

# Response

a journal for new work

Issue 02, October 2020

## **Response Issue 02**

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For questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact us at info [at] theworkandresponse.com.

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 are informed 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 one month 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 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:

Purposes and desires can be vague because their achievement or satisfaction conditions may have vague boundaries. This could be true even if there were no vagueness in language (or at most only parasitic vagueness in words like 'achieve,' 'satisfy,' and 'true'). Pierre's desire for some champagne may be vague because of the vagueness in just how much champagne is required to satisfy it, even though the words we would normally use to describe that desire, 'some' and 'champagne,' are perfectly precise, or at any rate, might as well be.

...

[Significance] is a context-dependent relation, since what is significant to one person may not be significant to another. Any use of 'significant,' or of any word whose content involves what is significant, requires an implicit subject with interests - an answer to the question: *significant to whom?*

— Delia Graff, *Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness*



# Contents

Lisa Allen .....	I
Caitlin Ghegan .....	13
Nicole-Anne Bales Keyton .....	23
Kentaro Kumanomido .....	31
Tim Lane .....	37
Daniel E. Pritchard .....	49
Forrest Rike .....	57
Brooke Schifano .....	61
Jessica Suderman .....	69
Megan Waring .....	81
About Our Contributors and Guest Editors .....	89
Notes Regarding This Response .....	93





# Your Alternative Guide to Wild Mushrooms

## *Amanita virosa*, “Destroying Angel”

*Take this as an IOU—I Owe You a housewarming gift.*

I’ll start there. You’d laugh if you saw me practicing to write you, but I can’t ruin this mushroom card. It was the only one of its kind in a bin of 70’s stationery at an antique barn in the Hudson Valley. That’s where I was when I texted you a photo of the hat rack, the jockey cap that would have looked cute on you. You texted back right away, told me to try the blue pillbox with face netting for myself, and then the red sun hat with silk lilies. A mom with two bratty kids walked by and looked at me funny for trying on silly hats alone, and it was a new way to miss you.

I drove up to the Hudson Valley to find a gift. I thought about sending you something from the city, whiskey from the distillery near your old apartment, beaded earrings from that shop across from Juno’s, key lime pie from the bakery by the pier. But you chose to leave those places behind.

My next stop was a “general store” selling “local provisions.” You’d see right through the handwritten labels pasted crooked on jam jars, the caramel sauce that listed the name of every single cow that made the milk that made the butter. I bought nothing.

Pop quiz: what did you think when you opened the card and saw the white stem and parasol cap? Did you think, *A tasty field mushroom! I'd sautéed that with garlic and olive oil and sea salt!* If so, check the caption: *Amanita virosa*, the destroying angel. Eight to twenty-four hours after dinner, violent vomiting and diarrhea would begin, and then subside for a day or two. You'd think you were fine. You would go about your business while the amatoxins killed your liver and kidney cells. By the time the pain sent you to the hospital, it would probably be too late. Half of one mushroom is all it takes. There is no antidote.

### *Armillaria mellea*, “Honey Fungus”

You mailed me honey from your new neighbor's hives—the *cute one*, you said in your note. I thought it would be funny to respond by sending you mushrooms from a honey fungus. Did you know that the largest living thing on earth is a honey fungus? Its mycelium filaments thread through 3.4 square miles of dirt in the Blue Mountains of Oregon. It's thousands of years old. Honey fungus feeds itself by infiltrating trees, spreading a white film between the bark and the wood. The trees die, but the mushrooms are supposed to be delicious. I did more research and learned that the funeral bell is a dangerous lookalike. The spore prints are different but it made me nervous.

So, your new neighbor is training you to help out with his hives on the weekends. You have this whole back-to-the-land narrative about moving to California. Like you hadn't seen a tree in years. Didn't we forage in Prospect Park, and upstate too? And last summer we drove a few hours from the city to camp in the mountains, twice. Are you going to forget everything that doesn't fit?

## *Pleurotus eryngii*, “King Trumpet Mushroom”

The week before our trip to the Adirondacks, a woman swimming in the Catskills was infected with the brain-eating amoeba *Naegleria fowleri*. I brought my swimsuit anyway—I know how you are about mountain lakes—but you wanted to go swimming as soon as we got to the campsite.

