

**Dani Spinosa—*Making Things Happen***  
**Review of *Poems in Response to Peril: An Anthology in Support of***  
***Ukraine* edited by Penn Kemp and Richard-Yves Sikoski**  
**(Pendas Productions/Laughing Raven Press, 2022)**

The anthology *Poems in Response to Peril: An Anthology in Support of Ukraine* (2022), edited by Penn Kemp and Richard-Yves Sitoski, works to answer that question that poets have long been so bothered with/by, “what does a poem make happen?” and more importantly, “what does a poet make happen when faced with tragedy, atrocity, and global violence?” Born out of conversation between Kemp and Susan McCaslin, the book questions “the role of poet as activist” (xiii) and while it is optimistic about the great power of the poem to bring awareness, it persistently asserts that “there was [is] still more to be done” (xiv). This anthology also brings up the important point that war in Ukraine serves as a “catalyst” (ibid.) for this anthology, but the book makes clear that there are other serious global tragedies brought to the fore here, and that it is interested in bringing the reader to “see the human tragedy of all the world’s conflicts” (xiv). It’s a smart and worthwhile clarification that helps contextualize the larger project.

This anthology has a varied and, indeed, CanLit star-studded list of contributors and several excellent poems therein. A standout is contribution from Tanis MacDonald, the poet-professor who long ago taught me all I know about elegies. In her contribution, MacDonald writes a poignant, thoughtful, and political elegy that questions, above all, how to mourn one death in the face of so many, and how to continue life as normal with the knowledge that, elsewhere, the violence persists.

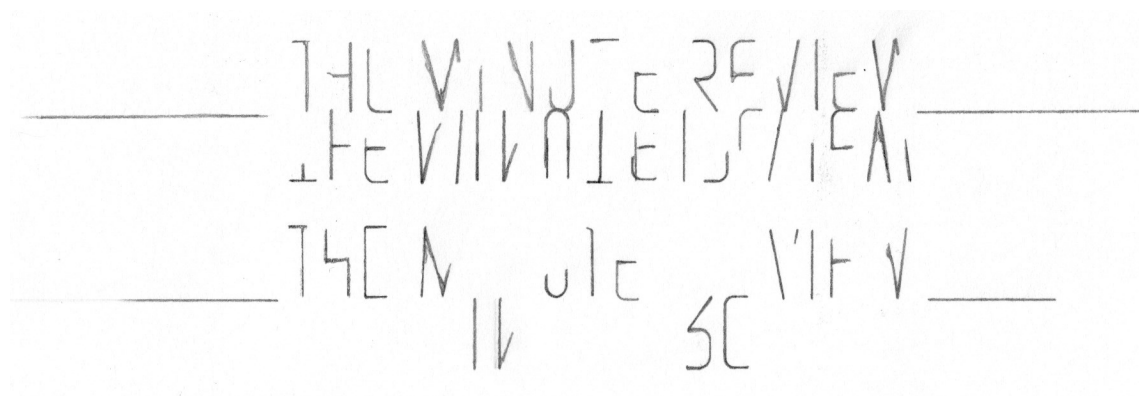
I want to also point out the lovely bonus in the inclusion of QR codes in the back which highlights the role of the playlist of videos/readings that was the start of this project. In all, this is a thoughtful anthology that shows a community coming together. It was a pleasure to receive and read through, and a crucial thing for these poets to *make happen*.

