

OTHER INVESTIGATIONS

VOLUME ONE, ISSUE ONE
NOVEMBER 2006

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Stationaery Press

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Volume 1, Issue 1, November 2006
Boston, Massachusetts

Printed by Ferrante and Associates, Weston MA.
Designed by Lauren MacLeod.
Cover Art by Michele Ramirez

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LAURALEE GULLEDGE is a (27 year-old) former art teacher and muralist from Virginia who has just recently begun gaining notoriety for the artwork she has been making as her own private art therapy for years. She is especially known for her highly personal, and often humorous, self portraits. Extremely prolific in her work, Laura Lee adds multiple new pieces each week to this ongoing visual dialogue that already contains hundreds of individual drawings.

MICHELE RAMIREZ was born in Le Grand, CA. She is a third generation Mexican American and discovered printmaking in 1990 while studying at California State University Stanislaus. She attended the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, receiving her M.F.A. in 1995. She has exhibited extensively throughout the Bay Area.

EDITORIAL LICENSE

ILYA ZAYCHIK

When we edit our own written work, we implicitly concede that whatever we had written the first time around wasn't exactly what we were trying to get across. If all writing is the desire to 'get something across,' then editing stands as something of a counter-intuitive concept. We think of the manifestation of that self-expression as something akin to a great pressure being released, like a sneeze. It's spontaneous, a function of circumstances such as weather, time of day, location, or God. It's a moment, as instantaneous as every one of life's moments, in which some magnificent process culminates in a real, organic, and beautiful representation of a thought or idea.

In reading, we naturally project that attitude onto the author. We want to believe a great book was created in the same way we consume it: fervently, emotionally, and with rapt attention. For us, it is all about those circumstance and processes and manifestations that make us understand or identify with a story, that make us read it over and over again. He *had* to have written it one night, just as I stayed up all night reading it.

But that is all an illusion, and the proof, in writing, is editing. The idea that whatever I wrote the first time doesn't need any editing because it's direct from the soul, often leads to fairly confusing writing. To the reader, it will seem natural no matter what, but without editing, the emotion or idea or moment I was trying to convey will be lost in my eagerness to convey it. That means giving up the myth that clarity comes in moments, like the events or ideas we try to represent. That means understanding that self-expression is work.

Anyone who's ever spent time polishing a piece of writing knows that its sharpness varies inversely with the time elapsed from the original instant of inspiration.

Now, sending your work to someone *else* to edit is an even larger leap of faith. It presumes that not only is the moment in which you originally expressed yourself an inadequate measure of your self-expression at that moment, it goes on to presume that you yourself are not the best judge of what you wanted to say.

If you edit your own work, it could be said that the piece is a collaborative project between writer and editor, both of whom happen to be the same physical person. The editor, having a different point of view because of the passage of time, alters the work of the writer to conform to what he wants to read. My confession is that I've been the over-bearing editor in this magazine, without the excuse of sharing the same body as the writers. I've riddled most of the pieces on the following pages with track changes and comments, selfishly and compulsively steering the author towards writing something that I'd like to read, or, more inexcusably, something that I'd like to write. I've treated each article like a puzzle, like a game won at an arcade in which I must make a small metal ball sit neatly in an indented rut, and a plastic screen prevents me from accomplishing this with ease.

To the authors who have graciously put up with my manipulative meddling, I beg your forgiveness. To the readers, I hope that perhaps you, too, will consider this something you'd like to read. Should you encounter any mistakes in the text, you can be sure that the editor is to blame.

CHAPBOOKS—WHY?

J.D. SMITH

*Birds do it, bees do it.
Even educated fleas do it.
Let's write a, write a chapbook.*

Okay, so maybe that's not what Cole Porter wrote, or even how Lori Petty's eponymous character quoted him in *Tank Girl* (1995). And maybe the lower life forms find themselves otherwise engaged.

Still, anyone who is reading a niche journal like this—when he/she/undecided could be reading *US Magazine* and eating Cheetos—has a higher-than-average chance of compiling a chapbook or knowing someone who does. And may even have it published. Such is life among the cognoscenti.

But before we pat ourselves on the back, or the front, a couple of questions are in order. First, outside of the safety of the immediate circle of similarly educated friends and colleagues—say, among relatives who still wonder why we don't get real jobs, or people we run into at our high school reunions—who knows what a chapbook is? A working definition of a chapbook is a digest-sized, usually soft-cover book of forty or fewer pages designed to provide a self-contained selection of a writer's work, usually poetry or fiction; its origins go back to a time when full-length books were beyond the means of most consumers and a small sample was all that they could hope to afford. Most people live happy lives without knowing this.

Second, how often do even we literati summon the dollars or cojones to buy a chapbook without ulterior motives? Accepting a free review copy doesn't count, obviously, nor do half-sloshed purchases at conference book tables where we're in fact buying face time with people who just might publish our own work. I mean the primal impulse that got us into the whole lit game to begin with—getting something because we'd like to read it, because we like to read.

The answers to these rhetorical questions are probably disheartening, at best, and this is not necessarily surprising. As a genre, and as a format, the chapbook in its present form has serious problems

Let's begin with its name. While the English tendency to elide and even swallow consonants might make the word more pronounceable on the island where the language was born, anyone used to pronouncing consonants as given can only stumble over the word. Great lingual gymnastics are required to separate “p” and “b”—closely related phonetically—and what usually comes out of the North American mouth is “chap (thudding pause) book.” Who wants some of that?

Even for those lucky few who can say the word without sounding and feeling foolish, there is the question of what the hell it means. Chapbook. Hm. A directory of Englishmen, perhaps, or an annotated guide to the Castro. The mundane and archaic truth of the matter is that a chapbook was originally a very slender volume sold by a peddler or “chapman,” a word of Old English origin that in the last couple of centuries has fallen out of use except as a last name. We may get our used books at folding tables set up on the sidewalks of our major cities, but most of us would be hard-pressed to say when, if ever, we've bought a new book from an itinerant peddler.

