

Wag's Revue

wag (n): 1. 'Any one ludicrously mischievous; a merry droll'; a habitual joker.
2. A web-based literary magazine (from portmanteau of "web mag" or "web magazine"). **revue (n):** 1. An elaborate musical show consisting of numerous unrelated scenes; also, the genre of such entertainments. *Times of London* 4 Apr 1899: "a specimen of this class of piece has to be called a revue and announced as an 'entirely new form'."

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FROM THE EDITORS



Death By Grill

[photo animations available online only]

With the release of this issue, *Wag's Revue* celebrates its first birthday. While we're busy enjoying our rented ponies, streamers and sheet cake, we're also making sure to take a healthy slice of humble pie. As a little research has taught us, many endeavors far greater than ours didn't share the good fortune of lasting a full year.

Two American presidencies—those of James Garfield and William Henry Harrison—did not endure as long as *Wag's* now has. Nor did the reigns of scores of monarchs you don't care about, like Sultan Jamshid bin Abdullah of Zanzibar, King Teia of the Ostrogoths and Lady Jane Grey, the Nine Days' Queen of England. The Republic of Benin was a sovereign state for just 24 hours; the Labin Republic, an ill-fated coal miners' nation in Italy, survived 37 days. Eleven Popes served for five weeks or fewer. The eternal bonds of holy matrimony between Pam Anderson and Kid Rock, Renée Zellweger and Kenny Chesney, and (shockingly) Carmen Electra and Dennis Rodman—all were severed inside of a year.

The much-lauded Judd Apatow high school sitcom "Freaks and Geeks" aired a mere twelve episodes before its plug was pulled. Apatow's next television venture "Undeclared" was also deprived of a second season, though, perhaps to compensate, the second half of *Funny People* seemed to last about a year. "Blondies are a Swirl's Best Friend," "From Russia with Buzz," and the 1987 reactionary release, "Economic Crunch," are among the dozens of Ben & Jerry's flavors whose batch was available for a very limited time only. The lifespan of a fruitfly, New Coke, the musical reign of the Baha Men, "Change We Can Believe In"—time, as we know, waits for nothing and no one.

But what of our small enterprise? Well, since our rude birthing last March, we've spent no small portion of our time on this earth rubbing our eyes, playing with toys and soiling ourselves. We've also done some exploring, though, and we've learned a good many things—all too often the hard way. But, after a few wobbles, we now stand firmly on two feet.

With our non-profit status recently secured, *Wag's Revue* is ready to go into its second year on a growth spurt. We plan to develop our website, build our readership, and most importantly, pay our writers well. As we've said since our opening manifesto, our mission is to establish a respected source for quality literature on the Internet. We've taken baby steps toward that aim, and competitive pay for our writers will go a long way further. If you believe in this mission (and let's be honest, you're here, you're reading, you must), then please join our nascent fundraising campaign at our Donations page. Even the most modest contributions will be met with soaring gratitude.

In the grander scheme of things, this past year has only strengthened our resolve, bolstered our belief in the need for a place like *Wag's*. Print continues to hemorrhage, belts continue to tighten, and more and more writers and readers turn to the Net as a place for good lit. If the announcement of the iPad taught us anything (besides the few tampon jokes we read online), it taught us that even the great technoracle Steve Jobs believes the future of reading lies in a format awfully similar to that of *Wag's Revue*.

So we continue after our mission. Hardened by a year of life, steeled against its challenges, we march forward into Year Two—hopefully the second of many. During our research of “stuff that we've outlasted,” we stumbled upon one daunting phenomenon that really put our tiny existence in perspective: the world's longest-maintained erection. A retired handyman named Charles “Chick” Lennon spent not one but *ten whole years* standing at attention, a ready-for-business decade he blamed on a penile implant gone wrong. Mr. Lennon, we at *Wag's* salute your iron will. We only dream of someday lasting as long as you.

—The Editors, *Wag's Revue*

INTERVIEWS



Death By Ink

[photo animations available online only]

NICK FLYNN

Nick Flynn is a poet, playwright and memoirist. His critically-acclaimed first memoir about meeting his estranged homeless father while working at a Boston shelter, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, has recently been followed up with a second: *The Ticking is the Bomb*, a hallucinatory whirlwind of a memoir, which centers around Flynn's reaction to the Abu Ghraib photographs. John Waters (yes, *that* John Waters) said of it, "Reading this book is like experiencing a very skilled surgeon performing an operation on his own insecurities and new found fragile security. The written operation may be painful but watching the scars heal on the page is a true delight." Flynn spoke via telephone from his Houston home with essays editor Sandra Allen.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: There was a potential generic risk you were taking with Another Bullshit Night when you chose to write a story that you knew well as a memoir as opposed to a first novel. I think a lot of people in your position would have written something fictional based (however closely) upon your experiences, and I think what you've done is commendable. What attracted you to the memoir form?

Nick Flynn: I never really considered writing it as a novel. Actually, that idea really horrified me. I worked with the homeless for many years and my father ended up homeless for several years and the idea that I would take that and use that as material for a novel felt very wrong. It felt more wrong than writing a memoir.

I had written about my father being homeless in my first book of poems, but I found that many people considered the homeless father in those poems to be an artifice—not dismiss the poems necessarily, the poems, whether good or bad, are what they are—but people could dismiss the subject as being a conceit,

assuming that I had created this character of a homeless father. Poetry is a transformative art, so it's understandable that people might assume that. To me, though, the idea of appropriating someone else's suffering—the suffering of a homeless person, in this case—and turn that suffering into a metaphor for my relationship with my father, made me very uneasy. Writers do that all the time, write about suffering that they haven't experienced themselves, but there was something about me having actually been through that experience that made it particularly uncomfortable for me. So it seemed important to wrestle with what actually happened.

Doing that, wrestling with what actually happened, I found that to be thrilling, in a way that I hadn't found to be the case when I tried to write fiction (it could be that I'm just lousy at writing fiction). For me, being forced to wrestle with what happened gives memoir, non-fiction a form, a form that you are forced to bump against. It creates an automatic tension within the work, which, you know, isn't missing from *all* fiction, but I think it doesn't necessarily *have* to be in fiction, that tension between something that happened in the world and your interpretation, your imagination, your speculation upon it. That's why if you don't actually honor what happened, the memoir falls apart, it doesn't have any life to it, it doesn't have any energy, the energy of wrestling with the physics of the world.

SA: But when you're depicting someone you know, do you worry about how that person will read what you've written? This idea comes up in your work explicitly, as when in Another Bullshit Night you describe your father's reactions to your depictions of him after he reads your first collection of poems. Or there's the hyperbolic example you give in the same when your mother reads your journals and, in

her suicide note, references the fact that she's read your descriptions of her. Do you think about it? Do you worry about it? Or are you not bothered?

NF: I do fret about what others might feel, but I try to channel that energy into questioning what my intentions might be. If I'm grinding an ax, the intention is likely impure—blinding. The fretting is a signal from the subconscious that I'm in some dangerous, uncertain territory, a place I have to navigate with some sort of integrity, or at least care. I try to always write from a place of compassion, at least what I end up putting out in the world.

But once it's out in the world and how people respond to it, I have absolutely no control over that. I haven't gotten in a whole lot of trouble for what I've put out there, so far, though I'm sure there's been some bruised feelings. If anyone talks to me about it, it can usually be straightened out in three minutes or less. People often get upset more by being left out, and all I can do is point out that everything that ends up in the book, in the end, is meant to serve the book.

As for the thing with my mother reading my notebook, that's something that paralyzed me from writing for many years. It can be read on many levels, but one is a cautionary tale: you shouldn't read other people's notebooks. A notebook is where all the crazy stuff rages, pure id wrestling with pure superego. It's dark, murky territory. A memoir is a very different beast than a notebook, though even in a memoir there is, hopefully, a level of intuitive energy that's almost uncontainable—yet it has been contained.

SA: I want to ask about your form, because it's surprising, it's what makes the experience of reading your memoirs unique.

On a surface level, both of your memoirs are comprised of numerous short (even one page) chapters, each with a sometimes catchy title whose significance is realized in the course of the text that follows. But on the macro level, both of your memoirs do not move chronologically, necessarily, so much as kaleidoscopically. You actually have a stunning description of the form of your first memoir in your second. You're in Rome and you construct an "imaginary city" of pages—"Some of the piles of paper, I imagined, were freestanding buildings, some were clustered into neighborhoods, and some were open space. On the outskirts,

“I sometimes thought of myself as Ishmael, sometimes as Ahab... On my good days I thought of myself as Queequeg.”

of course, were the tenements—abandoned, ramshackled. The spaces between the piles were the roads, the alleyways, the footpaths, the river. The bridge to the other neighborhoods, the bridges out. I'd walk along them, naming each building (tower of man-pretending-not-to-be-homeless), each neighborhood (the heights, the lowlands, the valley of lost names), each passageway (path of those-claiming-happy-childhoods) ...” What caused you to arrange your memoirs in this way? What does it accomplish?

NF: The form of the first book is loosely based on *Moby-Dick*—I'm not sure if Melville created the form, but I got it from him. Short chapters, a play, and lists. This associative movement,

yet located in time and space. It's a very meta text. That form made sense to me, as did the arc of that book. What surprised me when I read it—I first read it when I was writing *Another Bullshit Night*—is that the book's called *Moby-Dick*, which is the mythic whale, but this whale only appears at the very end of the book, for half a page. It rises up and pulls Ahab down. In writing *Another Bullshit Night* I didn't think of myself as Ishmael, necessarily—sometimes I thought of myself as Ishmael, and sometimes as Ahab, and sometimes as the White Whale. Sometimes, on good days, I was Queequeg.

But this idea, of chasing a phantom that somehow has done some harm to you, it resonated with how I felt when I was with my father. I was circling around him, this mystery, and it became an obsession of mine to understand him. In the end I don't know if I understand him any better than I did at the beginning, but I've gone through a journey. Compared with *The Ticking is the Bomb*, *Another Bullshit Night* feels like much more of a journey, a chronology—an almost conventional narrative. It takes place in time and space, in the homeless shelter, for the most part, for those years I was there. Each passage that ended up in the book has a connection with that thru-line, even if the connection is somewhat associative. It has an almost Aristotelian arc to it, compared to *The Ticking is the Bomb*.

SA: There is a conventional narrative, but the experience of reading it is that you actually tell the end at the beginning, in a way, and there's a building picture—things get known, and known better, and know better, you know what I mean?

NF: I hope it works that way.

SA: And you do time travel, you know, quite a bit.

NF: *The Ticking is the Bomb* is actually where it gets weird. It's much more intuitive, it's much less obsessive. I wanted it to be more of a meditative project. They feel like very different books. On the surface, like you say, they have a similar look—these short pages, catchy titles. *Another Bullshit Night* is like a train, you get on a train at the beginning and you ride it to the end. *The Ticking is the Bomb* is quite different. Many people, well, the three people who've told me about their experience reading the book, have told me that you're not sure actually what's happening for the first ten pages. They wonder, 'Is this going to work? It's all over the place'.

SA: *Yeah.*

NF: I have a sense, though, or maybe just a desperate hope, that if one stays with it, if one starts to pick up the threads that seem scattered about, and follow them, at a certain point, you'll get it. Which is what I hope people will do.

SA: *That makes sense, that at the beginning of The Ticking is the Bomb you're almost teaching the reader how to read it. It takes a little while, but then I got used to how far I'd travel from one section to the next.*

NF: I think of it as a constellation of images. Again, at the core, just like *Moby-Dick*, there's a central mystery—maybe mystery is at the center of everything. At some point, in the writing, I began to think of it as a planet, as a ball of energy. On the surface of this planet are various images—monkeys, photographs, hotel rooms, oceans, prisons, etc—some of them clustered together, some off by themselves. Each image is connected by a thread to all the other images, and they all lead the core, the central mystery. The whole book feels spherical, to me.

