

THE MINUTE REVIEW

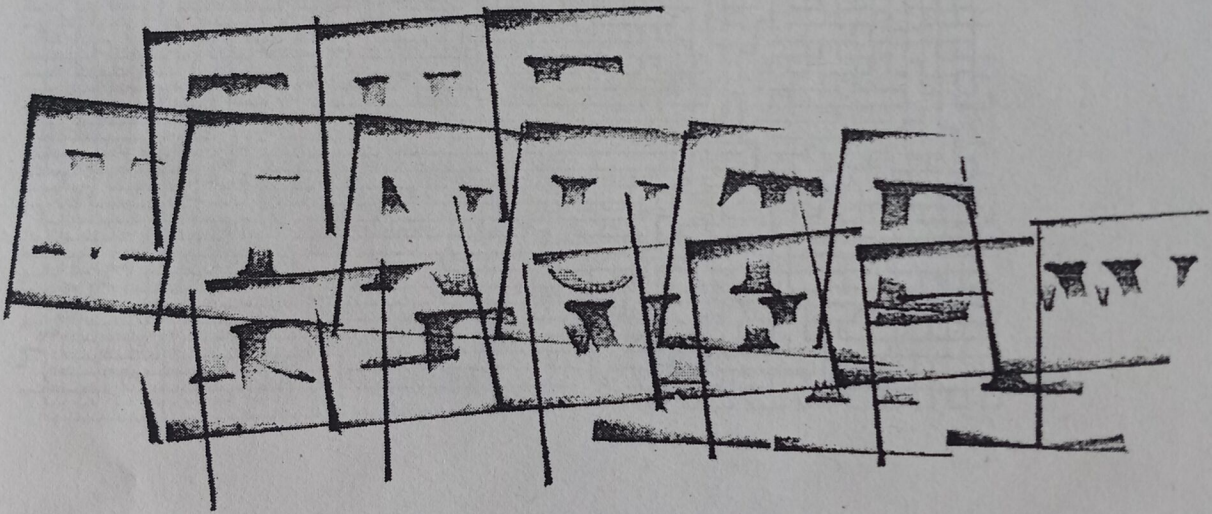
Vol. 2 No. 6 (December 2022)

a little magazine of poetry, prose, and reviews

Derek Beaulieu, editor

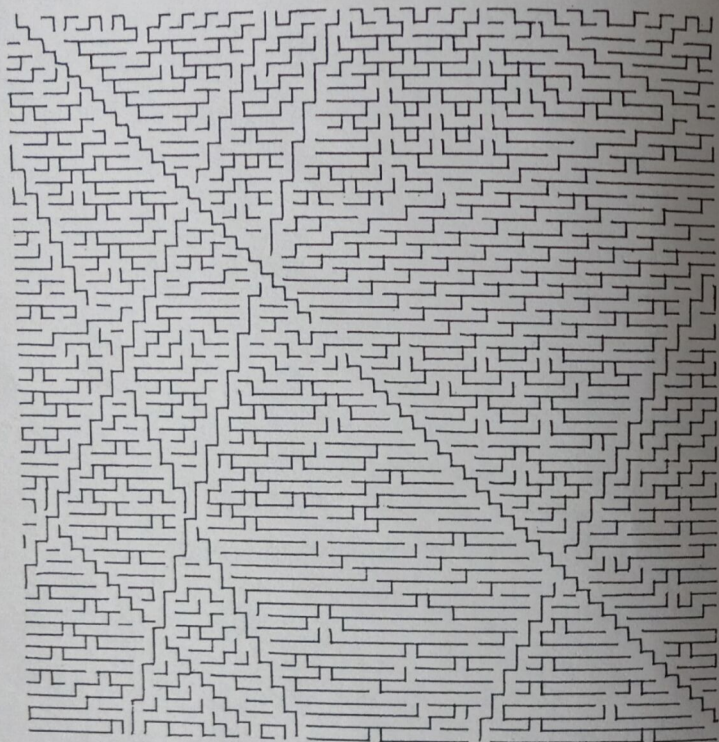
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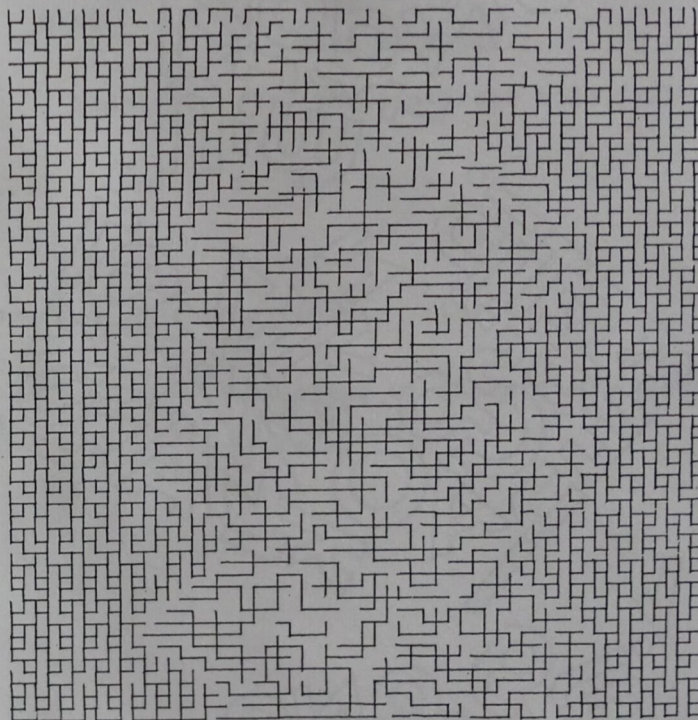