“Can we relax a little first?” I had my eye on the fire pit and the beer cooler. Our campsite was sheltered by a thicket of tall pines and it was just so cozy. We’d pitched your tent and mine across from each other, framing a little courtyard where we could sit by the fire and look out at the view.

“Oh my *god*, you’re thinking about the amoeba.”

“No, I just wanted—”

“Come on: It’s. So. Hot.”

“They like the heat.”

“You know it could be anywhere, it’s in shower water too, are you going to stop showering?”

I know when to stop arguing with you. We changed in our tents. I came out in my daisy-print bikini and you were waiting in your racing one-piece. I followed you into the lake. Shin-deep, our feet disappeared in the murk. I slowed down to test the rocky mud with my toes and you ran as fast as you could against the water. Waist-deep, you dove under. I walked in up to my chin and you popped up for air further out, hair slicked to the back of your neck. You swam freestyle and I doggy-paddled along the shoreline.

“Your hair is dry,” you said, bursting up from the water next to me.

“So?”

You went under again. I felt a pinch at my knee and then there you were on my other side.

“Did you notice anything? Was that an amoeba?”

You skimmed your forearm across the surface to splash my face and I held my nose—it enters through the nose, that’s how it gets to the brain—and dropped under. I let the water sink into my hair, all the way down to the roots, before I came up.

We dripped down the path to the campsite. After the lake, the heat felt good again.

“What’s that?” you pointed off-path.

I followed you into the brush. A bramble scratched my ankle. We stopped in front of a tree with a patch of mushrooms growing between the roots, tall girthy stalks with small caps. You severed the largest mushroom with your foot; it lay prone in the dead leaves. You gave it one hard stomp and left it there.

### *Laetiporus sulphureus*, “Chicken of the Woods”

We’d bought two bundles of firewood at a roadside stand but we needed kindling, so as soon as we dried off we went deeper into the woods. I was picking up twigs, and you were breaking up a larger branch into bundles when you pointed at a stack of fan-shaped orange fungi coming off the roots of a maple tree.

“Chicken of the woods!” you said.

I made chicken-dance arms.

“No that’s what they’re called, for real. They’re beginner mushrooms. No poisonous ones look like this.” You snapped off the smallest shelflet.

“Oh, you’re a mushroom expert now?”

“Aaron showed me. I should have made him teach me more mushrooms.”

Getting your mind off of him was the unstated point of this trip.

“The baby ones are the best. See? No gills.” The underside was egg-yolk yellow. You snapped it in half. “No bug-holes.”

Before I could say anything, you took a big bite. You chewed, watching me, and then you shrugged. “I bet it would be good cooked. It’ll go with our dinner.” You held it out like a poison apple, making innocent eyes. “The amoeba’s eating your brain, what’s to lose?”

Goddamned Aaron. I took a tiny bite—too little, I hoped, to kill me. Who would drive us to the hospital? We had no cell signal at the campsite, so it’s not like we could have called an ambulance. You started picking off young mushrooms and putting them in our kindling bag. It tasted like nothing.

While you arranged firewood in the pit, I said I was getting more kindling. Around the bend in the road I started looking for a cell signal. At the visitor’s center I finally got enough bars to google “chicken of the woods”—AKA Sulfur Shelf Fungus. It’s a saprobic parasite, which means it feeds on decaying organic matter. First, the mycelium attacks the tree and rots its heart. By the time mushrooms fruit on the bark, the tree is probably done for. I looked at three different mushroom hunting sites. Most of what you said checked out. The chicken of the woods has no poisonous lookalikes, but it can be toxic when it grows on conifers and eucalyptus. Did you know that? I couldn’t ask you without giving myself away. I brought back a few broomy branches for my alibi and rinsed the mushrooms at the spigot, chopped them on our little cutting board. Remember that creepy song you made up while you heated the oil? “Toadstools at dusk...fungi sublime, mystery mushroom musk.” You didn’t think I’d eat them. I

speared a big slice, held it up in the firelight for you to see, and took the first bite. Then you speared one and went right for it. This surge of adrenaline seemed to hit when you swallowed, and you looked at me like this might be our last night on earth. You hadn't looked that happy since the breakup. I felt guilty not telling you what I knew but I didn't want to bring you down. Stirred into our packet curry, the mushrooms were actually pretty good.