SA: *Like a bomb.*

NF: I guess like a bomb. I didn't think of that, but yeah, like a bomb. But the whole point is that the bomb never goes off, so it becomes more about the fear of the bomb. About how fear has come to control us, and justified the acting out of our darker impulses.

SA: *An issue in memoir writing is that of disclosure. Your work comes off as being not only personal but really honest, to the extent that there's the potential a reader could not like the Nick Flynn narrator. An example of that in *Another Bullshit Night* is how you're describing your father's intense alcoholism while also perhaps hypocritically disclosing your own descent into alcohol and drug abuse. Do you deal with your narrator in your work as a character apart from yourself in order to help make that happen?*

NF: I intentionally wrote both memoirs in that way so people can have their own experience with it, and with the Nick Flynn who appears as a narrator in each. People have said to me that my father, in *Another Bullshit Night*, seems like a really great guy, someone they'd like to have a drink with. Others say 'your father's a nightmare'. One guy said about *The Ticking is the Bomb*, 'the whole book's about women', and then I just did an interview on NPR where the whole book was about torture. It's interesting what rises to the surface for someone when they read it, and that's fine with me. It's like a Rorschach test. It's all projection.

When writing a memoir, one of the things you have to do, the poet Brenda Hillman said—she was talking about poetry—is you start with the autobiographical, then, as you push deeper, you move into the universal, and as you continue to push (maybe *push* is the wrong word—it doesn't sound like

Brenda—maybe the word is *follow*) you pass into a deeper mystery. Writing a memoir can seem a very self-centered, self-indulgent project, but this is only the scratching the surface—it has to transform into something larger, it has to, in the end, contain as little ego as possible, in order to get into the deeper mystery. Once you cross into that place, it allows for these projections to happen in this way that I think makes things interesting.

On a side note, I think it's interesting that you use the words 'hypocritical descent into alcohol and drug abuse'. I've never heard addiction described that way, as a 'hypocritical descent'. I didn't think of my descent as hypocritical. Or if it was, it was the least of my problems.

*SA: I think you're right that people are going to see what they want to see in your work. I guess what I meant by that question was how, in *Bullshit Night*, you are concerned about and critical of what your father is doing to himself. There is a lot of language about blaming the drug. On the other hand you are detailing a lot of your own similar problems. I thought that was an example of something you were doing that was, well, brave. And with *The Ticking is the Bomb*, you do the same with being very upfront about your sexual life, even infidelities.*

NF: I tried not to be too critical of my father's alcoholism, but to simply present the situation, almost devoid of judgement, though I'm sure some, or a lot, of judgement leaked through. It's more interesting, to me, and seems more true to life, the way intense emotions get misdirected—one of the few times I express anger in *Another Bullshit Night* is toward a little girl I see pointing at my father as he pisses drunkenly in the Charles River.

“It’s seemingly a very self-indulgent act to write a memoir—but it has to be done with as little ego as possible.”

And I don’t know if I’d ever blame drugs or alcohol for addiction—wine seems like one of God’s gifts. I love wine. I just drank up my fair share early on.

As for sex in *The Ticking is the Bomb*, a lot of people may think the representations are a little tame. Again, I think it depends on who you are. As for ‘infidelities’, did I give a lot of attention to infidelity? I think a lot of it’s about being in love with two women, which isn’t exactly an infidelity. It’s in another, maybe more complicated, realm—

SA: Complicated and really personal. You’re getting into really personal things that many people wouldn’t want to divulge to a room full of strangers.

NF: I try to stay out of those rooms full of strangers these days. But isn’t that the thing with memoir? Isn’t that one of it’s job descriptions, that we’re to go into dark, dark places? We’re to go into the places that other people aren’t comfortable going into, or talking about. The reason we do it is because there is an entire realm of humanity that’s suppressed and not discussed, but it’s a huge part of our lives. It’s funny to say that you struggled to like me in *Another Bullshit Night*, because I’m a goddamned hero in that book compared to *The Ticking is the Bomb*. I’m a blameless child in that book and in *The Ticking is the Bomb* I have agency. It’s a very different stance. But neither of them is completely true. I could have

written *Another Bullshit Night* from a totally non-victim stance, you know, and I could have written the *Ticking is the Bomb* presenting myself as a goddamn Bodhisatva. Both those selves exist in our lives all the time, running parallel.

With *The Ticking is the Bomb*, that's what I mean when I refer to 'the universal' and 'the deeper mystery'. That book is all about dragging the darker impulses that we all carry into the light, using myself as a representative subject. So, of course, I would come off as having a harder edge, because we're talking about torture and where that impulse comes from. Our job as memoirists is to push into these places that other people have a hard time going to. The Nick Flynn in the book is there to serve the book, so it doesn't matter to me what people think about him. The purpose of writing a memoir is not so that people end up knowing who I am, but simply for them to have their own experience with the book. You're not going to know who I am from these books.

SA: *Does it bug you that people will think that they do?*

NF: No, no, not at all. I think it's great. I do it myself, all the time. I think I know Buster Keaton really well, you know, but I don't, really, and it doesn't matter. I get something out of the connection I have with Buster Keaton. It doesn't really matter if it's true or not. I don't think it hurts him.

SA: *In The Ticking is the Bomb, you're not only a memoirist, you're also a reporter. You're using reporting techniques and memoir form, straddling that boundary.*

NF: That book started out as a series of long poems that were running parallel with all this research. As I wrote the research out, it felt dead, didactic. I have a self-righteous didactic streak that I have to keep in check, you know, that liberal mentality

that says, 'I know what's right.' I can be very prescriptive, but as soon as the words come out of my mind, I say, 'Do I really believe that? Do I really know what to do?' I was much more so in my twenties, I certainly knew how the world should work, back then, and I've gotten less and less so.

With this book I had to do a lot of research up front, which led me to a lot of people, and a lot of interviews. I talked to human rights lawyers and psychologists who specialized in post-torture trauma and ex-military personnel and ex-detainees of Abu Ghraib, and they all had a certain take on things. I'd synthesized and integrated what they told me into my thinking. It seemed there were certain ways that a poet would interpret the situation that were different than how, say, a lawyer would see it. A different perspective on the material. But it was really important to have the facts solid for the book.

It's not the first time I did research for a book. I did it with *Another Bullshit Night*, but it came at the end of my writing, rather than at the beginning. And I did a lot of research on honeybees, for another book, a book of poems called *Blind Huber*. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed wrestling with the physics of the world, seeing some unbelievable patterns and beauty. That's the deeper mystery, a thing much bigger than any one person. The research can help get to that place, so you can at least get a glimpse of it.

SA: Your work is experimental in form but it's also very legible. I appreciate this quality because right now the avant-garde essay is very popular, and I sometimes fear that poor writing can be disguised by the esoteric (not with the great writers who do this, of course). How do you balance experimentation while still paying service to your reader?

NF: People have been experimenting with language for as long as there's been language. It's a volatile substance, language. I don't think we should take it for granted. That's always in my mind as I'm working.

But the other thing is how to maintain tension in work, which is what holds it together. One is that tension balance between experimentation and legibility, as you said. And I actually do think that creates a pulse in the work, it forces you to ask yourself why you're being experimental, what it's serving, what it's for. Another thing is: I have this great sense of respect for readers' intelligence. Like anyone, I'll sit and watch big dumb Hollywood movies with things blowing up, but that isn't what feeds me. That isn't when I'm fully alive—that's when I'm choosing to shut up, shut down. What I try to do, and what the work that I respect does, is it requires an active participation from the reader.

SA: I wanted to ask about the relationship between the two memoirs, specifically about the overlap of content. There are back stories, anecdotes, even big ideas that are repeated from the first in the second. And while not every reader in the world will have read Another Bullshit Night before they read The Ticking is the Bomb, I would venture a guess that many people would have. This got me thinking about this idea of the mortality of nonfiction content. Nonfiction writers, I think, have a pressure put upon them, maybe more than poets or fiction writers, to not recycle or reuse information that they've already written

“You take off the monkey mask and there's your father.”

about. Are you unafraid of re-approaching a topic from a new perspective in a new work?

NF: Obviously not. [Laughs] Well, it's not obvious, because I could be afraid and still do it, and I did have trepidation in doing it, which I've learned is a signal that I should keep doing it. Anytime that a strong emotional energy starts to vibrate one should pay attention to it, I think—you're tapping into the subconscious. And that's the whole project, with this kind of work. You're wrestling with not only what actually happened, but also your individual subconscious mind or soul or body or whatever—all three, hopefully.

We all have this constellation of images that are floating around us. Maybe one thinks they'll be used up when you write a book and now you can move on. Put that image down and new ones will take their place. But then you'll realize that they're wearing masks. You take off the monkey mask and there's your father.

In *The Ticking is the Bomb*, there's not just the first memoir that is referenced, there's a whole library in there, all the books I was reading that for some reason snagged on my subconscious. The books you read, the music you listen to, the people you're with, they become your life, and it feels actually falser to put them aside and say 'I'm going to ignore that. I'm going to write a memoir, but I'm going to pretend that all my concerns that are in my earlier memoir don't exist anymore.' That seems actually more of a self-consciously artificial stance. I think there's room for all of it.

SA: I guess what strikes me most about your work, in terms of memoir coming into its own, is you've pointed out that it's kind of silly to arrange experience into a straight, linear

fashion, as traditional novels and the bulk of memoirs currently do. Your works are these trips into the experience of trying to understand a whole lot of things. I think you render it in an interesting way. My question is: when another writer writes a memoir in a form like yours, do you think they should call it a Nick Flynn?

NF: Yes. No. No, because it's not my form. It's a borrowed form. They should call it a Melville. They should call it a James Joyce.

SA: *I wonder if something that your form accomplishes is to resist summarization. I think with memoir more often than with poetry or fiction, people go, 'Oh, what's your book about?' Are you bothered by that? Or do you think, that's okay, that if people really want to know what your book is about they'll sit down and read it?*

NF: Unfortunately, if I summarize either of the books I don't really think anyone's going to want to read them. One's about my homeless father and the other's about my obsession with torture. Neither one of those is going to fly off the shelves. So there's certainly a resistance to summarizing. And yet you've got to talk about the book, you have to say what it's about. Fortunately a baby appeared in *The Ticking is the Bomb*, and so I can hold her up to distract people.

SA: *Do you think that part of the reason you employ an experimental form is to force people away from those kinds of summarizations? The Ticking is the Bomb isn't a book about torture where you sit down and get 'Chapter One, Torture Was Invented', you know?*

NF: Hopefully people won't be able to summarize it after they finish it. I hope it will have been an active experience. That

said, there's almost no book that you pick up that you haven't already summarized in some way. It's just part of the nature of the object. You pick it up, you look at the back, you look at the picture, you look at the title, you get information, and you decide if you're going to continue. You may even read the first page, but hopefully by the first page you'll get a sense that maybe this is something that you're interested in for reasons besides the subject. Though I do read nonfiction books that are basically about a subject of interest to me, I do that. Without as much joy, perhaps.

SA: Or memoirists or essayists in particular, to research torture or to research bees, or whatever it is, we still use that really information-centric stuff too.

NF: You know, when researching the bees, the book I got the most out of was called Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, which was published about a hundred years ago. It's lyric and Victorian and amazingly good. Completely impressionistic and yet it has all the facts down about bees. With *The Ticking is the Bomb* I probably got as much out of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* as I did from Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*. Yet I couldn't have written it without the influence of both.

SA: I am interested in the potential of the memoir to reach outward. Memoirists are often (too easily) criticized as being navel-gazers. On the one hand, you've got reporting, which denies the self, reaches out, and tries to objectivize, and on the other, you've got memoir, which is looking in. The Ticking is the Bomb could almost be read as an argument for the fact that that divide is false, that to attempt to contemplate torture, to go to Istanbul and watch the interview process of detainees who were tortured by America, can't be separated from the experience of being a particular human.