## THE MINUTE REVIEW

Vol. 2 No. 5 (September 2022)  
a little magazine of poetry, prose, and reviews

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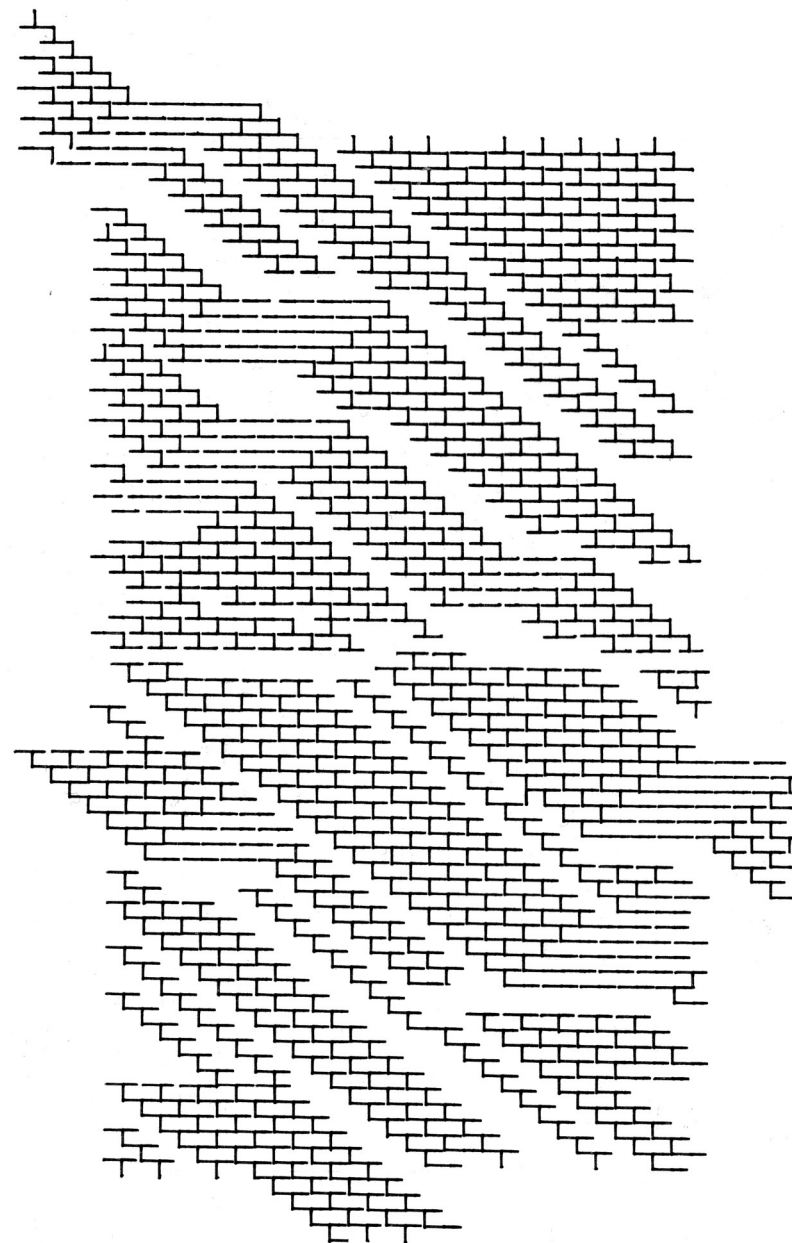
**Greg Thomas—review of *Concrete Poetry: a 21st Century Anthology* edited by Nancy Perloff (Reaktion, 2021)**