Changing means of production and distribution, however, are no match for the precious and inbred pedantry of academia and the creative writing business, and the weight of convention. So chapbooks they remain for the present, or “chaps” for the literary insider who must hope his choice of words doesn't put others in the mind

of cowboy apparel or leather-based adult play. There are still plenty of other terms that could be said with a straight face and no need for explanation, or at least prove intriguing. “Microbooks” or “monographs” could serve as an opening bid in the discussion, as could, in our increasingly bilingual polity, “libritos” (Spanish for “little books”). “Libretto” has the same meaning in Italian and could perform the same task, if the term can ever be pried from the dead hand of opera.

So, to paraphrase the late Edwin Starr's musical question, “Chaps—what are they good for?” His background singers' response, “Absolutely nothing,” might be overstating the case. Perhaps their greatest value lies in providing a platform for hand-printing and paper arts, which offer an aesthetic experience independent of—and sometimes superior to—the words on the page. Second, chapbooks give writers an opportunity to assemble work with a certain stylistic or thematic unity that cannot or should not be extended to a book-length manuscript; ideally, the work that makes up a chapbook would be included as a prefabricated section of a full-length collection of short stories or poems. Last, and least, a chapbook can serve as a calling card for the writer who is trying to publish a full-length book or, no less desperately, rack up publications to appease a tenure committee.

One is hard-pressed to come up with other advantages. Chapbooks are largely published through selection in contests, which are frequently marred by cronyism, reading fees that can rival those for full-length collections and, in any event, very long odds. If it turns out that you have written the chosen chap, it is generally printed in an edition of 200 to 500 copies.

How those copies get to readers, when they do, can be seen as either a mystery or a miracle. Some, but far from all, small publishers have started to sell chapbooks through their own websites and/or Amazon, while chain bookstores and the handful of distributors that pull their strings behind the curtain can hardly be bothered with

publishers that offer only a small and inefficient number of titles. Some saintly independent bookstores of the Booksense group are willing to carry chapbooks, but usually only those that are perfect-bound and can pass for full-sized. The saddle-stitched are sadly out of luck, and perhaps rightly so; they become shopworn almost instantly. What writers sell at readings, when they can find venues dedicated to neither bestsellers du jour nor open-mike excreta, appears to pick up the slack. Even then, the price of many chapbooks, seldom less than five dollars for 24 pages or so, scares off many potential readers; those who can afford that price are often too busy or too culturally malnourished to read even that much.

The troubling situation of the chapbook, though, merely reflects the situation of literature in the culture at large. Good writers are rarely good marketers, and for the foreseeable future marketing has the upper hand. Intriguing efforts certainly exist. *One Story* magazine, no more and no less than what the title says, serves a manageable portion of intelligent work, and Gumball Poetry of Portland offers verse-filled capsules in vending machines. A similar effort is underway in Montreal. There, Distroboto outlets, formerly cigarette machines, dispense wee books, among other items, for two Canadian dollars.

Other efforts have foundered. Displaying short poems on buses, subways and their respective stops, for instance, is in principle a grand idea, though it would help if most of the poems were not boring (no small feat in the few lines of large print available) or laughably bad. Most are selected by the same academic-industrial complex that has helped to drive the college-educated population away from serious literature in general and poetry in particular.

What is there to do, then? If one's motives are monetary, the answer is clearly "nothing." That battle is already lost, and may have always been lost, regardless of whatever golden age of literacy makes us nostalgic. The total sales of even the best-known poetry by non-celebrities, and of "literary" fiction, might seem like a rounding

error to Dan Brown's entourage.

Only aesthetic motives, brave and often foolish as they are, can sustain the production of chapbooks and similar short-form publications, which can at least show readers that possibilities exist beyond Danielle Steel's offering of the current fiscal quarter. This will require both writers and publishers to continue bridging the divide between the "high" culture of academic literature and the "low" or "popular" DIY culture of zine stores and performance spaces, as well as make chapbooks and selections thereof available for free downloading and printing; several journals are already doing this. Podcasts and other multimedia formats present an additional range of options altogether.

In the interests of keeping down costs and prices, authors and publishers of these very slender volumes may also need to make compromises with the world of commerce. Obvious choices include advertising and sponsorship, and selling chapbooks by subscription in addition to direct sale. The latter approach, fallen into disuse in recent times, is being revived not without success by publishers such as the edgy (and proudly pulpy) Contemporary Press.

Despair, like failure, is not an option. The alternatives to making our best efforts are all around us—on the bestseller lists, in airport bookshops, and sometimes on our own coffee tables—and they are too frightening to contemplate for long.

J.D. SMITH'S second collection of poetry, *Settling for Beauty*, was published in 2005. He has yet to publish a chapbook. More information about his work is available at www.jdsmithwriter.com.

MICHELE RAMIREZ
NEWSPAPER



BABY STEPS

TOM O'HARE

They say it all begins with a word, and they're right. What they're wrong about is that from the word, as a domino, the rest of the words fall into place mathematically. Uh, what they're wrong about, or what they lead you to believe, is that the rest of the words, after the first one, come easily. They don't. They take time. Maybe if the dominos are set up poorly, with big obvious gaps and holes, maybe then the metaphor makes more sense, because that's how it happens, that's how they come, these words—in short bursts, quick rapid-fire then, stop. Deep breath. Again. That's what happens, not dominos, not gravity, not Divine Inspiration...

TOM O'HARE is currently living in Portland, Oregon, where he paints houses and looks for bandmates.

