

IMAGINING



*Essays on Language,
Identity
& Infinity*

IMAGINING

Gary Barwin

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ALSO BY GARY BARWIN

Fiction

Big Red Baby
Doctor Weep and Other Strange Teeth
I, Dr Greenblatt, Orthodontist, 251-1457
The Mud Game
(with Stuart Ross)
Nothing the Same, Everything Haunted:
The Ballad of Motl the Cowboy
Yiddish for Pirates

For Children

Grandpa's Snowman
The Magic Mustache
The Racing Worm Brothers
Seeing Stars

Poetry

Ampers&thropocene
Bird Arsonist
(with Tom Prime)
A Cemetery for Holes
(with Tom Prime)
Cruelty to Fabulous Animals
duck eats yeast, quacks, explodes;
man loses eye
(with Lillian Nečákov)
The Fabulous Op
(with Gregory Betts)
For It Is a Pleasure and a Surprise
to Breathe: New and Selected Poems
Franzlations:
The Imaginary Kafka Parables
(with Hugh Thomas & Craig Conley)
frogments from the frag pool:
haiku after Basho
(with derek beaulieu)
Moon Baboon Canoe
The Most Charming Creatures
No TV for Woodpeckers
O: eleven songs for chorus SATB
(with Dennis Bathory-Kitsz)
The Obvious Flap
(with Gregory Betts)
Outside the Hat
The Porcupinity of the Stars
Portal
(visual poems)
Raising Eyebrows
The Wild and Unfathomable Always

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*Essays on Language,
Identity & Infinity*

*By
Gary Barwin*



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Published by Wolsak and Wynn Publishers
280 James Street North
Hamilton, ON L8R2L3
www.wolsakandwynn.ca

Editor: Noelle Allen | Copy editor: AGA Wilmot
Cover and interior design: Kilby Smith-McGregor
Interior images: Gary Barwin
Author photograph: George Qua-Enoo
Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro, Modesto Condensed and Old Man Eloquent
Printed by Brant Service Press Ltd., Brantford, Canada

Printed on certified 100% post-consumer Rolland Enviro Paper.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Canada

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. We also acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and Ontario Creates.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: *Imagining imagining : essays on language, identity & infinity* / Gary Barwin.

Names: Barwin, Gary, author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana 2023050258X | ISBN 9781989496794 (softcover)

Subjects: LCGFT: Essays.

Classification: LCC PS8553.A783 I43 2023 | DDC C814/.54—dc23

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Broken Light: The Alefbeit and What's Missing | 1 |
| The Ghost of Two Eyes | 9 |
| John Coltrane Was My Bar Mitzvah Teacher | 19 |
| Schrödinger's MS | 29 |
| Wide Asleep: Night Thoughts on Insomnia | 35 |
| Triaspora +1: The Sky on the Other Side of the World | 43 |
| Elegy for a Poodle | 53 |
| Other Happinesses: Magazines Are Good, Magazines Are Very Good | 57 |
| Flying Is Just Falling with Good PR: On Writing | 75 |
| Yes, and: The Ampersand, Twenty-Seventh Letter of the Alphabet | 81 |
| Three Sides to Everything | 85 |
| Meat and Bones | 91 |
| Writing as Rhizome: Connecting Poetry and Fiction with Everything | 97 |
| On Between | 111 |
| That'll Leave a Mark | 117 |
| The Archive of Theseus | 125 |
| Sunshine Kvetches of a Little Parrot | 131 |
| Language and a Half | 141 |
| Hitler's Moustache, My Grandfather's Lip | 143 |
| Racing Futurity | 149 |
| Letter to You as if You Were Kafka | 159 |
| The Selected Walks | 165 |
| There's a Crack in Everything | 175 |
| ENDNOTES | 185 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 187 |







BROKEN LIGHT: THE ALEFBEIT AND WHAT'S MISSING

When I was a little left-handed kid growing up in Ireland, we used fountain pens and I always smudged the letters as I wrote. I was really happy when I began going to Hebrew school and found out that Hebrew is read from right to left – the opposite of English. I could write clearly now while all the right-handed kids smudged their writing and got ink all over their hands. It was electric: this idea that language could be turned around. That it could make you look at things differently. Your inky hand. The page. Your way of being in the world.