NF: Someone who taught me a lot about that is the poet Claudia Rankine and her form. Her last book was *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*—the whole book is on that divide. It came out in 2004, we'd already had four years of Bush, and for many of us a huge amount of energy was going into tracking his every move, and banging our heads against the wall, and it all ended up in the poems. Snippets of things she read in the newspaper, and things she saw on CNN, things she blogged, things she saw on the Internet, all ended up in the poems. She created a character, an "I", who navigates all these concerns, as well as the concerns of the interior life, the effects of all this noise on an individual. It made a lot of sense to me. It was very influential.

SA: *I'm going to ask, if you don't mind, about literary quarterlies, because being an online publication it's something we're always thinking about. You're faculty editor of the estimable print publication Gulf Coast. Do you have any thoughts about how the literary quarterly is changing right now, maybe because of the Internet, or because the troubles that print is encountering in general?*

“I was going to burn the books. I was going to film it, redo *Fahrenheit 451*.”

NF: Lately I've been thinking that the Kindle might not be a disaster. There's tons of books a year that I think would be totally fine on a Kindle, because they are meant to be consumed passively, that are not actually concerned with 'the book as object'. They don't care about it, it's not their concern, they'd be fine on a Kindle, they'd be fine on the Web. They use language as merely a means of

passing on information, or as a way to kill time. Then there are some books that do wrestle with the idea of language as a substance, or the book as an object. That wrestle with the almost mystical elements of language. I think a lot of literary magazines do that, and a lot of poetry. But there are mystical elements to the Internet as well. I think it'll work out, you know, I really think it'll work out.

SA: You're the first literary editor who I've ever heard express that. Most are like, 'save print!'

NF: I bought this house in 2003 in upstate New York that I talk about in the memoir [*Another Bullshit Night*]. It was an eleven-room Victorian, the owner, the seller, had been there for twenty years or so. He'd been selling books on eBay for the previous six years, and each room was dedicated to a different genre. There was a romance room, there was a science fiction room. Each room of the house was jammed with books on little plastic bookcases that went to the ceiling. In some ways he was a deeply dysfunctional guy, like all of us, but his thing was that he just couldn't get out of the house, he couldn't leave. He had a place to go that was better for him, he had an apartment and yet he couldn't get his stuff out of the house. And after a month or two of me sleeping on a friend's couch he called and asked, 'Can I just ask you one favor? Can I leave my books in the house?' I said, 'Your books? You have to understand that books was all there was in the house. 10,000 books. A nightmare for a writer: all these books that nobody wanted. Even if it was a good author, even if it was a great author, it was the worst book they ever wrote. Saul Bellow, but it'd be the Saul Bellow that nobody wanted to read. Thousands of these. I put them in boxes and filled up one entire room with them, until finally, a year or two into it, I convinced the local prison to take them. Before the prison,

for awhile, I thought I'd burn them, I thought I'd film it, a remake of *Fahrenheit 451*. The books were worthless, totally worthless. Mountains of them, mountains of these books. I would have loved to have gone into that house and found just one Kindle on the floor.

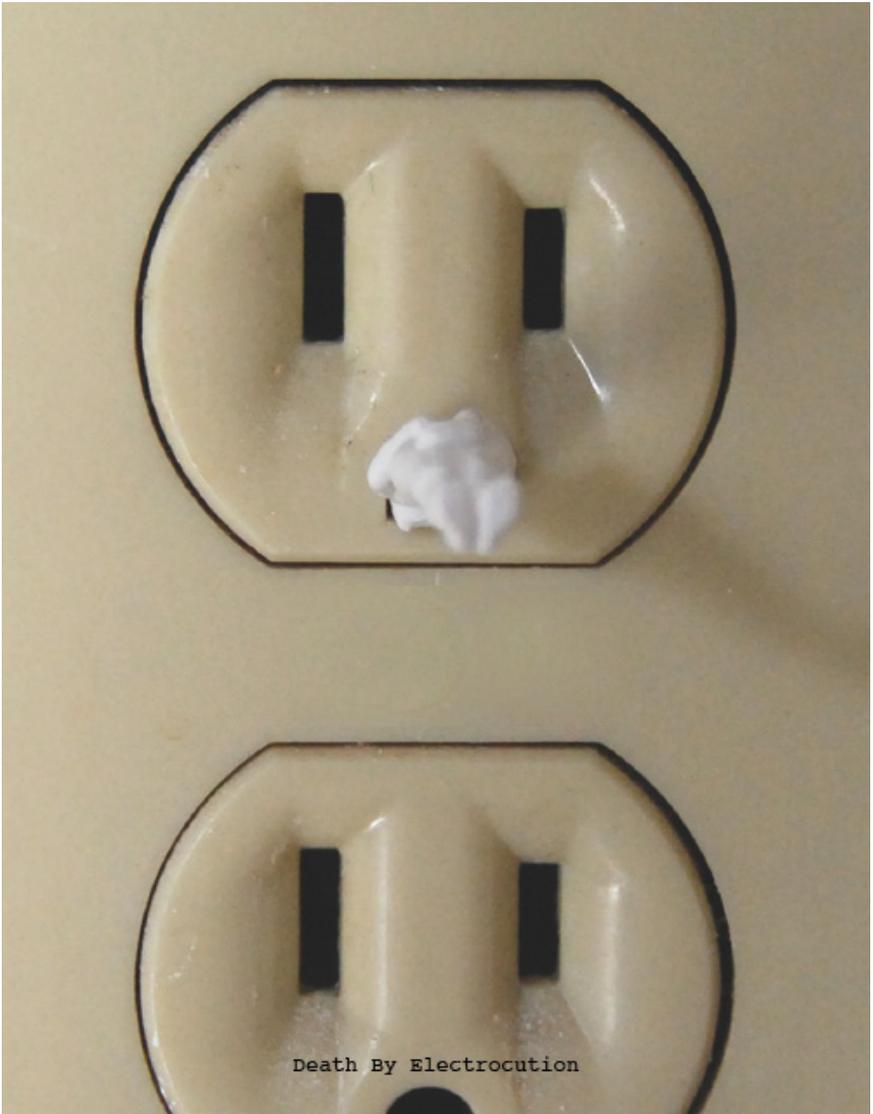
SA: A 'wag' is an old fashioned word for a wit, a joker. Who is your favorite wag—from your life, history, literature, imagination, whatever—and why?

NF: I only get one? I only get one wag?

SA: People have given more than one in the past.

NF: The people I laugh with are close friends. It'd have to be these friends, or a few of them. I'd have to say Doug Montgomery. Shane Dubow. Alex Lemon. Rebecca Wolff. I don't really get jokes, usually. Jokes drive me insane. But I laugh very hard with my friends. We don't really tell each other jokes. We riff on the moment.

POETRY



[photo animations available online only]

Since its inception, poetry has grappled with constraints of form. Ancient Sanskrit texts were organized around rigidly structured patterns of *padas* (cognate to the English “foot”); classical Arabic poetry has sixteen unique metrical patterns; likewise, Greek poems were organized around a number of intricate and well-defined rules. More familiar to English readers is a form like the sonnet, with its strictly controlled rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter rhythm.

This issue, *Wag's Revue* presents poetry in the Oulipo tradition. A French poetic movement (short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or “workshop of potential literature”), Oulipo asks, why not create new patterns, new structures, new constraints under which to write? George Perec’s novel *La Disparition* (*A Void*), a three-hundred-page text which never uses the letter “e,” is a famous example of an Oulipian constraint known as the lipogram, in which certain letters are not employed in a given text.

We have published poetry with unusual constraints in the past—Christian Bök’s translations of Rimbaud in Issue 3, for instance, use a number of Oulipian techniques. But this issue we devote entirely to the unusual constraint. We begin with selections from a new work by Ian Monk, one of some twenty living members of the Oulipo and the rare native English speaker in the movement. The work, entitled “Leaves of the Yucca,” is an expansion of the ancient Japanese haiku form.

**from LEAVES
OF THE YUCCA**

Ian Monk

The moon is asleep
tell me tell me so
when the it came down to it
a dumb stupid tale
what I thought I was feeling
just pathetic affection
words words words she wept
like love forcing a statement
the sun comes up watch
here the moon rises oddly
I shall never pray
I give the poor my money
like a hypocrite
I loved them and loved them all
fucking family
Jesusing mother-in-law
go and shaft yourself
she laid on me once fuck me
not my daughter no
I didn't Jesus saved me
from a heinous act
I went on to another
act two act three go
on explain she said sweetly
the foreplay's the thing
I don't know really I don't
I speak and that's all
love trembles trembles wriggles

I try to say shite
then the smile shites from my lips
the world gobbles it
and goes on anyhow fuck (...)

(...) hello and hello
beneath the silvery moon
I wake up and say
when you bathe you dream you just
carve love from the cliff
it came coded as root beer
the blacks were just blacks
when she was as young as me
we loved I think loved
one morning early and pissed
she got up and raved
come on now come on
hey you know about women
they never listen
sent shuffling homewards later (...)

(...) the drift of ourselves
well all came to pass during
one blank day of sleep
she picked me up on the train
I love fucking yes
she was well put it this way
plain faced about it
oh yes sweetness oh yes you
this is where we fuck
the golden business of art
come in here shut up
this is and isn't about

love and ambition
hone in and focus on knees
running and falling
childhood memories sharpen
leaves of the yucca
caress the skin of the drum
green nails across flesh
as they wrinkle and tumble
across the carpet
hoovered scattered making fuss
your mess run amok
told tales come on spill the beans
lick the sauce yum yum
and savour its sickly taste
of gone spice and verve
there's little left to relate
the world breakfasts on
like hotel guests awkward
in their choice of slush (...)

(...) wrap yourself around me now
tell me tell me so
when the it came down to it
the moon is asleep
tell me about it come on
is this socialist
when the world whirls it wobbles
the fucking yucca
tickles the drum skin (then what?)
green nails and green skin
someone says something sweet
past time past reason

the drunk on the street bawls and
my one night stand yells
what the fuck is up with you
I'm sleeping that's all
shut up now we're shooting
tonight in Antibes
nothing happens again zilch
this shit runs its course
like it does fuck anywhere
life bleeds underground
to feed itself again here
there now on the street
dribble comes then puke erupts
it is bile time wow
while here on the street life purrs
speel purls from each door
and says its speech to the void
it blabs on and on
saying out unthought reasons
they rhyme one on one
with the world and his fucking
wife who hen-pecks him
employer who screws him up
for good asks for more
reason to detest the world
in her Sunday best
when she speaks her so-called mind
she's out of control
the universe shuts itself up
when the world rumbles
she shrinks to herself then says
I am in love I
shall mould a cesspit into
sweetness look I am

me look just at my ankles
thighs why not go on (...)

(...) the door stammers shut
so can you picture it here
while you're gone tonight
the world spins and it trembles
so fuck that yucca
look it's there invisible
against the curtain
you can't see shit anymore
as bollocksed photons
divorce and get pissed as cunts (...)

(...) put laughter aside
so what does love really mean
it means a black hole
but here your life is bleeding
between your red hands
you clasp your cold destiny
you know love's like puss
it never drains but it pours
when calm comes it seeps
I dribble on and splutter
calm down my lovely
remember that your life's worth
all this pile of shit
a nice way of putting it
on the straight way out
of thought of teeth and wank mags
hell beckons so what
mouthing a fuck all really
just your head your head

which works on and on
which doesn't and dies who knows?
silence of course does (...)

(...) to be is to fuck
someone normally alive knows
to go is to walk
walking works simply between
the automobiles
makes your self-importance
quite silly really
watch the people in cars how
dumbly they look straight
at the windscreen then hit it
ants pain jams hurry
on towards nothing good night
your weirdness beckons (...)

(...) learning or brooding
or reading you know about
this kind of bullshit
like anything else in fact
implies a black hole
in the fabric of curtains
drawn to block the light
the charcoal scratches away
your sweet fingernails (...)

