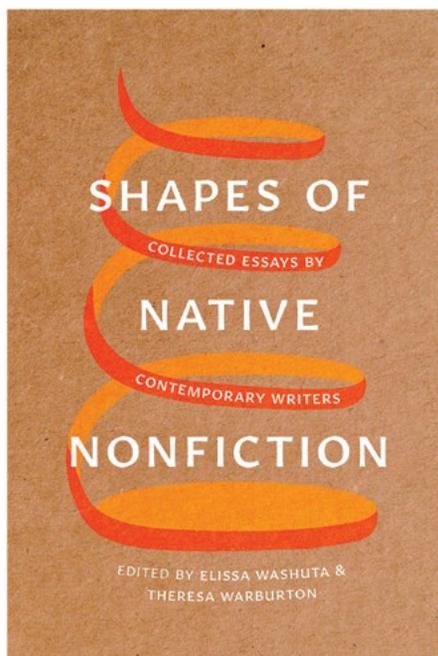


lips, leaving everything else to the imagination. Similarly, the story focuses on the lovers' passion, evoking in a few sentences the entire life of a once-famous man now defeated, tormented, unrecognizable to his close friends, and a stranger to himself.

Alice-Catherine Carls  
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### *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*

Ed. Elissa Washuta & Theresa Warburton. Seattle. University of Washington Press. 2019. 266 pages.

THE BEST ASPECT of *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers* is its intrinsic anthological quality. This anthology of indigenous writers features one or multiple pieces from twenty-seven Canadian and US authors, a veritable feast of First Nations and Native American writers that readers may otherwise never have discovered. This is not a collection of instantly recognizable literary rock star names—Joseph Boyden, Joy

Harjo, David Treuer, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, Linda LeGarde, Natalie Diaz, and the newest addition to the canon of bright Native writers, Tommy Orange, are conspicuously absent—which leaves this fan of Native literature curious. Still, this book serves up plenty of new discoveries.

Consider Stephen Graham Jones's essay, "Letter to a Just-Starting-out Indian Writ-

er—and Maybe to Myself." This essay could serve as a summary for this book's intent and of expectations of indigenous literature overall. This piece asks heavy questions: What topics should we expect to find in an anthology of Native writers? How should we expect them to write?

The publishing industry will package Native writers as "exotic," Jones warns. He

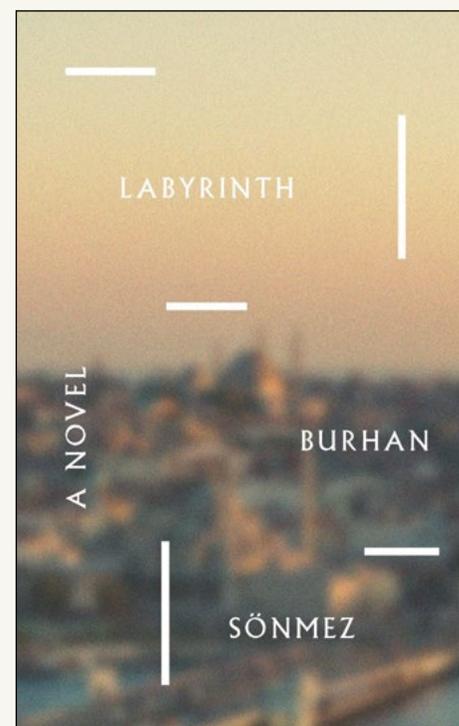
## BURHAN SÖNMEZ

### Burhan Sönmez *Labyrinth*

Trans. Ümit Hussein. New York. Other Press. 2019. 192 pages.

COMPACT, thought-provoking, and gently exquisite, *Labyrinth*, the fourth novel by Turkish author Burhan Sönmez, quietly establishes him as one of Europe's great contemporary authors. From page one, we are drawn into the immediacy of the main character, Boratin, a youngish jazz musician who has lost his memory following a suicidal leap into Istanbul's Bosphorus strait. Moved home from the hospital, we follow his studied reimmersion with once-familiar objects and with the family, friends, and social mores that have formed the trappings of his life until then.

Largely shut out from this previously ingrained reality, Boratin progresses through clouds of impressions, reflection, reasoning, and evaluation, seizing each new-old thing he meets—propelling the narrative with an etched clarity that sends out sparks at every turn. The effect of the book's simple clauses, infused with a continual stream of sensual description, is hypnotic. Sönmez has a knack for finding just the right offhand detail to throw a scene or stream of thought into perfect philosophical relief—akin perhaps to Don DeLillo's prose, yet tempered here with a sort of European humility. In place of



DeLillo's hard irony, a brilliantly earned sensuality restores a sense of narrative wholeness in how we experience this novel's unfolding:

They had heard that in the beginning was the Word, now they can hear from the book dealer's voice that in the end too there will only be the Word. Life is comprehending the word. And when the book dealer's slow-moving lips eventually say that death too consists of words, the young pair raise their heads and

also instructs: “Don’t let people shame you about not being an expert on your own culture,” and “You don’t have to be able to define what an Indian is in order to write ‘Indian.’ Putting a definition on us, that’s playing their game.”