In modern Israel, I know that Hebrew is used when asking for an oil change or when ordering socks online, but my first association with these particular letterforms, the Hebrew alphabet, the *otiyot*, was that it was the language of my ancestors. The shape of my people. Ancient, mysterious and numinous. Not that my ancestors didn't speak of socks and BO, but for centuries, Hebrew was a sacred language, not an everyday one. Its shapes: thick lines of black and white, each ending in a little curl like a black flame rising. Was this flame something to do with the temple? With eternal light? Or perhaps an arcane kabbalistic alchemy of words. The prayer books in the *shul* of my childhood were musty and worn, like the old *tefillin* of the praying men ... or the threadbare carpets. The prayer books had been shaped by use, the way an old tool takes the form of the hand that touched it. It seemed like the Hebrew letters had also been shaped this way – they had been worn over millennia by the touch and speech of those who had muttered their sounds. And Hebrew, at least in the traditional shapes, seemed to preserve the motions of ink and brush, the motions of a scribe not writing so much as drawing the letters, his hand floating above the surface of the parchment like a hovering bird.

Rabbis and kabbalists look carefully at everything and make connections and draw inferences. Every element of the Torah can be examined as if it were made of atoms and molecules. And then looked at even more closely to reveal language electrons. Memory quarks and neutrinos. The Torah is a finite expression of the infinite, therefore this finite text can be examined infinitely. Little stories, little parables are told about the shapes and positions of the letters. For example, there is a tradition considering the fact that bet is the first letter of the Torah. It's like a square bracket at the very beginning of the text. It's closed on the top and bottom and on the right side, but it is open on the left. It means start here – it all starts here – and then keep going left in the direction of reading. Be open to what is to follow. The shape of the letter is an aphorism, a parable.

But it's not only traditional Jews who considered the shape of the letters and thought that they might represent something. According to the seventeenth-century Christian kabbalist and linguist, Francis van Helmont, Hebrew letters are “actually diagrams illustrating how the lips and tongue should be positioned when uttering the sounds they make.” There has been this perennial idea that Hebrew letters have a unique connection to the physical world. For instance, in 1881, John Henry Broome wrote that the constellations which formed the zodiac could be shown to be derived from the Hebrew alphabet. The stars form Hebrew letters. And like the zodiac, it's often believed that there is an almost magic connection between the Hebrew letters and the world. For example, there is a tradition concerning the golem, a creature made out of clay. Some sources say that once the golem had been formed, one needed to write on the golem's forehead the Hebrew word for “truth” – “emet” (the letters aleph, mem and tav) – and the golem would come alive. Erase the first letter, aleph, and you are left with mem and tav, which is “met,” the word for “death.” Another way to bring a golem to

life was to write God's name on parchment and stick it on the golem's arm or in its mouth. You would remove it to stop the golem.

This idea of concealing secret bits of paper, secret writings, in hidden places was full of mystery and intrigue to me as a child. Secret agents and pirates hid little scrolls in secret places. And it's true, like most Jewish families, even mostly non-practising ones like mine, we had a mezuzah on our front door. Inside the mezuzah, behind the letter shin, I knew that there was a little scroll with Hebrew letters written on it. They spelled out prayers, though I didn't know exactly what was hidden away on our doorframe. It made me think that there were aspects of the world that were ancient, that we couldn't see. There was literally more than meets the eye about our lives. What could that be? What was the story behind the story? There were superstrings and black energy, intimations of a network of invisible forces that were represented by these letters:



*

A few basics about the Hebrew alphabet, in case it's been a while since your Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Or since you last read *The Protocols of the Elders*

of Zion. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters. None of them represents vowel sounds, at least not by themselves. Vowels are represented by little lines and dots and other symbols added to the letters. There are no upper- and lowercase letters in Hebrew, but there are a few letters that have special forms at the end of words. In Hebrew, some of the letters can be written with dots: the letters change sound if there is a dot in the middle. For example, the second letter in the alefbeit is called bet when it has a dot in the middle. Then it makes a *B* sound. When there isn't a dot, it's called vet and makes a *V* sound. The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph, is silent. According to Laurie Anderson lyrics – my authority on all things, though I think she's quoting tradition here – when you see an aleph you open your mouth to begin making a sound and then stop. Then you just think about the letter. The sound of aleph is all in the mind.

