

Response

a journal for new work

Issue 01, June 2020

Response Issue 01

Published June 2020 by The Work and Response.

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This journal body text is set in Vollkorn, designed by Friedrich Althausen, with titles and other callouts in Work Sans, designed by Wei Huang. The journal is typeset using AsciiDoctor-PDF and PyPDF4, along with some other scripts and tools. Printing is done on-demand by Blurb in San Francisco, CA.

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You can also find us online at theworkandresponse.com.

What is Response? Response is a journal aimed at engendering and supporting *new work*, which means that all of the work included in Response was created (or, in some cases, adapted) specifically for the journal. You can think of it like a glorified artistic exercise if you'd like, but we prefer to think of it more like an opportunity.

Our issues work like this:

1. **The call:** two and a half months before publication, solicited writers, poets, and artists will get notified that we want their work, and we ask if they'll do some for us.
2. **The response:** Two months out is the deadline to say whether a contributor is in or not. At this time the work (a quote, painting, text, etc.) which they'll be responding to will be revealed those who've said that they are in.
3. **The work:** Contributors have between two months out and one month out to complete the work. This means that all the initial work done for the journal takes place within a month (~30 days). This constraint is intentional.
4. **The response to the work:** A week after their initial submission, contributors will receive some feedback from that issue's guest editors.
5. **The work continues:** Contributors then have up to two weeks to send us revisions, changes, something completely new, etc. Here's the thing: *contributors do not have to make any changes if they don't want to.*
6. **The work gets out:** After this process, the usual production steps take place (copyediting, page proofs, etc.), then the journal is put out into the world.

We hope you enjoy this new work.

For this issue, contributors were invited to respond to the following:

There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the "dominant ideology"; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text... The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro.

— Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text

What is significance? It is meaning, *insofar as it is sensually produced*.

— Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text

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Alison Lanier

At the Ghost Factory

After Nina McLaughlin



A cinema studio is a factory for making ghosts. The cinema is a ghost language that has to be learned.

— Jean Cocteau

So Connie and I went to a movie. One of those crackling black-and-white ones, where their faces go ecstatic with every single emotion. *La Belle et La Bête*. Connie's always been more of an art person—galleries and museums, everything beginning and ending in the space of the frame. The visual guidance in movies is too prescriptive, she says. The gaze is too dictated. I reminded her

that she's a pretentious ivory tower millennial lesbian, and she reminded me that I am too. So we just went to the movie anyway.

So I'm watching this movie, watching the La Belle's narrow 1940s eyebrows hang ponderous with consternation, watching La Bête's overlarge, overbright cat eyes drilling back through the screen. And I think *La* and *La*. Not *La* and *Le*. Why did I never think about that? All the dead hours in the college moviehouse, absorbing flickering cultural standards, and I never thought how gay the language makes this movie. What if La Bête was just a butch lesbian living an eccentric lifestyle? I know Connie could've fucked with that reading. What if this is a crush-on-a-straight-girl, enemies-to-lovers, the jock-and-the-nerd-hooking up story? Damn. All these slow, sticky possibilities. Of course at the end — the happy ending — La Bête is revealed as the beautiful golden haired man La Belle always wanted him/her to be. But I mean. A *beautiful* man. Fuck.

Connie leans over and whispers, Hey that ruff and the hairline kind of make him look like Queen Elizabeth in the globe portrait, you know what I mean?

So now we're both thinking of Cate Blanchette, which only makes it gayer. Turning all these gentle myths into something for *us* instead of for that cooing hetero family a few rows up who are obviously here because they liked the Disney version. Connie wasn't even allowed to *think* the word gay when she was those kids' age. When I was those kids' age—like, nine? — I knew *gay* was a bad word. I had the *Rent* DVD in my hand once in the hall in high school and *boom*, everyone was like, you *gay*? Jean Cocteau, the director, he was gay. That guy in that Bête suit is his lover. *Was*. Everyone's dead. Gay and dead. Hell. This is a gay-ass myth. This is some sacrilegious bestiality minded fucking nonsense. In this story, it takes an act of pure love to make the gays look human. In this story, I'm making everything exactly what I want it.

What? God, no. I'm not saying that. *Want her, want to be her.* It's a distracting question. Queerness is messy like that. Like you've got your own body and the kind of body that you think is beautiful, and if they don't match up, that's whacked. But anyway yeah. I know Connie didn't look like La Belle. Neither do I. That isn't even what we're talking about is it?