(...) the dumb endless cry
time's up now please come on and
empty out the bed

it's not made for pure chat
here's where we fuck
the world and his wife just look
they're buying things things
and things again things clothes look
life's here in the drawer
she said and showed me it was
a real eye-dribbler
reams of amazing lace yes
you'd barely guess at
the inner life of someone
into such underwear
it's so white tame and cotton
you can't come can't think
so you close the door go out
open the next door
behind it lies what or who
let's says you rather
would in fact like not to see
the face of your dead
when the it came down to it
tell me tell me so
the moon is asleep

What follows is a digitization of a project by founding Oulipian Raymond Queneau. Queneau wrote ten sonnets, all with the same end-rhymes. Then, a new sonnet is generated by randomly choosing lines from the existing sonnets. If the first line is chosen from any of the ten poems, and the second line is chosen similarly, then there are $10 \times 10 = 100$ possible combinations of two lines. By extension, this process yields $10^{14} = 100$ trillion possible fourteen-line sonnets.

The result is that the poem you see on the next page has almost certainly never been read, and almost certainly never will be seen again.

Wag's Revue

10,000,000,000,000 POEMS

Raymond Queneau

translated by Stanley Chapman

coded by Magnus Bodin

[this piece available online only]

We conclude our tour of constraints with a showcase of a brand-new form. In May of 2009, Gilles Esposito-Farres debuted the *sextine syllabique*, or syllable sestina, in a message to the Oulipo listserv. The constraint is as such: each line has six syllables. The syllables in the first line must be repeated in a particular pattern throughout the remaining five lines. The pattern looks like this:

123456
615243
364125
532614
451362
246531

This is called a “syllable sestina” because the traditional sestina also uses this pattern, albeit to a different end. (Read more.)

Rather than explain further, let's turn to an example, submitted by Michael Schiavo. (He's added a seventh syllable and a seventh line “which,” he says, “mimics the endless playout of B.B. King's “Nobody Loves Me But My Mother” from his *Best Of*.”)

SOLFA

do re mi fa sol la ti
la do sol re fa mi ti
mi la fa do re sol ti
sol mi re la do fa ti
fa sol do mi la re ti
re fa la sol mi do ti
ti ti ti ti ti ti . . .

Ignore all the “ti”s and you'll see the pattern quite clearly. The sixth syllable of the first line (“la”) becomes the first syllable of the second line. The first syllable moves to the second position, and so on.

In February of this year, *Wag's Revue* challenged poets to create syllable sestinas. (Read the instructions we gave writers.) We received a great many submissions, which ran the stylistic and creative gamut, and toyed cleverly with the restrictions of the form.

A couple of lines from one of our selected sestinas will show the ingenuity involved. Consider the opening two lines from Damion Searls' "Proust":

Remembrance of Things Past...
Pastry, thinks Mom of brunch.

123456 becomes 615243: "Past" and the first syllable of "Remembrance" combine to form "Pastry," "Things" is reimagined as "thinks," "-brance" becomes "brunch," and a delightful new line is born.

The next several pages are populated by the most exceptional submissions of a generally exceptional crop. We publish eight syllable sestinas, by the aforementioned Mr. Searls, Tiel Aisha Ansari, Winston Daniels, David Hamilton, and Marina Blitshteyn. Where poems only have five lines, the title is meant to be taken as the first line of the poem.

Enjoy.

—Will Guzzardi
Poetry Editor

PROUST

Damion Searls

Remembrance of Things Past...

**Pastry, thinks Mom of brunch.
Brunch pasta-free, Mom. Things,
thinks prince, mmm. Passed tree, eve
of thing's reprints; passed Mom,
mum of past things' brunt, sorry.**



FAULKNER

Damion Searls

**Few and sundry, the the
the feud the angry sounds
sound the reef you and the
The Sound and the Fury
wreath if you sound the int-
ent read though this sound few**

SYLLABIC SESTINA

Damion Searls

Nozzle? Tía says pick
bigness. Cecil (last tea-
steep, ick!) unnuzzles his
Sis. T's all: "Bic? Nuh-uh!
Ass's naughty pixel."



INCOHERENT MIDNIGHT

Tiel Aisha Ansari

Night in mid-Corinth. He,
her knight renting comet
'mid her con. I, tenant,
rent midden. Her knight cu-
ckoo! And night-mad herein.

THAT'S A WRAP

Tiel Aisha Ansari

Cuts, if loose, tingle would.

**Woodcut ills: if tin glows,
lose wood thing. Cut civil
elusive woodcutting.**

Thing: ill-cut, loose wood sieve.

Sifting would all lose. Cut.



LITERATURE POTENTIELLE

Winston Daniels

**These li-po fills, extras,
trussed the sex/sleep hills of
porous, filthy Sleazex
Expo. “Lee, trust these Phils.”
(Ill sects, these, of trust.) “Leap,
Lee!” “Filters.” “Sex.” Puff these.**

OH, DORA

David Hamilton

**Oh, Dora, come to bed.
Bed, oh, to do or come, ah.
Ah, bed, come odor to.
Toad or bed, oh, come.
Come to, oh, ah, better.
Dorko, m'bedoah, oh.**



THE DRAMA OF 'CALL ME'

Marina Blitshteyn

**Gesticulating 'call,'
cull jesting. Tickle ache. You
cue call. Late, just sticking
in cuticle, chest lay
lading chess queue. Cultic,
tick. Late calling, cue jest.**

ESSAYS



Death By Inadequacy

[photo animations available online only]

HOTEL COOVER

Robert Moor

[pages 44-80 available online only]

GOOGLE IS BUTCHERING THE WRITTEN WORD, or, “How to Buy PEX Tubing Online”¹

by William Litton

Five menacing stealth-bomber-esque jets fly in a V-formation above a thick overlay of clouds. Their bellies open to reveal an arsenal of sinisterly stylized meteorite-like drop pods, which release from their hatches and rocket towards the earth. The pods' scorching entry into the troposphere is witnessed by a montage of dumbfounded, small town folks. These are folks of admirably simple means—Idahoans, let's say—real salt-of-the-earth types: cattlemen, woodsmen, men on the road, et al. (The one female witness is attractive in a potato-fed kind of way.) These are good people watching something potentially horrifying. The pods strike violently into the earth, leaving wide craters in their wake, sending ranch horses dashing away in that peculiar kind of fear frenzy that only a horse can effectively exhibit. Our Idahoans slowly approach the smoking hollows, wary of what they will find. What the hell waits inside these

1 In regards to such a polemical/nonsensical headline, your essayist feels it's necessary to clarify two items at the outset:

a) Your essayist is not an indiscriminate Luddite, nor does he suffer from any personal or vocational bias against the Google Corporation (i.e., Google has never, to his knowledge, made any disparaging remarks against himself or his family; and—as his creative writing degree has yet to land him a job with Microsoft, Yahoo, Apple, AT&T, Mozilla or indeed any company whatsoever—he has no affiliation with any of Google's competitors). In fact—despite the handful of occasions in which said corporation's 'Maps' application has, through some miscalculation or omission, catastrophically sabotaged one of his road trips—he considers himself a savvy and contented patron of Google's software and Web services.

b) This essay will not instruct readers apropos the online purchasing of PEX tubing; it will not familiarize a curious shopper with the suppliers, varieties, or competitive price ranges of PEX tubing, or even its most basic attributes and uses. Your essayist knows precisely nothing about PEX tubing. Is it used for heating/plumbing? Perhaps as gerbil-cage accoutrement? He doesn't care. Not even enough to perform a simple Google search of the product, which would no doubt take mere fractions of a second. The topic's titular privilege, rest assured, will be explained sometime later in the essay.

unholy capsules? Is it alien? They peek closer. The orchestrated string music suddenly vaults toward a crescendo. The pods hatch open with the familiar hydraulic sound of futuristic things hatching open, and—*holy fucking shit it's a cell phone!*

So goes the fairly recent Verizon/Google ad for their new Droid smart phone. The ad is remarkable for more than its sheer inanity; it's also one of the few times Google has associated its brand with the identity-forming noise, character, and narrative of TV advertisement. Indeed, among the companies vying for supremacy over “The Internet and Stuff Used to Log Thereon / Navigate Therein,” Google has managed a peculiar feat: Unlike Microsoft, with its aura of an impenetrable, viral-ridden, and merciless hegemon; or Apple and its smarmy, scenester-escent, and totally over-aestheticized Justin Long² charm; Google has maintained an immaculate public image.

This may be credited in large part to Google's dominance in its field. Despite Microsoft lading its Windows operating system with IE/MSN/Bing refuse, and its aggressively annoying Bing ad campaign, its current share of US search traffic is astronomically lower than Google's—something like nine percent compared to Google's 72. Yahoo! straggles along around 15 percent, and Ask.com picks up the pieces with about three. Google has successfully dropkicked all of its competitors from the showground of search engines, and can thereby abstain from the ubiquitous TV ad tiffs that so nauseatingly color the iconographies of other tech corporations. (e.g., AT&T v. Verizon: the great 3G war, apps against maps; and Mac v. PC: “I'm a Mac” / “I'm a PC” / “I'm a well-paid actor”).³ But the face of Google is not merely

² Nothing against Justin Long per se. Your essayist feels the same way about Mr. Long as he does about most Apple products: they fill certain roles very adequately.

³ The Mac v. PC example provides us with some frighteningly Orwellian slogans; as if one's identity, or even one's very *ontology*—as in the bizarre world of the Mac ads (two anthropomorphized computational systems quipping in the midst of a white-lit void)—might be reduced to a preference of OS. Owning a Mac, especially, seems like it's become a kind of personality statement. The ad campaign is so effective, even IBM is joining the fray with its new “I'm an IBMer” slogan.

unblemished by hokey ad slogans—it's one of eerily unfeasible perfection, like a wig stand. And this should give us pause.

In general, people trust and appreciate Google in a way that is surprisingly uncritical, especially in an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, the attendant Neo-Luddite backlash of the conspicuously over-40 crowd, and the insatiable hypercriticism of the young 'me' generation.⁴ Google's website somehow placates with its simple and unaffected style, only occasionally altering its logo to celebrate the anniversaries or birthdays of Beatrix Potter, The Peanuts, Gandhi, and other such entities that are impossible to roll one's eyes at without seeming like a hateful bastard. For all the hulking power Google wields over the Internet—intricately mapping, ranking, and categorizing the endless and coiling miasma of websites; determining at every instant, by some unfathomable⁵ algorithm, which sites will place well for certain popular search terms, and will thus be heavily trafficked, and which sites won't even make the cut—most people find the company harmless, unimposing, and perhaps greater still, compassionate and attentive, all in an unpretentiously hip kind of way. Of Google's remarkable utility

⁴ See Louis C. K.'s "Everything's amazing; nobody's happy" on YouTube.

⁵ The word "unfathomable" requires unpacking. Strictly speaking, the algorithms behind Google's search engine are, to most everyone, unfathomable, simply because most people (your essayist included) couldn't understand Google's complex computational algorithms even if they had access to them, though your essayist might easily make the similar argument that his late grandmother's recipe for dinner rolls is unfathomable, simply because most people, even if they had the recipe, probably couldn't make dinner rolls as well as she did. However, to the select group of algorithmically savvy individuals (or, to follow the metaphor, expert bakers), Google's code (grandma's recipe) is not such a huge mystery. The reason for Google's continued success is that it was the first company to make use of a link-based ranking system, and now it has such incredible funds, infrastructure, and—crucially—brand recognition, that competing is nearly impossible, even if it's not terribly difficult for those skilled enough to create comparable or even more effective algorithms. (At this point, the dinner roll metaphor kind of breaks down, and because your essayist is now realizing it was probably a stupid idea to begin with, he will henceforth abandon it). Yahoo! and Bing are probably nearly as useful as—if not more so in certain capacities—Google's search engine, but the wildly infectious meme of "Googling" something is too deep-seated in our culture to be reckoned with at this point.

your essayist has no doubts—he has employed its technology countless dozens of times in the composition of this very essay, for both legitimate research and asinine distraction⁶—but regarding its ostensible (and fashionable) benevolence, he is deeply suspicious.