Like most written languages, Hebrew has different styles of writing and different typefaces or fonts. There's a very old one, which has the equivalent of serifs – that is, little decorations at the end of the letters' strokes, kind of like cowlicks. The other type of font is a more modern one. It is like a sans serif type and is much simpler – something like the Hebrew equivalent of Helvetica. Is there a Hebrew Comic Sans? There is a style of handwritten Hebrew, the equivalent to cursive, I suppose, which is different than the print form though the letters are also not joined together.

Though my interest in the elements of language comes from literature and experimental poetry, including visual poetry, my work is also influenced by Jewish mysticism, which, as I mentioned earlier, traditionally considers the shapes of Hebrew letters to be meaningful: elemental symbols inherently connected to creation and the universe. Edward Hoffman writes in *The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey* that “the 13th-century mystical text, the Zohar, is filled with references to

the importance of the Hebrew alphabet as a celestial code or blueprint for the cosmos ... Just as we now regard the DNA molecule as a carrier of incredibly condensed information concerning the development of life, so too have kabbalists viewed the Hebrew language ... as a cipher describing the universe.” In this tradition, the letters are vessels made of the light of life itself, and recall the divine vessels that were broken at the time of creation. There’s a story that says that when Moses smashed the stone tablets as he came down from Mount Sinai, the two tablets broke into a thousand Semitic smithereens, but the letters rose to heaven – even though they were carved into the stone. Another similar story tells of a rabbi being burned at the stake. His executioners wrapped him in a Torah scroll. As he was burning, he was asked what he saw. I don’t know why they asked him this. Who knows what to say at such a moment? It’s not like they make Hallmark my-condolences-on-getting-burned-at-the-stake cards to help out. But this rabbi answered them from the fire. He said that he could see that the Torah parchment was burning to ash but that the letters were ascending to heaven. I imagine it as a kind of alphabetic murmuration, a dark muttering cloud seeking infinity. But it is about communication: the idea of communication, and the promise of communication.

In the great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges’ famous short story “The Library of Babel” there are an infinite number of books in an infinitely large library. Each book contains some combination of only twenty-two letters. Borges, lover of all things kabbalist and writer of the stories “The Aleph” and “The Zohar,” doesn’t specify, but obviously he means the Hebrew alphabet with its twenty-two letters. Everything in the infinite universe, according to Borges can be represented by some permutation of the Hebrew alphabet – the foundational sacred alphabet, at least for the West. The twenty-two letters are the building blocks of everything. They are, in themselves, everything. Our world is

language. Do we think in language, or do we only know what we think because of language? This recalls for me what it says in Genesis: the earth was without form and void until God gave shape or reality to it, all with words. With the letters that form the Hebrew alphabet. But are there things which cannot be represented in language? We know there are sounds that cannot be represented with our letters. We can only talk about these sounds. A fire crackling. A baby crying. The sound of a supernova. Maybe we hear a cow make the sound “moo” or a rooster say, “cock-a-doodle-doo,” because the letters are a kind of lens, a window onto the world which only allows us to see a certain view, a certain quantity of light to reach our eyes, which themselves are a type of window. Just in case all my spritzing gives the impression that I think I’m a big macher who’s knowledgeable about Hebrew, I should also add that, like many Jews who had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, I learned how to read Hebrew, that is, how to recognize and sound out the letters. And then I learned how to chant using the little symbols added to the letters. But I never learned how to know the meaning of what I was reading (I did read the passage in English translation – it was something about King Uzziah and his throne). But not understanding Hebrew left me to think a lot about the shapes and sounds of the Hebrew alphabet, unimpeded by the distraction of knowing what the words actually meant.