LAURALEE GULLEDGE
MEANDERING



SIN EMBARGO: AN ATTEMPT AT SELF-
(RE)INTERPRETATION

CELIA LISSET ALVAREZ

For Ramón Saul Sánchez

Last night I found myself literally “dreaming in Cuban.” In the dream, I am leafing through a magazine, and am surprised to find an article I have not noticed before, one of those exposés from “inside the real Cuba.” I am excited to find this article, and turn to show it to my husband, who is a Cuban Studies scholar, both in real life and in the dream. He shows some polite interest, but does not seem to find it particularly remarkable. It begins with a stunning two-page photograph of Cuban children lying flat on the dirt. At first I think all these children are dead, but then I realize they are simply practicing a dance for an upcoming political rally. I move on to the article, in which the reporter interviews one of these children. I become obsessed with trying to figure out whether the boy being interviewed is the long-lost Elián Gonzalez, but the interviewer either does not identify him or is not aware of who Elián Gonzalez is. Suddenly, I find myself in Cuba instead of reading an article about it.

My entire adult political history can be said to be a recurring nightmare of frustrated *cubanidad*, beginning with my shortcomings during the Elián Gonzalez ordeal. Despite having been the ripe old age of twenty-seven during that time, I see now that I was inappropriately naïve before then. I remember being so full of the need to speak out that I logged on to an AOL chatroom on the topic. I was horrified to find no discussion at all there, but rather a volley of slurs about how all us “wetbacks” should go back to Cuba

and stop taking jobs from “real” Americans. The incident had merely provided an escape valve for all the hatred against us—against *me*—that had apparently been seething for too long. What caught me off guard wasn’t the hatred itself, since certainly I wasn’t *that* naïve, but its depth, its ugly melting of all Latinos into one object of pure hate.

Nevertheless, this experience alone was not life-altering. It took Bill Maher’s April 25, 2000 show to deliver the next punch. It wasn’t so much that he referred to the Miami relatives as “the cuckoo, nutty, drunken relatives of Elián Gonzalez” or that he said “they don’t seem to have jobs” because they went to Washington following the boy. It was the way Maher and guest Ken Hamblin ridiculed *Marisleysis*, the name of Elián’s cousin, that most offended me, as if even her name was not worth pronouncing, as if it was more than simply a foreign name, but, rather, a preposterously stupid, inferior one. The comments on cuckoo, nutty, and drunken, even laziness, these I could address. I was not cuckoo, nutty, or drunken. I was a highly educated professional. I could research and bring up stats on drunkenness and employment, I could offer arguments. I could address these comments and potentially even enlighten Maher and those like him. But the name? This was an insult beyond reason, beyond addressing.

Even then I was not changed, however. It took something more personal and visceral, a luncheon comprised of nearly a dozen intellectuals, all of them “Americans.” They spoke of Elián Gonzalez with the detachment one might expect from a group of intellectuals, although not one of them in the fairly sizeable group even contemplated the possibility that the Miami relatives had any sort of valid point. I remained quiet throughout the conversation, until someone, of course, pointed out that I was Cuban. Suddenly all eyes were on me. Here was the venue I had been waiting for, and yet, for some reason, I found myself repeating to them some ridiculous rumor I had heard about how Castro had been told that Elián

was predestined to be his downfall, some sort of *santería* version of the messiah. It seemed like just the kind of Dark Continent secret they wanted to hear. What was the point of trying to *address* someone on some sort of rational level, if they could not be brought to address me, to pronounce my name?

I have never been the same since that luncheon. I lost my ability to circulate among equals. I am painfully aware of being Cuban everywhere, in every social interaction. I am painfully aware that anything I say, no matter how well thought out, might be dismissed by someone who is not listening to me, someone who is laughing at my name.

Since then, I have experienced many such moments, moments marked by an itching inarticulacy that I, as a writer and a teacher, hardly ever feel. It happened again not too long ago at a conference both my husband and I attended. He was reading a paper on Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*. After he and the other panel members finished the presentations, a woman sitting behind me brought up the issue of the “privileged” status of Cubans in immigration. Another woman in the audience challenged the notion of trauma “when all you have to do is put one foot on dry land” to get into this country. My husband, along with another panelist, a Puerto Rican woman who had presented a documentary about Latina immigrants, attempted to reiterate the traumatic rippling effects of immigration. Neither directly commented on the second woman’s “all you have to do” remark.

I was seething.

Was my husband not going to say something brilliant? Was he not going to tell her that saying “all” a Cuban has to do is put one foot on dry land is like telling a slave “all you have to do is cross the Mason-Dixon line”? Where was the outrage? Had she not seen the footage of Cubans hurling themselves into the ocean in one final, desperate, cuckoo, nutty attempt to reach dry land and freedom? Being intercepted by the coast guard and taken back to Simon

Legree? Dying in massive numbers, shot down, drowned, and eaten by sharks in an attempt to find freedom, without even glimpsing dry land? Where was the sympathy? How is this privilege? Had we gotten to such an extreme point of intellectual detachment that suffering had become relative, that one could actually be classified as not oppressed enough? Because more Cubans have made it into this country than Haitians, does that mean that Cubans aren't worthy of asylum? Is oppression a game of numbers?

A few weeks later, I found myself having a similar discussion with one of my students, who asked me what I thought of Ramón Saul Sánchez's hunger strike. Sánchez was then on the last day of a twelve-day hunger strike protesting the dry-foot/wet-foot policy that had recently sent fifteen very privileged Cubans back to the island even though they had managed to get to the old Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys. The bridge was no longer connected to American territory, authorities argued, and so none of the thirty feet involved was technically dry. I found myself explaining to my student what the dry-foot/wet-foot policy was. I felt that old tingly feeling. It's degrading and insulting, I said to her, a travesty of privilege and justice, a cop-out. It's like that annoying game kids play, waving a finger really, really close to your face, all the time chanting, "*I'm not touching you!*" so you can't complain. "But we can't just let everybody in!" my student exclaimed. Then don't let us in at all, I said to her, don't make desperate people risk their lives on some false promise, dangling freedom in front of them like a finger in their face, all the time chanting, "*this bridge isn't touching land!*"

In my dream, I also merged this experience with another attempt at teaching politics to one of my students, something that happened on the same day. She was planning on breeding her dog, and I was trying to convince her not to. I felt that same hopelessness, that same itching inarticulacy. I could do my best, I could get her stats on how many dogs are put down in Miami-Dade county, information on the benefits of spaying and neutering. If, however, in the

end it all sounded like it was coming from some radical vegan weirdo, none of it would register as truth. I had about as much chance of convincing her not to breed her dog as Sánchez had of changing the dry-foot/wet-foot policy.