### *Lactarius rubidus*, "Candy Cap"

I don't know how to tell you I want to take back your birthday present. I thought I would be there to help you use it. Could we negotiate a trade? I'll give you a new gift and you'll give it back. And then I'll have two mushroom hunting guides, but the point is you won't have one. I know, it's the last thing that turned into a "thing" for us before you left. But you text me pictures all like, "Candy caps!!" and it scares me; they look so much like deadly skullcaps. You assured me your haul had the *telltale maple smell and brittle stipes*, distinct from the cartilaginous stipes of questionable lookalikes. Nothing I could see in a photo. Maybe I should give you more credit. You have a good eye, you say you take spore prints, and I'm impressed by your command of stipes. The thing is, I can't forget the way you used to commute from Brooklyn into Manhattan on your bike with no helmet, because it made you *feel alive*, and what did I do? I got you into mushroom hunting.

## *Calvatia gigantea*, “Giant Puffball”

You learned that your birthday was during the peak of the Perseid meteor shower, and you wanted to see it. We booked another campsite in the Adirondacks. We both forgot to bring corkscrews so we looked for twist-offs in the refrigerator case at the liquor store. You picked up a bottle wrapped in metallic foil and did what I thought was a jack-off hand motion but then you said “Pop top!” We bought two.

The ranger told us the best time to see the meteors was the period after midnight but before moonrise.

“The witching hour,” you said.

Our campsite was a rocky clearing on the edge of a pond that carved a bowl of open sky into the treeline. After a swim and a dinner of campfire nachos, I gave you the guidebook with a post-it marking your favorite mushroom, the chanterelle.

We made a mug of weak pourover to stay awake and then we had some birthday Champagne. Technically Brut—I know how some people are about the Champagne region of France. We filled the coffee mug with bubbles and kept refilling until my head hurt from the sugar.

“Let’s take a walk,” I said. I needed a break.

Our flashlights cut a path around the lip of the pond. I paused my beam on a cluster of round leather-brown mushrooms with little holes on top.

“Puffballs,” you said. “I loved those when I was a kid.”

You squatted in front of them and read the guidebook by flashlight. “The average giant puffball contains seven trillion spores.”

*“Trillion?”*

You squeezed a puffball; a white cloud swirled up into my flashlight beam.

“It says here that spores travel all the way up into the clouds. They can change the weather by agitating a cloud to make raindrops, or snow or hail.”

“Let’s see if it starts raining.” My head was spinning. I lay down on the ground, resting my head on a mossy patch, and you leaned back against a rock. There were a few puffy clouds in the sky. I imagined the spores floating up and getting lost in the white haze, suspended in the heavens until the cloud flushed them down in a burst of rain to perpetuate their species.

Something bright flashed across the sky.

“A shooting star!” I said.

“Comet debris burning up in the atmosphere.”

“Let’s a make a wish on the next one. A birthday wish.”

“Secret wish?”

“Secret.”

When the next meteor streaked past I made a wish that we would come back to the Adirondacks every summer. It was a bad choice for a secret wish. I couldn’t tell you I wanted that, because then the wish wouldn’t come true. You know I’m superstitious. Not that it matters now. Now, you’re a six-hour flight away and I’ll be lucky if I see you anywhere every year. I can’t ask what you wished.

Back at the campsite, when we finished the Brut you threw the bottles one after the other at a big rock and they shattered, and



then you crawled into your tent and I went into mine and the last thing I remember thinking is *someone's going to have to clean that up*.

In the morning I came out of my tent and you were already awake, pouring steaming water from the kettle into the pourover. Camping, the first person to get up claims moral high ground. The plastic bag hanging off the edge of the picnic table had long shards poking out at its sides. Plausibly two complete Brut bottles worth of shards, but what do I know. I was never anywhere close in the how-many-jellybeans-in-the-jar contests at my orthodontist's office, which always seemed cruel. We couldn't eat jellybeans with braces. Remember when my braces came off and my parents took me and you—you, who never needed braces—on a tour of the Jelly Belly factory? We stood on a glassed-in catwalk above the factory floor, staring down into stacked white crates filled with jellybeans and I wanted to plunge my hand in and feel the smooth pebbles clink around my fingers. The crates were organized in rows separated by color, and I named the flavors for you: cherry, lime, blueberry, cotton candy. I wasn't sure about cotton candy, it could have been bubblegum, but you looked impressed until I said, *thousands of them*. You shook your head: *millions*. I decided that it was a significant day in my life: the first time I'd ever seen millions of anything. The tour guide could have told us how many, but I just wanted to believe you.

