought

they were genuinely good. There is a thing that happens at the side project that definitely happens with this play, where everything is very precise. It's a tiny little space, so any flaw really shows. And they have gotten rid of the flaws. Things are on purpose, there's no hesitation, things look beautiful, the sets are well realized. Simple, but realized. There's always a real sound score to their pieces, I've noticed, which helps because it blocks out the sound from the street. Other plays in that space, by other companies, often don't have that, so the sounds of the world get into their plays. The side project is just very conscientious about what works there, for them as a company. I don't know if that's Adam Webster's influence, or who it is. Probably it's Webster; he seems to be the only really consistent person there. There's a lot of 'artistic associates' and stuff, but he's always there. [A weighty pause] ...Do I have a 'but' about it?

Carine: I don't know, do you...? At the beginning, as we sat in the chairs and waited for the show to start, we were talking about the staging decision of the actor being onstage already as the audience comes in, as a way of entering the world of the play. For this play, I don't know that I needed that one aspect of it, but what I really liked, along those lines, the world-blending thing, was how as the play started up the stuff was happening in the lobby. They had the seats moved out into one long row along the wall opposite the two entry doors, and there were *people* out there, just *doing stuff*. Vacuuming and walking around and whatever, but it became evident that they were focused, in character. Just rolling into the show with that business out there, great. And depending on where you were sitting in that one long row, you could or could not see all this stuff, and so be it. But I thought it was a beautiful effect, that we're in a little black box theater, and then there's this color out there, the persimmon-colored lobby, and this movement, just sweeping back and forth in little frames, the doorways.

Edmund: Like the deep background of a painting. I liked that too.

Carine: I think in a way, with the mother being on the bed as we entered, just reading books or whatever, I would have liked the girl to be on the stage too, putting rosin on a bow or something — which I could see her doing in the lobby, through the doorway, briefly, and that was nice. The play was about their duality, I think, and yet at the beginning we mostly just get Mother. But it's an effect of the space, that it looks different depending on where you are. Most people probably didn't see the rosin thing happening at all, but it was resonant for me.

Edmund: And some of the movement out there, like the vacuum cleaner — it swept along. I assumed that the man who's listed in the program as "Boy," who sang in the play, was also the one who played the piano, but I don't know for sure; I couldn't see. I assume that was what was going on.

I thought the Glenn Gould character was quite a good character. Nice to see him, think about him — that Gould exists, and has that influence on people. Every time he pops up somewhere, I'm always very happy to see him. The audience was kind of like that with him, I thought, happy to see him. And the challenge of Schoenberg was pretty clear to me.

Carine: The challenge intellectually, musically, of Schoenberg?

Edmund: Yes. They described all his history well, his style, and using his letters as a source was a pretty good move, I think. So probably my 'but' is this — I knew I had one: it seemed like there was a great deal of quoting in the play — from the Schoenberg letters, from Gould, also from Mahler, Freud. And maybe it's not quoting, maybe the playwright is writing it from scratch, but I kind

of doubt it. And as the play went on, things were said... maybe a little too carefully for me, I guess.

Carine: Careful like precious?

Edmund: Maybe that's the word I mean. But it wasn't cute, which I really liked about it. And I think it's difficult to write about music, especially classical music, atonal music. So maybe it's not a minus in Tolan's decision as a playwright to include them so much, specifically, what they actually said. But it's maybe a limitation of the play, a little bit. Like how the "Poor Toscanini" thing was explained; a lot of things were explained. At first I thought they weren't going to be, there'd be some mystery left over, and then they were, and I was kind of satisfied to have them explained — I've seen a number of things recently where things weren't explained, and I've thought, okay, am I supposed to get this? So it was clear in this play that the writer wanted us to get it. The production seemingly wanted us to get it. I pretty much got it. So the girl, Hannah, does she die, and that's how she disappears? Does she jump in the river? Is she lost in the cosmos? That question kind of still remains, but I assumed she had died.