And so I find myself in Cuba, sitting at an old student desk inexplicably in the back of a lingerie shop. Fretful at the waste of time, I take out my journal, and try to write. As in real life, nothing meaningful comes out of the pen, even though I feel as if, surely, this experience of visiting Cuba has to elicit some sort of good writing. I decide to attempt automatic writing, a practice I find hokey but am willing to try out of desperation. I just can't do it, though. I can't stop myself from writing planned-out, empty sentences. Finally, I just start drawing squiggles, and it's then that I notice all the carvings on the wooden surface of the desk. All sorts of phrases have been scratched into the wood, and all of them betray an urgent frustration. One of them is especially clear: *politicar es politiquéo*. I am excited about this find: here is proof, proof of the pain of Cubans. I take out my digital camera and start taking pictures of the desk.

From the back of the store, a tall, thin woman in a neat bob, an American woman, approaches me. "Excuse me," she says, "but I can't help but notice that you are a tourist. Would you like to join us in protesting the embargo?" I am infuriated by the request, and immediately jump up and start screaming at her. How dare you, I say, "how dare you presume to know what is good for the Cuban people? The embargo may be slowly starving them to death, but it's all they have! Can't you see that? It's the only hope they have!" In my vehemence, I start waving a brown paper bag at her. She begins to shrink from me, as if afraid that I might hit her. I realize what she's thinking, that I'm some cuckoo, nutty, drunken Cuban, so I try to tell her: "I'm not some lazy nutjob, you know, I'm a professor!" This stops her from running away, and I start to tell her about the dry-foot/wet-foot policy, and what a travesty it is. As she begins to listen, her face starts to turn into that of my student, the one who in

real life asked me what I thought of Sánchez's hunger strike. Then I wake up.

It was a strange sensation of fulfillment. I don't know whether I succeeded in convincing that woman not to protest the embargo or not, but, at the moment when her face turns into that of my student, I know that *she is listening*.

I woke up feeling Cuban, entitled to speak as one, you might say. I felt that I had finally succeeded where so many times before I had failed: at the luncheon, at the conference. I don't really know why the resolution of the dream, and hence of my *cubanidad* crisis, should hinge on the issue of the embargo. In real life, I'm not as unquestionably in favor of the embargo as I once was. It's starting to smack of the same hypocrisy of the dry-foot/wet-foot policy: "I'm not hurting you!"

If we look at it from a Freudian perspective, however, it becomes an issue of language. *Embargo* comes from the Latin *embargar*, to barricade or impede. Thus, the Spanish phrase *sin embargo*, which is used to express "nevertheless" or "however," literally means *without impediment*. In the Cuban context, however, *sin embargo* could also mean *without the embargo*. I believe that, in my dream, this phrase symbolized a confluence of meanings: the actual embargo, and my own. I had been living for over six years with a symbolic speech impediment, and I was yearning to speak *sin embargo*. I was yearning to inhabit my Cuban self with the ease of my husband, who did not stoop to attacking the "all you have to do" woman, or with the heroism of Sánchez, who I'm convinced was willing to die to make his point.

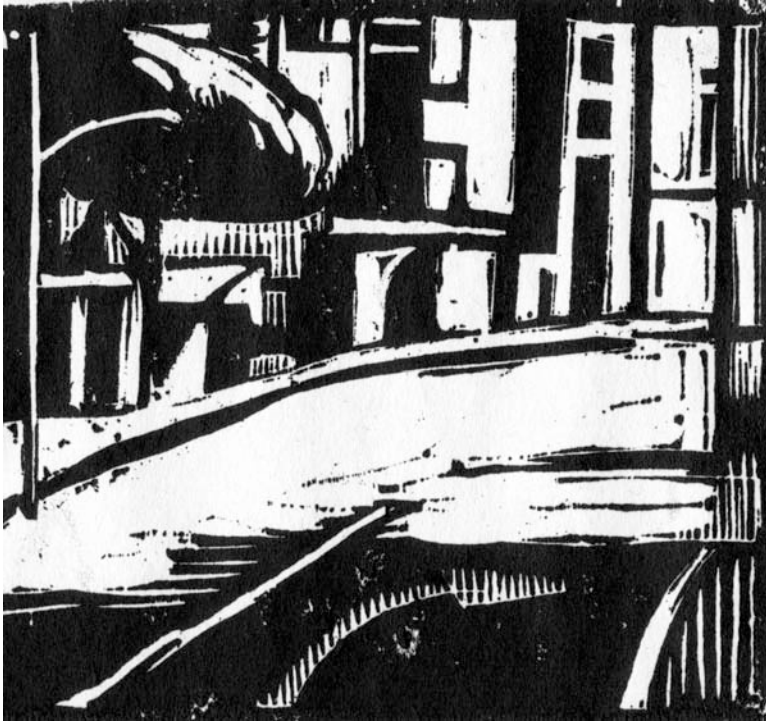
Sin embargo, it's not this phrase that provided the catalyst to my awakening, but, rather, the one carved on the desk: *políticar es polítiquéo*. This phrase is comprised of two very similar terms. *Políticar*, I guess you could say, is a verb meaning *to talk politics*. *Polítiquéo*, *sin embargo*, is a derogative noun meaning *political babble*. In other words, the frustration of the carver, possibly a student forced

to toe the party line, with no better outlet for her frustration than an anonymous carving on a piece of wood, is that all politics are nothing but babble. This is the revelation that Maher and my luncheon companions had impressed on me years earlier, that the line between *políticar* and *polítiquéo* is easily blurred.