There is a medieval kabbalistic text that says that there is one letter missing from the Hebrew alphabet. It will be revealed in the future. Every problem in our current universe is connected to this missing letter. An inconceivable letter that makes an inconceivable sound. We don't know what sound it might make. Its sound will make undreamed of words and worlds. Some think that this letter is the symbol that appears on the little black tefillin box that Orthodox Jews wear on their forehead for morning prayers. The symbol looks like the letter shin except with an extra arm, kind of like a *W* with an extra bit, a triple *U*. So, the thinking goes, we might already know what it looks like. But we don't know what new sound it might make, this new sound that might heal the universe.

I love this idea. That discovering a new letter might fix what is wrong with the world. That its new sound might heal the crack in everything. That we might discover that this new letter is already in the world, and we just need to know how to pronounce it. Or maybe that by playing with the shapes of existing letters, we might discover this mysterious missing letter and solve everything. This tradition imagines that the very letters of the alphabet are powerful. That they are magical. That the elements of our language – of our writing, of our speaking, of our communication – make the world, represent the world, speak back to the world, improve the world. That there is something to say that is just beyond our reach. For now. So of course I, too, believe this about letters. The idea that communication, the concept of language, the idea that language, speech and writing are themselves cause for wonder, curiosity and creativity. And, ultimately, because this undiscovered letter is there to be found, language is a cause for hope. But I would add that we also need to watch out for language's ability to lull us, to beguile us, to trick us with its deftness, its beauty, its ability to construct plausible and believable worlds, worlds which may misrepresent or ignore. We

Imagining Imagining

must always look very carefully at language. At its beauty, its mystery. Its power to make us think and feel things. Its power to make and re-make the world.

THE GHOST OF TWO EYES

They said my right eye was “lazy,” as if there was something slothful, a bit decadent or maybe indulgent about that eye. Oh, they could fix it all right. If I didn’t start using it more, they’d patch over the left, more achieving eye and make that right one work. Boyo. Later, it was determined that the back of my eye was not spherical like a marble but egg-shaped, like the dip in a spoon. It couldn’t see properly, no matter how hard my brave little eye tried. It was astigmatic and everything was fuzzy. Even with glasses, they couldn’t completely correct it. Unless, they said ominously, I lost my good eye, then measures could be taken. They never said which measures or why they couldn’t just correct the eye now. And so I’ve never been able use binoculars or 3D glasses in the manner in which God intended. Or those antique stereoscopic things where two very slightly different images (the left-eye and right-eye view) of the same scene make the combined effect into a 3D scene.

*

I’ve just turned fifty-nine. LIX in Roman numerals, which perhaps better convey the one-less-than-sixtyish feeling that I have. I’m nearly there. About to turn a corner. Open a door. About to step over a precipice and hurtle ... where? I’m not sure. Into being older? Old. Is it to a place where I’m less worried, where I’ve arrived beyond some concerns I had throughout my younger days? I suppose I’m feeling that the end is in sight, even if I’m lucky and it is thirtysomething years away. In truth, I’m liking this life, where I’m at, what I can do, and I want more of it. I want it to continue.

*

I was thinking about the stereoscope because I misread a word in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, and in Sebaldian style, I realized how it was a good metaphor for the past. Or for memory. History. Our two views: how

Imagining Imagining

we saw something then, how we see it now. Or maybe, how our view of the present is affected by the past. We see the same image but from two different perspectives and it literally creates greater depth. This is either a good thing or a kind of illusion where we are tricked into thinking our view is closer to reality. Two different views blended as if they were one, and we lose the ability to see the two distinct components.