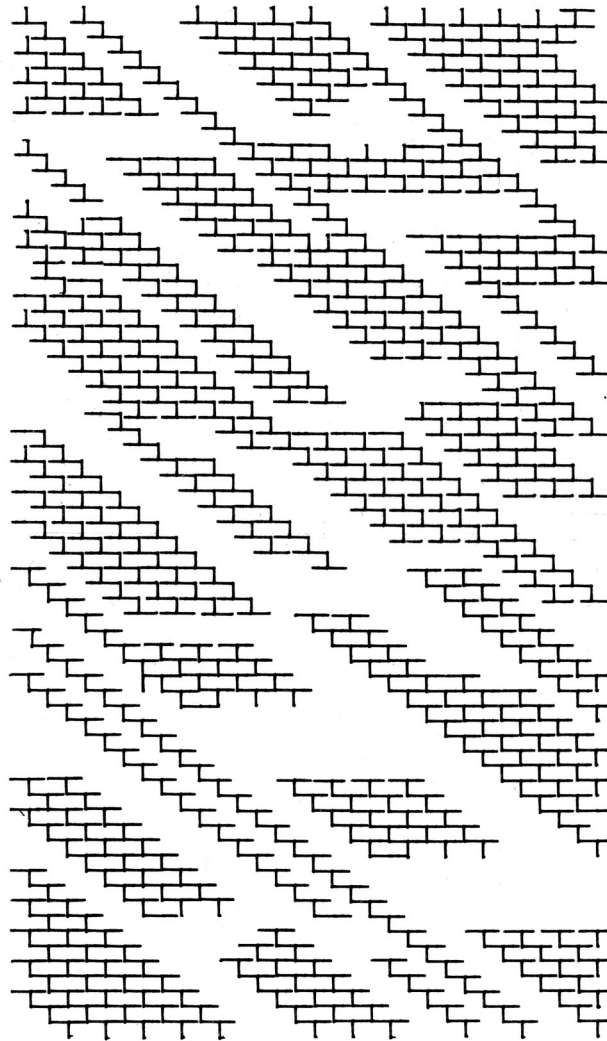
As recently as a decade ago, concrete poetry was still routinely passed over in anglophone criticism as a kitsch footnote to twentieth-century literary and artistic history. When the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth derided the style at the peak of its popularity in 1970 as “a simplistic and pseudo-avant-garde gimmick”, he set the tone of its reception for decades to come.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the methods of concrete poetry—in essence, the presentation of language as a visual or otherwise materially arresting entity—have proved enduringly engaging. Over the last ten years or so, there has been a critical re-evaluation of the style among English-speaking critics and audiences, with publications and exhibitions reinserting the work of concrete poetry’s major figures, including Ian Hamilton Finlay, into a context from which their defenders had often sought to extricate them, while reappraising less feted contemporaries.

Among the most significant of these projects was the 2017 exhibition *Concrete Poetry: Words and Sounds in Graphic Space* at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, which drew on the institute’s collection of prints, artists’ books, journals and manuscripts. Curated by Nancy Perloff, it presented a range of two- and three-dimensional forms, including the “poemobiles” of Augusto de Campos and Julio Plaza—a series of object-poems resembling pop-up books. As such, Perloff is well-placed to present the first major anthology of the historical movement since the 1960s. Her ethos for doing so is that a “revisionary” approach can now be attempted. Whereas the editors of early concrete poetry anthologies were duty-bound to capture the breadth and scale of a burgeoning international style, it is now possible, Perloff argues, to “discriminate between the more and less important of these many poets and perspectives”. She takes an avowedly “personal” approach to this task, with a particular attentiveness to the formal dimensions of the work presented. “Spare does not mean easy”, as her introduction notes, and concrete poetry’s tendency towards linguistic minimalism should not be mistaken for a glib or decorative use of semantics. At the same time, a visual and, in some cases, sculptural vocabulary founded on Concrete art and Constructivism is integral to poetic effect. Indeed, it was a failure to grasp the allusive richness of extra-linguistic affect in concrete poetry that led many literary critics to dismiss it as thin or childish. Perloff, by contrast, is attentive to the many dimensions of expression through which the most interesting concrete poems are manifested.

An example will suffice to show how Perloff’s approach teases multivalent complexity from apparent superficiality. Taking De Campos’s poem ‘Codigo’, which might seem to evidence the claim that concrete poems are no more interesting than graphic advertisements, Perloff notes: At the centre of this poem is the famous palindrome “god/dog”. Additional readings, which result from

**Paul Prudence—*Backspace Drawing 10***





dividing “codigo” in two, yield “digo” (I say) and “co-digo”, a neologism that suggests a collective statement. The entire poem can function as a representation of the world evoked by the shape of a globe spinning through the ideogram.

Such attunement to the minutiae of semantic and sensory play is what is required to bring concrete poetry to life. The readings attached to each piece, furnished with engaging and presumably hard-won biographical and cultural vignettes, bear out Perloff’s claim that a revisionary anthology can open “a window on to how to read concrete poetry and how to explicate the subtleties of its language and its visual and semantic density”.