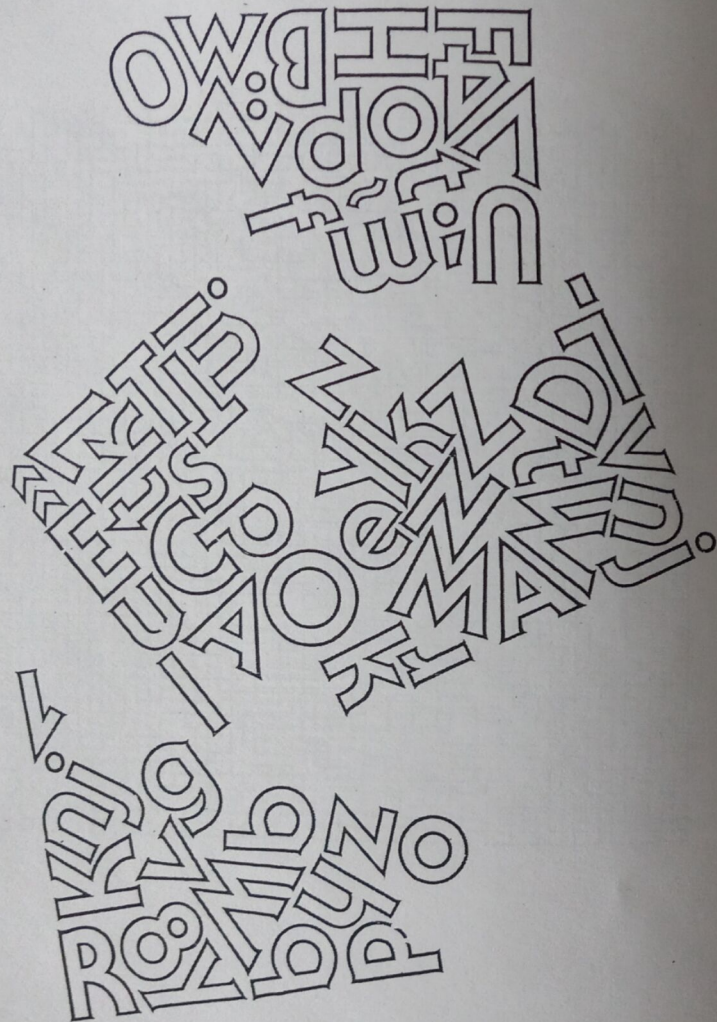
petra schulze-wollgast

Paul Prudence—*A Wiring for the Evolution of Stars*



Paul Prudence—*You Might Not Know an Algorithm Until You've Typed It*





Sunday

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reading in the margins: Kristjana Gunnars
rob mcLennan