These authors ask when exactly is it okay to stop talking about the fact that their people suffered genocide at the hands of whites

for hundreds of years and that Western corporations continue to desecrate the land and rights of indigenous people today from Canada to Chile. They talk about trying to hold onto their traditions yet simultaneously progress. They are not writing for the acceptance of a white audience but for all the judging of and by each other and the lack of identity they sometimes feel as individuals.

gape at him. If a book states that on the very first page, who knows what promises all the other pages might contain.

Boratin’s injury has also smashed certain elements of time from his walls of knowing—biblical and historical knowledge exist in him now without the certainty that they are relegated to the distant past. Handled lightly by the author, this additional layer adds a great understated power to the narrative—it manages to evoke much more than it says.

To write this tale, Sönmez undertook considerable research into medical accounts of amnesia and related conditions. The arresting particulars of observation that suffuse this novel stem partly from Sönmez’s own experience recovering from brain trauma in early adulthood. (For an in-depth audio conversation with the author about his writing of *Labyrinth*, please visit Trafika Europe’s “Burhan Sönmez Interview” at [mixcloud.com/TrafikaEurope](https://mixcloud.com/TrafikaEurope).) Parenthetically, the thin Bosphorus strait divides the European and Asian hemispheres of Istanbul like a corpus callosum. One might observe that Boratin has plunged through this narrow strait into his newly awkward state of unknowing and relearning, of foreignness in the everyday, much as Turkey herself has plunged into a new phase of identity, displacing many from their lives, in a society they once knew. It is a tribute to how smartly

Sönmez has woven this narrative that the text withstands such structural parallels.

Boratin’s route back to a whole identity comes in the small discoveries he makes along the way: that others also sometimes feel mortal fear, displacement, and compassionate yearning and that they respect and love him for his art of music. Slowly, the narrative voice itself shifts more to first person, as this imperfect character integrates back into his community of all-too-human friends and comes to feel he belongs.

Over it all stands Boratin’s vulnerability and his insistent progress nonetheless, through his own private terrain, at once brand new and yet eternal.

*The night, that squeezes into the net curtain in the bedroom, vibrates slowly when the medicines prove ineffective, turning into a bottomless, restless, pitch-covered pit of torment. This night isn't clear like other nights. If Boratin surrenders to the thought he has been striving to banish for hours and takes a few more sleeping pills and pain killers, he will be embarking on another suicide. But it's better to live and find out what it is that can induce someone to turn their back on life, and then commit suicide again, if need be.*

Thus is great art made.

Andrew Singer  
*Trafika Europa*

Deborah A. Miranda’s “Tuolumne” is a grueling, haunting personal narrative about generations of her family trying to make peace with itself and other family members. Her unwavering voice arrests readers from the start. This masterful storyteller can describe three generations in a breath: “My father was silent. I do know that. He was stunned by the beauty of that place, the taste of the wet air on his tongue, same air of his first breath, when he emerged from his mother’s womb nearly forty-four years before. Stunned by the song of water, the explosive greens of leaves and pine needles, the scent of life.”

Just as Hemingway could tell a story in six words, Terese Marie Mailhot exhibits equal talent in sentences in “I Know I’ll Go”: “Once, I packed my bags, mimicking my mother,” and “He promised me he would stop and then weeks later he left.”

Other writers to look for in this anthology include Tiffany Midge, whose fiery, aggressive diction could be used in warfare; Eden Robinson, who serves up a humorous take on dating other Indians; and Natanya Ann Pulley, who places readers at her family’s Thanksgiving dinner table when she was a child in “The Trickster Surfs the Floods.”

This book is not without its problems. Editors Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton may have tried too hard to draw a connection between making baskets and writing literary nonfiction. “Just as a basket’s purpose determines its materials, weave, and shape, so too is the purpose of the essay related to its material, weave, and shape,” reads the back-cover copy, which mirrors an unwieldy introduction by the two academics. They divided the book into parts with names such as “coiling” and “plaiting.” While it manifests as academic artifice more than actual structure, though, it doesn’t necessarily detract from the content within.

Academic literary qualities such as experimental essay types and the

abundant racial/gender subject matter indicative of the early twenty-first-century zeitgeist make this a likely tome for the classroom. Readers who stick to *Shapes* despite periodic inaccessibility, however, will discover several works exhibiting lyrical and rhythmic mastery and gorgeous craft worth rereading multiple times.