Among the other important practitioners to whom similarly close and lucid attention is offered are the Japanese Sei’ichi Niikuni, whose Kanji ideographs contained inbuilt pictorial dimensions, and Ernst Jandl, an Austrian master of the performative and neo-Dada elements of Concrete experiment, whose recital at the 1965 International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall, London, received rapturous applause. Mary Ellen Solt, one of the few women associated directly with the Concrete movement – rather than with the wider fields of language-based art and visual poetics that encompassed it—saw concrete poetry as an evolution of the use of spacing to track demotic speech rhythms in the work of her friend and mentor William Carlos Williams. Her own works, however, sometimes tended towards pictorial form, as in her 1966 collection *Flowers in Concrete*.

On some matters, Perloff’s editorship is less attentive—perhaps deliberately so. Much recent writing on concrete poetry has been concerned with the cultural, political, technological and economic circumstances for the movement’s emergence after the Second World War. Although individual poem readings gesture towards these wider concerns, a different editor, more preoccupied with the sociological dimensions of literary and artistic history, might have made more of the dynamics of information transmission in the age of mass media, 1960s counterculture, space travel and the transnational imagination, and early computer technology as enlightening contexts. When Perloff asks why “similar ideas emerge[d] in such different geographical locations” from the 1950s onwards, her answer remains largely within the formalist terrain of asserting “the need [...] to rediscover the early avant-garde”, a statement that yields several further “whys”.

On issues of selection and exclusion, the decision to elevate the Austrian poet Gerhard Rühm to a position of equal significance to De Campos and Finlay as among the pre-eminent figures of concrete poetry will come as a surprise to many. So too will the decision not to grant the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer comparable status. It is broadly, although not universally, accepted that Gomringer and the São Paulo-based Noigandres group (which includes De Campos, his brother, Haroldo, and Décio Pignatari) defined many of concrete poetry’s original traits. Certainly, they coined the term “concrete poetry” to identify a

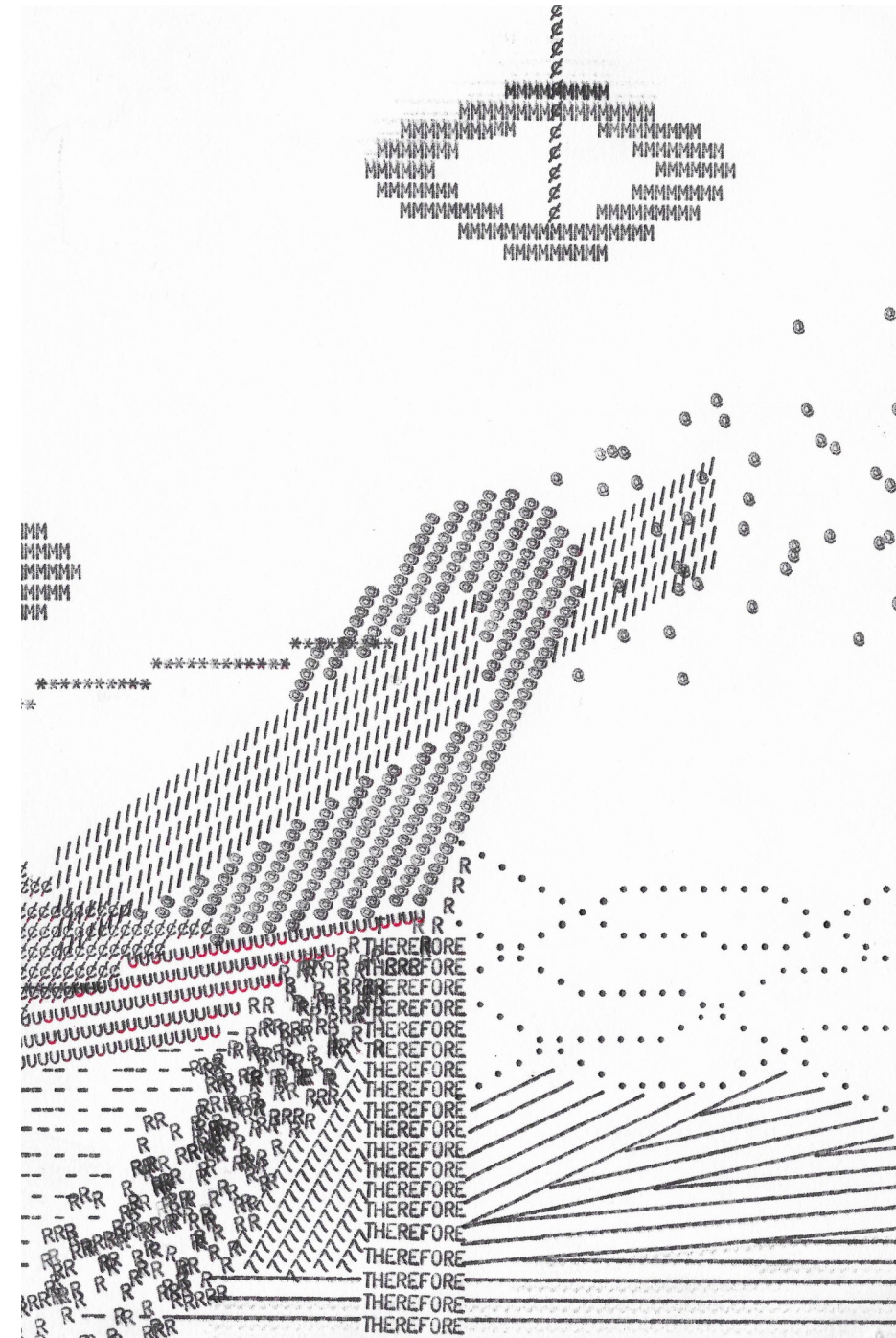
number of shared aims after a meeting between Pignatari and Gomringer at the Ulm School of design in 1955.

