INTERVIEW (HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/)

Louis Bury by Micheal Leong

Using writing constraints to range widely.

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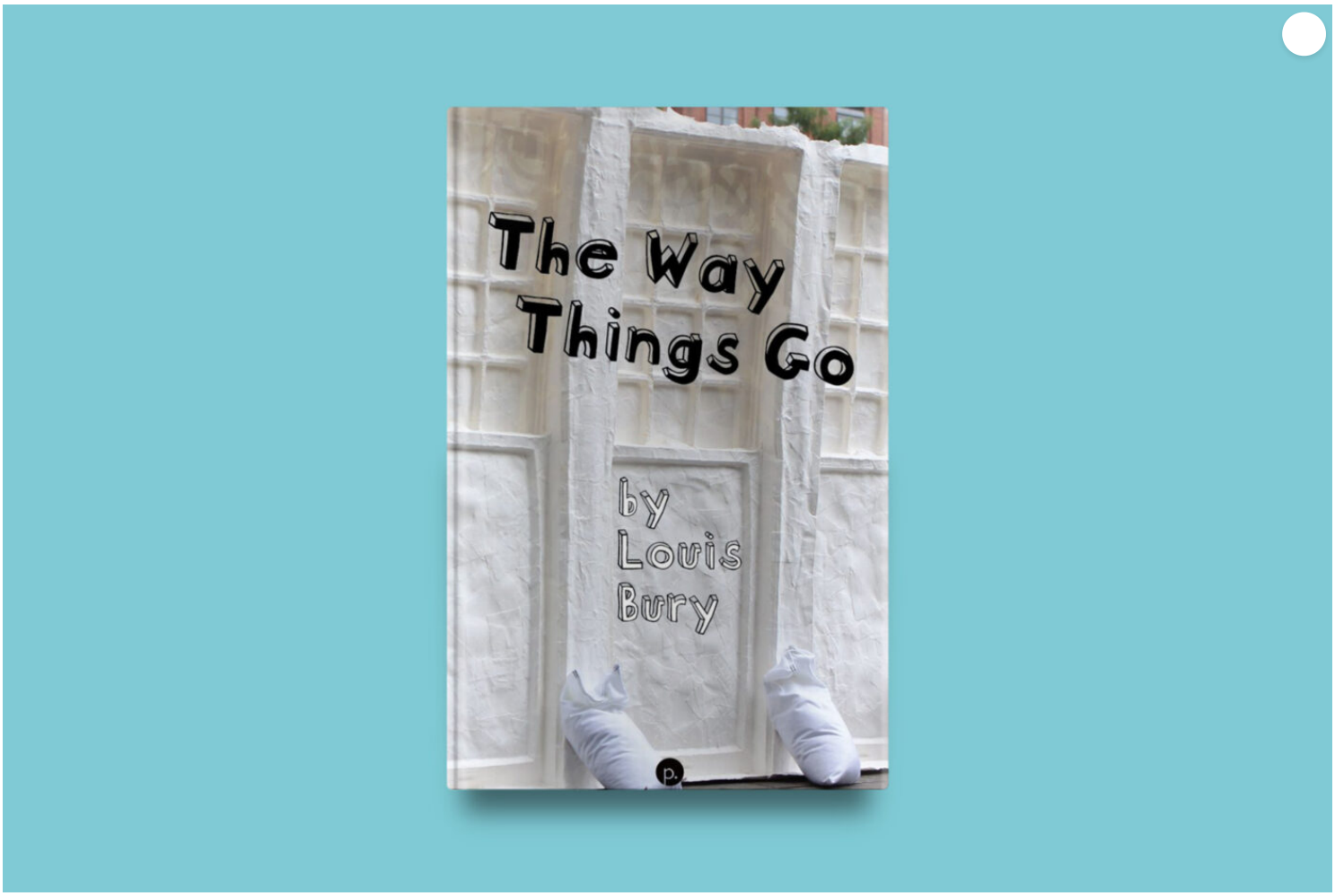

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There is an intimate, polymorphous formalism in Louis Bury's *The Way Things Go (https://punctumbooks.com/titles/the-way-things-go/)*, which encompasses poetry, discussions of contemporary art, and life writing. In an elaborate assemblage of microgenres (from diary entries, to lyric essays, to documentary interpolations, to Joe Brainard–style catalogs), Bury movingly covers topics such as addiction, illness, intergenerational trauma, fatherhood, and climate change. The book's macrostructure of seventy-one chapters autobiographically reflects the life expectancy of a white, American male born in 1981; the clever procedural twist is that the form of each subsequent chapter "melts" one sentence at a time, culminating in a one-sentence chapter. Both memento mori and memento vitae, *The Way Things Go* is a kind of Rube Goldberg hourglass that makes more acute the mixed speeds of lived experience in the Anthropocene.

