

LEVEL END by Brian Oliu
Origami Zoo Press, 2011
Reviewed by Kelsie Hahn

Brian Oliu's *Level End* opens on a playful note—the chapbook's cover mimics the manuals Nintendo packed in with the old console games, complete with the little sunburst logo and the health warnings we all ignored in our quests for keys, coins, and princesses. What the introduction doesn't tell you, however, is that the warnings are real. Oliu's lyric essays are nostalgic and troubling, wistful, strange, funny, even painful. The struggles of the speaker's life are embodied in the twisted forms of the monsters he must face at level's end, and his (and your) respites are few and inadequate. *Level End* is a small read in that it is twenty-two pages long. In every other way, it is enormous.

Gamers will appreciate the nods to the classics, both in the content and the design—the latter in particular exudes a sense of delight and care in such details as the Final Fantasy title font and the pixel hearts at the beginning of each piece. The hearts, however, are not merely a clever design choice; they add a sense of both progress and tension for the reader as the speaker's health wanes or grows, and they contribute to the heavy, drawn beat of the chapbook's end.

Even readers with little experience or knowledge of video games will revel in imagery both tender and violent as the speaker addresses the strange, wonderful, and terrible monsters he must face, and with whom he feels a connection despite his need to defeat them. "I see myself how you see me, green like a waxy leaf, maybe, green like crawling," he tells *The Eye From Which We See Ourselves* as he waits to be carried, to hear the monster's voice. To *The Gold Robot*, he says:

The cuts on my arms, the burnt skin from hot metal, the smooth charred ends of shocked fingers mean nothing if there is no one to show them to: you, bulbs smoked out, teeth rusted, should be surprised that I made it this

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far, that you are impressed with my character, that it is too bad that my journey ends here.

The speaker both loves and fears these bosses, representations of the people and trials of the world outside the tiny 8-bit one before him. He both regrets and celebrates their demises. This cycle of fighting, and killing, and changing, is somehow better because he shares it with them, even as he cuts them to pieces.

The speaker fixates on the recurring theme of size as he battles bosses who are too large for the rooms in which they live, whose doors they could never fit through. And this book gives the same impression—that it's bigger than it is, that “this place was larger than my heart gave it credit for.” The experience of reading it is bigger than this small book would seem to indicate, and by the end, like the speaker, you will feel hollowed out and finished, and then you will want to play it again.

Video games always warn players to look away for ten minutes every hour. This book carries the same warning. But don't look away—keep ignoring the warning, just as you did for all those hours you sat cross-legged in front of your Nintendo. You cannot stop now, for “There is no leaf. There is no typewriter. There is no saving here.” The speaker cannot stop fighting, changing, or moving forward, just as none of us can.

SUDDENLY, A KNOCK ON THE DOOR: STORIES by Etgar Keret
FSG Originals, 2012
Reviewed by Kelsie Hahn

Etgar Keret's *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door* is a delight. A strange delight, granted, but one that can't only be tasted. It must be savored. You take a bite, you wrap up the rest for later, and unwrap it again to sate a late-night hunger.

This collection can't be devoured in one sitting—it needs digesting. These are stories that stick with you, that echo around in your head after you finish them. It won't do to hurry on to the next story. It won't do to rush.

Keret's stories, within themselves and within the collection, are juxtapositions, pairing the innocent with the evil and the glib with the morbid. These stories explore the intersections between childhood and death, heaven and hell,

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curses and blessings, and many others. Even in Keret's imagery, this contrast is present, as in one instance a stabbed man struggles to survive as "his life leaked out of him like chocolate milk from a punctured carton," pairing a random act of violence with the mundane and childlike.

The rules in these contrasting worlds of Keret's stories are often flexible—whether lies can become real in a secret dimension, tiny zippers under the tongue unzip to reveal a whole new person inside, or a goldfish can grant wishes—and each world is deftly, quickly rendered by Keret so that the rules are never unclear. But many of the stories exist in our own world, where it is the people see the world through a skewed lens or interact in ways unfamiliar, or perhaps all too familiar, to the reader: a husband jealous of his wife's success in a creative writing class, a little boy who clings to his politeness even as his family falls apart, a father who allows himself into the childlike world of simple, single-minded desire for a pleasure as small as a bus ride. These worlds are peopled by characters we can understand, even if we wouldn't necessarily want to know them or to be their friend.