Carine: I had that question, and about fifteen minutes before the play ended, I decided that she had died, just from how one line was played, very gravidly. But it's left with some ambiguity, I think. It's implied but not spelled out. Because, for instance, Glenn Gould — is he dead? Right now? You're talking about him in the present tense. I assumed that he was dead, from the implications of the play, but I don't know.

Edmund: Right. It says in the program that the play takes place in the 1970s — or that's the most recent time. The settings given are

1908, 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, "uncertain." But if that was the '70s, Gould was definitely alive then.

Carine: Because it could have been that those scenes were her dream — that she met Glenn Gould and he wouldn't take the violin from her. Or she could've been dead, talking to dead Glenn Gould. I don't know if it's really important. But that was interesting. Either way, it felt very sad at the end — the death or the mere estrangement between mother and daughter, both possibilities really had weight.

Edmund: And it didn't rush. It really took its time, especially at the beginning. And all the quoting from German poems, biographies, letters — contextualizing and leaving it for you to get. The script really seemed to be an act of love. And I don't mean that cynically. I think the playwright loved thinking about these composers, how they affected people. She wrote about them through these two women's roles — the mother, an almost fan role, and the daughter being the artist role. But the fan role being the not-tortured person, and almost the more artistic person in a way, living in her imagination. On a different day, I might pick at this play more, say it was too careful for me or too highbrow, but I didn't mind those things. I liked it. I thought the extended puppet-paperdoll section in the middle went on too long; I didn't know why that was a good depiction of Mahler's music, any more than just listening to the music would have been. But I may always think that about depictions of music. I did like the shadow play, the Mahler and Freud stuff.

Carine: I thought the puppets were a little long, yes, but when that trunk rolled out and opened up, and there were lights inside and mountains and figures, it felt very magical to me. A good use of puppetry in an otherwise very human-figure-oriented piece of

work. I also liked all the little things they did with lights throughout: some were obviously just a switch on the back of something, and an actor hit it and a row of lights would come on over the mountains, or whatever. It drew focus in little ways, careful ways. We were talking at the beginning about the setup of the room, the long wall with audience along it, and I thought the production used light well to deal with the necessity of looking back and forth, choosing where to look. The light demarcating the spheres well, controlled my gaze. It helped keep my focus from wandering, in a multi-strand story that moved a lot between time and place, very dynamic. I knew where to look, and I'm often a big attention-wanderer. And maybe that's part of what you're saying about productions by the side project, about things being really ironed out — because in this stage shape, we're one foot away from the actors, and the spatial loose ends would be glaring if they were there. But they were pretty well sorted out, for the most part.

Edmund: Yes, and that's pretty much across the board been my experience of seeing shows there. Even when I'm not very interested in the play — if there's something about it aesthetically I don't like, or its point of view I don't like — I don't fault their productions. They're realized, and there are always actors in them that I've never seen before. I think everybody in this show I have not seen before, which is nice for me, the surprise. I think they really go looking for the actors they need for the production. I don't always like that, but here I do. Generally, I'd probably prefer going to see an ensemble, where the actors are consistent over the years — I like to see the same actors reappearing, changing. The side project might disagree with this assessment — they might say, 'oh, we use so-and-so in everything,' but that's not my experience of them. It feels like it's a new group of actors in each show I see.

Carine: I was marveling at the casting of this show. A few parts were more straight acting, but then some were "I need a man of this age who can sing and play a piano and accordion and be a waiter and look kind of German," and "a woman of this age who can sing in German and recite poetry and play a violin."

Edmund: It's a very specific person.

Carine: Yeah, it's skill sets; it's not just random people off the street.

Edmund: The young woman particularly — I thought, wow, they had to go looking for her.

Carine: And she was good as an actor, too — quite good. It wasn't just one thing or the other.

Edmund: I looked at her notes here. She's at Northwestern, but her focus is not music, it's theater and creative writing. So, an interesting artist there. And if you read through all the credits here, the places where people have worked in this group, for the most part it's small Chicago places. Reading programs like this really underlines the range of small theaters in Chicago; there's a dozen in here that I've never even gone to, many I've never heard of. And I go to the theater all the time. It's an indication of how alive the scene is, and how deep. I've probably seen some of these folks, actually — they're at Trap Door, Eclipse.