Even when Google seems like it's getting dressed down, it somehow manages to end up in even finer duds. Type "Google is" into a Google search field, and the engine will recommend (besides "Google is your friend") two potentially scathing critiques: "Google is making us stupid" and "Google is Skynet." The former is in reference to a pretty astute Nicholas Carr essay in the *Atlantic*, titled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" The essay's mention of Google, however, is brief—even peripheral. Google's spot in the headline is mostly a hook to start people reading an essay with a much broader thesis: that the Internet as a medium is causing us to become scatterbrained, to think in a fundamentally different manner. In the synecdochic title, though, Google stands in for the entire medium. And, really, this synecdoche makes perfect sense: controlling a large majority of external referrals to US/European websites, Google is the gatekeeper, the polished facade of the Western Internet. The Skynet prompt is in reference to a satirical *Fast Company* article comparing Google to Skynet—the self-aware military computer system in the *Terminator* movie franchise, which ends up turning against the human race and executing a nuclear holocaust. Of course, the article does nothing more than point out how incredibly meaningless the comparison really is.

But every major tech corporation deserves a suitable and entirely unflattering sci-fi analogy, even if it's just to help the public maintain a healthy level of cynicism regarding that corporation's intentions/actions. Obviously Microsoft is the financially and technologically endowed, yet overextended,

⁶ See, for example, footnote #4. That most mercilessly intoxicating vortex of online distractions—YouTube—is now, of course, owned by Google.

widely-hated, and morally corrupt Galactic Empire; and Apple, by attempting to turn us all into slavishly trendy sycophants, is roughly akin to the alien race in the new ABC series “V”; but Google, despite some mild circulation of the idea, isn’t really Skynet. Even though Skynet was run by an artificially intelligent computer system and Google’s co-founders certainly support the idea of running their search engine with a kind of AI in the near future, the analogy just won’t stick, probably because nothing can stick to Google’s pristinely waxed surface.

Perhaps the aforementioned TV ad, though—stealth bombers, Idahoans, smart phones—presents a unique opportunity to analogize using the material emanating from the minty fresh maw of Google itself (even if it’s really the maw of some subcontracted ad firm, and more intimately tied to Verizon). The mapping is fairly simple: Google is the network of stealth bombers—its incredible wealth and technology are unfathomable⁷

“The dangerous part is that we play the role of grateful, ignorant savage.”

⁷ There’s that word again, “unfathomable,” which your essayist never finished unpacking in footnote #5. The most important point is this: even though the technical specifics of Google’s algorithms are a well kept secret and above the heads of most laypeople, the broad strokes of how the engine ranks websites are widely known, and thus that ranking system is easily manipulated. (At this point, your essayist is pretty tempted to return to the dinner roll metaphor employed earlier, but he remembers his promise to abandon it and is a man of his word. What follows is a more obvious, and perhaps more appropriate, metaphor.) Google’s ranking system is a lot like the special sauce on the Big Mac—sure, we don’t know the exact recipe, but it’s fucking Thousand Island dressing. Because Google holds a near monopoly on search traffic, and because it commands such fervent brand loyalty, it has relatively little incentive to innovate at this point (the sauce ain’t changing much). Individuals and companies are now extremely proficient in gaming Google’s ranking system, so that ranking becomes more corrupted every day. Most importantly, the barriers to entry are extremely un-meritocratic. Google’s engine favors those sites that are already well-trafficked and those with the funds and wherewithal to manipulate its system. More on this in the “SEO” portion of this essay.

and invisible to nearly everyone—and we are the Idahoans, simple, unassuming, barely able to understand and utilize that which Google deigns to offer us, as gifts, as if miraculously from the sky: search results, emails, cell phone applications, etc. The relationship is deeply paternalistic, colonial, perhaps even theological. The dangerous part is precisely this: that we play the role of the grateful, ignorant savage.

Maybe your essayist's rhetoric is becoming a little heavy handed, but goddamnit he's trying to illustrate a point. Despite Google's extraordinary usefulness; its friendly, intuitive design; and the fact that its slogan is "Don't Be Evil"—which its founders love to reiterate as often as possible during interviews—the company's central drive, as a publicly-traded corporation, is, and must be, *profit*.⁸ And it is one of the fundamental philosophical errors of our era—awash as it is with neoliberal influence and the language of economics—to conflate profit with value, or, even worse, to moralize profit, to insist the pursuit of it is a productive force that, if unadulterated, will necessarily be "not evil." The drive for profit is no doubt a productive force, but how and what it produces is too seldom the subject of inquiry. Google may clean up well, but, largely out of the public eye, it still makes time to sully itself in the name of the almighty dollar.⁹

8 To be clear, your essayist doesn't wish to portray Google as a malicious profit-grubbing monolith. The company still undertakes plenty of projects that should help reassure us that the "Don't Be Evil" slogan is taken as seriously as it can be. For instance, Google recently discovered that if it monitors the rate of searches related to "flu symptoms" in a given area, it can identify a flu outbreak several weeks faster than the US Department of Health, and can advise that additional immunizations be shipped to that area, preventing the spread of disease and potentially saving lives. Your essayist is happy to agree, that's pretty fucking terrific. However, this does not detract from the fact that the company's most essential driving force has to be quarterly profit. By the very legal construction of a publicly-traded corporation, and the process by which capitalism sustains itself (valorizing surplus value), Google cannot consider the imperative of "not being evil" before it considers its primary imperative of profit. It cannot even *exist* to "not be evil" without first sustaining profit, its lifeblood. Ontology trumps ethics.

9 Though it's far beyond the scope of this essay, a great deal could be said about Google's ethically questionable practices and the way the influence of the

Enter Google AdSense,¹⁰ the company's main source of revenue. The program is, admittedly, pretty ingenious. Any business can create a simple image- or text-and-link-based ad campaign associated with keywords relevant to their product or service, and Google will place the ads on participating Web pages that contain content pertinent to those keywords. Google's crawler scans the text of every participating page and posts only the most applicable ads (though the pairings are sometimes a little awkward). The result is a massive network of fairly well-targeted, niche advertising—much of it very small-scale. The AdSense program is also used to fund Gmail,¹¹ which is why whenever you receive an email from your buddy about the money you still owe him for booze, a bunch of ads are listed for cash advances, debt management, alcoholism recovery programs, etc. (probably all scams in some form or another). Advertisers only pay each time their ad is clicked on, and host sites make revenue on the same per-click payment basis; Google, of course, makes its billions by skimming the difference.

The implications of this program are profound: any website can scrape together a little revenue just by allowing Google to dump ads on its pages. The barrier to sponsorship is, if not totally demolished, at least significantly miniaturized.

commercial sector pollutes what should probably be considered a public utility. That we would allow a corporation to gain a near monopolistic stranglehold on how an enormous portion of the world's population accesses knowledge on a daily basis is already unsettling, but for some further (albeit somewhat poorly organized and articulated) thoughts on the ugly minutiae of Google's opacity, monopoly, and privacy policies, see www.googlewatch.org.

10 The complete program goes by two names, AdSense (for host sites) and AdWords (for advertisers), and is significantly more complicated than need be illustrated for the purposes of this essay. If you care to know the details, just fucking Google it.

11 This means that Google's crawler "reads" the content of every single email sent and received on the Gmail servers, and the data could be saved indefinitely. There was an ugly scandal about this invasion of privacy just as the Gmail program was launching, but it's mostly been forgotten. Probably the largest concern is that the government can subpoena any email from Google's servers, and the tried and true methods of freak electrical fire and paper-shredder accidents are no longer of any use. The USA PATRIOT Act further complicates this whole mess, but your essayist would rather not get into it.

The revenue may not be on the same scale as traditional advertisement sales, but the qualifications to carry AdSense are basically non-existent and the opportunity for expansion (i.e. carrying more ads) is effectively endless. In principle this would seem like a liberating development for small-scale website owners and entrepreneurs—and in many cases it is—but a lot of awful horseshit arises when big companies get the bright idea to exploit this miniaturized barrier/profit situation by maximizing its volume.

That is to say, the AdSense program makes possible an entirely new and utterly despicable business model online: get an assload of written content together—quality be damned—distribute it across a bunch of different sub pages of a central site, add AdSense at every turn, and voilà—a healthy revenue stream fully formed from the head of Zeus. It used to be that

“Attracting e-rubes en masse—a business model as ancient as the carnival.”

websites, just like print publications, had to demonstrate some modicum of quality to potential sponsors in order to carry advertisements and become profitable.¹² But this basic hurdle has been all but steamrolled. Now large Web publishing companies—Demand Studios, Suite101.com, Examiner.com,¹³

¹² Full and immediate disclosure: your essayist has contributed content to each of these three companies. Indeed, it was his harrowing, doldrums-inducing spat as a freelancer that inspired this essay. He apologizes to those readers who—because of the authorial distance implied by the whole “your essayist” gimmick—had high hopes this piece wouldn’t turn personal.

¹³ Mining search data could provide excellent sociological insight into populations’ collective consciousnesses; it’s an incredible shame that the intricate details of search traffic are propriety information.

and many others—court enormous armies of freelance writers to crank out tidal waves of barely-passable content (usually for slave-rate commission wages); and then those companies publish the rotting lot of it and rake in big money off the AdSense clicks. This isn't the whole story, of course. Because AdSense pays per click, the onus is on the website to attract click-happy traffic if it wants any revenue. The real barrier becomes, as always, attracting a large viewership to this heap of written garbage; or, more appropriately, attracting e-rubes en masse—a business model as ancient as the carnival.

But Google is also revolutionizing this timeless endeavor of duping people into visiting dumb places (or now, Web pages); Google is the vehicle used to crash headfirst through the viewership barrier, and the whole bloody catastrophe bears this title: “Search Engine Optimization” (commonly abbreviated SEO). An entire industry has emerged around these three letters. There's not a marketing/pr/ad agency the entire world over that hasn't adopted “SEO” into its litany of sacred rigvedic mantras (giving the term a privileged spot beside other hallowed business jargon like “differentiation” and “synergy”). The trend has, to a very serious extent, changed the composition of the Internet; and, given the amount of search traffic Google controls, “Search Engine Optimization” might easily be re-titled “Google Optimization.”

Though it has broad-reaching and complicated effects, the SEO concept is pretty simple. The large strokes of how all the major search engines rank websites are widely known in the business world, so—with the proper expertise and necessary resources—those rankings can be manipulated a great deal. SEO is basically all the things that a company does to juke its Web presence higher on search engine rankings for certain key terms and phrases. And, because search engines—Google especially—drive most of the traffic on the Internet, the kings of SEO command incredibly high viewership. At journalism

conferences, reporters are now taught that they don't make it on the quality of their writing, but by the strength of their SEO—and, unfortunately, as websites like the Huffington Post prove every day, this is precisely the case. The old manuals of style—AP, Chicago, Times, etc.—have been all but discarded online. The responsibility of the Web writer is becoming less about writing for a human audience and more about writing for Google's crawler.

The SEO techniques employed are myriad: the incessant use of key terms in (often superfluous) headers, subheads, nut graphs, section heads, picture captions, etc.; continual updates to the page via user comments, twitter feeds, and other drivel; artificial inflation of external referrals and click-through traffic; interlinking several pages with basically identical but slightly rephrased content; and the list goes on and on. The important point is that the SEO structure drives many companies to create noisy, crowded, ugly Web pages filled with awkward, vacuous, and repetitive content. The game that Google facilitates—or rather, incentivizes—is simple: dump Google ads on a page and elbow it to a healthy search ranking; rinse, repeat. And if the profit incentive is to produce tons of search-engine-optimized content as quickly as possible—without any regard for the quality or even the veracity of that content—the result will inevitably be enormous, steaming piles of written shit.

Perhaps the finest exemplar of this phenomenon is eHow.com. If you want to know how to accomplish any task, chances are eHow has a dozen articles on the subject, several of which will invariably be among the top hits of any Google search pertaining to the task, and will, most likely, be of no real help to you at all. eHow's strategy is all about scaling horizontally, maximizing the miniature. The site may not control the top hits for super popular keywords, but it does have a monopoly on just about every “how-to” project and “about” article, no matter how mundane or obscure. And every one of its articles is fueled by Google ads.