Sin embargo, this anonymous carver in my dream was still angry enough to take it out on a piece of government-owned furniture. Herein lies the lesson of the dream: all those students carving their anger on that desk, subjecting themselves to harsh punishment, no doubt, had they been caught, all of them, *sin embargo*, did it anyway, so eager were they to speak. How could I, with access to freedom and language—not to mention the materiality of intellectual production: paper, pen, computer—how could I give up trying to express myself? Would that not constitute some form of sin, a sin of self-embargo? The therapeutic value of the dream, in a Jungian sense, was its ability to reveal to me that it is not eloquence that matters in terms of speaking in Cuban, or even the venue; what matters is the rebellion of the act, simple phrases carved on a wooden student desk. I have to speak, like all Cubans, *con embargo* or *sin embargo*, with or without impediment.

CELIA LISSET ALVAREZ is a writer, poet, and teacher living in Miami, Florida. Her first collection of poetry, *Shapeshifting*, was declared the winner of the Winter 2005 Spire Chapbook Contest and will be published by Spire Press in 2006. A second collection, *The Stones*, will also be available soon from Finishing Line Press.

MICHELE RAMIREZ
RIGHT TURN



NO MORE FLARED JEANS

UZODINMA OKEHI

Listen to the pundits, I suppose. Tack the slogans up, buy the posters, but what you always first learn about Art when you try to go about it is the great multitude of things one can't and shouldn't do.

Then again, life itself is for the most part a burden, an endless saga, and it's only after the fact that one can ever construe circumstances into the sort of two-beat gems that seem so true on paper. What I mean is to refer to that great chasm of bullshit, the one I tumbled right into, hoping at first to become a celebrated artist ... Chasm, as in turn-of-the century New York City, as in the all-too true fact that everyone seems to have a manuscript, a portfolio or something wistfully artistic in hand ... As in something people tell you but you have to go for yourself, something you verily have to see to believe ... Chasm, as in the way you can feel it crushing down on you, that sheer weight of so many forlorn hopes ... As some genius told me at the bottom of one of those nights, baby, *do everything*, leave no stone unturned. *Speak in absolutes, apologize later*. You can scoff at idiots if you must, but sooner or later know that you have to join them, that you have to throw yourself to the very bottom.

Chasm, as in graduate school, where I could barely stay awake during the lectures. I could never seem to latch on to what was supposed to be so post-modern about it, nor could I fathom where it was I might graduate to, other than the confines of some office, and the privilege of being lulled back to sleep by fax machines and groaning copiers. But if not that, then it was back to the same chasm

out on the streets, out in the East Village with my pals where I wore white bell-bottoms and a felt cowboy hat, where I disavowed poetry but then tried to use it whenever it seemed handy, where I could scoff at the concept of money, in cafés, in polite company, but then that was also where I spent away those NYU stipend checks. I lived out real-life nightmares at gallery openings, at avant-garde art parties and poetry slams. I was there that night, for instance, down in that basement in Alphabet City, with that white guy going nuts on his drum set with an assortment of squeeze toys, with blue furballs and rubber muppets raining down into the seats. But that was me there then, any of those nights, in that butt-ass, tight shirt, mauve stripes, like: *jazzy days*, *turpentine nights*, and while it might not have been me up on stage saying that, I was right there in the crowd, and looking none-too skeptical either, as everyone around me burst into thundering applause.

Maybe it's just that we choose our own lot. Maybe it only sounds poetic to make it seem as if we were led down one certain path or another. I thought so much about Art back then, that it became just like money, or like sex, just another lump on that big burden. And maybe there was no end to it! That's what I thought to myself time and time again, my portfolio like a ton of bricks slung across my back, shrugging upstream on crowded streets or perched on stoops in the embers of evening light. Chasm, as in the way it seemed to make no difference what I was wearing or whether there was any money at all in my pocket. But I eventually went to work in one of those offices. Not only that, I also waited tables, I cleaned bathrooms, mopped floors, cut fish, and toiled away night and day on warehouse floors ... Which is also what I mean when I say that I once pulled oars in the galleys of Etruscan longships ... Hand over hand, I dug the palatial tombs of kings ... Another way of saying it was that at long last, I finally stooped and played my part to keep the wheels of civilization turning.

Yet no matter how hard I tried to get with the program I was

always eventually belched back out on the streets ... *Go long*, bottomless chasm, as in the way I had the courage, like stuffing, knocked right out of me, the words stripped off my tongue. Words, which stood for thoughts, which stayed with me through thick and thin. The very thoughts, in fact, that you see me writing here, now, scribbling, lifetimes later, while loafing on the job. You see me with the apron on, with those Hindus handing out the pink flyers with the girl straddling the lightning bolt—One drink, free admission—on the corner of Fifty Second and Eighth avenue, see if you can pick me out ... Here's a hint: No more flared jeans.

My technique with the flyers is to let the Hindus do the bulk of the hustle, because they like me well enough and they don't complain about it. As the night wears on I'll dump a handful of flyers in the trash, here and there, so that I can keep up with my thoughts. If you listen you can hear me thinking, and I'll tell you, it's in the wrist. Because those Indian guys, they can really snap those things out, and they'll even jog along to get your attention. But me, even if you've seen me twice already, even if you look like you loathe my type, with me, there's just the soft-sell, like the flip side of the same coin. And that's what you see me thinking, what you hear me writing, that there's really not two sides at all, no one way or another, just that long fall from everywhere you thought you'd be, in other words, that chasm, and the sense of distance exists, not just in the downtown traffic streaming by, but because sooner or later, with or without Art, Hindu or not, a man still has to find some way to free himself.