Carine: Do we have anything else to say? I think that might be all we have to say. [They turn off the tape recorder.] You know, the thing about that play is — it was really good. Good script, direction, actors; well made, realized... But I'm not effusively in love with it. I guess I feel a little cold about it.

Edmund: Turn that recorder back on! Say that to the recorder! [They turn the machine back on.] So it was all in place — but so what? You did everything right, but so what? There's a little bit of that.

Carine: Yeah. Like a hyper-refined coldness.

Edmund: Like, I haven't been moved or altered by the experience of watching it. In a way, I was more moved and altered recently, seeing Prop Thtr's production of *The Two Chairs*, which is a more flawed play. But it's emotionally more risky. There's no real risk in this play.

Carine: Hmm. Risk. People talking about plays like to talk about "stakes" and risk. 'What are the stakes?' I always kind of think, does somebody have to be hanging by a thread and they're going to die in order for the play to be interesting to me? I kind of like little stuff. Everything is not giant drama.

Edmund: Well, what are the stakes here? The stakes are, will she pick up the violin and play it?

Carine: Was that Schoenberg she played at the end? I was thinking, 'Why isn't this music pretty?' And then I realized, 'Oh, Schoenberg.'

Edmund: Yes, a little dissonant. So the stake is that she'll pick up the instrument and she'll play it; and that Schoenberg will never get to finish his work, which he didn't. So that's a kind of minor stake.

Carine: Well, that's a given. History.

Edmund: I loved the Gould thing about listening to the vacuum cleaner and realizing he had to hear something else whenever he played music. I hope that's what he actually said, I hope that's a direct quote, because it makes sense to be about him, and about music. It's getting away from the preciousness about him. But that's not a stake, that's just an interesting point of view. Stakes were low, side project! But a solid show.

Carine: For the record, I'm anti-stakes. I don't care about stakes. I do care about two-liners.

[They walk across the street and eat Indian food. They return to the side project and take in the 7:30 show. They exit, and the air in Rogers Park is warm and damp and moving.]

Edmund: You could've done that baby in an hour.

Carine: I would like to note, about both of those plays: written by woman playwrights, directed by men named Adam. That is my Lincoln-Kennedy coincidence for the day.

Edmund: This was a little looser. It didn't fit the space as well — it was harder to keep the focus of scenes. The car scenes, particularly. Not that I minded the two women sitting there in the car when they weren't the focus, but... I had a harder time with separation of space. It felt like a crowded play. A lot of characters, a lot of story lines. But I liked that about it, too. There was a little bit of an emotional sloppiness about it that the other piece we saw today did not have. I liked that this had a little bit of sloppiness. But there were still some story things I didn't want. I did really like a lot of the performances. They were different women, and the parts were written for different women, I liked that.

Carine: There were, I think, eleven people in the cast? And two understudies. That's a lot of people. It's a big cast.

Edmund: I probably could have done without a couple of the characters. I felt the small characters weren't really needed. The one was there for comic relief. I didn't know why the Japanese teacher character was there.

Carine: I didn't know why she was dressed in a schoolgirl outfit. That was odd. It reminded me of *Sailor Moon*. It felt jokey.

Edmund: And I didn't know why she had those scenes at the beginning... Actually, the beginning was the most sloppy part of the play for me. The presentation, the speech by the Civil War guy, the teaching device — I didn't really get that. But I guess it was setup.

Carine: Well, I found that interesting, once it got resolved, once we got all the people into place and the fragments we had been seeing made sense. But then once everyone got into place, they just stayed in place. That initial wildness of story digression didn't come back — we just got A, B, A, B for a while. Or that double-speak, toward the beginning, where the two characters spoke in different scenes but reached the same lines here and there — that was interesting, but it was just the once.

Edmund: I think you could've cut most of the beginning and gotten right to Rebecca writing the first letter in the bathroom, and the group getting together. You could've cut the first fifteen minutes of the play, for my eye. But I get it — when I'm composing, I like to follow something intuitively, let the lines of the story show themselves before I start pulling it together. And it seemed like the playwright did that. She began with different

stories of people, and then started to weave them together. So I have sympathy with the decision.