I figured it would be rude to check the bushes like I didn't trust your bottle cleanup, you the first-to-wake-up, so I just sat down at the picnic table and watched the coffee drip. I opened the guidebook, began at the beginning. *What is a mushroom?* To make a mushroom, the reproductive "fruit" that spreads spores, the hyphae give up their individual questing underground. They weave themselves into a fabric that forms the flesh of the mushroom, their final unity.

## *Boletus edulis*, “King Bolete”

You started mushroom hunting by yourself in the woods near your new house, and you swore you'd find chanterelles before the year was up. Your first edible find was a king bolete. It's an upstanding forest citizen. Fungi aren't always agents of parasitic rot. Until I read the guidebook, I didn't know that fungi like king boletes and chanterelles provide an underground communication network between trees and other plants. The relationship is called “mycorrhizal mutualism.” In this symbiosis, mycorrhizal hyphae—fungal tendrils that spread through the earth in search of food—connect the roots of plants and trees. These networks conduct information and nutrients and facilitate cross-species exchanges, such as a phenomenon called fir-birch mutualism. Paper birches, rather than siphoning off Douglas firs' resources, actually donate more photosynthetic carbon through the hyphae than they take in, helping their neighbors survive. For their troubles, fungi take a small cut of photosynthesized material. In a mycorrhizal economy, everything connected benefits. Doesn't that sound utopic? I don't know exactly how fungi and trees communicate their needs but I know it's limited by proximity. With you so far away, if I'm being honest I don't even know what you need any more, much less how I could give it to you.

## *Agaricus campestris*, “Field Mushroom”

When you texted “Field mushrooms!” with a photo of suspiciously generic specimens I called you. Lots of mushroom hunters won't touch round-topped white mushrooms with gills. Especially young ones.

“What if they're destroying angels or death caps?”

“It’s fine! There were no sacs at the base! They’re in the pan already. I’m trying to have a nice night!”

“But—”

“I have papers to grade.” You hung up.

Both varieties are common in California, I was going to say.

### *Morchella esculenta*, “true morel”

I had this feeling walking back to my apartment the night you left the city. It was cold and dark and I was passing these beautiful warm-lit restaurants and bars and each one was just a place I’ll never go with you. When you visit we will go out on the nights you aren’t catching up with other friends, but those places won’t be part of our lives. Our only future in this city is nostalgia, and nostalgia is the dusty dried morels I buy when I think of the honeycomb-tops we found growing in the shade of a dead sycamore in Cold Spring. You left me in a place produced by the dialectic of our life in it, and now I don’t know where I am. Reality isn’t something that can be experienced alone. Reality is a shared space. You left and the city is bleeding significance. Juno’s could shut down and before, that would have meant *now we’ll have to find a new place to end up on Friday nights* but now—what would it mean? For you, it would mean *I’ll never see Juno’s again* and for me, *I’ll never see Juno’s again with you; is it even Juno’s without you*. I’d watch something else replace it, something that means nothing. I haven’t been back since you left. If I went back and texted you a picture of Marta mixing your favorite whiskey sour, you’d text me a photo of yourself in your sunny kitchen three hours earlier in Pacific Time, chopping vegetables from your garden. By the time you finish your second glass of wine after dinner I’ll be asleep. And I kind of want to text you right now to say *Remember*

*the Perseids?* but it's 2 a.m. on a Sunday night and we both have work in the morning. The text would find you watching TV. Or maybe you finally invited your beekeeping neighbor over. 2 a.m. texts look unhinged at any other hour. Across these time zones the only time of day that feels the same way at the same time for both of us is the afternoon, a static time. Possibility is nocturnal.