So anyway, we went out for dinner after, and then we got ice cream. Minty and melty off the cone. It was a hot summer. We both had the movie score in our heads. Or at least I did, and Connie said she did. Or maybe she didn't say that. I don't know. Guess I wasn't really paying attention. You see. I was thinking a lot about how a few years ago I wouldn't have gone out for dinner and ice cream. That was when I did want to be beautiful. It was like the way La Belle était belle: stretched thin, luminously halved, smooth and bright under the closest scrutiny. Fragile as a reflection in glass. Just a shift: all gone, untraceable with its edges all afterimage. That's the beauty I wanted. Like Joan Crawford's twiggy arms struggling to support a typewriter in *Grand Hotel*. Like Brigitte Bardo's mysterious, unashamed slimness. Like all the endless legs sticking out of miniskirts in *The Italian Job*. Everything on screen was wanting wanting wanting. It's easier to make a story when you don't want as much, right? Don't you think so? I don't know, just asking. Like I just want to know.

But that skinny girl—La Belle, you know I recognize her when I see her on screen like that, falling in love, making her love pristine where it would have been messy. A prince, not really a beast at all. She's just so good at showing up the way you need her to. Maybe it's the beauty. I see her gay. I see her shining. All at once. She's me and the reflection-bright ghost of me I wanted to be. Like I'm carrying her around inside me, a smaller better me. A me that's really beautiful. Want her, want to be her. Want to kiss lips, want to kiss with lips like that. You see? It's all reflections. I don't know. Is that problematic? I mean that's always the fear, right? Like what if I've internalized something that I shouldn't

have and I just don't know it's wrong yet? But how can you watch out for it if you don't know it's wrong? God I'm just asking. I'm not accusing you.

But shit I need to tell you what happened. That's the whole point. What was I saying? I was saying... I want a drink. I wanted a drink. I said, let's find a bar. It wasn't that late. We didn't have class tomorrow, I forget why. The city had gotten so quiet, like it was holding still, just watching. Leaning in. Bright yellow cat eyes. Yellow? I don't know why yellow. It was a black and white movie. I just thought those eyes must be yellow.

We were splitting a flight of beer — Connie always liked the ones that were way too hoppy. Like way too hoppy. I just let all that bitterness slide around me, mostly. I just drank to drink. I liked the softness. Wanting isn't so sharp when your brain feels like it just crawled inside a feather pillow. And I'm like damn. Everyone in this bar is so cute. Like really. It was like walking into an ad, you know, like the ones in the magazine, Vogue or something, where everything's just so beautiful it's painful? And it's like, if you want this bad enough, if you know this is what you want, all this can be yours? Like the house you know you'll never buy or the juicy hamburger in the subway ad or the travel picture of a lake and you're just like yes. That. I want that. Like a dream everyone's having at once. I don't know. Guess I was drinking too fast. But I could see that halved-down beauty—La Belle-level beauty—on everybody. Just glowing on them. And Connie was glowing like them too. Under all the ambery bar lights and doubled in all the different sized mirrors on the walls, they'd just *clicked* into exactly the way they were meant to be. And I was on the wrong side of things. The ugly side. Where all I could do was want.

There's nothing you can do when you *want* so bad. You can't day dream about something else. You're just there, magnetized to the thing you're never going to get to touch. What? No, I know. Connie and I were a thing. We touched all the time. That's not the

kind of touch I mean. Like how you can touch a screen, but the picture on the screen is still just a picture? Like if I pulled up a picture of a cat, you wouldn't really be touching cat fur when you touched the screen.

Connie's face was too transparent for this moment — the looseness of the silences became too deep, too much like needles on skin. Her eyeliner was too perfect, too carved to be *true* somehow, like it wasn't really on her face, like it was the crystallized shape of her attention arrowing at me. That focus made me too trembly to speak.

I felt small, weirdly weighted down on one side. I felt unarmed—there was an enormous pressure, forward, forward, forward — I had to say something. Me to her, all settled and shining in the beautiful world. I kept waiting for her to turn into something else. I wanted that so badly. A shift to something easier, clearer. I didn't want to be outside of what she was anymore. Women used to turn into trees and nightingales and rivers and reeds back in the day, in the oldest stories. So I just—shifted. I took a step outside myself. Like I said, maybe I was drinking too fast. But I just *wanted*, you know. That's all. I don't know. I had it, for a second. Standing on the other side, looking back at me, seeing me shining and different in a way I didn't quite know how to look at. It was safe. There wasn't anything else to want. It was all that beauty, all that tangled brilliance. I'd just found it. All the beauty I'd be promised and promised again, and it was just *here*. And I had it. It was the end of every story.