Gomringer's iconic minimalism—with roots in Northern-European Concrete art and strong connections to post-war artistic grammars of mourning, reflection and meditation—was vital to the qualities with which Concretism became associated, although it perhaps does not suit Perloff's lively and intellectually probing style. Rühm, by contrast, was connected to the cabaret-oriented activities of the Wiener Gruppe. Their output included intermedia happenings that uncannily prefigured Fluxus, and dialect poems—the multivalent semantic connotations of which are expertly unpicked by Perloff. The Wiener Gruppe was one of various neo-avant-garde groups working in a style adjacent to Gomringer and the Noigandres in the 1950s who utilized the term “concrete poetry” to articulate certain elements of their activities. Although Rühm can be counted as one of a large number of globally dispersed concrete poets who achieved striking invention within the constraints of the form they helped to develop, his œuvre nonetheless lacks the spectacular development into three-dimensional world-building, as achieved by Finlay, for example.

The construction of hierarchies based on assertions of quality inevitably invites such queries, with different issues raised by different readers based on any number of contingencies. Despite this and despite questions of inclusion—are John Cage and Carl Andre really concrete poets?—this is an exciting and engaging summary of an important and still misunderstood field, the value of which lies in the intelligence and sensitivity of Perloff's close readings.

Note: This review was originally published online at *Burlington Contemporary Journal*: [contemporary.burlington.org.uk/](http://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/)

### Kevin Stebner—*Nothing Else*



rob mclennan—review of *One Small Saga* by Bobbie Louise Hawkins (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021)

BARBARA [HENNING]: Did you get there?  
BOBBIE [LOUISE HAWKINS]: Oh God, nobody ever gets there.