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LAURALEE GULLEDGE
SELL THE LIE



A MILLION LITTLE MEMOIRS: IN PRAISE
OF GIVING A SHIT

ELI S. EVANS

My old friend Periel Aschenbrand, memoirist, reviewing Bruce Benderson's *The Romanian: Story of an Obsession* (also a memoir, same imprint as hers) for Paper Magazine, begins as follows: "Had everyone under the sun not decided to torture James Frey for the past three months, my review of Bruce Benderson's book would probably be quite different. So." In the paragraph that follows, she wonders aloud, as it were, whether Benderson indeed *did* everything that, in his memoir, he says he did. Her answer? "I don't give a shit."

This, despite the not-so-shocking irruption of the obscenity, is a familiar enough posture amongst the members, full-fledged or otherwise, of the New York literary scene, and the attitude it betrays is not particularly difficult to decipher. The average reader who is so up in arms about the fact that James Frey fabricated some of his memoir isn't bright enough to understand, this kind of posturing suggests, that we're dealing with literature, here, and literature is above questions of truth and falsehood. What matters, this posturing insists, is not whether he lived this life, but rather that he wrote this book. But it strikes me that if writers who enter the fray of popular culture are good for anything, it is for folding back the skin of the obvious to expose the meat, what's really going on, and if this is the case, then I am not sure that writers like my old friend Periel Aschenbrand are performing their function. We all already know that literature is above questions of truth and falsehood. We can take this more or less as a given. What that doesn't explain, though, is why, in the case of this particular piece of literature, questions of

truth and falsehood seem to matter so much. To blame an uneducated or unsophisticated readership, as most have, strikes me as something of a cop out. After all, literature should teach us how to be its readers. And to blame a sensationalist media, the other option, is, I suspect, equally misguided. The truth is that stories about literature and writers aren't all that juicy when we have wars and sports and celebrities to write about. If this story has earned the media coverage that it has, it can only be because so many people have cared.

Of course, nobody has been more eager to defend Frey than his fellow memoirists, and God knows there are enough of them these days. These days, if you can't find a way to publish a novel, the answer to your problems seems to be to write a memoir, thank you Dave Eggers and the gang, but most of all, thank you Oprah, whose television talk show has fittingly been at the center of this controversy. That talk show can no doubt be credited with the fact that the memoir is now officially the most marketable literary genre, for that talk show is nothing if not a daily dose of the kind of memoir we encounter in the work of all of the aforementioned, the kind of memoir that has, lately, assumed a privileged place on the literary scene.

But what kind of a memoir *is* that kind of memoir? To begin with, it is the kind of memoir in which it very much does matter whether that which is being commemorated really did take place, the kind of memoir in regards to which everyone really does give a shit, like it or not, whether or not it all happened the way it was supposed to have happened. That much, at least, has been demonstrated by the James Frey scandal, which is essentially a case of a guest on the Oprah Winfrey show—it was her book club's stamp of approval and his promotional appearances on her shows that rocketed him to fame, and his book to the top of the lists—lying about his experiences. But the question that needs to be considered seriously by a group of writers who haven't yet considered it, is *why* people give a shit.

The ethic and aesthetic of the Oprah Winfrey Show depends precisely on the experience—most often an experience of suffering, but from time to time others as well, of triumph or of the extreme (a celebrity releasing a new album, or a man who scaled Everest on one leg)—to which the guest bears witness. This is why it doesn't matter if the guests are articulate, charismatic, attractive, insightful, or anything else you might add to that list. What matters is that they have experienced something the audience has not, and will not, because we wouldn't want it to happen to us, or because we won't be so lucky, or courageous enough, or because we are not so talented—an experience from which we are excluded, above all, in circular fashion: it is on television because it is an experience beyond our capacity for experience, and it is beyond our capacity for experience because it is an experience worthy of appearing on television. They come to the show as traces of that experience, as our most direct access to that to which we have no direct access, and it is only insofar as they trace into our existence that inaccessible experience that they are interesting or compelling to us. That the discourse they manifest in their twenty or twenty-five minutes of television is as fleeting and contingent as any real human experience in the world is evidenced by the way in which an episode of the Oprah Winfrey show will inevitably have lost its traction in us already by the time tomorrow's episode begins.

Speaking against the notion of “feminine writing,” the late French feminist Monique Wittig writes: “What is the ‘feminine’ in ‘feminine writing’? It stands for Woman, thus merging a practice with a myth...The words ‘writing’ and ‘feminine’ are combined in order to designate a sort of biological production peculiar to ‘Woman,’ a secretion natural to ‘Woman.’” The contemporary memoirist, in the tradition of Frey or Dave Eggers or, even, my old friend Periel Aschenbrand, produces a body of writing that is consumed not so much as literature, *per se*, as it is as just this kind of natural secretion, in this case not of Wittig's ‘Woman’ but, rather, of Oprah's

'Experiencer.' Its function, entirely myth-like, is to allow us a proximity to an experience we will not have for ourselves, an experience we cannot have for ourselves precisely insofar as the work which allows us access to it simultaneously mystifies it. Again: it is an experience worthy of a book because it is beyond our capacity for experience, and we know that it is beyond our capacity for experience because it is an experience worthy of a book.

But in tethering itself to the myth of the inimitable experience, it fails to be literature. For Wittig, the problem was that when the practice of literature is merged with a myth, like the myth of 'Woman,' when it becomes the accessible trace of that which is inaccessible to us, the evidence of its material production is effaced. We no longer read it as something made, cobbled together a word at a time, but instead as the byproduct of an Experience that exceeds our capacity for experience. What I might say instead, or in addition, is that where the practice of writing is merged with a myth, the myth of a gender or the myth of an unrepeatable or inimitable experience, all of the signifiers of which its product is composed gather themselves up under the singular sign of that myth, and when that happens they relinquish the most essential quality of the literary—the novelistic, perhaps, as opposed to the simply commemorative—which is that it is a space, as Salman Rushdie described it in 1990 before he became the singular sign under which all of *his* work gathered, of "conflicting discourses." Literature is polyvocal: its signs are multiple and contradictory.