*

I'm beginning to think of the past – my past – with tenderness. Like it's an old dog. It waddles. Its eyes water. It leaks. I remember its leaps, its appetite, how it barked and protected us. The time it got away and worried us. The times it crapped on the floor. On the bed. I'm getting sentimental about even the bad things. At least they were *my* bad things. I'm lucky that nothing truly tragic or traumatic happened. Just loss, sadness, worry. A slow accumulation of troublesome experiences or knowledge, the ground slowly shifting rather than a sudden earthquake or tidal wave. I sense something like an accumulation of debris, sediment – fine sand with occasional sticks, stones, old tin cans – shifting around, forming dunes and undulations. It slows me down, but it is much less sharp than the rocks from which it was formed.

*

I never dated as an adult. My wife, Beth, and I first began seeing each other when I was eighteen and she was twenty. We never stopped. Or rather, we got married a few years after we met and here we are, forty years later. On one of our first few dates, we went on the rickety old Flyer roller coaster at the Canadian National Exhibition. It was the '80s and Beth was wearing a floofy sweater. I still had braces. I turned to say something just as the ride began, and I got my braces caught in the elaborate fabric of her shoulder. She thought I was just scared, but I was trying to extricate myself and my braces for the entirety of the ride as we went up and down and around.

Before we'd even spoken, Beth had had a dream where hundreds of people were being led somewhere and it wasn't good. We were in the line. It was an Irishy hill, grey sky, mist, a drystone wall. We picture it now as the Mourne Mountains. Dream-me led us away from the line and to a patch of brilliant sunshine. We sat on the wall in this bright warmth under a large and iconic tree. We were two people, coupled by our escape. A few years ago, when I went to Ireland, I bought her a tree necklace, which now she always wears.

Or she did. It got lost and so I had to buy her another identical one.

I visited a giant thousand-year-old bell in China some years ago. It looked in perfect shape, so I asked about it. It was a perfect replica. In China, I was told, they don't think of a recreation as any less authentic than the original. It carries its spirit.

The past is tricky. Sometimes we have to make it again. Ship of Theseus: solved.

*

Regrets? Yeah, I've had a few. Mostly, I'd like another chance at some things for which I was too anxious, or impetuous, or unprepared, so I could really appreciate them, enjoy them. But that's hindsight. Mine isn't even twenty-twenty with corrective lenses. Unless I lose my good eye, then I could be twenty. Just twenty. But you can only know what something was, what it will mean to you, after it was and not during. If there's too much "oh, this is something I'm going to remember forever," you aren't entirely in the moment. You'll only remember your advance memory of it. If I could only live through my circumcision again so I could really be in the moment. But you can't be too self-consciously in the moment. I think of the times when I would play squash and the ball would arrive in the perfect position for me to slam it with triumphant and stylish bravado. I'd be so aware that this was a perfect opportunity, a perfect moment, I'd flub the shot.

Imagining Imagining

*

I wake up and think about the time my seven-year-old son somehow convinced me to cross a river barrelling through a steep gorge. The park ranger was shouting for us to stop. “But I’ve put my wallet in my shoe and thrown it across the river already,” I said. We began to cross the river, lost our footing, swam like mad and made it to the far shore. We survived. We might not have. It was extremely dangerous, and I was the one in charge. But I’ve had this retrospective fear, this charge of “what was I thinking,” so many times that it has lost much of its piercing terror.

*

When that same son was fifteen, our family was swimming at a Hawaiian beach. We’d hiked down a cliff to the remote beach because it had black sand and was open to nudists. The sand was amazing, but, much to our sons’ disappointment, the naked people comprised only old hippies with sagging scrotums that looked like Hacky Sacks in long bags.

We went for a swim, but then the tide went out and the waves suddenly became huge. We were being tossed around, pulled from shore. Beth is a strong swimmer. She made it back to the beach, albeit deposited unceremoniously on her bum, her bathing suit filled with sand. I was struggling and unable to return to the beach, but then I felt strong arms around me, which lifted and swam me to shore. My son, recently qualified as a lifeguard. He’d rescued his little sister and then came back for me.