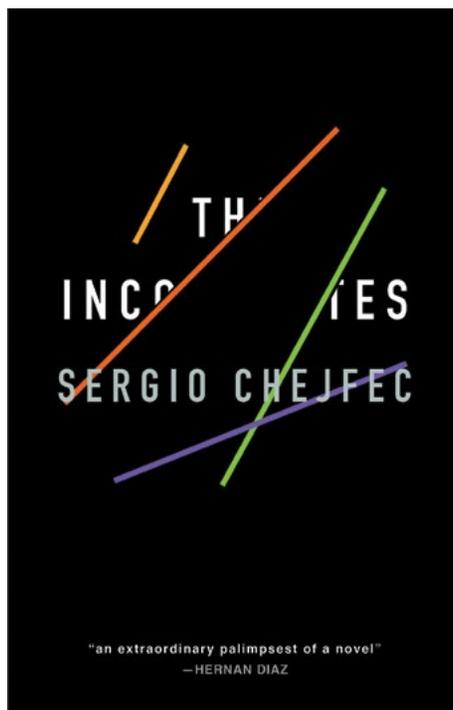
Nichole L. Reber  
Chicago

### Sergio Chejfec *The Incompletes*

Trans. Heather Cleary. Rochester, New York. Open Letter. 2019. 180 pages.

A NOVELIST ONCE said that writers come in two types. One is the storyteller, whose art originates in folklore and the oral tradition and whose work can be told and retold (or even adapted to a different medium, such as cinema) without a significant loss of meaning or narrative effect. The other is the writer in a literal sense, whose achievement is rooted in writing and dependent on it for all communicative and aesthetic purposes. It would be difficult and hardly productive (or even reasonable) to tell, describe, or film a novel by Sergio Chejfec, simply because in his case, the telling is no less important and meaningful than the tale and typically inseparable from it. And the “telling” (i.e., the writing) must be read in order to be fully comprehended and appreciated. In Chejfec’s case, it should be read silently and ruminatively in order to sample this master’s exquisite, multilayered prose style; and ideally it should be read in the original, unless a good translation is made available, as in the case of the book under review.

Originally published in Buenos Aires in 2004, *Los incompletos* is Chejfec’s eighth novel and his fifth to be translated into English, something for which we should thank Open Letter and its open-minded publisher. Unlike the anonymous friend of Chejfec’s previous novel, *The Planets* (1999), Felix is not missing but simply absent, having



years before “decided to leave his country and survive in the world like a wandering planet” (my emphasis). This condition puts him in limbo, which the narrator populates with his own “interpretive reading” of the cryptic postcards he receives from time to time from his friends and from destinations like Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona or the Hotel Salgado, a derelict establishment on the outskirts of Moscow, where most of the “action” in the book takes place. Here Felix and Masha, the only hotel employee he ever interacts with (although wordlessly and almost telepathically) and an offspring of the establishment itself (she is believed to be daughter of the mysterious Mr. Salgado), play a ghostly game of hide-and-seek through a series of “events that only barely occur” but at the same time take them constantly to the threshold of something—a possible encounter, a fateful discovery—that never happens, and (the reader eventually realizes) never will. Because the book’s subtle achievement consists in a fuguelike sequence of reciprocally revealing and perpetually elusive interfaces: Felix’s enigmatic postcards, the hotel logo, the bundles of banknotes that Masha and other staff mem-

bers find in remote corners of the hotel, apparently left by a furtive “chronic guest” (a cameo reminiscent of Hasidic storytelling), and the “photography exhibition about the era of political violence,” which Felix visits in an “old, dilapidated home” in a “city facing the ocean” (we are not in Moscow anymore) and which brings the book to its cogitative close. Or not, since a “new era began that morning, a new time: one of waiting for the next memory to emerge.”

We realize that the title refers as much to the main characters as to the nature of literary representation itself—indeed of any kind of representation—whose existence and *raison d'être* are contingent on the presence of a recipient of some sort, individual or cultural. In this presence the storyteller and the writer meet, each one mirroring the incompleteness of the other.

Graziano Krätli  
North Haven, Connecticut

### Gabriela Ybarra *The Dinner Guest*

Trans. Natasha Wimmer. Oakland, California. Transit Books. 2019. 150 pages.

GABRIELA YBARRA grew up in death’s shadow. Before she was born, her grandfather was kidnapped and executed by Basque separatists. When she was young, her father received a bomb in the mail, and in 2004 her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Ybarra weaves all three of these experiences into a multifaceted narrative of death, absence, and fear in her debut work of autofiction, *The Dinner Guest*.

Ybarra’s novel opens with a bang. Her grandfather is kidnapped from their family home in Neguri. Ybarra explores this event as she learns about it years later, piecing together critical and often conflicting details from friends, family, and investigative research, to address not only her family’s experience of death, grief, and fear but also her own experience of absence, silence, and confusion. It is a narrative of conflicts,