In "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer," Susan Sontag writes: "The writer is the exemplary sufferer because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate his suffering. As a man, he suffers; as a writer, he transforms his suffering into art." The point is that the art into which an artist, a writer, transforms his suffering is not the trace of that suffering—one that can be gathered up under the sign of the writer as really having suffered, for instance, what the rest of us have not—but rather that

which transcends that suffering, for suffering is fleeting, temporal, whereas literature comes to us, as the poet Jane Miller puts it, from "a perspective of infinity."

Literature cuts a line of the infinite through the *real* experiences, fleeting and contingent, from which it is inevitably drawn, and so it hardly matters at all if an author, whether he writes a novel or a memoir, has in fact lived the experiences he describes. The contemporary memoir, on the other hand, descended in a direct line from the Oprah Winfrey show, and still very much indebted to it—none more than Frey's, of course—fails to become literature precisely insofar as it merges the practice of writing with the myth of the author's actual experience in the world, an experience whose very mythology is that we who come to the book could not possibly experience it for ourselves, because we would never want to, or we are too smart, or too stupid, or not courageous enough, or not talented enough, or not lucky enough.

All of that is only to say, that while perhaps there is no reason to give a shit whether or not James Frey did or did not live quite the life that he claimed to have lived in *A Million Little Pieces*, there is every reason for us to give a shit that millions of his defrauded readers gave a shit.

ELI S. EVANS lives for at least eight months out of the year in Los Angeles, California, not because he likes it there but because, like Bartleby, he'd prefer not to live anywhere else. His work has also been published elsewhere.

MICHELE REMIEREZ
TWO READERS



DID I TELL THE TRUTH? (A LOOK BACK AT
JAPAN)

KENDALL DEFOE

I don't remember who received my first letter from Japan. I kept a journal during my stay there – several of them – but I did not record the identity of the recipients, nor the time the letters were sent. And this does bother me. I need to know what I said, and how I said it. Let me explain:

I like to write letters. I liked to do as much even before leaving home. I used the internet, but the messages I received began to depress me: bad punctuation, worse spelling, and a sense of paragraph construction that would have caused conniptions in any elementary school teacher. I do admit that the speed of response and the ability to reach many people with only a few mouse clicks appealed to me, but it seemed to me as though the messages were rushed and forwarded without a pause, as the technology would merit. Letters force the writer to consider words and phrases before sending them off. They create the need to think about what comes next on the page. And another factor arose in my decision to continue with the hand-written form.

Japan is a nation where technological advances and solemn traditions commingle and live with one another in a relationship that can be called harmonious. I lived there for over three years and had no difficulty finding Buddhist temples and internet cafes in the same Tokyo neighbourhoods. New and fashionable cellphones and laptops were as easy to obtain as communion with spirits and gods. But the most important discovery was made in the stationery stores. I still regret that I have not seen such fine and affordable goods in Canada. Japan honours the written word with the physical media

available in even the least attractive shops. Not so in our more secular economy, where pragmatic and dull is the rule of trade. There is a specific art in Japan called *washi*, or paper making. The medium itself becomes an integral part of the artist's work, usually through colour, texture and shape. I was lucky enough to discover this and share it with my recipients.

I had a list of people whom I wanted to contact while working as a teacher and writer: my mom, certain relatives, and key friends. I knew that there would be people who would never write back, and that made the idea of writing letters to them on attractive stationery much more exciting: it would be an interesting test of who was able to stomach the most guilt. But, over time, I became more interested in my experiment. The letters would be a source for not only future letters but also stories, and this essay.

I mentioned that I kept several journals. This habit, along with my endless letters, allowed me to compare and contrast what I told the people back home with what I told myself. I did what all of us tend to do when we travel: I exaggerated, or just lied, to please my lucky readers, among whom I could count myself. I could never truly explain the Japanese love of manga and the openness with which graphic sex is depicted in those advanced comic books. I could not explain the feeling one has at the sumo tournaments when the underdog defeats the reigning champion and the spectators toss their cushions onto the clay ring. And I could never explain the food, which is an interesting amalgam of the simple with the ornate. Even the prepared bentos (box lunches) were designed to please both the eye and the stomach. Now taste itself is subjective, but somehow I believed that the presentation helped the food go down easier. How else can a person eat jellied ginger, fermented beans, and the occasional roasted grasshopper?

My letters did not contain all of these details. They were thickened with adjectives and descriptions of my working life, temples, beaches, *izekayas* (bar-restaurants), parks, architecture and people.

These letters did not lack colour, but I felt as though I only captured surfaces in my writing, not the inner details. Yes, the temples were beautiful, but why were they beautiful, and do perceptions of beauty change when moving from the West to the East? The people were friendly, but what was behind the smiles? Is there something about island cultures that makes one more protective of what one has? I felt as much in England and, being the son of former island dwellers now living a world away, I felt that I had some insight into this. But my letters were not exploratory; they only played to the particular level of the readers' perceptions about what Japan should be, not the actual experience of living in that land.

Perhaps my love for the stationery was to blame for my feelings and the discontinuity between the letters and the journals. The art of the writing material—so unfamiliar to Canadians—forced me to say what I should say as a Western transplant experiencing the charms of the Far East. It was dishonest to allow that tension to enter my writing and disrupt the clearer picture I had formed of the culture and environment.