That was the last time anyone saw me. I guess I'm still walking around out there — my body, my arms and legs and lungs and heart. Like you could see it going by on the sidewalk, but I don't have to be there anymore. I'm here. And you're listening. No, I'm not tempted to haunt them. To try to get a closer look. Connie likes my body. Takes it to the movies every week for classics night. So everybody's happy. It's like I cut all the strings and gave

myself the room to breathe. Not that I have to. Breathe. You see how wanting is over? That's what I wanted to say. All things wane out of shape. The calm you want at the end of the workday. The peace you're supposed to wake up with in the morning. A reflection that knows you when you look in the mirror. They try to keep it all just out of reach. Hamburger on the subway ad. The art on the wall that's supposed to make you interesting. Smelling nice at the end of a whole day. Really getting that book not just reading it. The wonder you're supposed to feel when the moon is full. Belle-ish beauty up there on the screen. But here's what they don't tell you: Just make a story, and give it a happy ending.

Shadows

the empty semi-trucks, stacked like dominoes,
are a body metallic between the grey warehouses

and the hot dog shop. the chili and malt shake
toss and turn in your gut. your bones—bolts

of sugary lightning. your old neighbor's lawn is still
a garden of weeds. your childhood best friend

walks her dog and you don't stop the rental car
to say hello. at the old house, the pine tree your sister

planted is now fifteen feet tall. it reaches, sharp and wild,
into the blue, and you could swear it leans towards you

as you drive by. like it knows from whose hands
it sprung, who planted it, who watered it drunk.

Deciduous

as you sleep, I am thinking
about the pressure of leaves.
their curl and snap and
how they hold on long. how
autumn is just another
word for forgetting. how
the cold blows through my shirt
while the air turns and hurts
our bones. downhill, the lake
begins to freeze, from the top
down—everything trapped
underneath.

I remember
the season when I saw a fawn
curled at the side of the road
and she blinked at me, slowly.
I remember the first time I gave
blood I felt drained—dry
and dizzy.

I memorize your mouth
as you sleep—its breathy opening,
your tongue resting like a pearl.
I do not remember when I saw you
last—your back turning away
from my body—a shadow.

I imagine that we wept. it must
have been this way: the earth
curled around us and no matter
if we wanted to or not,
we remembered everything.

Frisson

self-portrait as shadow,
as wall, as fool trying on
gold rings until they fit.
knuckle-born, night-ridden.

I am the water, laughing.

I reach to touch
my mouth and my hand
returns with a peach pit.
every sad story starts
out this way:

I watch the moon buck
against the wind. my back
curls into a snakebite. I try
to be important and necessary.

my hair lifts and rises
from my body like a cloud
or spiderweb. my mother sees
me floating and smacks me down
with the wooden spoon.

the foxglove moths keep flying.
it feels like pain, and
it's just begun. I look in the mirror.
pick at my teeth with needles.

this is my self-portrait: the worn,
nearly transparent dress sock tucked
into my best shoes.
self-portrait as my deepest bruise.

Inspection

the dark tells me nothing
about observation. flyover lands
are shadows, the sky offers up
darkness and we snatch it up.
I lay chest up against the weeping lawn—
fire flickers up the back of my neck.
the heat has two faces.

the wind whips sand into my mouths—
the young palm trees submit to the push.
one hundred sailboats line the bay
like a string of pearls.
a storm pushes above the sun.

I talk to myself in my small apartment.
I narrate as I hard-boil eggs until the yolk
is just cooked. just cooked
or barely set, or still swimming
in salted water. on the shore's stiff jaw.

I am a perforated scroll of steel;
hammered thin slice of beef.
I love the color orange until I can't look
anymore. I collect the dark
until I am nothing but a ghost
on the night's leather belt.

Shadow Song

when clouds of people gather
at the lake's dark mouth
to see how the moon paints it pink,
I am alone, and the lighthouse

is a red metal sun. the moon
is so close I can smell
its breath; it has teeth like silver
fish—flickering, I am

turned loose by the flash
photography, the crowd
flanking my solitary body.
the moon dips itself into black ink—

speaks in exhalations, deep sighs.
the water is a frigid rush of cymbals.
the mine to the west is quiet
and the ore is black as wet night.

a man to my right says, *the moon,*
it's going so slow this year, like the moon
knows the speed of lips,
the ache it reaches into.

a man to my left can't stop
clearing his throat, like the moon
clearing its throat and putting on its face
of milk.

the moon is asking me to say something.
the lake does not believe me
when I say I am leaving,
chasing the songs of wolves.