*

Some of the fears I’ve had over the years have gone underground and become part of what I am, part of who I am. Like toxins, my body has worked to process them, to integrate them, to neutralize them. I know they affect my thinking and behaviour. Some experiences never go away. They are ghosts inside you, haunting you. Whistling or howling, giving your gut chills.

*

When I first went for glasses, my father, a young man at the time, tried on several pairs himself. He found some that were just like his boss's, a more senior doctor. These are the ones you should get, Gary. And indeed I did get them. I once told a therapist this, and we thought it was telling: issues around the separation of father and child, the possibility of being who you really are, the expectation of parents and so on. Now, I see my father as young, with all the fears and worries of a young man trying to establish and prove himself in a serious career in a new country. Of course, he shouldn't have tried on the glasses himself and made me get them, but after fifty years, perhaps I'm ready to see this moment with compassion. And with distance. I've had plenty of chances to become who I am and who I want to be. My parents did provide me every opportunity in other ways. Maybe there is more to this memory, or perhaps it wasn't quite as I remember it.

It's entirely different than the time I tried on some jeans in a store in London, England, and the store clerk said, "Perhaps the young gentleman is too husky for these dungarees." Details like that you don't forget.

*

In Northern Ireland, during the Troubles, my mom used to campaign for the Alliance Party. It stood for what it sounded like – an alliance between the Catholic Republicans who wanted to return Northern Ireland to the rest of Ireland, and the Protestant Unionists who were in favour of continuing to be part of the UK. Our neighbour, Dr. Heel, an entomologist, made a huge *A* for Alliance on his front lawn by letting the grass grow long in an *A* shape, and cutting the rest short. He wanted the overflying British military helicopters to see. Another neighbour, Molly, used to call Roman Catholics "Rice Crispies," because of the initials R.C. And whenever anyone woke late, she'd say, "The dead have arisen and appeared to many," which is a line from the Gospel

Imagining Imagining

of Matthew describing an event after the resurrection. One time, my mom – who had a South African accent – while knocking on doors for the Alliance Party was asked, “How long have you lived here?” She explained, proudly, “Ten years.” “Well,” the Protestant woman said, “we’ve been here for three hundred. Come back when you’ve been here as long as us.”

*

It’s been one of my favourite lines of poetry since bpNichol quoted it in a second-year creative writing class of his that I took at York University.

Goodbye as
the eyes of a whale say goodbye, never having seen
each other.

It’s W.S. Merwin. I never thought of this line as sad until my friend Elee said so. Incidentally, a blue whale’s eyes – and I do imagine a blue whale here – are surprisingly small for such a large creature. I wonder about these eyes: saying goodbye to each other, these grapefruit-sized eyes that have never gotten to know one another, living in two solitudes on either side of the massive head? I imagine the whale as having access to two mysterious and separate parallel worlds, the left and the right, tied together by the braid of its giant cetacean brain. The brain connects just like a stereoscopic image. Each eye relies on the other to explain its side of the world.

*

It couldn’t have been later than Primary Four when I joined the entire Dunmurry Primary School to sit on the gym floor and listen to a bible story, told with the aid of a felt board and felt figures. A felt camel. Felt shepherds. A felt baby Jesus, a felt thirty-three-year-old Jesus. Mary and Joseph in flowing robes. A little felt manger. A felt Pontius Pilate. Was

there a felt cross? Felt beads of blood and felt nails? I do remember the felt figure of Jesus being moved in procession, carrying his cross. And when they said, “The Jews killed Jesus,” I looked around to catch my younger brother Kevin’s eye. He was the only other Jew in the school, as far as I knew. What should we do? Be cool. Say nothing. And so I didn’t.

*

The eye you see is not an eye because you see it;
it is an eye because it sees you. – Antonio Machado

Are there any creatures that can see their own eyes? Many have eyes on the opposite sides of their head, unlike others such as humans, which have both eyes pointing in the same direction but from slightly different horizontal positions for both depth perception and peripheral vision. Imagine Wayne Gretzky with eyes on the sides of his head like a whale. Now one of the great ones, skating between the waves, deking out the limitless sea. And then there are the horizontal slits of the pupils of goats, made, so I understand, to better see across the length of the horizon. Permanent landscape view instead of portrait.