Bury signed my copy of his first book, *Exercises in Criticism: The Theory and Practice of Literary Constraint (https://bookshop.org/p/books/exercises-in-criticism-the-theory-and-practice-of-literary-constraint-louis-bury/8226834?ean=9781628971057)* (2014), with the inscription: "To all the potential literature we've yet to write." It was a pleasure to talk with him nearly a decade later about how *The Way Things Go* became an actuality.

—Michael Leong

Michael Leong
I love the clarity of *The Way Things Go*'s conceit in which you've sentenced yourself to a form of incrementally descending sentences. How did you count—and what did you consider—a sentence?

Louis Bury
Most of the book's sentences are actual sentences, but in places I did some creative accounting. For example, in the lab report documenting my sudden sensorineural hearing loss, I counted each line of blood-test results as one sentence. That report was too long to fit into a single chapter, so I allowed it to span several consecutive chapters. The conceit of chapters that progressively shrink in length is linked to the book's subject of anticipatory grief. But it also made the book progressively easier to write. I was less concerned with strict adherence to my own rules than with making it to the finish line.

ML
What was it like to work with found documents? The way you fold them into the book is often surprising, with the highlight being your sister Emily's prizewinning poem from third grade.

LB

The documents made writing easier because they filled some of the book's limited real estate, and in many cases they also worked better than anything new I could have written. Emily's poem was written in 1992 and titled "Tomorrow's Possibilities." I couldn't have scripted a better poem for a book about family and the future. Apart from such coincidences, I feel that documents work well when nestled within your own writing. The contrast breaks up the monotony of each text's voice.

ML

Is that why you write in a notebook entry toward the end of the book that you're "feeling put off by autobiographical writing lately"?

LB

In a roundabout way, yes. My initial experience with anticipatory grief was through Emily's diagnosis with pediatric lupus when her rheumatologist told her—inaccurately, it turns out—that her life expectancy was thirty. That story matters to my family but not necessarily to readers, so in writing it I asked myself what interest it might hold for others. The answer I arrived at is that a similar type of grief occurs with respect to climate change. Many people understand climate change in the intellectual abstract but not with visceral immediacy, a dissociative tendency that also characterizes cultural mythologies of whiteness and safety. Weaving documents into the book helped me widen the autobiographical lens onto those larger contexts.

ML

The way you've clipped headlines from *The Guardian* climate email digests and inserted them into the book's page footers—for example, "How worried should we really be about 'insectageddon'?"—gestures at a collective "autozoography" that haunts the main body of your text, contributing to a productive tension between the teleology of the book and the eschatology of the world.

LB

Holy shit, the way you articulated that is incredible. I modeled my footers after Dale Smith's book-length poem *American Rambler* about the Spanish colonial explorer Cabeza de Vaca. As I remember them, Dale's footers contained tidbits of historical context, as though the footers were the main narrative's subconscious. That effect seemed a way for my book to register how life's day-to-day minutiae can make it hard for individuals to process ongoing collective crises, from Covid-19, to climate change, to creeping authoritarianism.

(https://dumboopenstudios.com)

ML

If you could add a footer to this interview, what would it be?

LB

"*That's what friends are for," with the asterisk referring back to the word "autozoography."

ML

I appreciated the chapter about midpoints and midlife crises, and I ultimately think of the book as being about transitions. This clicked for me with the charming insertion of your son Ethan's soccer assessment as a New York Red Bulls youth program participant. For the category "Reaction to transition moments," he received high marks as a midfielder. Would you consider yourself a midfielder of writing, defined by traversing boundaries, generic or otherwise?