I'm appreciating the reminder of how important Kristjana Gunnars' novels were to shaping my early thinking on writing, thanks to *The Scent of Light* (2022), a reissue of her five novels—*The Prowler* (1989), *Zero Hour* (1991), *The Substance of Forgetting* (1992), *The Rose Garden: Reading Marcel Proust* (1996) and *Night Train to Nykoeping* (1998)—in a single volume, offered with a stunning introduction by American poet and critic Kazim Ali. "Perhaps it is not a good book, he said, James Joyce said," Gunnars wrote, to open *The Prowler*, "but it is the only book I am able to write." I most likely picked up second-hand copies of those first three novels somewhere in my early twenties, possibly from the now-defunct Richard Fitzpatrick Books, a store that sat somewhere along Ottawa's Dalhousie Street. Returning to these novels, I'm startled by how deeply some of these sentences resonated, and became foundational for my thinking of, and approach to, composing fiction. The very notion that we write the books we do and in the ways that we do, in large part, because we simply haven't the ability to write them in any other way. How did you do that, someone might ask. Practice, intuition, judgement. The question becomes unanswerable, beyond what might otherwise sound flippant. Experience.

I recently read a passage in Montreal poet Gillian Sze's *quiet night think: poems & essays* (2022) that caught my attention: "Why do you write? was a question that I was often asked, and my answer for both weeding and writing was Rilkean: I must. Yes, there was something inherently futile with every weed I pilled, but I did so stubbornly, thinking of what Mordecai Richler said: Each novel is a failure or there would be no compulsion to begin again." I was struck by Richler's quote (I would be curious of the context around the original source), one that suggests a difficulty around such an adherence to scale: the massive narrative undertakings of his novels, writing hundreds of pages encompassing such a wide swath of detailed, world-building, narrative prose. The scope of works might be comparable to other Canadian writers of his era such as Margaret Laurence or Robertson Davies. Each novel, Richler said. Well, each novel of *his*, maybe. As with the example of Gunnars, my own sense of writing is not to encompass the whole world, or even the whole world of a space, but a particular portrait of a scene or a sequence. I don't agree, I suppose, but it also doesn't apply. But the difference in approach is interesting.

I spent a great deal of my twenties telling myself that I preferred the French-language aesthetic of writing interior monologues over the English-language aesthetic of the exterior description—pages upon paragraphs to describe every inch of a tree, for example, or what colour a particular character's hair might

be—none of which I considered required unless it is actually essential for the story itself. It took years to realize that my prose didn't require dialogue, something I didn't know how to include either way. I wonder now if it was actually through Gunnars that I became interested in novels propelled by language over cinematic scenes, and assembled via a narrative constructed through accumulation. Whatever else a book-length project might be, at least in my thinking, it is less all-encompassing than a kind of lyric, narrative burst, which relate to my early readings of writers such as Kristjana Gunnars, Elizabeth Smart and Dany Laferrière, all of whom also explored the form of the novel as accumulations, and of auto(biographical) fictions. "For eight hours we concentrated," Gunnars writes, as part of *The Substance of Forgetting*, "not noticing time passing. Dawn turned to morning. The sun rose and shone on the water. Once we stepped out and watched the blank stillness of the water. The thick forests of the mountainsides mirrored themselves in the lake."