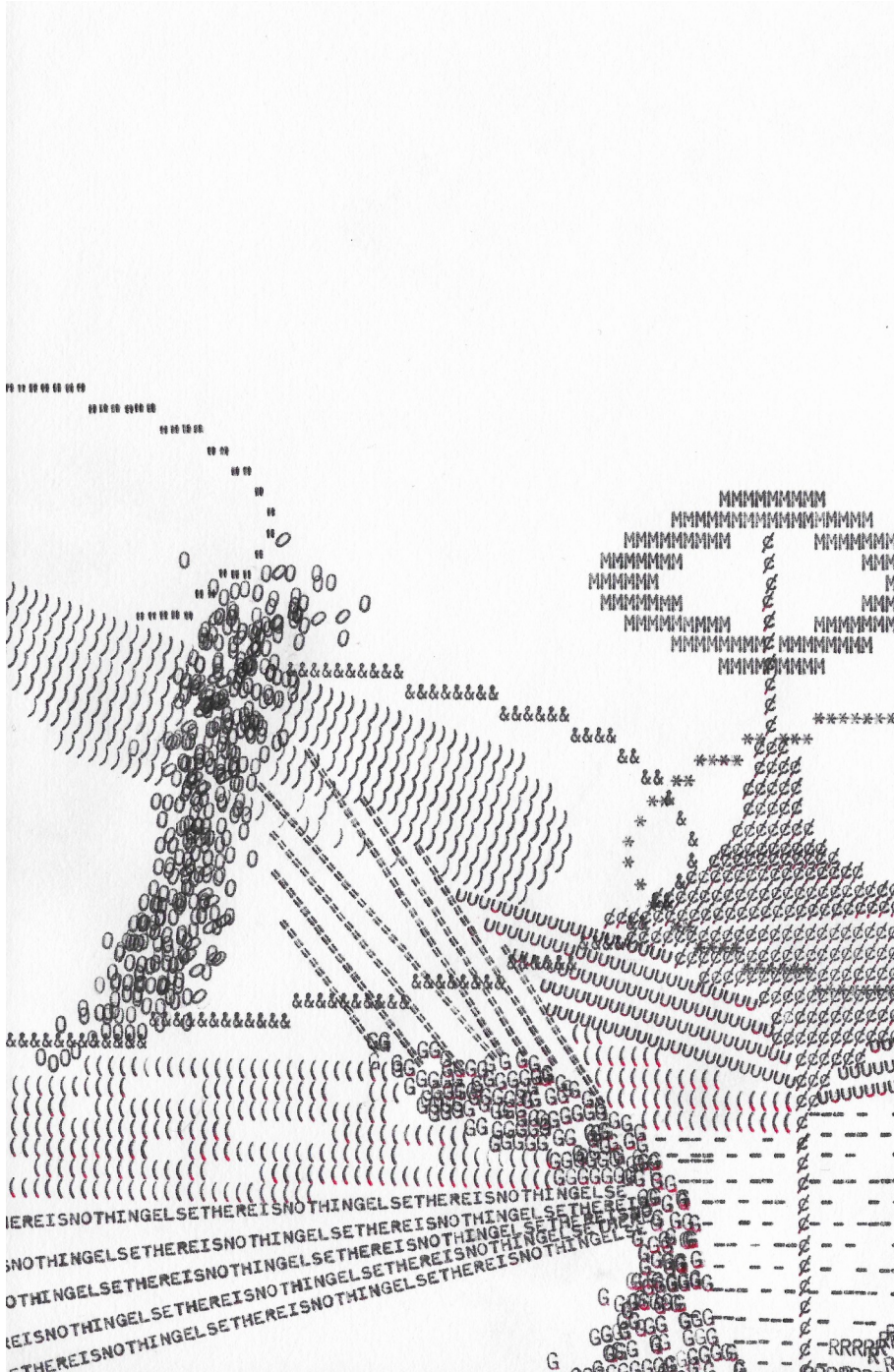
During pandemic mornings lifeguarding our young ladies in their e-schoolings, I sit on the couch with notebook and pen, amid various drafts of in-progress short stories, and a copy of Bobbie Louise Hawkins’ reissued 1984 novella, *One Small Saga*. Produced with a new introduction by Laird Hunt and Eleni Sikelianos, as well as a long out-of-print short story, this new volume also includes a lengthy excerpt of an even longer interview that Barbara Henning conducted with Hawkins across 2011. Throughout the book, Hawkins’ prose is sharp, attentive and coiled. Her prose is descriptively expressive in this really lovely subtle way.

I’ve been attempting to be more proactive about seeking out prose that strikes my attention. It isn’t as easy as one might think: as an active reviewer, I’ve received books in the mail almost every day for more than two decades, but the kinds of prose that really strike are few and far between. Lydia Davis, Sarah Manguso, Miranda July, Anik See, Kathy Fish, Heather Christle, Lorrie Moore. I pour through literary journals and pry open envelopes, but much of what I encounter reads as too straightforward; narratives that might be easier to adapt into film, but harder to hear the music of the language.