I don't believe me either.
I am a collector of disbelief.
the moon reclaims its body, the lake
pushes harder. its current

tongues my feet, pink
under the blood moon, it numbs me
as if it misses me. as if it whispers
in syllables of soft foam.

Reflection

when I fall in love with a man
who is stupid and beautiful,

she shakes her head and her hair
whips against my neck—

bouquet of needles.
she pants into my ear

when I touch myself.
she is a quiet quilt—

memory of my body.
see through, malleable. her life

is so easy. she is so eager
to please. pressed up against

hot concrete, fragile glass. gravel
in her teeth. in her creases.

if asked, I would describe her
as thin and clear-skinned.

one dimensional apparition of bone.
dark cup of shimmering water.

endless depths. oil slick of sweat.
floor of the deepest canyon.

Discounts

She wanted to talk about morals. About story endings. She said cycles were meant to be broken, that you can't finish something where you began it. She had apparently never looked out a window.

I met Valerie on a wet and dreary morning when the damned C-line wouldn't arrive and the tire of her 1997 Toyota Camry sprayed water up to my shins when she pulled up too closely to the curb. It was a red light.

Valerie looked at me, my faded blue jeans damp. She held up her index and middle fingers, a small space between them, and began wagging her tongue in their center, up and down, up and down.

Fuck you, I mouthed to her. This just made her move her tongue more rapidly, more deliberately.

I am not the type of person to assault a stranger. In fact, I often go out of my way to avoid upsetting anybody, in whatever way that might mean. When I traverse crosswalks, I wait for the traffic to finish before taking my first step onto the painted gravel. At movie theaters, I don't chew my popcorn once the trailers have finished and the film has begun. I suck it.

But this day, the day I met Valerie on a cold and drizzly morning in Brookline, I did something that broke character with who I was, with who I had always tried so hard to be. I reached into my purse, pulled out a mandarin orange, the kind you buy in netted bags with faces and halos, and threw it at her window. It hit the glass with a thud and landed in the puddle beneath her tire.

Valerie opened her window. She did it slowly, because her car didn't have automatic windows, and she looked like an idiot cranking the glass down, her shoulder jutting up and back like an old woman with a tick.

Get in, she yelled out to me, and because the rain was falling and my pantlegs were wet and the C-line was never going to come, I did. But instead of walking around and getting inside the passenger door, I walked up to the backseat and pulled on the handle. Valerie's locks were manual, and she had to reach around and unlock the door behind her with greasy fingers, which I would learn later was a result of her need to constantly eat old fashioned donuts while she drove around town.

The backseat of Valerie's car smelt like extra ripe bananas. This made it less surprising when I picked up the blanket that lay next to me in the middle seat and saw a pair of browning fruit beneath it.

Valerie, like Mallory, but with a V., she introduced herself to me.

I told Valerie, like Mallory, that she had a bunch of rotten bananas in her back seat.

Oh, that's what stinks, she said, looking at me through the rearview mirror. Throw them out the window.

The light turned green, Valerie accelerated. She cruised through intersections and didn't come to a complete stop at two of the three stop signs we passed through.

I told Valerie that I wasn't going to litter. That I was, in fact, a volunteer in the parks and rec department of Brookline, and that by throwing garbage out of a car window, I would be going against my vows.

Your wedding vows? She asked me, making a right turn onto a busy street filled with shoppers. I had lived in the area for the

past six months. The bookstore on Harvard Ave. was always filled with old people who only read friends of friends and young people who read everything else.

No, my volunteer vows. I said. For the parks and rec department.

It's not litter. It's biodegradable, Valerie replied.

She had a point.

And besides, she added, I've seen you throw fruit before.

I picked up the rotten bananas and carefully moved them over one more seat so that they were further away from me. The stem of one of them ripped while I did this. I put the blanket back on top of them.

Valerie drove in silence for another three blocks. I looked at the man who always sold local newspapers on the corner. He had never asked me to buy one. I had never wanted to.

Valerie drove without caution. At yellow lights she sped to dissect intersections. Around corners, her tires squealed. Once, she almost hit a dog that was trailing behind its owner at a pedestrian crosswalk.

I thought about the likelihood of this being how I died. A woman, named Valerie, who explains her name as rhyming with Mallory, taking me to a wooded area and hacking me apart, limb by limb, then keeping me in her Camry's backseat like those rotten bananas. Maybe in a suitcase, but maybe just under a blanket.

Still, I stayed seated in her car. When she did get caught at a red light, I didn't budge. In the rearview I watched as her eyes scanned the intersections, locked onto individuals, mostly women, and released.

Do you normally pick up strangers and drive them around silently? I asked Valerie, breaking her stare at a blonde woman

whose roots were so outgrown she looked like a skunk.