LB

(*laughter*) Yes and no! Both my books are formally heterogeneous, almost to a fault; yet I've also written hundreds of formally homogenous art reviews, so if a midfielder of writing is someone who covers a lot of ground, or wears different hats, that's a fair description. On the other hand, a soccer midfielder has to be good in most phases of the game, but I'm a writer who doesn't pretend to be well-rounded, who leans into my obsessions and avoids work I don't enjoy. My job as a tenured English professor at Hostos Community College, City University of New York, allows me to write what I want, how I want, which is a fortunate, if increasingly uncommon, position for professors and journalists. My career could easily have branched in less fortunate directions, so I try to use whatever platforms I have to bring attention to underrecognized work.

ML

How has your understanding of the amateur and the professional impacted your writing practice? You discuss a fascinating "Rube Goldberg poetics" in your book and express appreciation for what you call "feats of amateur engineering, fabricated from what's at hand."

LB

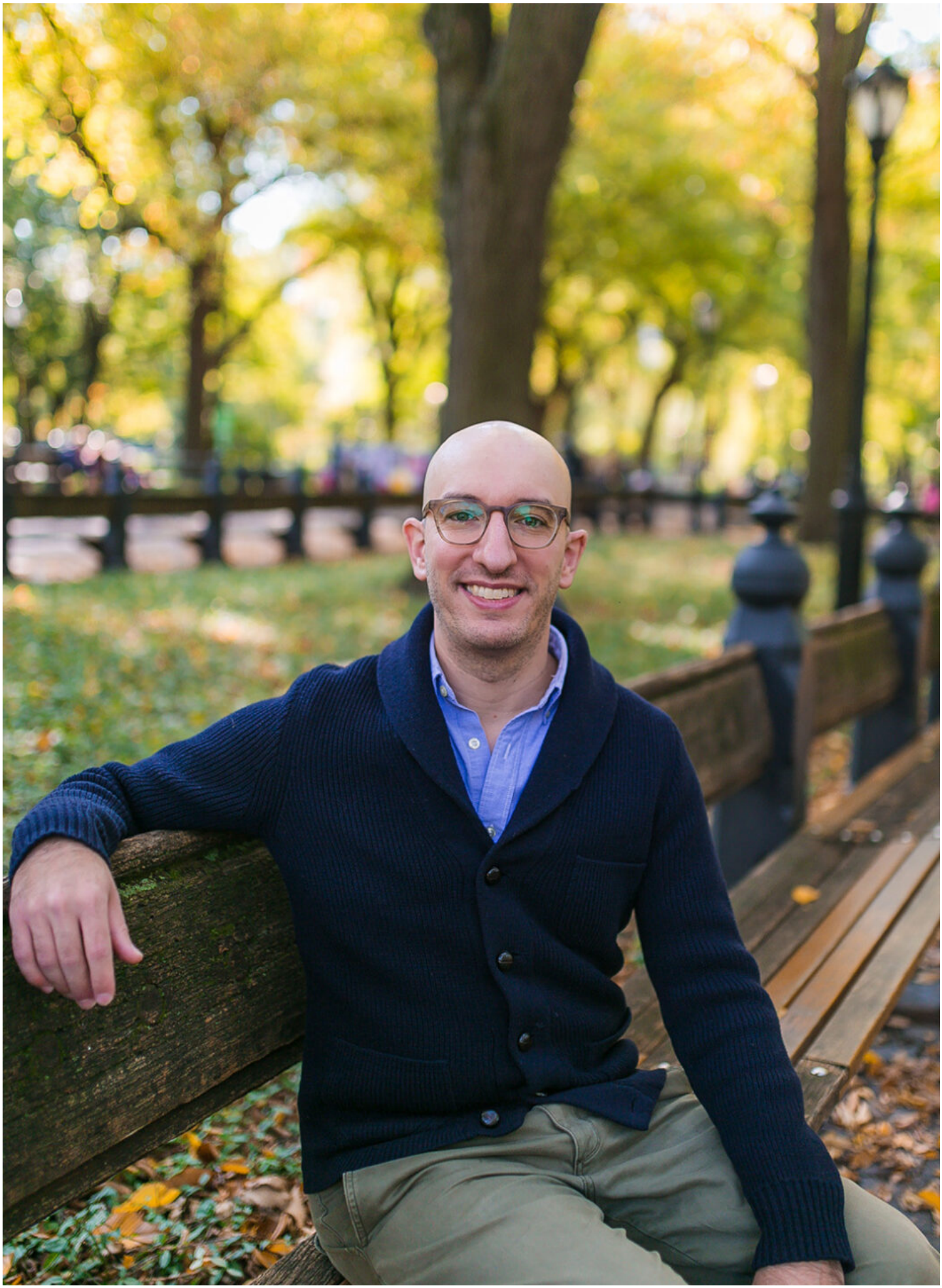
My answer has two parts, one financial, the other aesthetic. The financial part comes from my time playing online poker for income as a late aughts grad student. In my lifetime, both college teaching and journalism have become increasingly precarious career paths with fewer and fewer stable, middle-class jobs available. From my experience as a part-time poker professional, an income source that sounds risky but was actually quite safe, I felt clear that I didn't want to earn a living directly from writing because it's such a high-risk, low-reward proposition. I looked instead toward the model of poets who do other things for money because commercial markets for poetry hardly exist.