But an audience is very important to a writer. It can be more important than the writer's own thoughts and prejudices. This explains the tone of those letters. Anything that my mother received would have the basic tagline that everything was fine: the weather was fine; the food was fine; the work was fine; the social habits of the Japanese were fine. With my brother and his family, I could go into details about social relationships, friendships and the life in our shared house (I lived with a group of expatriates who displayed every possible juvenile vice). Friends would receive a lot of personal information that they never expected or wanted. A journal, however, never required such gradations. There were fewer gaps to fill, since I was my own audience.

I began this essay with a complaint, but it was a selfish one. I would like to remember who received my first letter so that I could ask that person how much they learned from it. I reserved some

observations for my journal, but I wonder about how much truth escaped my own self-censorship. What if those letters got mixed up in the mail? Anything is possible.

LAURALEE GULLEDGE
TRUTH DISPENSER



KENDALL DEFOE finished a master's degree at McGill University without actually taking it with him when he graduated. He is working as a teacher of English as a Second Language for three different schools and hopes that the stress of this cancels out any feelings about his incompetence as a teacher. He is also a contributor to a web site called Suite101 (www.suite101.com), using his advanced knowledge of Shakespeare and Milton to write about music from the seventies (the nineteen - seventies). He will continue to harrass the managers of this page from time to time with his half-digested ideas and insinuations. And he is thirty-three years youngish.

BONNIE RUBRECHT

Across the black and white pages of newspapers, in the hands of rushed commuters on the New York City subway, are headlines that speak of disaster, poverty and violence. The people are shuttled away to their everyday lives. Though their interaction with the written word is brief, it is one that impresses a growing sense of urgency. Newspapers confront us with difficult realities for a moment, before we go on with our lives. The problems facing the world are left strewn in crumpled piles around the interior of the abandoned trains.

One sunny winter day in the South Pacific I found myself facing a crisis. I stood in front of a class of students, all about 17 or 18 years old, holding my paperback copy of *Othello* and writing archaic English words on a dusty black chalkboard. The students at their wooden benches in the cement classroom on the second floor watched me attentively. I had come to realize that only two or three students from my class would be able to pass the British board exams required for them to go on to university. The rest would be faced with a life in the islands, where poverty and a stagnant economy reduced possibilities for the future.

I stood at the front of the room lecturing on Shakespeare while the students took notes. Afterwards, as they disappeared into the desolate school yard, I contemplated the situation. While I had never considered books a superfluous printing cost or pictured a place without libraries, here these things were simply not pragmatic. Literature had influenced my own education immensely, but that day the texts I stood on seemed to waver.

In New York, years later, I posed this question to a Rwandan playwright at a language panel: how can you justify fiction and poetry in the face of a world looking for realistic solutions to basic needs? The playwright replied that literature was one of the foundations of culture. Beyond that, and more importantly, he said that we need the words of those who have lived before us to serve as a witness to the past, and in doing so help us understand our own humanity.

When I was in college I stopped studying English in order to study something that felt more practical. What I didn't realize was that I was sacrificing the very thing that had given voice to my own experiences. It was through the poetry of Romantics like Shelley and Byron that I had found familiar expressions of grief written in a way that transcended the time. In Langston Hughes I found pained cries for social justice.

While I was in high school I stole Rilke's novel from a friend's sister and it changed the way I understood relationships and myself. What I could not articulate became tangible through his ethereal descriptions of self-reflection.

The texts that we read allow us to reach through time and space to connect with realities we cannot otherwise fathom. Reading literature sharpens our perspective and helps us become aware of the world around us; we are forced to reexamine who we are.

The students of the tiny island nation of Tonga in the South Pacific wrote essays about *Othello* in which they drew connections to their own lives; they were able to find part of who they were in Shakespeare's writing. We, too, have to find the relevance that comes through iambic pentameter across the ocean to the chalkboard and the student.

The question I posed to the playwright is a difficult one, and the answer must resonate above the noise of corruption, loss and indifference. Our lives will be different because of what we read. Who will be the witness to the events that you are living through, and

who will be the reader, lost in a book on the subway, learning again
what it means to be human?

MICHELE RAMIREZ
THREE WRITERS



BONNIE RUBRECHT is a poet and writer living in Boston, MA.

THE FINAL GURGLE OF THE WESTERN MIND

DANIEL IMMERWAHR

In 1829, Thomas Carlyle looked around him and saw a world in the process of ossifying. “Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand,” he wrote. “We are no longer instinctively driven to apprehend, and lay to heart, what is Good and Lovely, but rather to inquire, as onlookers, how it is produced, whence it comes, whither it goes.” And at the end of this process, thought Carlyle, was a grand stupidity—a human race empowered to move mountains but too impoverished to think clearly.

I can never tell with Carlyle if he actually believes what he writes or if he’s just a show-off with a knack for fiery, Old Testament rhetoric. But his complaint bothers me. It bothers me because I read it, again and again, in his successors. Marx, Ruskin, Morris, Nietzsche, and dozens of others great thinkers make the same observation: that people are slipping into a narrow-minded idiocy, increasingly incapable of evaluating the world around them. Except by the time it gets to the twentieth century, the warnings get more shrill. Huxley speaks of brain-death by cheap thrills and Orwell’s got a similar story. The Frankfurt School starts worrying that pretty soon nobody will even be able to be able to be able to think critically enough to *complain*.

And then something else happens. Around 1950, the warnings stop. Good-natured optimism wins the day and the dissenters start babbling in incoherent tongues. Nobody talks clearly anymore. A tidal wave of turgid reasonableness drowns the last of the

naysayers. Things seem pleasant. Everything feels...fine.

Sometimes I wonder who, in the end, was right. And then I wonder: *how could we ever know?*

DANIEL IMMERWAHR is a graduate student at UC Berkeley, and the author and editor of *Investigations*, a zine that directly inspired this one. He has also co-written a new zine, *Lunching Out*. Daniel can be reached at dsi5@columbia.edu.

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