*

This schoolyard carol parody from my childhood, when there were few television channels – only the government’s BBC and the Independent Television network ITV:

While shepherds washed their socks by night
While watching ITV
The angel of the Lord came down
and switched to BBC.

Another schoolyard memory, this from the private school, Inchmarlo, that I eventually attended. A game where a boy wedged himself face

Imagining Imagining

forward in a corner while other boys lined up behind him. The goal was to push the first boy from his position and take his place. Each boy pushed on the one in front of him, trying to squeeze him out. The pressure on each other was enormous, especially those near the front – the combined force of all those boys, like a reverse tug-of-war.

*

We had little red hymn books, which fit perfectly into our black uniform jackets. If you were quick, you could pull out the hymn book, hit a boy on the head and return your hymn book to your pocket before a master saw you. I was never caught. Eventually, because I was Jewish, I asked to be excused from morning chapel, where the hymn books were used for singing. I was directed to wait in the dim boy-scented cloakroom among the coats, snacks (rock cakes!) and outdoor shoes. With me was a pale curly black-haired boy with a network of purple veins over his thighs. Julian. The only other Jew in the school. We became friends of a sort. I'd go over to his house to play chess.

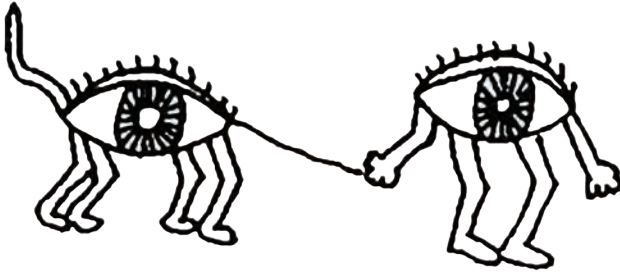
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I feel a bit bad, having told the story about my dad and the glasses. I was recently thinking of an incident around this time when we were in a restaurant airport and, across the room, a man in a wheelchair had turned bright red. He'd stopped breathing. If I recall correctly, he was choking. My father leapt up, ascertained the problem, unblocked the guy's throat so he could breathe again. I remember being amazed by my father's rapid dance of symptom-taking: airway, pulse, pupil dilation, lips, tongue swelling. I'm not sure what else he checked, but I was thrilled by the quick grace of my father, that as a young doctor he could rise from his sandwich and instantaneously switch into doctor mode, following emergency protocol to literally save this man's life.

*

In bpNichol's writing class, I doodled as I listened. One day I drew an image of two eyes. The left with a single pair of legs, the right with two