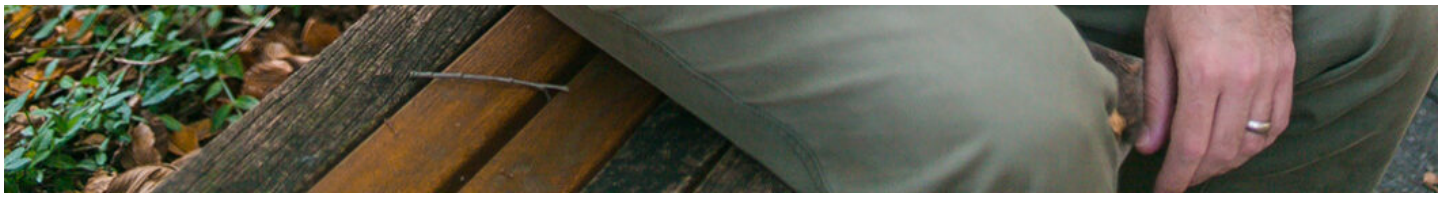
ML

And the aesthetic part?

LB

The Way Things Go's title comes from an eponymous, cult-classic 1987 Peter Fischli and David Weiss film in which industrial and everyday objects knock into one another as part of a thirty-minute-long, Rube Goldberg–esque chain reaction. It's riveting to watch, despite being a slow film, and part of the reason why derives from how the jerry-rigged chain reaction pans out, just barely. I love poetry and art that play in the space of that "just barely"—works made with shoestring materials and quixotic values. Like most artworks, Rube Goldberg machines are unnecessary from a pragmatic point of view yet can serve as powerful reminders of the built world's miraculousness and precarity.

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ML

In their incorporation of constraints, both your books foreground their artifice. How has your thinking about formal constraint evolved since *Exercises in Criticism*?

LB

My view of constraints hasn't changed dramatically, but my usage of them matured. In *Exercises*, I use constraints like children use bumpers in a bowling lane—to guard against potential mistakes. In *The Way Things Go*, I use constraints like the arrows on a bowling lane to guide my efforts toward the target. Both books contain varied forms and themes, but the melting snowball constraint helped me keep the latter cohesive from start to finish.

ML

Toward the end of *The Way Things Go*, you say something provocative: "I hope not to have to write any more books after this one." Why is that?

LB

Even if our species transitions to a post-book era, books will remain a cultural medium that can do things other media can't. The reason I hope not to write any more books myself is because I find short-form writing more enjoyable. You work on an article for a week or two, a month or two at most, then move on. Books take years to complete, and I've only completed mine by breaking them up into numerous short chapters. That said, soon after drafting *The Way Things Go*, I was diagnosed with undifferentiated connective tissue disease, a milder form of lupus, basically, and thought, "Sheesh, now I have to write a sequel." I'd believed I was writing a book about experiencing disease and anticipating loss secondhand, from a physical or psychological remove, but it turns out I've had the condition I believed I was safe from the whole time. That story can also serve as a parable about climate and whiteness, but if I'm kind to myself I'll write it as an essay rather than a book.

The Way Things Go *is available for purchase here (https://punctumbooks.com/titles/the-way-things-go/).*

Michael Leong is a poet and literary critic. His most recent books are *Words on Edge* (2018) and *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry* (2020). He is Robert P. Hubbard Assistant Professor of Poetry at Kenyon College.

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