

One gets the sense that *The Bitter Withy* attempts a sort of transubstantiation of figures of domestic life into those of death and the afterworld. The prime example of this is in “Long-Legged Bird,” which begins, “I have a sweet house / Halfway to the top of fires....” The poem borrows its title, the image of the halfway house, and many lines in their entirety from Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli.” In “Long-Legged Bird,” the house becomes both a figure of home, and of a Limbo, a place from which Revell can look below upon the ultimate tragedy, and above see his dead restored to innocence: “My mother as a baby, my father a cowboy, / My sister, finally, after so much heartbreak, / A girl.”

If “Lapis Lazuli” is centered on art’s ability to transcend tragedy, “Long-Legged Bird” identifies the means by which this transcendence is managed on the human level: forgiveness. The ultimate figure of forgiveness is introduced in section IV with the rhetorical: “When did our sweet Jesus / Become the purview and bad pretext of jailers? / How did loving kindness / Come to devastate the world with wars?” Revell knows very well the answers to these questions. Such lines are a gambit: they risk being dismissed as naïve. Yet by enacting naïveté, they acknowledge that it is a prime quality required of innocence, the desire to do no harm, which is itself required if one desires conversion. In *The Bitter Withy*, Revell sincerely grapples with such conversion. Sincerity is risky. In an age that seems averse to that risk, these poems are welcome company.

Tim Erickson

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B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*. New York: New Directions, 2009. 176pp. \$24.95

Like the work of his idols, Joyce and Beckett, B.S. Johnson’s most notable novel, *The Unfortunates*, first published in England in 1969 and re-released by New Directions in 2009, experiments with form in order to render episodes from daily life. Published as twenty-seven unbound (sometimes stapled, sometimes glued) pamphlets ranging in length between one and twelve pages, *The Unfortunates* is collected in a sturdy, laminated box. The pamphlets, aside from two labeled “First” and “Last,” can be read in any order.

A thinly disguised *roman à clef*, *The Unfortunates*, like *Ulysses*, takes place on a single day. It is comprised of a series of recollections occasioned by the narrator’s trip to Nottingham to cover a rather underwhelming football match; an aspiring writer himself, the narrator is trying to make some extra money as a hack sports journalist. Though the events of his trip are seemingly of little note—a watery bowl of oxtail soup is consumed, a bus is

ridden, a beer is drunk—the painful memories that the city summons differ as radically from a humdrum Sunday in the English Midlands as Johnson’s fractured and fortuitous work differs from a usual book. Johnson takes the attempt to integrate form and content seriously and self-consciously; so seriously and self-consciously, in fact, that his novel ends up raising crucial questions about the promise of the innovative form in which it is written.

Once in Nottingham, the narrator is quickly reminded of two figures from his past whom he associates with the city, Wendy and Tony. He relates his relationship with Wendy, his undergraduate paramour, with a combination of idealization and bluntness—recalling for example, his casually cruel unwillingness to let her beat him at tennis, or the bedspread at a guesthouse where the two enjoyed the passions of new love. He thinks also of the dissolution of their relationship, of the traumatic mark left by that rupture, and of the inescapability of this past. The narrator’s and Wendy’s slow, painful dissolution is eclipsed only by the fate of Tony, the narrator’s best friend, who engages in a long and ultimately hopeless bout with cancer. These two sets of memories prove to be so interwoven as to be ultimately inseparable, and Tony’s death ends up shading the entire set of experiences to the point where the narrator is incapable of remembering which of the two were actually present at certain events. He recalls Tony’s “parents’ house, for formal tea.... I do not remember Wendy being there at all. Perhaps she was not there. Does it matter? So much of what I rehearse of him involves her, in the early days, for this first year they were not closer, they were associated, they have become more so in my mind.” There is a sharp contrast between the quotidian nature of most of these recollections of tea times and train rides on one hand and the monumental fact of Tony’s death on the other. Much of the novel consists of the narrator’s attempt to work out the relation (or the difference) between the significant and the ordinary.