"I have sometimes thought: it is possible there is no such thing as chronological time. That the past resembles a deck of cards. Certain scenes are given. They are not scenes the rememberer chooses, but simply a deck that is given. The cards are shuffled whenever a game is played." I held on to this passage of *The Prowler* for more than a decade. Thinking back on it now, the notion of memory as a deck of cards shifted the foundations of how I saw the construction of narrative prose. A deck of cards, or a photo album: each section imparts the possibilities of the next. The novel I fumbled to compose across the mid-1990s, titled "Place, a novel," was a collaged-suite of self-contained bursts that attempted to hold itself together across a very loose narrative, akin to how my twentysomething self understood Gunnars' novels. It didn't cohere, but it was certainly the narrative structure I furthered across my two published novels—*white* (2007) and *Missing Persons* (2009)—as well as my current work-in-progress. As Ali writes as in his introduction to the new edition:

The struggle of the writer to transform or transmute life into literature in a meaningful way may be why in each book there is a fluidity of time (the story as it happens, but also the narrator writing the story) as well as place (Denmark/Iceland, Winnipeg/Portland, BC, Interior and Coast, Trier/Hamburg, and Denmark/Saskatoon/Calgary). The shifts in time and space are required by the core structure of each book: a writer is writing a book. She writes the book and she tells you about what it was like to write the book.

There is such a lovely and lyric interiority to her passages. Gunnars' novels exist as much through ideas, theory and speculation, writing internal monologues over descriptive scenes, and writing out the ways in which one writes, far beyond simply offering a story told through sentences. As the opening paragraph

of *The Prowler* reads, in full:

Perhaps it is not a good book, he said, James Joyce said, *but it is the only book I am able to write*. It is not a book I would ever read from. I would never again stand in front of people, reading my own words, pretending I have something to say, humiliated. It is not writing. Not poetry, not prose. I am not a writer. Yet it is, in my throat, stomach, arms. This book that I am not able to write. There are words that insist on silence. Words that betray me. He does not want me to write this book. The words make me sleep. They keep me awake.

So much of my articulations on Gunnars' work appear in the past tense, although that shouldn't suggest I'd been absent from thinking about her writing across those intervening years. More recently, I was fortunate enough to produce a chapbook of her poems in 2016, *snake charmers: a cycle of twenty poems*, for an event we were both participating in through the University of Alberta's department of English and Film Studies, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of their writers-in-residence program. A bit later, I produced a chapbook-length essay of hers as well, *a moment in flight: essay on melancholy* (2020). "There are fragments of eternity in all passing things," she writes, as part of that essay, suggesting a clear linkage between those early novels and her current work, although the essay was restructured into a long poem, set as the opening sequence of *Ruins of the Heart: Six Longpoems* (2022). I'm not sure why the difference in structure, but it does alter the flow, just a bit. I am still looking into it.

6 capsule reviews Derek Beaulieu

Two Sides by Kevin Stebner (Non Plus Ultra, 2022)

This slim volume consists of fantastical video-game landscapes and geometric forms, all created on a Remington Performer, a manual typewriter, using only 3 different keys: the slash (/), the underline (_) and the period (.). Using multicoloured ribbons and an incredibly limited palette, Stebner creates breathtaking forms which suggest a poetry of girders and beams, platforms and passageways. Utterly astonishing.

Rooms: Women, Writing, Woolf by Sina Queyras (Coach House Books, 2022)

Sina Queyras' *Rooms* explores how classrooms, communities, and writing is indelibly informed by class, gender, and sexuality. Queyras extends Virginia Woolf's "Room of One's Own", Queyras into a memoir-reflection on the space needed to write, how moments shape lives, and how gender continues to inform artistic decisions and opportunities.

The Very Last Interview by David Shields (New York Review Books, 2022)

A widely interviewed author, David Shields has collaged together over 2,700 questions he has received in print and spoken interviews, from the banal to the boring ... but none of his answers. What remains in *The Very Last Interview* is 22 chapters of questions and assumptions by unprepared interviewers. The reader is presented with a series of questions they can answer themselves, confronting how they see the writing life.

***Leviathan* by Jason Shiga (Amulet, 2022)**

For over 25 years Shiga has created award-winning comics and graphic novels which challenge expectations and playfully explore how we read. *Leviathan*, which seems to be the first of an upcoming series, is a comic book choose-your-own-adventure novel. Small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, *Leviathan* will occupy you—or any younger readers in your life—for a deceptively long time. It will take hours upon hours to explore all the options, the false starts, the tricks and trials as you seek to defeat the terrible sea creature which torments the small coastal town of Cobalt Isles. A treasure.