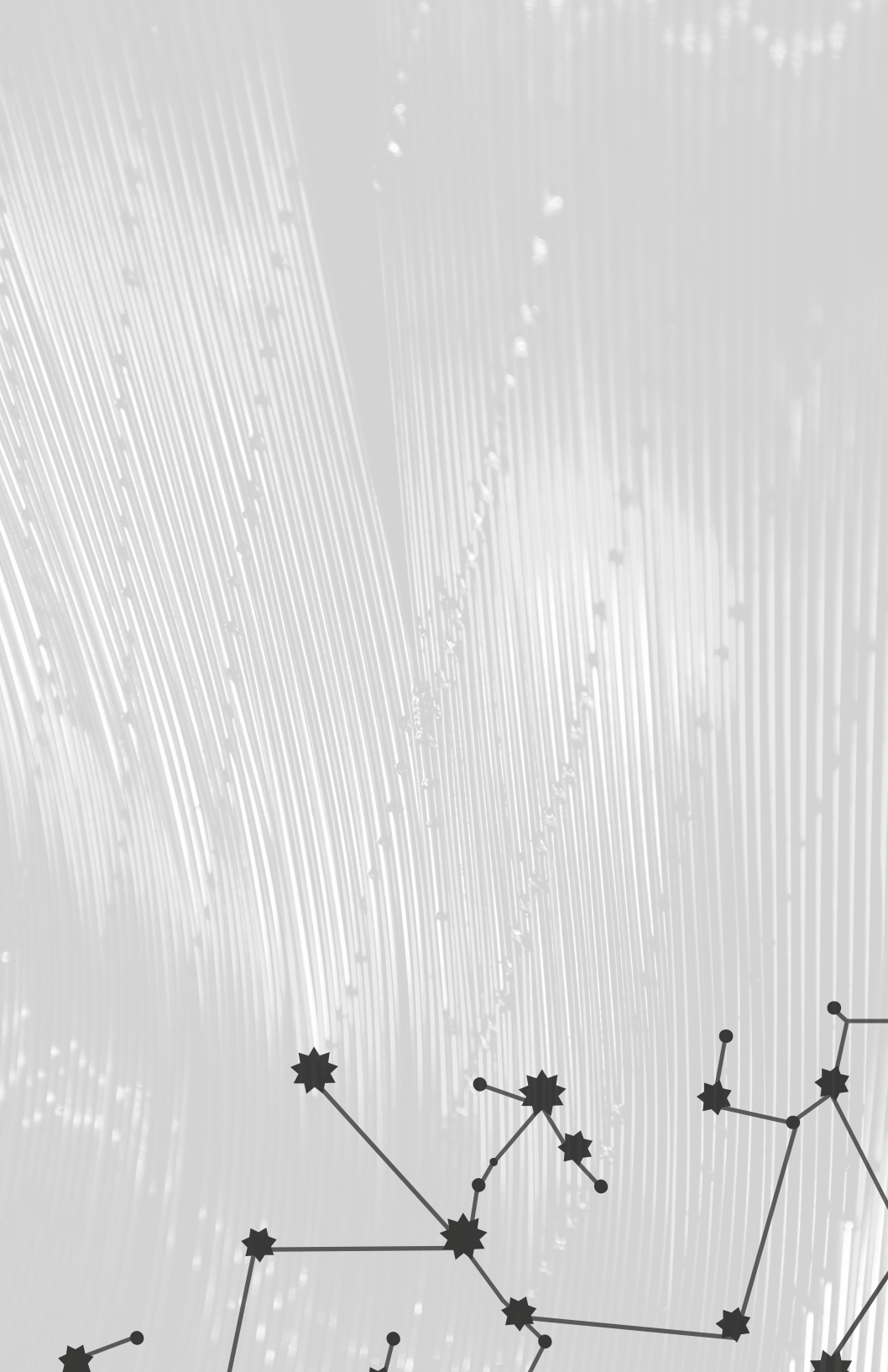
pairs. The first eye held the other on a leash. A human eye leading a dog eye. I've begun to think of this image, over the years, as my logo. I like its tricky wink to hierarchy, as if one eye could be led by another, as if it could be a pet. What exactly is going on here? Is it a trompe l'oeil, a visual pun, or something from a folk tale? And here it is at the end of this essay as if it always belonged here, as if the metaphor of stereoscopic eyes on the past had already literally been embodied by me forty years ago. Is this the revisioning of history, something just to the left, just to the right of the truth, and yet somehow connected? Relational? The I of the present, the Thou of the past.







Gary Barwin is a writer, composer and multidisciplinary artist. He is the author of thirty books including *Nothing the Same*, *Everything Haunted: The Ballad of Motl the Cowboy*, which won the Canadian Jewish Literary Award, was shortlisted for the Vine Award and was chosen for Hamilton Reads 2023. His national bestselling novel *Yiddish for Pirates* won the Leacock Medal for Humour and the Canadian Jewish Literary Award, was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Scotiabank Giller Prize and was long-listed for Canada Reads. His 2022 poetry collection, *The Most Charming Creatures*, won the Canadian Jewish Literary Award. Barwin was born in Northern Ireland of South African parents of Ashkenazi Lithuanian descent. He currently lives in Hamilton, Ontario, and at garybarwin.com.



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ISBN 978-1-989496-79-4



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