This work is also central to the narrator’s drudging efforts to write about the football match at hand. He notes that the draw of a sporting event is that it will live up to its name, its promise of being an actual *event*. There is, Johnson writes,

[a]lways, at the start of each match, the excitement, often the only moment of excitement, that this might be the ONE match, the match in which someone betters Payne’s ten goals, where Hughie Gallacher after being floored nods one in while sitting down, where the extraordinary happens, something that makes it stand out, the match one remembers and talks about for years afterwards, the rest of one’s life.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the match proves largely uneventful, the play consistently unimpressive. The one moment of play that does resemble an event

is unintentional and therefore difficult to incorporate into a coherent narrative: the only goal occurs when the ball ricochets off a member of United and flies by chance into United's net. What is impressive, though, is how Johnson manages to transform all of this into something astonishing and artful. Rather than merely presenting the news story, Johnson recreates the narrator's writing process, capturing his internal monologue along with his real-time edits. When describing the goal, for example, he cycles through different descriptions of the erring player's mindset that might account for his unintended shot, enacting the narrator's moments of deliberation with white spaces:

Edson advanced and *stooped academi-*
cally correctly to gather the ground shot with his body behind it, some
demon chance gremlin trog thought took over in Mull's mind that he
could stop it himself and accordingly stuck out a boot.

Elsewhere, the narrator jokingly reflects on potential legal pitfalls of sports writing: “*The referee, whose handling of the game had until now been firm enough was, no, libel, seemed to be at fault in...*” By streaming the narrator's composing consciousness, Johnson reveals both the careful decision making that goes into the creation of even the driest of journalistic prose, as well as the contingency inherent in the composition process. Turns of phrase are tested and rejected, the narrator meanwhile reflecting with bitter humor on the canned clichés routinely employed by the most famous sports journalists. Though he may aspire to write the sort of hyper-crafted prose produced by his literary idols, his looming five o'clock deadline forces compromises. Flat phrases are accepted; opportunities to interview fans are lost; interesting imagery is passed up. The contrast between the aimlessly stuttering style of the stream of consciousness narrative and the tidy prose of the final copy (which appears not in any of the pamphlets but rather printed on the interior of the book's box) parallels the contrast between the messy, mundane quality of the narrator's memories and the looming event of Tony's death (also absent from the pamphlets' narrative proper).

If *The Unfortunates* represented nothing more than a pushing of formal innovations, Johnson's book would remain little more than a graceful and moving literary footnote. Instead, Johnson seems to realize that modernism's formal experimentation, while it may sometimes equal the ecstasy of an extraordinary football victory, can just as readily prove as unsatisfying as an own goal. Thus it is in some sense misleading to concentrate exclusively on the idiosyncratic form of *The Unfortunates* at the expense of its poignant characterizations, flawless evocation of the gray drear of a cold day in the Midlands, or its brutal honesty. The novel's closing lines could be a gloss on

the relative efficacy of its formal innovations just as easily as they refer to Tony's passing: "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us[.]" The fact of loss can resist compensation through form. Johnson arrives at this skeptical conclusion about form through a rigorous experimentation with it; this is to his credit as both a writer and a thinker.

Chris Bench

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Best European Fiction 2010. Edited by Aleksandar Hemon. Preface by Zadie Smith. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010. 421pp. \$15.95

In *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction Since 1990*, Warren Motte commends the latest generation of French writers for being at once innovative and reader-friendly. The reputedly forbidding "writerly" texts of the earlier nouveau roman generation have given way, in this schema, to what Motte describes as an "avant-garde with a human face, an avant-garde that seems to welcome its readers with open arms, while still insisting on innovation."

If Dalkey Archive Press's *Best European Fiction 2010* is indeed what its editor, Sarajevan-born novelist Aleksandar Hemon, claims in the anthology's introduction—"a detailed snapshot of the contemporary European literatures"—then we can say that the French strain identified by Motte has gone viral and infected a continent. A book of snapshots suggests a family album, and Zadie Smith tells us in her preface that we're not wrong to see a "family resemblance" uniting the volume's varied contents, a morphology that sets it apart from the mainstream of current U.S. literary fiction. For Smith and Hemon, this European quality is expressed in the adventurousness of the writing itself—in Smith's words "a strong tendency towards the metafictional"; in Hemon's a "formal diversity" deriving from Europe's history of fragmentation and integration. The volume—the first of an anticipated annual series—brings together thirty-five stories from thirty nations, in a geographic and linguistic range stretching from Iceland to Russia and Finland to Macedonia.

Short fiction in the U.S. continues to be dominated by the "well-made story"—carefully crafted if loosely plotted psychological realism, with a clearly identified conflict at the beginning and an epiphany at the end. While Zadie Smith says that many of *Best European Fiction 2010*'s stories "seem to come from a different family from those long anecdotes ending in epiphany," at least a third of the volume's stories do follow this formula, and could successfully apply for citizenship in *Iowa* or *Missouri* or *Mississippi Review*. This