What do you want to talk about? She asked and looked back at me through the mirror.

I looked at her hair, brown and frizzy, sticking out in pieces around the headrest. There were a few grays, really only three or four, and I wanted badly to reach for them and pluck them, one at a time.

Where do you work? I asked my chauffeur.

There, she said, nodding out the window. We idled outside a grocery store, with bright red lettering and a color scheme that reminded me of Christmas. It was where I bought my coffee, and sometimes, my wine.

You work at Trader Joe's? I asked her, and she grunted. I asked her if she could get me a discount.

On what? she wanted to know.

Wine?

No, no alcohol.

I knew this wasn't true. My sister worked at Trader Joe's in California, and I knew employees got ten percent off everything.

How about bananas? I asked her.

Yes, she said. Fifty percent off bananas.

And grapefruit?

She thought for a moment, then shook her head no, her brown hair rubbing against the headrest and creating a light snowing of dandruff onto my shoes.

No, grapefruit is full price.

She drove us away from the grocery store, and into the wealthy suburbs of the neighborhood. We drove past the home JFK grew up in. It looked like all the others.

Are you on edge? I asked Valerie.

Of course, she said back, then looked into the mirror. Aren't you?











Adam, Paul, Georgia, and René

I always feel like I'm cheating when I'm at an art museum and read the text on the wall before looking at the art. But my eyes can't help it—they meander over to glance at the title, artist name, and what the curator has to say about the work. It has taken me many years to unlearn this habit and experience visual art like a child again, absorbing what I see, not read.

So this is the shadow—the explanation for the images on the left. But I'm not going to give it to you on a silver platter. What's even the point of showing you these images of apples? So many artists in history have already painted or photographed an apple! (wink, wink) You already know what an apple looks like—you probably even know what it tastes like! But do you know what this apple tastes like?

Servings Per Container About 6

I pulled a wrapper
from the soda
bottle smashed in
the street and called it
text. And the words
still shake from the tire
burn, the weight
of the concrete
beneath them. They
are thankful to be
immortalized by their carbon
shadow, and mock, almost
howl at the paper
straw dissolving
in my latte and
the news ink smudging
thumb prints
on your cheek.

Chiaroscuro

planes pass your window
every minute and even
an orange helicopter

your leaves take
the sun
the white sun and you

run slender fingers
through your midnight
haircut and the one

you gave Sam
and the cheery
bottle tip of the last

of the black bottle
of drip of berry
wine at midnight

of last night
you see a plane to
the left and much further

the right and they
see one another
and this means minutes

you microwave coffee
and speak ginger poems
to the planes

give them names
and cool your forehead
on the glass

In so far

I know that
the Rodin at
the Harvard
Art Museum is
in front of
the Monet for
a reason. I choose
where to put
my plants based
on where the
shadows fall. I
eat rice twice
a day. I have nothing
else to say about
the sky greying.
It was too white
outside to see
the snow at 4 pm
but now it's black.
I forget the American
spelling of *gray*
and don't want
to be mistaken
for someone who
adds u's to neighborhood
and color. I think
this is funny because
I hate Anglophiles.
My blankets are
a ball on my bed
and I'm the pink
lump next to
them. Together we

are your favorite
piece by Louise
Bourgeois. I start
talking about yellow
when I decide I'm
done with apathy. I
drink orange juice
and listen to
Orange Juice. I
decide that
I'll never continue
a conversation
with someone
who self-identifies
as an asshole and that
peonies are a watery
pink and to think
about Elizabeth Bishop
peeing on the floor and
how New England smells
like salt and
freezing wind. I
listen to the news
while a candle
burns down to the
glass and dance
around my
apartment in
my girlfriend's
underwear. If I stand
in the sun I'll be
sunshine, maybe even
red and burning and
enormous. I come
to an informed
decision about

who I'm voting
for and knock
on every door
in America. I
never leave
my room because
the internet can show
me Iceland and
Nairobi and
the houses on
the street where I
grew up. I lose my
footing on the
stairs and do
a timestep. I choose
the body wash
for sensitive skin. I push
my school building
into the Boston
Harbor and buy
a plane seat at
a ticket counter.
I put the flat
green soda bottle in
the gutter in
this poem and
the next one.

Grimoire for the Lovebound (Myself)

I. Introduction

You've spent weeks, months, years speaking enchantments in call and response, summoning the great loves of your life. A powerful, incremental magic building in layers like a bridge from the belly of the Earth until you've terraformed a new moon where the dirt is purple, nutritious.