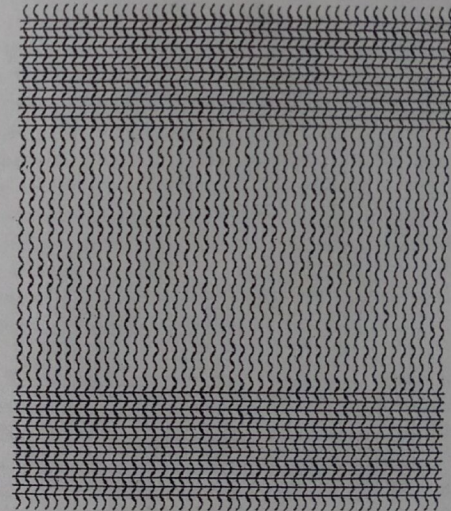
***Optic Subwoof* by Douglas Kearney (Wave Books, 2022)**

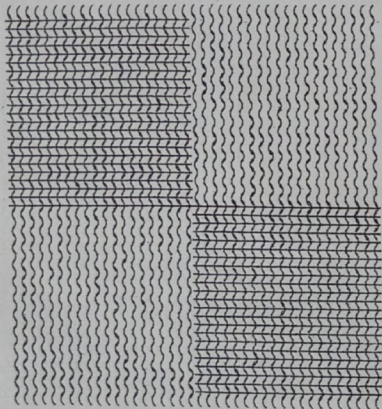
Recipient of the 2022 International Griffin Prize, Douglas Kearney brings a spoken, performative poetry to the page in a form which fully embraces breath and cacophony unpacking the racialized spaces of contemporary poetry. *Optic Subwoof*, published as part of Wave books' Bagley Wright Lecture Series gathers Kearney's talks and lectures—but these are far from dry academic treatises, every chapter crackles with the urgency of voice, politic, performance and dizzying possibility.

***Particulates* by Greg Thomas (Timglaset, 2022)**

Building on the minimalist poems of Aram Saroyan and N.H. Pritchard, *Particulates* does a tremendous amount with very, very little. Here evocative poetic moment like "tpyrc" and "dreamph" stand on creamy fields of open pages, typewriter-like typefaces explore how the grid can evoke musical scores, pages unfold to twice their regular size to allow for graphic banners of full-bleed repetitions suggest infinite wonders. Thomas, a thoughtful critic of concrete and visual poetry, has created a volume which stands in conversation with some of the canonical texts from the '60s to the present.

**Two Weavings
Danni Storm**





'A sensuous monomania'¹: Matthew Tomkinson's *oems* (Guernica Press, 2022)
Susie Campbell

Matthew Tomkinson's *oems* is a remarkable study of obsession in which the poet uses a lipogrammatic constraint for his textual staging of monomania. The thirty-six 'oems', each organised into eight tercets, are composed of 'flat words', that is words which include no letters with an ascender or descender. Tomkinson explains² that his creative process began with going through the dictionary. Only words using the letters a-c-e-i-m-n-o-r-s-u-v-w-x-z were allowed into his poetic lexicon. Words including any of the letters b-d-f-g-h-j-k-l-p-q-t-y were banished. He then used spreadsheet formulas to generate random combinations from his curated list. We are not given any reason for the poet's preference for 'flat' over 'tall' words, but this question is rendered irrelevant by Tomkinson's commitment to 'leaning into' the irrationality of OCD and monomania. Obsession anyway rarely yields satisfactory explanation for its single-minded focus: this is part of its mystery and generative power. The success of Tomkinson's poems is such that we entirely inhabit their flat universe without asking such extraneous questions. And these poems are anything but flat tonally. Some ripple with a light humour, finding serendipitous word combinations such as 'craven ravens' (oem viii) and 'minnie mouse on ice' (oem xxxv). Others are heavier, their word pairings hinting at conspiracy and even a possible violence in erasure and constraint; xviii uncovers 'our universe as one massive ruse' while xix worries that 'erasure is a war crime' or that 'evenness means massacres'.