Carine: I'm left wondering a little bit... I'm always interested in group therapy as a setting. As a starting place, it can be useful for getting character details in. But I'm left wondering, why was the therapy group in the maritime museum? I get that they were all the wives of guys away on a submarine, and that this was maybe a town meeting place, but I think I wanted a little more mining of the meaning of the aquatic museum. What is in there, what does it mean to these women?

Edmund: That makes sense. And I also thought that the whole setup — the 'our husbands are deployed on the submarine,' was a red herring, and not a strong one, for 'our husbands are dead in Iraq.' I think the play wanted to have a little more tragic bite to it, but because the decision was to make it be about the men just being gone, and how the women function when the men are gone, it stayed in a lighter zone. I think that if... when was this written?

Carine: It's pretty recent, I think.

Edmund: I don't know how you can do a play now about a bunch of men away in a military situation and not have it be about them being at war. I don't know why the writer would make that decision. So, the danger underneath everything in this play is that they're not coming back, right? Which, for the Rebecca character, who never leaves her bathroom, really makes her character arc make a lot of sense. If she thinks her husband's not coming back — she hadn't heard from him, she can't reach him — her going to pieces is understandable. Which, there was an implication of that, the disappearance...

Carine: That idea was also in her talking about the news stories, about submarines, accidents. But — and I might be wrong about this — unlike active war zones, I don't think submarines are all that dangerous in the modern world. They don't go down all the time, do they?

Edmund: So the implication is, the men are gone for six months, and that's a drag. Therefore we have to live this life, this really altered life, while they're away for a while... And I have sympathy for that, but I think six months in Iraq has a bite to it that the submarine setup does not. And maybe the playwright meant it to be allegorical, and knew that she was taking that device. It's not clear.

This reminds me. I was reading about a film, *Southern Comfort*, that Walter Hill made perhaps ten years after Vietnam — but he set the story during the time of the Vietnam war. In the story, this bunch of National Guard guys are deployed to the swamp in Louisiana, and they're goofing around and fire shots at a group of Cajun men who are fishing, because they're lost and they want to steal the men's boat. So they do that, and then the Cajun men come after them and kill them, one by one. It was very much an allegory for Vietnam, and pretty controversial for that reason. So I understand that device, though I'm not sure I ever really get it—

Carine: The displacement?

Edmund: Yeah. By having the main characters of this play, the women, already be the people who are not in Iraq, you already have displaced the conflict, to a degree... so why remove it even further from what seems to want to be the play's subject?

Carine: That might be a reaction against topical news-oriented plays, like a conceit on the part of the author to make something

'universal,' translatable across time periods, so that in 20 years — I don't know if people are thinking like this, really — people won't look at it and say, oh god, that's so *of that time*. Maybe that's it. Which is a little vain on the part of an author, and it's a speculation, but who knows.

Edmund: And maybe the writer's initial interest is just simply military women away from their husbands, and putting the war in it would make it more bristly as a piece. But I thought that was a bit of a weakness in the play.

Carine: Earlier, we were talking about stakes, and that makes it kind of low stakes, I would say, to have the men be gone but relatively safe, wherever they are. I believe I said earlier that I was anti-stakes, but in this piece I would have liked more stakes.

Edmund: I thought you were talking about dinner.

Carine: Oh, and we saw two different uses of that stage in a long setting, with these two shows. The one long row across the back, it felt quite different from one to the other.

Edmund: I agree, different uses. I thought the slightly smaller show—

Carine: Which one is that?

Edmund: The Mahler show.

Carine: The first one? By smaller do you mean shorter?

Edmund: It was just smaller in terms of staging. Fewer people to try to get on the stage at once. It was shorter. It was also simply

smaller. More space to be filled, it felt like. Whereas *Hello Failure* felt crowded most of the time. I didn't hate that about it; I just felt like the play was more compromised by the space than the first one.