You're a little much. The hex curdles your blood, a reverberating toxin like echoes in a castle with skulls for bricks. Remember all the searing incantations over the years, spark of inferno in your chest, charred bones still so fragile from just the right combination of words. How many invisible lacerations can you count? So many utterances can kill.

You've even seen the universe split in half as you waited for *I love you too*, a four-word fissure-invocation rending reality into two precipitous paths your life could take.

This is the eldritch, banal power you wield, whether you like it or not. Every sentence a magic spell with its own cost and consequences. What fiery wake, what infiltrative incendiary can erupt from your lips. Your teeth the flint, spark of potentiation, creation. Every word is an open mouth rocketing through space, the world pressed tightly beneath its tongue like a pepper or a pearl.

II. Practice

Every day you wake up in a library as long as your life. The air still and humid but crackling with potential, as if built inside a time-starved thundercloud. On faraway shelves behind you, projecting from books singularity-dark, you see spells clashing beyond the atmosphere, twisting around each other in *n*-dimensional ouroboros. The finer flourishes of their arguments are lost on you now — string theory to an ant. Distinctions like "pleasure versus bliss" have lost most of their meaning to you, have even turned mealy, saltless. You no longer wield words with the finesse of a sage. You're a brute. You've got a two-handed grip on language, *zweihander*-swing of tongue. Is it better this way? Sometimes, you miss the carbon-fiber lightness of the old days. Back when you were sharper, quicker, perhaps simply superior.

On nearby shelves, misting from sturdy tomes *in media res*, you see short blasts of charms between two people who are in love but don't know it yet, splashing each other in the ocean and laughing. You see careful incantations, the deliberate, circuitous speech of faces leaning in for their first kiss. You see a single kind word alighting on the peak of the universe.

Is it better this way? The sages have gone on without you, beyond to the frontiers of erudite spellwork where they name small but important and beautiful things. And here you are, with your stout charms, clumsy sprigs of enchantment. The small magics everyone is capable of. But late at night, when ghosts swarm the ones you love, you can still speak radiance from your plain pages and do a good thing in the quiet. Not better, no, but enough.

III. Ramifications//Limitations

You had a dream of energy in its purest form: the ability to enact an infinite amount of little differences. It radiated from your tongue and pressed into spacetime like an elbow into underbaked bread. You had a dream of every word that had ever escaped from your mouth and its fingerprint on the course of this universe.

You had a dream of something hunting in the night. Crowds of vulnerability, eaten up like so much rice. You had power, but your magic wasn't strong enough to keep the teeth at bay. You weren't even strong enough to get your feet on the ground as the fleeing multitudes carried you away. What can you do? There are so many with the same power as you. Beasts, people, gods.

But here is the essential question: Do you believe in the worthiness of small loves? Do you believe that the work is worth doing? That anything is worth doing? In the dream, your words drift in loosening orbit around the viscous demon of time. Sooner or later, it'll all be gone. Will you keep going anyway?

IV. Acquiescence//Dissolution

Somewhere in the world, an eye opens, and it does not see you. (You imagine it belongs to someone you would love.) There is nothing that connects you to anyone else, no network of ancient mycelium spanning the earth, no dimension-defying, arcane spider silk strung between far-flung hearts. Any bridge you conjure looked different in your head. How does everyone else do it? What's wrong with you in particular? You've cast perfect spells and still no one will love you. HAH. What a brutal joke. The fundamental magic of who you are is faulty, must be bad somehow. You're something *almost* right, the way two flashing lights begin in lockstep but fall apart as fractions of a second wedge and expand. What have you done wrong that you're not allowed to be in love?

V. Breath//Denouement

Does staying quiet solve your problems, little bird? Is it better when you close your mouth and suck on a rancid song? The illusions have to stop. Your runic language of camouflage has gotten you nowhere. All that's left now is you.

Let the magic show your face. Your powers are just as much for quiet mornings and late night conversations as they are for time travel and setting the captives free. Tell someone the truth, and watch as it conjures an armada of peach-pit sized ships, the seafoam glow carving oceans through continents, launching fleets of self from your mouth.

Maybe no one will sail out to meet you. Maybe the magic of who you are really isn't worth setting free. But given that you want to fall in love with everyone in the world and for everyone to fall in love with you, what else can you do? The magic you learned for hiding is worthless for this purpose.

Every word is an open mouth, yes, but each is also an atom. You can build either a second body out of faces or a hand the size of the universe.