Most striking about this collection, however, is its capacity to hope—one more strange juxtaposition within these stories. In the third story of the collection, "Cheezus Christ," the knowing, frank narrator describes the theory of the butterfly effect, a theory famously illustrated by the example of a butterfly fluttering its wings in Brazil and creating a tornado in China. The narrator explains that this theory illustrates that "the scientists who specialize in probability know that the chance of something detrimental occurring is a thousand times greater than the chance of something beneficial happening." This is the world Keret's characters struggle through, but they struggle for that one in a thousand chance that the ripple will end in a beneficial effect. Keret has been described as Kafka-esque, a comment or a critique that Keret nods to in "The Story, Victorious," saying that this story is better because it listens and because when the public calls for it to stop, it stops. But Keret's stories, for all their dark humor, violent actions and imagery, and the fantastical threats and evil, have a note of hope. It may be as small as an attempt at connecting between a dying man and the shift manager of a cheeseburger shop, the dream that lies can create something beautiful, or the satisfaction for a tortured man that his suffering brings him closer to the state of a god. The people of these stories find solace where they can in a world that is often turned against them, where somewhere, a

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butterfly moved its wing and “evil winds began to blow,” but there is always the hope, the moment, when the evil winds become a caressing breeze.

This latest collection from Keret has all the elements Keret is known for—the fantastic and grotesque, moments of violence, moments of tenderness, all wrapped in bite-sized papers; most of the stories are only a few pages long. But these stories reflect a more delicate balance than his earliest collections. Here is the work of a writer at the height of his craft, a chef at the zenith (so far) of his career. Each piece is perfectly flavored to leave the taste on the tongue long after the story has been chewed and swallowed. The reader wants to come back. The reader needs to come back, to taste this dish again.

TOWN OF SHADOWS by Lindsay Sterne

Scrambler Books, 2012

Reviewed by Sessily Watt

There is no central protagonist in Lindsay Sterne’s *Town of Shadows*. Instead, the focus is on the town in question, with a structure reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*. As in Anderson’s novel, the narrative shifts between the various residents of the town. In this case, though, the characters’ time in the spotlight is brief, lasting for no more than a page or two, and often the narrative pushes toward a surreal violence more akin to Merce Rodeada’s *Death in Spring*, another novel concerned as much with the town in which it occurs as it is with the story of any individual character. Fissures emerge between characters in Rodeada’s novel and in *Town of Shadows*, and people are united by an ambiguous and destructive oppression rather than by affection or love.

Each character here is buttonholed by their position in town—“The Horologist,” “The Taxonomist,” “The Widower”—but their narratives aren’t about the connections those positions might create. “The Banker” suffers from an all-encompassing itch. “The Soldier” attempts to scrub away his memories, his hands growing raw. One man is trapped in a mirror, and another is left huddled at his kitchen table as objects inch closer and closer to him. Happiness, such as it is, occurs in isolation from other characters: “Smiling into his quilt, he suspected he was better off this way, released

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into a world of partial darkness, blind to all that he knew” (41). But it doesn’t seem like isolation is the road to happiness, either. The primary antagonist, the mayor, is continually forcing inventive methods of isolation on the townspeople. First they must wear cages around their heads and then they mustn’t. They can’t use vowels. People who speak against him are “deleted,” and he leads the townspeople into a war that can’t be spoken about, identified within the book by a blank page.

From beginning to end, these characters are reaching toward each other and failing to touch, and so, too, is the text fragmented, jumping between people, scenes, definitions, and a series of experiments. This fragmentation is simultaneously effective and frustrating. It mimics a town that is in parts, composed of individuals who don’t have a clear sense of collective history nor the ability to talk about it. At the same time, it undercuts any narrative arc that might develop over the course of the book. Instead, the snippets of narrative are tied together through theme. Mortality and time are both important: following the clock versus living fully in time, the present versus the past or future, the place of memory. Thought, too, comes up again and again: the language used to think, official language versus individual language. Throughout there is a sense of loss and of trying to understand why people and things go away. These themes appear again and again in beautiful, surreal imagery, and yet, they feel unmoored from character’s full lives, including a sense of time as it is lived. Fragmentation isn’t something that occurs to the town; it’s how the town is, from beginning to end. This weakens the story. On the one hand, fascinating play with words and ideas pull the reader through the text, but as enjoyable as they are, they don’t quite remain in memory, fading along with the brief impressions of a town half-known.

ALMOST 1 BOOK / ALMOST 1 LIFE by Elfriede Czurda

Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop

Burning Deck, 2012

Reviewed by Jeanine Deibel

Experiments in verse culminate in the declaration of an apostate in this two-section collection by Elfriede Czurda, translated from the German by Rosmarie Waldrop. Resisting the formal rigidity of language, Czurda journeys through entropy, calling

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attention to the semblance of order projected by the ruling class—be it social norms, historical records, or literature: “throw away words / long words throw distant shadows / throwaway shadows wordlong / shadowy roads widen long words / open sesame / throw away words.” Czurda’s poetry relies heavily on sonic energy and interlinear relationships to guide readers into unknown territory. The result of actively discarding previous conceptions of language and meaning is the ability to adopt new and recombined formulations as they come into being.