Carine: Huh. I guess I wouldn't think of it as smaller because of that. But it's just a word. Anyway. The first show did more with the space, imaginatively: it felt less clunky. It flowed through the space, I thought.

Edmund: But for me, this piece, more than any of the pieces I've seen recently, was carried by the sheer quality of the ensemble. My cynical mind kept saying, 'Oh, this woman isn't very good, she's not going to do this well' — and for the most part, the actors not only did do it well, but they kept me there, in the story. And I forgave any weakness in the play or the staging because of the performances. I cared about the characters and the performers. The only scene I really didn't think worked well, and didn't like for that reason, was the explosion scene, with that one quiet sort of woman suddenly saying "My husband won't touch me" and throwing everything around.

Carine: Oh, really? I loved that scene! I thought that was the only good scene, actually. The last scene I found excruciating, where they all talked right to us. Ugh.

Edmund: Really? That's interesting. I thought that explosion scene could have been very good, I thought she just didn't know how to play it. We had a different response to that scene, clearly.

Carine: I found that sequence much more interesting than everything else that happened. That woman, she was good — I did think that character getting the last line of the play was a little

much, even so... But the thing of fragility and holding it in and sudden outbursts, and I get that in a character, and I believed it in her.

Edmund: I didn't dislike the character or the actress, but I thought that the scene itself needed a real explosion, and to me it didn't feel like a real explosion.

Carine: Oh, I thought of a part I really hated... I shouldn't just keep saying parts I hated, though. Never mind. Why was it called that? What do you think the title is?

Edmund: I don't know. There was the history of the submarine having failed.

Carine: Yes. I think it's a nice title. I like to say it. I also liked that actress who played Valeska, the one lady with the accent. I like that, in a play, where there's a casting decision to use somebody with foreign-accented English. You don't see it all the time, and it was refreshing here.

[After a lengthy discussion of what country the actress might be from, they look her up; she appears to be from Louisiana.]

Edmund: Oh. And Kate, the character who was driving, who supposedly had the affair — she surprised me. She seemed like the kind of character where I can just go, "Oh well, I know where this is going," but she had more depth than that. And so did the new girl character. She surprised me too. I think this is good, to be surprised by performances — that I'm not just allowed my little prejudices of assumption about how actors will be used.

Carine: Yes. They had a good group there. I loved the woman who played Rebecca, in the bathroom. Across the cast, I appreciated a little diversity in age and look. Everybody wasn't hyper-prettified, hyper-feminine.

Edmund: This is a play I would like to see again, and here's why. The play I saw this afternoon, I feel like I got that all in one go. I understood it. And this play, I felt like I got it all too, the story, but there was more that flapped about it for me. I might find out more if I saw it again. I felt this with *The Two Chairs*, too, that I was being asked to think and work as an audience member in a way I wasn't quite ready for, to put things together. Perhaps I wasn't quite a good enough audience member for it. It's hard to know, going into a play, how much it will want you to give as a thinker, or how much it's just going to tell you everything.

Carine: I would like to note, now that you mention Prop Thtr, that this play had a joke using 'Gary' as a funny name, as did last season's *Clumsy Sublime*, which played there: there was that joke about how in order to get anywhere good, you always have to drive through Gary, Indiana. Can I stick up for Gary, Indiana? The Jacksons are from there... And, okay, that's all that I know about Gary. But why is that word so funny? Can we rotate onto the next funny word?

Edmund: If you're from Chicago, Gary is the pits. It smells bad. It's got all the coal factories. The haze. I don't like the weather when it's hazy. Somebody said that in the play, and I agree.

Carine: Well, that I can understand. Down with haze! Up with stakes! Or something.

What to Listen For ran at the side project (1439 W. Jarvis Ave.) from May 31—July 6, 2014. It was written by Kathleen Tolan, directed by Adam Goldstein, and performed by Holly Allen, Andrew Bailes, Julia Duray, Spencer Meeks, Aram Monisoff, James Munson, Robert Oakes and David Prete.