About Our Contributors and Guest Editors

Lex Bobrow

Lex Kim Bobrow is a mixed race Korean writer from South Florida, whose work has been published in *Synaesthesia Magazine*, *Saw Palm*, *Fugue*, and more. Lex's debut chapbook, *The Boy with a Sledgehammer for a Heart* is available through Finishing Line Press or on Amazon.

Charling Chen

As an artist and landscape designer, Charling's work ranges in media and scale. She draws from her background in music, dance, architecture, and exhibition design. Charling received her BA in Architecture from Washington University in St. Louis.

Chelsey Grasso

Chelsey Grasso's fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *Indiana Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Harvard Review Online*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Carve Magazine*, *Joyland Magazine*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere.

Alison Lanier

Alison Lanier is a writer and editor living in Boston. She's a graduate of Wellesley College and got her MFA in fiction from UMass Boston. Her work appears in *Ms. Magazine*, *Origins*, *Atticus Review*, and elsewhere, and she currently works and studies new media at MIT. She has read more Batman comics than you.

Julia Lattimer

Julia Lattimer holds an MFA from UMass Boston, where they were the Editor-in-chief of *Breakwater Review*. Their work can be found in *Hobart*, *Scoundrel Time*, and other places you can see on julialattimer.com. They live in Texas.

Sara Ryan

Sara Ryan is the author of the chapbooks *Never Leave the Foot of an Animal Unskinned* (Porkbelly Press) and *Excellent Evidence of Human Activity* (The Cupboard Pamphlet). In 2018, she won Grist's Pro Forma Contest and Cutbank's Big Sky, Small Prose Contest. Her work has been published in or is forthcoming from *Brevity*, *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, *DIAGRAM*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, and others. She is currently pursuing her PhD at Texas Tech University.

Nick Snow

Nick Snow received his MFA from UMass Boston. When he isn't panicking about the end of the world or writing poems (more or less the same thing), he's walking the streets of Dorchester, trying to pet the feral cats he finds.

Christie Towers

Christie Towers is a poet and educator living in the Boston area. She teaches creative writing at UMass Boston, where she is earned her MFA in May 2020, and works with unhoused writers at the Black Seed Writer's Group in downtown Boston. Her work can be found in *Narrative Magazine*, *Meridian*, *Nimrod*, *Belle Ombre* and others. She is currently working on a series of poems based on the visions of Hildegard von Bingen.

Notes Regarding This Response

Lex Bobrow, *Contributor*

I don't engage much with "the canon" much these days. Aside from my personal poetry, I write a lot of long form marketing copy, a really weird kind that gets Baby Boomers to shell out \$1,500 for a year of emails about investing. And I'm not bad at it. It's good work if you can get it. But it sort of plays into this unoriginal idea I like to turn over in my head of language as magic. Obviously there are real cultures and religions that practice or practiced magic, and language is a component of that, so I don't mean to relegate this to merely the world of ideas. What I do mean is that the correct order of words, presented in the right way, has power to produce change in the real world. If that's not a spell in a traditional fantasy sense, then I don't know what is. And that's something I'm always engaging with in my work week. If I choose my words correctly, I can sell millions of dollars' worth of literally just email subscriptions. Persuasive magic. Similarly, do you remember a time when the perfect text message filled your chest cavity with flowers? Pathomancy. Or when a new perspective (communicated to you via words) radically changed how you saw the world? Neuromancy.

Again, not a new idea by any means, but I've wanted to engage with it for a while now, and this seemed like the right place to do it, given the first Barthes passage that talks about (the?) text as it functions in the real world. So I attempted a prose-poetic essay of sorts (one that kind of devolves into a personal exhortation to

myself, the use of “lovebound” in the title purposely ambiguous: bound for love/bound by the idea of love).

I also understand I’ve substituted the idea of “text” for “language” in my piece. As I mentioned in section II, I don’t really care about these distinctions these days. The point is, words have real, literal power, just like magic spells, and I wanted to write about it.

Charling Chen, *Contributor*

I am constantly going back and forth between my academic brain and my intuitive brain. When I first read the prompt, I jotted down words and notes to myself. A few weeks went by and I received a reminder about the *Response* deadline from Danny. I quickly meandered through my house, picking up materials and objects, and assembled various compositions based on instinct. I picked my favorite images of the compositions and wrote a long and formal paragraph about the historical references I was trying to make. I felt like I needed to take a firm stance in response to Barthes’ quotes and explain my argument. Another few weeks went by and when I reread my writing, it felt sterile (like something you’d read on the wall of an art museum, which makes sense because that used to be my job). So I revised it in my own voice and liked it much better. If Danny pushed back the deadline again, I would probably revise the text or imagery again, because that is “the process,” and its evolution won’t stop until the hard cut-off. But even then, ideas don’t stop at a deadline*#8212;they’ll find their way into something else and even manifest themselves in another medium. I love words, but as Bell Hooks writes, “Language is a place of struggle.” Maybe for the next volume, Danny can source an image as the prompt.