Your essayist and some of his closest friends spent several months under the employ of eHow's parent company, Demand Studios, and during that time (a very dark time, indeed) they produced some of the most heinous how-to articles to ever pollute the Web. The Demand Media Company has a computer that tracks relatively popular search terms and their projected Google AdSense revenue, and then synthetically generates titles based on that data. Freelancers can then claim and crap out the articles for \$5 to \$15 payment. The computer comes up with some absolutely bat-shit ridiculous titles. As a reflection of fairly common search phrases, these titles are also a reflection of the sheer weirdness of the modern condition, and they beg to be anthropologized.¹⁴ A lengthy though certainly not exhaustive selection, to wit:

How to Buy Different Kinds of Faux Leather, How to Design Your Own Dog Bandanas, How to Make a Tree with Little Debbie Swiss Rolls, How to Make a Keytar, How to Declare a Missing Person Dead, How to Use Multiple Condoms, How to Know If Your Contraceptive Fails, How to Grow Taller at 40, How to Use a Hitachi Bread Maker, Helpful Hints for Proper Use of a Meter Stick, Making Broom Puppets, Words You Can Make Using the Periodic Table, Pee Wee Tennis Rules, DIY Build a Dog Casket, Heely Trick Tips, How to Start a Reflective Essay, How to Change Body PH, How to Make Eel Traps, How to Make Lamps From Deer Antlers, How to Make a Homemade Flame Thrower, How to Make Your Own Parrot Toys, How to Use the Words of the Serenity Prayer, How to Answer IQ Tests, How to Prepare for a Colostomy Reversal Operation, How to Use Sugar Sweetener, How to Prevent Alcoholism, How to Have Dinner with Diabetes, How to Treat Lice on Goats, How to Kiss After a Dental Extraction, How to Eradicate Tiredness, Apple Cider Vinegar Cure for Shingles, About Tui Na Massage for Dogs.

¹⁴ Mining search data could provide excellent sociological insight into populations' collective consciousnesses; it's an incredible shame that the intricate details of search traffic are propriety information.

Perhaps your essayist's personal favorite, though, is the most worthless one he ever composed: "How to Buy PEX Tubing Online." He appreciates this article not for its outlandishness or aesthetic decrepitude, but for its sheer brevity. It is a near-perfect distillation of the inanity that is eHow.com. Here it is, reproduced in full:

PEX tubing is some of the strongest, most versatile home plumbing and heating tubing on the market. One of the best ways to purchase PEX tubing quickly and cheaply is from online suppliers.

1. Visit various wholesale suppliers' websites online, such as PexSupply.com, BlueRidgeCompany.com, and PEXHeat.com.

2. Browse the various PEX tubing options. There are a wide range of lengths, diameters and strength grades for different prices.

3. Find the option that is right for your needs and click "add to cart."

4. Follow the website's guidelines for purchase and shipment.

Tip: Browse several different websites to find the best price before buying.

Ah, fuck all. Your essayist's name will be attached to that rubbish in perpetuity, for anyone and everyone to stumble upon online. He wishes he could be like Michael Caine in regards to his role in *Jaws IV*: "I've never seen it. I hear that it's awful. However, I have seen the house that it built, and it is terrific." The closest your essayist can come: "I have seen it. I bloody well wrote it. And the Subway sandwich and 12-pack of Miller High Life it purchased were mediocre at best."

Your essayist has no idea whether PEX tubing is "some of the strongest, most versatile home plumbing and heating tubing on the market." This may very well be an outright lie. The real travesty, though, is that when you Google "how to buy PEX tubing online," this article is the first hit; but, the three preceding sponsored results are almost always PexSupply.com, PEXHeat.com, etc.—the listed websites that will not just instruct

you how to purchase PEX tubing online, but will, in fact, allow you to purchase PEX tubing online. The further irony is that the Google ads listed on this article are also, almost invariably, for those exact same several websites that sell PEX tubing online. People looking to purchase PEX tubing couldn't possibly derive

“I have seen it. I bloody well wrote it. And the Subway sandwich and 12-pack of Miller High Life it purchased were mediocre at best.”

any value from your essayist's article;□ they'd do far better visiting the suppliers directly. The article thus occupies a strange and useless adjunct space in the architecture of the Internet, like a blank hallway that loops its way between two rooms that are already directly connected. But, just like any bridge to nowhere, plenty of people are making a pretty penny off the article's worthlessness. With the current incentive structures in place, the geometry of the internet will only become further convoluted by trap doors and superfluous compartments.

It's not just that Google is butchering the written word; more importantly, it's corrupting both our knowledge base and how we access it. In an ideal world, one would be able to search for instructions on “how to make a keytar” and the top results would be legitimate, detailed literature on the subject (and yes, surprisingly enough, plenty of detailed literature on how to make a keytar does exist online, but for the most part it won't make the first page of Google results). As it stands, the top

results are usually whatever eHow garbage some idiot like your essayist has shat out in about half-an-hour for a \$15 payment, because eHow is extensively search-engine-optimized.

The really terrifying trend, though, is that Google prices keywords according to how popular and lucrative advertisements associated with them will likely be; and, because the most lucrative terms are often associated with health and finances, this encourages the massive Web content production companies to target these topics, seeing as they get a slice of that inflated price. Getting bad info on how to make a keytar is one thing; getting bad info on how to treat a serious illness or refinance a home mortgage is another thing entirely.

Your essayist's roommate—a med student—would often write eHow articles on topics regarding health and wellness. He's a very intelligent guy, and some of his pieces were actually pretty astute, given the formal constraints. Unfortunately, he would often encounter titles that were, in and of themselves, outrageous—something along the lines of, “how to use some bogus treatment to cure multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis.” If he ever wrote the responsible article, which would read, “Don't try this crap. Consult a doctor right away. MDRTB is one of the deadliest diseases worldwide, and it was misinformation and improper treatment that led to the rise of these strains in the first place...” editors would throw the yellow flag and demand that he treat the topic in a more ‘unbiased’ fashion—in other words, to entertain some bullshit that might actually kill somebody if taken seriously, just so eHow could attract search traffic and Google ads.

For a portion of time, your essayist himself dabbled in home finance writing for Suite101.com. Your essayist knows absolutely nothing about home finances—he has never even owned a home—yet when he wrote a dozen half-assed articles on home mortgage refinancing and debt reduction, his editors lapped up his crap because it brought in high-paying ads. It's not news that

you can't trust what you read on the Internet, but the scary part is that perhaps the least trustworthy material often occupies the top search result spots. Your essayist's finance articles certainly fare way better than their quality warrants. Largely thanks to the Google Corporation, it's most profitable for Web content companies to either not monitor the veracity and ramifications of published articles, or, even worse, to purposefully entertain false and pernicious ideas just to have the written content on which to place ads.

Critics may say that your essayist's attacks on Google are misdirected. It's not Google, they will argue, but the companies that fund and publish this rot that ought to be blamed. Or, in fact, much of the blame should be directed toward your essayist himself; after all, it was he and he alone who penned "How to Buy PEX Tubing Online," etc. These critics are, of course, correct—to a certain extent. eHow is, by and large, a despicable organization, and deserves a healthy portion of the blame. And it's not your essayist's wish to deny outright his own agency in the decline of the written word online. He has shamefully contributed to the squalor. Call this essay his confession, his plea for forgiveness.

But your essayist is wary of treating the individual subject as an absolutely sovereign unit of analysis, or of assigning full responsibility to an institution without glancing towards its surroundings. One must look toward the intricate systems and socioeconomic structures that govern the manufacture of abysmal Web content. Complicated shit is afoot, and Google occupies a central role in the strange organism that excretes all of this written waste. It is the beating heart and the brain. It provides a nearly endless supply of sponsorship to make the writing profitable, and it provides the means and defines the logic by which that writing will be located and consumed by readers. It also profits most.

Perhaps the more astute critic would raise the opposite

complaint: that your essayist's attacks on Google are still far too microscopic, beset with blinders to the even larger systems and structures at play—the logic of Capital, the infinitely complex fields of economic power. This critic would argue that the current situation of knowledge pollution

“Google runs a business, not a public utility; but does this really make sense?”

has more to do with the fact that the internet emerged in an advanced capitalist society where knowledge is intensely privatized and proprietary, where the valorization of surplus value trumps ethical concerns. This critic is probably onto something. This critic is also most likely a professor, and far more intelligent than your essayist; so your essayist will leave the pursuance of this line of argumentation in the doctor's more qualified hands.

It's no doubt frustrating to listen to some raving malcontent bitch and moan about something and never propose a solution; but, in the face of the endlessly convoluted shitshow that is Google's Internet, simple solutions seem to be in sparse supply. Though perhaps, if your essayist may be so bold, part of the solution is to make search engines act less like Google and more like PEX tubing (or at least more like what we can only assume PEX tubing is and does). If, as Senator Ted Stevens postulated, the Internet is a series of tubes, then this comparison ought to be downright brilliant: Google and PEX tubing are already a lot alike; they lurk nearby—underground, behind drywall, on your browser's toolbar—and deliver essentials: water, heat, search results, and automatic updates.

But Google never allows anyone past the opacity of its architecture. There are few building codes for it to be in

compliance with; it never allows outside plumbers into its infrastructure. In short, Google runs a business, not a public utility; but does this really make sense? More and more, search engines are the way most everyone accesses information on a daily basis. We regulate the public's access to clean water because we consider clean water an essential public good, and we understand that the commercial sector can have a dangerous influence on it. Should information not also be considered an essential public good? Imagine an open-source, completely transparent search engine, with a deep crawl powered by publicly-owned processors, or even a cloud of volunteer participants.

Obviously this doesn't address nearly all of the aforementioned problems, and it's not at all as simple as the analogy might make it seem. Nothing is so simple in the information age; and yet, on the surface, it would seem that Google is continuing to simplify everything—to annex all the major Web continents, raise its four-colored flag¹⁵, and initiate one beautifully streamlined online empire: faster, smarter, easier at every turn. Google recently acquired YouTube and now runs AdSense on its videos; it launched Google Wave beta testing to revolutionize data sharing/networking, and Google Buzz¹⁶ to potentially unseat Facebook and Twitter in the social media domain; it is aggressively advertising its new Chrome browser; and it's making serious headway with the new Android operating system.

And hell, your essayist will almost inevitably end up using and probably enjoying each of these programs. He feels a lot like that guy in the Hotels.com commercial seriously, go ahead and watch it on YouTube so this analogy makes sense); even if he suspects

15 Really, it's not so outlandish to think of Google hoisting a flag. What with the recent Google/China debacle, we've witnessed how the company now participates as a sovereign entity in serious international affairs.

16 Many people have been shocked and outraged by the volume of information Google had already amassed for their personal profiles when setting up a Buzz account. Like the outrage over Gmail privacy policies, though, this suspicion will likely subside as "buzzing" enters our common parlance.

there's an ugly game behind it all, he still loves to have that shampoo. On top of being hilarious, this advertisement presents us with a perfect figure of the subject of late capitalism—a man standing in front of his own reflection, lathering himself with a commodity that is both snare and salve, lamenting loudly, “Ahhh, they got me. It's working! It's working!” The image is outright haunting. It reflects how your essayist feels every time he uses Google—terribly, irreconcilably satisfied.