Hello Failure ran from June 11—July 13, 2014. It was written by Kristen Kosmas, directed by Adam Webster, and performed by Dean Beever, Julia Daubert, Kirsten D'Aurelio, Meg Elliott, Jen Goode, Amy Johnson, Amanda Lipinski, Meredith Lyons, Michael Shields, Mari Uchida and Nate White

Notes on Contributors

Poet **Cecile Goding** and rock guitarist **John Lake** live and teach in Iowa City. Selections from “The Machine Stops,” their first opera project, were performed at the University of Iowa in June. A video of the performance is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIBS7_0gn-0

Charlotte Hamilton is a writer living in Chicago. In addition to reviews, she writes humor, short fiction, and essays. She supplements her writing habit by working as a hospice social worker.

Jayita Bhattacharya is an interdisciplinary writer, director, performer and choreographer whose work includes *To End To Seem To End, today like a kind of shivering, I Know the Bird By Its Call (but do you know the bird's call?)*, *ElvisBride, Make Sweat an Oak, should we put it out? (the smoke)*, and *Green Science Bloody Done Hate*. For Curious Theatre Branch, she has directed or assistant directed *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *The Caretaker*, *Mexico*, and *The Madelyn Trilogy, Part II: The McGuffins Run the 440*. She holds an MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Bryn Magnus and **Jenny Magnus** are siblings: brother and sister to Julie, son and daughter of Ralph and Bab. They have been making stuff for 30 years: they have both made children and marriages, and they have both made writing.

Michael J. Brün and **Stefan Brün** were born in the last century in Germany, which was West at the time. They both teach, the former economics and the latter writing. Neither of them get it done.

Lucas Foglia (b. 1983) lives in Berkeley, California. A graduate of Brown University and the Yale School of Art, he exhibits his photographs internationally. Nazraeli Press published his first two books, *A Natural Order* (2012) and *Frontcountry* (2014).

Laurel F. Foglia (b. 1985) lives in Chicago, Illinois where she completed an MFA in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Also a graduate of Brown University, she makes work ranging in form from performance to curation to page-based publication. Lucas and Laurel are currently at work on a collaboration.

Chris Bower is a Chicago-based writer and teacher, and the host/curator of The Ray's Tap Reading Series. He is also a founding member of Found Objects Theatre Group. You can find him and more information about his two upcoming book projects with Rose Metal Press and Curbside Splendor at holdmyhorses.com. Information about FOTG's summer production of *Notes to Molly* by Chris Bower and *The Art of Painting* by Mark Chrisler can be found at foundobjectstheatre.weebly.com.

Further Notes on Contributors

Lin Su-Zhen is a zine writer from Chicago. Send notes of any length to anaisninjaturtle@gmail.com.

Jamie O'Reilly assumes many titles in the arts nomenclature: cultural artist, activist, singer, producer, writer, media personality. Her love of singing, entrepreneurial spirit, and a fiercely held belief in the value of the artist fuel her active and vibrant world. Jamie's more than three-decade career in Chicago has yielded much fruit from, beyond, and in spite of her sprawling family tree, not the least of which are gifted daughters Meg and Nia, two thirds of the doo-wop rock n' roll band Midnight Moxie. Jamie's role as salonnière of Roots Salon in Lincoln Square brings all sorts of interesting characters to the doorstep. Read more about her adventures at jamieoreilly.com.

Bridget O'Reilly is a writer and student of literature who lives in California. Her two favorite media are voice and paper.

Edmund St. Bury is a lifelong Chicagoan and a longtime fringe theater fan. Even so, he is trying desperately to get out of the city for a spell this summer.

Roger Moy is a 40-plus year Chicago resident, working artist, conductor of art therapy sessions for substance abuse treatment centers, and, recently, author of *The Art of Recovery*. For more information on the book, visit www.the-art-of-recovery.com.

Carine Loewi is a co-editor of *Chicago Arts Journal*, and works in the medical technology field. **Franco Loewi** lives in Bern, Switzerland and works in a bank, but his true passion is loafing on other people's boats in warm places. Carine and Franco have several other siblings, none of whom cared to comment.

Sue Cargill is writing a novel.



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