The poem “When You Leave Home and Wish Nothing Had Happened” lures readers into abstraction as a phone number is personified, operating as a stand-in for a person or place, in juxtaposition with a character’s attempt to rationalize and take control of the situation: “you step into the strange phone number and know nothing / was supposed to happen / . . . the phone number remains silent and you wish nothing had happened / . . . when the phone number answers you must know something has / happened // . . . then you leave the phone number and go back home / then you go back home and believe nothing has happened.” Communication breaks down as these poems explore the tension minds feel when confronted with external stimuli, pulling readers not only into the content of the poem but also into themselves with the use of second person. Intellect is further examined in “Paranoia III.” A series of cancellations mute the currents of the mind, creating a zen koan effect, before tilting towards a conceptual conclusion as seen in the following passage:

the drawing room is a studio
the studio is no drawing room
the studio is not oval
the drawing room is not oval
the idea is implied
the intellect is outside
the intellect is oval
the table is oval
intellect = table = oval = the corners remain bare

Czurda’s manipulation of language and use of circular, logical phrasings throughout the collection are reminiscent of Gertrude Stein and Ron Silliman. This is not surprising given that all three writers transgress traditional structures of poetry in order to make social and political arguments. “Mutilation with Intent”

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revolves around a refrain of a mistress being judged for her activities and place within the social hierarchy: “the denseness in the brain telescoped and collapsed screaming / mistresses are normal in aristocratic circles / your home is my castle *fondata nel bianco* and women belong by / the hearth.” This mixed-media piece is replete with cell division diagrams, concrete poetry, inverted lines, and an interlude – “*manifesto of the stichomantic cat*.” Here, the tailless cat is eventually excised as the subject of the interlude, serving as an extended metaphor for our futile attempts to find satisfaction while under the influence of debilitating constraints. For Czurda, repetition, humor, and subversion push words into and against one another, growing tails, chasing them, and biting them off.

The second section, “Almost 1 Life: A Fragment,” compliments the vagaries in previous poems by providing an enumerated and allegorical account of dystopia where the idyllic comes under siege. The mother is in search of her silver ballroom slipper, history is a “horror-go-round,” and saliva must be stockpiled lest you be left in short supply. Furthermore, the government has instituted a no kissing policy: “to forestall a kissidemic the government prescribes for its citizens / to recite at least three times a day: every day in every way i’m / getting better and better.” “Almost 1 Life” serves as a more direct albeit satirical critique of the established order of language, meaning, and classification. Based on seemingly benign attributes and actions, individuals are categorized and punished, much like the perpetuation of discrimination today. Offenses also involve questioning or challenging the despotic rules in place through methods of communication, as seen in this passage from Part VIII: “the worst infraction for the hatless is however using the conjunction / because: because begins to explain and is therefore considered / making indecent advances to the conversation partner.”

Czurda names the leading politicians “Push” and “Shove,” though they too are raked with their own internal dilemmas that require “exercises in terminology.” Erosion of language and literature parallels the decayed state of society: “somewhere the story lost its thread a thread leading back to the / sheep’s wool is not necessarily progress / ...broken conventions break any story’s neck / ... most popular are novel-length aphorisms.” Through editorial digressions and metapoetic moments, Czurda acknowledges the fact that her experimental poetry is misunderstood and perceived as “a thorn in the eye of literary history.” Being artistic is a foreign concept to most citizens of the dystopia as well, yet artists still remain: “you’ve got an artistic

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daughter / . . . her face shows deeply defiant challenge and superficially suppressed / disappointment.”

Despite the overcast atmosphere that shades most of the collection, gloom and doom are not the resounding notes we are left with. In one exchange with an opposing reader, the speaker equates hope for humanity with the existence of subversive texts. Czurda also inserts several claims in defense of transgressive works as a progressive means for change: “the unconscious and the repressed can only show in fantasy in a fantastic story / anything can be said and anybody attacked // only in this form does society allow the breaking of taboos.” In lieu of linear narratives, epiphanies, and finite conclusions, we’re given unrestrained language, jest and new opportunities for continuation. The disorientation produced by Czurda’s writing allows us to recognize superficial constraints and be open to possibility: “when the story has lost its thread / it might as well roll its own.”