Postscript: On “Google Search Stories”

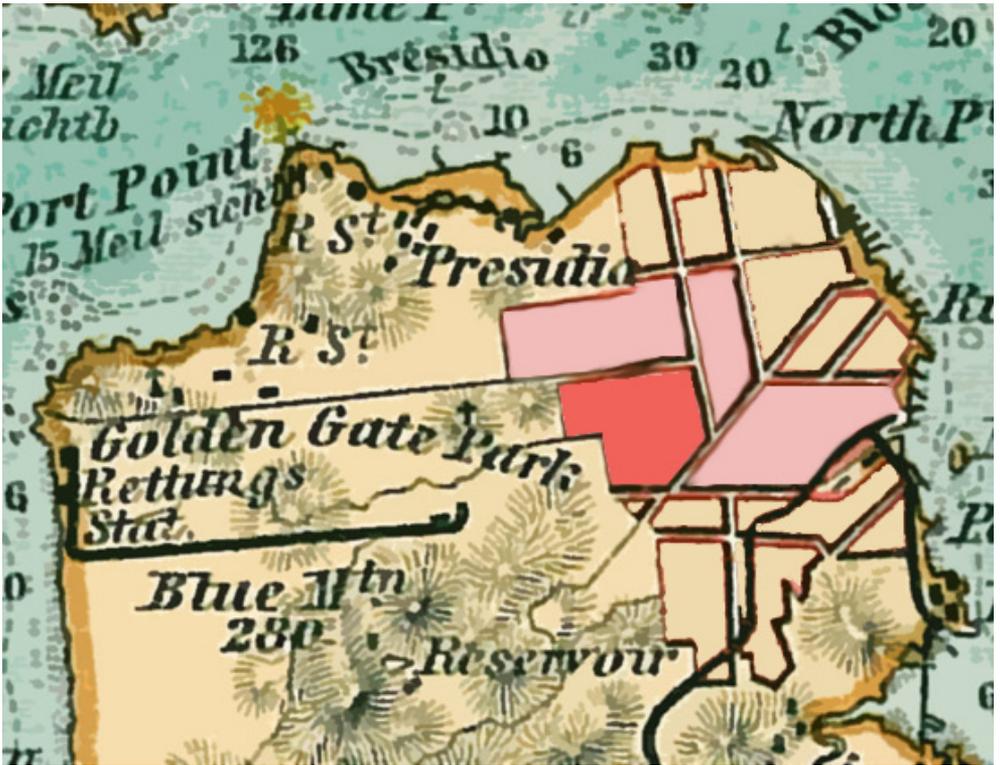
During the late drafting of this essay, Google launched a new TV ad campaign for its search engine. The campaign is called “Google Search Stories,” and it's devilishly brilliant. Each ad unfolds a heartwarming story through a series of searches. Just like every good Coke ad—hawking the ameliorative and friendship-inducing powers of high fructose corn syrup—the search stories make you feel as if a world in which Google exists must be a world filled with love and companionship. The pilot ad, titled “Parisian Love,” was launched in one of the most prized slots in all of TV ad history—Super Bowl XLIV, no less—and tells the story of a young American man who studies abroad in France, meets the woman of his dreams, moves to Paris for her, then gets married and has a child.

That last bit of information is conveyed through a search for “how to assemble a crib.” And what's the very first hit is when you actually Google that phrase? An eHow article. And it is absolutely worthless.

FOUR AUDIO EXCERPTS

Andre Perry

[This piece available online only]



FICTION



[photo animations available online only]

THE SCAPEGOAT

Michael Ives

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was
the priest of the most high God.
Genesis 14:18

He and his wife referred to their holiday hors d'oeuvre spread, a carefully rounded heap of deviled ham and selected spices, as the *Mound*, the exterior of which was covered with a mantle of processed cheese spread. Though few chose to eat of the *Mound*, neither cocktail party nor moveable feast could be considered complete without it, as if the *Mound* were invested with the power of an idol, as if it were a transgression to eat from the *Mound*, but an equally grave transgression to omit it from the “pre-prandial fare,” to borrow the phraseology of the husband. The occasional adventurer might with nacre-handled cocktail knife penetrate as far into the *Mound* as the lower reaches of its yellowish coat. Infrequently a lusty soul would entrench as deep as to catch on the tip of his knife blade a small bit of deviled ham. Yet the integrity of the *Mound* as a sacred, inviolable tumulus never failed to survive these bruised avatars. For the most part no one dared deface the *Mound's* inscrutability beyond minor excavations, which in any case, constituted a *ritual and hygienic scarification*. Lest anyone should nurture so much arrogance as to allow thoughtful conversation to intrude among the jello salads and pretzel nubs, always there was the *Mound* to warn him away from such extravagance. “Let your talk emulate a curved, sparsely pitted surface,” the *Mound* would seem to enjoin, “dumb and inanimate like unto the moon's.”

The moment the *Mound* entered the room, its near hemispherical perfection, the totemic gravity it asserted into the otherwise moronic ambience, would impel all present to

observe a momentary hush appropriate to sacred levels of admiration. *Ah, Mound!* someone would whisper, pointing at it as if at a hydrocephalic who, for the enormity of his fatal defect, was thought to bring good luck upon the tribe who gave it succor. Signatures of the divine: an aquarium in the skull—a dome of anonymous potted meat. The *Mound* gave off an aura of portent: that it might sire prodigies and miracles, that some token of unassimilated wonder might burst forth, as of suddenly coming upon an image of the holy mother pressed into the deck of an immaculately sealed slice of American cheese.

When, on one occasion, an unaccustomed guest chose unwittingly to drive a knife straight through the center of the *Mound*, everyone looking on let out a collective gasp, for it had remained a mystery whether yet more of the same macerated pork and associated by-products lay at the core of the *Mound* and not some other, explicitly numinous, token—a mortgage document for instance, or a golf ball. Oh, the terrible undifferentiated truth of the *Mound!* The hapless guest might as well have split open an infant's head for the looks of horror his bisection inspired. Like Buridan's ass, starving to death unable to decide whether to drink the water to its left or eat the hay to its right, the guest—similarly trapped between the inevitable injury he would cause his host by restoring the grayish mass to its crevasse under such intense scrutiny and his cresting fear that, on a footing with that very scrutiny, to eat from the *Mound* was plainly inadvisable—he hesitated for what seemed a geological age, *Mound*-encumbered knife in one hand, table water cracker in the other.

He knew what he had to do, had known from the moment he cleft the *Mound*, but as he began to chew, the full force of taboo bore in upon him the grievous error he had committed. *He's actually eating it*, someone whispered. *Sic transit gloria Mound*, another gibed. Even the husband struggled to suppress his astonishment. All then went silent but for the soft clinking

of ice cubes and, issuing from another room, the Hammond organ stylings of Walter Wanderly. People backed away, as if to escape responsibility for having produced a foul odor. An inexorable recognition began to paint itself into the fresh plaster of the guest's face as he swallowed the baneful dollop. The image of its descent down the length of his esophagus, heavy with intimations of sacrificial blades and altars and beribboned yearlings, lodged itself in the sensibilities of all who looked on, and for this act of witness they were drawn closer one to another, and he closer to the congress of furies gathering in his duodenum.

HERE

Elizabeth Gonzalez

At seven every night two bats come down the street, circling one another as they fly between the trees. They travel twenty feet above the asphalt, hunting mosquitoes and moths. They look like rags operated by an inexperienced puppeteer. Sometimes in summer the children toss up stones to watch them dive. They don't seem to know stone from food.

A woman wearing a camouflage coat and black pants walks a black dog every night. She comes out at the same time as the bats and follows the same route, head down, oblivious to traffic. The children call her suicide lady.

A man who lived on the end of the street committed suicide four years ago. He went on vacation and dove off a lighthouse. His wife was bewildered for a while, then moved away. He used to rinse his driveway every morning and nudge acorns out of the cracks with the toes of his slippers.

She turns the tap. Steam swirls under her chin. She has the window open for a breeze but there is no breeze.

The children work at the table. They are learning to do bubble tests. If none of the given answers fit, instead of NA for None of the Above, they are told to mark NH for Not Here. As if to say, there must be an answer somewhere but it's gone missing.

Moths bat at the screen, drawn to the light over the sink. When she turns off the water she can hear them hit, a splanging sound quiet as clothes dropping on carpet. They hold onto the screen with hooks fine as hair. They have mistaken a 60-watt bulb for the moon.

The moon is out, only it's 200,000 miles from here. Today it came out in midday, a bland blue picture hanging over the grocery store parking lot like a prop laid out in a hallway before a show.

The neighbor's porch light goes on. His wife died in the spring. They are from another era and still loved each other. Sometimes at night when she is out on her porch she hears him cry. His dogs are keeping him alive. They need feeding.

This afternoon she passed a farm where a sheep was cuddling up to a cinder block wall. Its chin was pressed tight against the block, eyes closed in sleep. She wishes she hadn't seen it, that black chin pressed against the block.

Her son has a question. She takes the paper from him and reads. A ring of suds radiates from her thumb into the paper. It will dry crinkly but clean.

She dries her hands and moves to the table. She makes the lightest circles around their mistakes, erasable circles, and they make corrections. The answers are here after all. The moths hit the picture window, louder against the glass but still a sound one has to listen for. She read an article that said they're disappearing, fruitlessly courting billboards, soaring headlong into headlights, filling bug zapper trays. Fortune favors the bright.

One by one the children pack away their papers. One by one they return from the shower, hastily dried, and she tucks them in. Tell me what I did when I was little, her daughter says, her hair wetting the pillow, tell me about your childhood. What her daughter means to ask is, who were you, who am I?

You used to say hambubber, she tells her. Twice in first grade you rode the wrong bus home. Once you were jumping on the bed and knocked your teeth through your lip and had to get stitches. Finally her daughter smiles, satisfied. She remembers, she always says, even things that happened when she was too small to remember.

She reads stories to the baby. The old stories are brutal and she edits them, takes out the squirrel's heart in the box, the stones sewn into the belly of the wolf.

Her husband is asleep. The moths are at the windows, tracking the last light. Up close, they are unique. Some have shaggy legs and rust-colored manes like lions. Some have iridescent wings like the insides of shells. They are the colors of old pearls and bark and dried out cornstalks at sunset. They all have great black eyes and cannot help themselves; they see in every glimmer something shining, something beautiful, something they cannot live without.

She turns off the light, and one by one the moths drop away, making the tiniest sound of all when they let go. Down in the back of the yard, milkweed leaves wave like white hands under the moon. Her husband stirs, reaches an arm across the bed. Where are you? he says, and she says Here, I'm right here. If the children come in the middle of the night and say I'm scared she says, Here, and pulls them into bed.

How do you know, she wonders, when you've found what you were looking for? She has been a stranger on this road forever, hunting after things that shine; she still can't tell from the cast and fall of a thing whether it is food, whether it is stone.

THE BUILDER, THE FATHER AND THE SON

Steve McClain

The Builder sat sobbing in the turret attic window overlooking the river. The tin pig's head which he had built from tourist gadgets, gutters and chicken wire was fitted firm over his chin and wrapped tight around his ears. He had punched holes for his eyes and none for his nose. He'd cut a stern slit through which he ate and drank infrequently and most times messily, leaving a wetness on his naked lap.

At the pig's chin he'd punched a hole through which he had looped the coarse twine he had discovered months previous in the pants pocket of the pants he'd found in the closet at the attic's corner. The twine dangled downward over his uncovered chest and was tied hurriedly to the belt he had built round his waist from belt leather, tourist gadgets, gutters and chicken wire. It was his chastity belt. At the crotch, he'd cut a toothed mouth from the junk tin through which he had roughly drawn his penis weeks before. He had left his scrotum hidden and he thought protected behind the apparatus' face.

From the wicker rocking chair (a chair he had discovered during his first hours in the attic room) the Builder watched the road and river below him. It was Christmas or New Year's. It was snowing in Stockholm and cold. A blond woman walked floors beneath him by the chimney boats at the river's edge before the Statues' Bridge. Her white hair, escaping beneath her hat, bounced against her coat's back as she walked. She wore a black leotard above her boots, and what the Builder could not see of her thighs' shape swinging beneath her chest, he imagined frowning from his chair. Beneath the Builder's room, the Father sat reading to his Son.