'Evenness' is telling. Tomkinson dubs his poems 'smooths' which in many ways is a more apt description than 'flat'. Despite the cynical tone of some, there is a sinuous and mouthpleasing sensuousness to many of the oems as they curve and twist down the page. Read aloud, they accumulate into a thick creaminess of sound from the sonic mellowness of so many vowel and soft consonant sounds (m, n, v, w), uninterrupted by the thresholds, grittiness and plosive qualities of any 'tall' letters. And *oems* illuminates something fascinating about what happens when obsession is restaged as creative constraint. These lipogrammatic poems find a rolling, tidal movement very different from what can be the binding anxieties of OCD. Tomkinson himself argues that his active embrace of 'formal fixations' reframes monomania as not 'mental prison, but instead: a conceptual playground'.³ The success of *oems* is that it is insistently constrained and yet transforms any sense of entrapment into a dynamic set of word patterns which flow and spread.

But perhaps the most important poetic question this book asks is what does a textual staging of obsession tell us about language? For me, it spotlights the

importance of writing's anatomy, highlighting the way the bowls and curved shoulders of its 'smooth' letters and words bring to the text a distinctive set of tones, textures and temperatures. It exposes an important range of qualities, inflections and meanings to do with word easily buried in the more varied architecture of unconstrained writing.

Notes:

¹ oem i

² <https://lithub.com/five-writers-on-how-writing-with-creative-constraints-unlocked-their-projects/>

³ See fn 2

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Review of *Marginalia Drawings* by Joe Devlin (Timglaset, 2022)
Jane Leonard

Amongst all my many recent international book mail deliveries, my favourite visual poetry/art book purchase of the last year had to be Joe Devlin's *Marginalia Drawings*, published by Timglaset Editions.

The book contains 18 of Devlin's works (digitally printed in black & white) bound into a small volume with a simple grey cover made from recycled cardboard and nothing but an unassuming label in one corner announcing the title and author name. On first glance the volume could be some kind of bureaucratic ledger, but contrary to austere appearance, the works inside are both visually and conceptually rich, and are anything but just 'drawings'.

Initially comprised of many hand-copied jottings, scrawls, lines and notes found in various library books, the annotations gather themselves together in the printed drawings in overlaid clusters and clumps that hum with meaning like some form of magnetic static you can almost hear and feel coming off the pages.

The once separate raw ingredients are barely discernible in the final drawings, merging together to create something powerfully new and whole that takes on a collective life of its own. Looking at the pages is like witnessing a tiny textual version of those massive flocks of birds you see majestically swooping in random formations, or encountering whole hives on the move as the bees separate and mass on top of each other around some central branch. Like these phenomena, the effect of Devlin's creations is to produce a deeply satisfying and very beautiful kind of chaos. Yet a chaos that it pulled together by concept.

Just as much as I love how the *Marginalia Drawings* look, I am also very moved by what they express about what's important in life to me. One of the things I find most sustaining in the world, especially in these last years, is reading and looking at books, that process of engaging with text and images on the page to seek meaning, information, entertainment, distraction or a deeper understanding. The *Marginalia Drawings* capture so wonderfully the essence of this act. With no clue given to the specific words that bore the annotations, or to the readers who did the annotating, what we are left with is a pure representation of people's engagement with text or subject on a page. Each drawing provides a powerful piece of collective evidence of countless anonymous interactions that had provoked in some way, whether negative, positive, passionate, bewildered or indifferent, readers to make a mark on a page. We will never know if the individual notes, lines and scrawls, singled out content that was loved, hated, that resonated, seemed important, was to be questioned, didn't make sense, or represented some other reader reaction. But it doesn't matter, because by bringing them together in his drawings, Devlin offers a brilliantly evocative visual survey of the very essence of reading, one that affirms what I feel to be deeply true: one way or another, books matter to people.