Chelsey Grasso, *Contributor*

I read the prompt many times and then looked up all the words I didn't know. Chiaroscuro? Fecundity? I should probably have known what fecundity meant, but I didn't. After staring at the Barthes's excerpt for quite some time, I was reminded of a person who once told me my stories couldn't end where and they had started. I had disagreed. To me, ending something where it starts was making a point. I thought more about this person, and I started writing.

Julia Lattimer, *Contributor*

I had a fuck-off-Danny moment when I saw Roland Barthes was our source text and I still don't know a lot about him. I ignored him as a college freshman in a literature survey class, lumped him together with some other men who are also both French and dead. The only image I have from the dead french unit was the grayscale drawing of a panopticon projected on the overhead of our dark raked classroom. But I know, I'm actually very sure, that the panopticon was Foucault. I will say, and I'm sorry for bringing the c-word into this comment, that producing or considering any work during the COVID pandemic automatically assigns the work a very annoying shadow, something to consider the work against, or under the condition of, or in response to, or with the additional weight of. Now I'm revising three poems I wrote in the month before we all locked down while I'm mid-lockdown and have started a new life under the condition of, in response to, and with the additional weight of a global crisis, making it impossible to see those pieces as anything but pontifications. The record of which is a snapshot of the attitude of that time.

Sara Ryan, *Contributor*

I was thinking of these shadows that Barthes writes about as being memories, ghosts or the intricate details that create a personality, a person. In my poems, I wanted to remember the places I used to live, the versions of myself that I used to be. Some of my poems were rooted in place, but others metaphorically tackled the self-portrait or the reflection of oneself. I liked Barthes' question about what we find significance in, and his idea that memory or the meaning we make of memory is "sensually produced." I took this to mean that memory and significance are rooted in the senses, in the body, in physical touch. Because of this, some of my poems also navigate relationships with the body, with the bodies that surround it. These poems all have shadows underneath them, and I tried to write and revise in search of these shadows, in search of making them more visible. Most of these poems already existed in some form before I received this prompt from *Response*, and I wanted to challenge myself to revisit them and rewrite them, almost treating them as traces, or past paths the poems had taken. This was an exercise, for me, in taking these ghostly poems that had faded into the depths of my file folders and bringing them out of the shadows, allowing the border between light and dark to become more visible and contrasted. I also think that there is a specific uncomfortable sensation that comes with placing oneself in the past or moving backwards into a memory; I wanted to sit inside of these memories, rather than returning to them fleetingly, or at the surface level. In revising these poems, I was able to metaphorically change the past — remedy what I remember, adjust who I once was.

Daniel Elfanbaum, *Series Editor*

I've been thinking about this project for a long time. I've wanted to start a new journal since leaving undergrad, and I'm always chasing some dream of an idyllic arts community. Thus, *Response*. And it's really wonderful to see it finally come to fruition, even if this issue didn't exactly go according to plan (at all).

Blame COVID-19, blame my last semester in graduate school, blame whatever, but the work included here is pretty fucking great. Worth the wait in any case. And I'm pleased I had the opportunity to bring all these wonderful people together. They made new work in a month, and the world is better for it.

Charling, I've known since middle school. I met Lex and Sara in undergrad. Ali, Chelsey, and Julia were in the program at UMass Boston with me, as were this issue's guest editors, Christie and Nick. These are all friends and people that I admire, and though I am painfully aware of problems surrounding nepotism in the literary and art world(s), this is a solicitation-only journal, and for the first one, I wanted to bother my wonderful friends to make some new art for me. So sue me. Their work speaks for itself.

So far as the future: this will not be the only issue of *Response*. It will be the first one, however, and that's pretty exciting. The first of anything is always kind of exciting. But because it's the first, a lot of this is still being felt out. Fine. We'll grow and change and make it up as we go along; this pleasingly mirrors the form of the journal.

I was originally planning on writing something more about why the journal is the way it is and so on and so forth, but let's be real: there is a global pandemic going on, I'm writing this at the tail end of my first week at a new job, and you don't need to wait while I prattle on in any case.

So, if you've already made it to the end of this issue, go back to the beginning and read it again, or else pass it along to a friend. If you skipped to the end (I know some of you do that), go back and read the good stuff.

I'll see you all again in Issue 2, arriving (probably) sometime this fall.