THE JUDGMENT (AFTER FRANZ)

Kenneth Tighe

George surveyed the bleak, sparsely furnished bedroom with satisfaction. There was a single window with a view of an enormous brick meat plant, a closet door adorned with a poster of Rodin's "Gates of Hell," and a simple bureau. On top of the bureau was a small plastic trophy depicting a boy executing a perfect handstand. Upon the neatly made bed lay an open suitcase filled with the paraphernalia of a life: articles of clothing, necessities of hygiene, a thick stack of frayed drawings. At long last George would leave this room, a development that filled his heart with a strange glow, a wild kind of happiness he'd never known, for his life to this point had been a series of predictable events systematically arranged by his parents. In twenty years of living he had never controlled his destiny nor experienced, in the slightest way, the thrill of spontaneity. Now, after a brief meeting with his mother and father, he would walk out of this house into an uncertain future entirely his own.

Two wonderful occurrences had made this freedom possible. He had become engaged to a lovely young woman whom he had known for several months, and he had been accepted into the Academy, an unprecedented accomplishment in George's family. It was a family, as his father was fond of pointing out, of clerks and gate guards. Indeed it was in total secret that George had obtained and submitted his Academy application. Without telling a soul he had completed a battery of rigorous tests. He had submitted designs, sketches and formal drawings of buildings erected out of the caverns of his mind. Most of his creations were dreamlike structures, vast labyrinths that often rambled beyond the very margins of the page. He was accepted

by the Academy on the same day that he was accepted by the lovely and perfect Felicia.

Now he need only inform his parents of the wonderful news. Then, with suitcase in hand, he would proceed to the subway station to meet his good friend Maxwell. Together they would travel uptown to the apartment they had already leased, an austere but affordable flat near the Academy where Maxwell was a prominent and successful student of chemistry.

The walls and floor of George's room vibrated with the passing of a train below. It was a common occurrence, something George had learned to ignore, as the building was situated directly over a subway line. He lifted the small plastic gymnastics trophy from the top of the bureau and held it carefully in his hands. Over the years its coating of cheap gold paint had nearly chipped off entirely. He placed the trophy gently inside the suitcase and snapped it shut. With the suitcase resting on the bed he left the room.

Out in the hall were the familiar kitchen smells that had marked his childhood—onions, cabbage, sausage. Entering the dining room he saw the familiar picture on the wall. It was an old print of the Savior wearing some strange, thorny headgear that broke the skin of his scalp, spattering drops of blood over the pinched agony of his face. It was a striking countenance, worthy of examination. But it was the Savior's heart that always drew the eye, for it was entirely exposed, skin and bone having been miraculously splayed to reveal a pulsating, blood-red organ. Indeed, protracted scrutiny of this heart had been known to produce the optical illusion of a living, pumping muscle.

George's mother entered the room, a short gray-haired woman with a narrow and severe look about her. His father followed. He was a tall bald man with a strange and vacant face. Strapped to his belt at hip level was a revolver that was securely fastened in a leather holster. Together they looked across the dining room table at George. He returned their gaze and said,

“I am engaged to be married to Felicia Bauman. I have been accepted by the Academy into their School of Design. I have leased an apartment in the West End with Maxwell Brown.”

There appeared suddenly, at the corners of the bald man’s mouth, the faintest suggestion of a sneer. He cast a furtive glance at his wife whose face had opened into a wide and very polite smile. She fastened tender eyes upon George, the smile widening, and said, “Where would this design come from?”

George said, “It comes from me, just me.”

“We shuffle papers,” said his father. “We guard gates.”

“I suppose,” said his mother, “that design falls from heaven like rain.”

George bristled. He threw back his shoulders and said, “This is what you said about my tumbling, but my trophy speaks for itself.”

A fine spray of spittle issued from his father’s mouth. “Surely you knew it was presented out of sympathy, to spare your sissified feelings. Why—it’s plastic!” He held out a massive palm that closed slowly into the rock of a fist. “I could snap it in two,” he said. “I could crush it into little pieces!”

“You’re aware of course,” said his mother, “that Stanley Bauman is a bank officer. You’re aware that a relationship with his daughter is laughable.”

“We guard gates,” said his father. “An engagement to the Bauman girl can only be nonsense.”

“The kind of nonsense,” said his mother, “that can only be fiction.”

“It’s obvious,” said his father, “that someone’s imagination has run amok. Mr. Bauman is an officer at a bank.” He leveled a superior smile upon his son.

George thought it imperative that he not rise to this bait. He and only he knew of the profound love for Felicia that dwelled in his heart, and of her mutual feelings for him. He and Felicia were committed to one another. Their bond was eternal and no

one, least of all these doubters, could alter that fact. So it was with intense personal pride and unwavering adoration for his future wife that George stiffened his spine in defiance. He need say nothing. He merely stood before this odd parental inquisition thinking of the lovely Felicia, of their mutual devotion, of the certainty of their future together and of the plush sofa in her father's home where, a mere three nights earlier, she had exposed her soft pale breasts to his feverish kisses.

With a turn of her head George's mother indicated that she was about to speak. "This friend," she said.

"This acquaintance," interrupted his father, "whom you fancy a friend."

"This—I don't know..." said the short gray-haired lady.

"Vagabond?" offered the eager pistol-packing elder.

"This boy," said his mother. "This Max whatever..."

George interrupted in a firm and clear voice. "My close friend Maxwell Brown and I have signed a lease for an apartment in the West End." He looked at his watch. "In fact, we have arranged to meet one another very shortly. He has obtained a key to our flat."

"A flat key?" said the mother. "Hmmm..."

George looked at her blankly. Her gaze assumed a look of benevolence and pity. Smiling sweetly she said, "A key is one thing. A lock that cooperates is still another."

George announced, "My bag is packed." There was a moment of silence. The two elders seemed taken by some collective mirth known only to themselves, as if a secret joke were being shared between them.

George's father, suddenly agitated, eyed his son with a hand squeezing the holstered sidearm. As if to calm himself he looked over at the picture on the wall. Following his example George too looked at the Savior. It was a very old print that had buckled in numerous places and was covered with old yellowed glass. These impediments created a potential for certain visual distortions.

As father and son perused the picture a late afternoon commuter train thundered below. The vibrations continued unabated and the image itself seemed to move. Certainly the Savior's face remained fixed, filled with love and pain. But the heart, the naked ever-present heart seemed alive, so vivid and bright with blood that, to George's weary eye, it looked more like a wound than a vessel, a large gaping wound the size of a man's hand that, upon close inspection, teemed with countless quivering white worms as thick as fingers, each intricately segmented, each with hundreds of threadlike legs wiggling, the tiny tips of which glowed with an odd phosphorescence.

The shaking abated, the portrait became still, but George felt as if the floor beneath him was the deck of ship in rough seas. He feared for his balance. He felt drunk. His father had lighted a cigar and layers of blue smoke began to obscure his vision. He looked through the haze at his mother who was high in the air. He realized after a moment that she was seated upon his father's massive shoulders. Her arm was outstretched, a forefinger pointed at George. He turned and began to stumble from the room, but not before hearing her unmistakable words: "You tumbling fool," she bellowed. "I sentence you to an acrobatic death."

Staggering along the hall George felt his intoxication begin to wane. His head cleared. He straightened his posture and quickened his gait. He opened the door to his bedroom, snatched the suitcase and hurried outside to the street. He took in a deep rush of cool air and his breast swelled with a renewed sense of purpose. The sound of his own heels clicking on the sidewalk was music to strengthen his resolve. Doubt and uncertainty fled before a hard, icy clarity. Moving quickly along the street he felt as if his future was etched deeply into his being, as if carved painfully into the flesh of his back. He hurried down into the subway station where he was to meet his best friend.

Maxwell was seated alone on a bench against the wall of the

station. He stood and looked at George with an affection that was palpable. “For some reason I was afraid you wouldn’t show,” said Max.

George pushed the suitcase into Maxwell’s hands. Max said, “I don’t think so buddy, you’ll carry your own baggage.” He was a pleasant looking young man with a full head of wavy red hair. “I have some bad news,” he said. “There might be a problem with Felicia. We’ll talk when we get home.”

George smiled and said, “Of course.” From the tunnel came the rumble of an approaching train.

“But I have good news as well,” continued Maxwell. With thumb and forefinger he held up a thick, gold key. It did not take a great deal of scrutiny to see that it was flat and smooth with no grooves or notches cut into it—a blank.

George smiled in approval. “What do you think Max? A key to the future?”

Maxwell beamed.

“Just as smooth and straight as an arrow,” said George. “Like the Six Train I’ll be catching.”

“No, we take the West End car,” said Maxwell. “The Six Train’s an express. It doesn’t stop here.”

At the far end of the platform a train emerged, screaming out of the tunnel like a black bullet. The entire station shook with an angry metallic gnashing. George pushed the suitcase against Maxwell’s leg, stood up and took several steps forward. Momentarily he hesitated, not over what to do so much as how, precisely, to carry it off. Immediately a revelation passed over him like soft heavenly rain, like an ancient genetic mystery decoding bright white daggers of truth into his mind. He threw out his arms and began a series of perfectly straight and erect cartwheels in the direction of the red line at the platform’s edge, his spinning limbs blurred like the spokes of a wheel. As if programmed he landed with both feet together on the painted red line. His toes gripped the edge of the platform. He bent his

knees, bellowed “I can fetch it Maxie!” and swan-dived neatly into the path of the barreling Six Train, thinking how fitting and proper it was, how perfectly appropriate, that an entity so small, a life so meager, should vanish in so vast and clamorous a racket.

CONTRIBUTORS

ARTWORK

Featured artist TARA KELTON is an Indian-American artist and designer who recently completed her MFA at the Yale School of Art. She lives in a blue house in New Haven with her cat groovy. Prior to beginning her MFA she ran her own design studio in New York City.



POETRY

IAN MONK (from “Leaves of the Yucca”) was born near London, but now lives in Lille, France, where he works as a writer and translator. After contributing to the *Oulipo Compendium* (Atlas Press) he became a member of the Oulipo in 1988. His books include *Family Archaeology* and *Writings for the Oulipo* (Make Now), *N/S* (with Frédéric Forte (Editions de l’Attente)) and *Plouk Town* (Cambourakis).

RAYMOND QUENEAU (“100 Trillion Poems”) was a French poet and novelist. Born in 1903 in Le Havre, he co-founded the Oulipo in 1960. He died in 1976. STANLEY CHAPMAN was a British architect and translator; Queneau would describe his reaction to Chapman’s translation of “100 Trillion Poems” as “admiring stupefaction.” Chapman passed in May of 2009. Formerly a pragmatic programmer, MAGNUS BODIN is now an experimentalist with with a vast interest of communication in any form. Currently he is studying Mandarin and performs as psychic entertainer.

DAMION SEARLS (“Proust”, “Faulkner”, “Syllabic Sestina”) **is a writer as well as a translator from German, Norwegian, French, and Dutch. His most recent books are *What We Were Doing and Where We Were Going* (stories, Dalkey Archive Press) and editions of *Thoreau’s Journal* and Melville’s ; or *The Whale*. His poems “Moxomenon” and “A History of Printing in America” are forthcoming in *The Paris Review*. More at www.damionsearls.com.**

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ESSAYS

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FICTION

MICHAEL IVES ("The Scapegoat") is the author of *The External Combustion Engine*, from Futurepoem Books. His poetry and prose have appeared in numerous magazines and journals both in the United States and abroad. He teaches at Bard College.

ELIZABETH GONZALEZ ("Here") is a freelance writer living in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her stories have appeared in *Sycamore Review*, *Greensboro Review*, and *Post Road*. She is justifiably worried about the fates of moths, frogs, and everything living in the ocean other than jellyfish.

STEVE MCCLAIN (“The Builder, the Father and the Son”) **received his early Catholic education in south western Connecticut. In 2007, he graduated with his B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy from the University of Virginia. After two years teaching ninth grade English on the Texas-Mexico border as a Teach for America corps member, he moved to the Colombian port city of Barranquilla where he currently fights crime.**

KENNETH TIGHE (“The Judgment (after Franz)”) **is a retired janitor living in Savannah, Georgia with his wife of thirty-seven years. His pottery and clay sculpture can be seen in several galleries in the Southeast. A short story of his will appear in the June, 2010 issue of *The Battered Suitcase*.**