As part of a post-reading panel at the Ottawa International Writers Festival in October 2007, the late Quebecoise novelist Gil Courtemanche complained heavily about English-language North American novelists. “You don’t want to write books, you want to write stories,” he proclaimed, thanks to my notes from the time. He was on a panel alongside British writer Marina Lewycka and Newfoundland writer Michael Winter, both of whom he dismissed with a wave of his hand. Courtemanche declared the problem with “our” fiction was that we all wanted to be filmmakers. It was no longer about words, he said. It was no longer about anything more than action. He went on, of course, saying that he doesn’t bother reading North American fiction anymore, because something always has to “happen” in them, and writers can’t just write anymore. *Where is the interiority*, he accused.

He also complained about being prevented from smoking indoors, claiming we were a culture of barbarians. Once he left, we christened a side-room of the festival hospitality suite the “Gil Courtemanche smoking room.” It was where all the conversation occurred.

Hawkins’ is a name I’d heard for quite some time, but never quite got to, in those ways in which we all do, filing an ever-increasing list of names of writers that one wishes to get to, but haven’t quite been able to, yet. Julia Cohen, Paige



Lewis, Rachel Eliza Griffiths. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. In my own way, I do wish to get to everyone, but it does take some time.

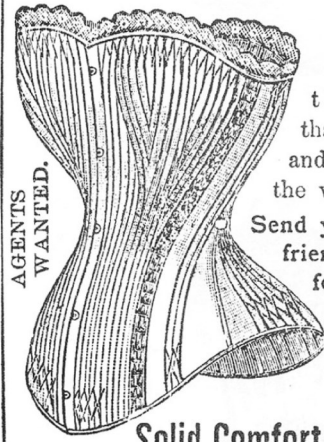
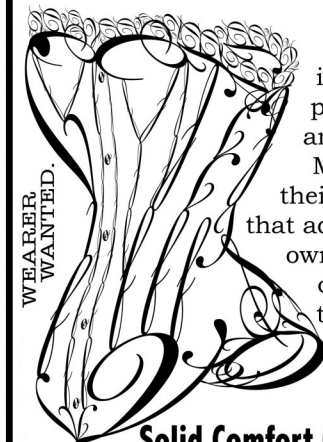
My prior of Hawkins' work was limited to the fact that she published a novel with Coach House Press at one point, and had been one of Robert Creeley's wives. I only mention Creeley for how important his work was for me throughout my late twenties and into my thirties, having spent an enormous time learning through his rhythms and lines, and those other writers that surrounded him, although I seem not to have paid nearly enough attention. I first caught her name through the association, and possibly her Coach House title catching my eye in multiple second-hand shops over the years.

I slip downstairs through our fiction shelves, and there it is, *Almost Everything* (1982), a co-publication between Toronto's Coach House Press and East Haven, Connecticut publisher LongRiver Books. A paperback set amid Elizabeth Hay and Fanny Howe and Sheila Heti titles. A price sticker on the front cover is dated January 1999, \$3.99, from Toronto's late, lamented community bookstore, This Ain't The Rosedale Library. A whole book by Bobbie Louise Hawkins, there on my bookshelf, entirely unread. And so, to begin.

I'm fascinated by the ways in which Hawkins utilized the information of her life to shape fiction, writing out a narrative propelled by observation and commentary, composed over her own situations and experiences. She married a Danish architect when young, and begin to travel; so, too, did the narrator of *One Small Saga*. She was deeply pregnant during the cruise across the Atlantic; so, too, was her narrator. She uses the structures of her own life, but her work is fueled by her observations, her language. Her clipped articulations of what might not have been spoken of in fiction by male writers, or even caught at all. Her paragraphs expand, and then curl into conclusion. There is nowhere to go but the next line, the next thought. The language itself, propels. Hers is the most wonderful music, and one I regret not spending time with before this.

Helen Hajnoczky—*Book About Corsets*

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