### *Cantharellus cibarius*, "Golden Chanterelle"

It's been raining all month and you know what that's good for? Chanterelles. It's 3 a.m. but I can't sleep and I feel them out there, calling to me. I'll get dressed and take the subway to Prospect Park. I'll enter at 15<sup>th</sup> Street and find the lake from the north, shine my flashlight around tree roots until I catch a flash of gold, a fluted underside. I'll check for false gills that fuse to a smooth stem, make sure I haven't mistaken them for true-gilled toxic jack-o'-lanterns. The trees around them will be healthy, well-nourished by the mycorrhizal network. I'll gather tender ones in my basket, enough for two. They won't last long. Tomorrow morning I'll wrap half of the chanterelles in bubble wrap to protect them from bruising. I'll seal them in a box with an ice pack from my freezer. I'll send them by two-day mail and you won't believe I found them, your favorite, right here. I'll wait until it's dinnertime in California. Then, we'll make them together.

## For Edie or Never Ago

The sky through the trees looked like purple streams of bubbles from a wand. I told Adam, and he said hey, that's *great*, I might use that—that okay? He had his left hand curled over his lips in thought and the other on the wheel, and I thought he might be serious. I said sure? I wasn't the artist. I wasn't writing anything, just doing the retreat part. But we drove the rest of the way up mostly in silence.

The trees grew thicker and thicker, closer together and taller, and the rain that came later seemed impossible, like a downpour couldn't have come from such a thick tent of pine. A cold and damp seeped in. I asked to turn up the heat. Adam murmured he didn't care. I fiddled with the console, sticky with age, and something deep in the belly of the car started to moan. I turned it back, pulled a blanket from the backseat over my knees, shaking off dirt and splintered leaves. He reached a tentative hand across the console and squeezed the edge of my thigh.

He said he won the cash for the trip in a radio call-in. The 11-hundred at 11. When I came over for Sunday dinner, I pressed for more details of this miracle from his Mom, us shoulder to shoulder at the sink with our sweatshirts over our elbows. Radio winnings from a guy without a working stereo? Really? And she sheepishly said, I dunno, Edie. But his sister said it was the last of his share of their Aunt Betty's insurance money. I took the car and went home before dessert. He slept on Mom's couch for a couple days after that.

Adam was set on his plans. He was gonna make the next *For Emma* album. All he needed was time and a cabin and he'd make it. He'd be Bon-freaking-Iver. He said he found a thread on

Reddit, found a picture and an AirBnB link to a cabin up north of Eau Claire in the thick of a forest. And the Redditors said yeah, that's Bon Iver's dead dad's cabin, DEF, that'd be sick.

Bon Iver dumped his girlfriend to be "one with the wolves" for a winter, Adam.

When we'd finished fighting, I don't know how I'd agreed, yes, I'd come along and cook. We'd make the most of that time for him to finish an album. I could take his Dad's gun and try to hunt, or at least go snow shoeing all I wanted if it snowed. I didn't have to pay, not even for gas. I thought of a whole list of things I'd have to pay for or not if we made the same choices. Flowers. Dresses. A barn and buckets of Christmas lights from raw, rough beams. All that dreaming for a cabin in the woods. I shouldn't have counted on one penny of Aunt Betty's money. You can't start saving on a dead person's wallet.

I made up my mind last-minute to test us out. Like fine, I'll go, I'll be quiet, I won't bother you. I packed my extra-thick socks. I borrowed a book from his sister. I wanted to take my fleece-lined hat, a sherpa with a shorn rabbit down, but Adam said I looked like a matted bear, a no-go for hunting season, and he swapped it out for a neon pink ski hat he found in the hallway closet. Edie, I'm just looking out for you. Come on. Let's get going.

We pulled up a dark gravel drive, the late November rain swaying with the promise of flurries, and we found the narrow path the owner said we'd follow to the front door. Adam yanked his guitar and his duffle from the back and tore into the thicket with a flashlight, his voice trailing behind, he didn't want it to get soaked. I humped the three bags of groceries, our boots, the old hockey bag with the rifle, clunking heavy against my leg as I hurried down the path. Adam stood fiddling at the lockbox, hugging his guitar close in the dry bubble under the tiny awning. I felt a clod of slush fall onto my head and split down my

forehead. Down my collar against my neck, I shook and it felt like a fever.

I hurried him and urged him to give me the key, if he couldn't do it, let me get it. But he managed and opened the door to a dark room. He sidled in, dragging his duffel in with his foot, and I nearly tripped.

His friends from school told him he could make it big, his professors did too, but he had to work at it. He hadn't worked at it much in the years since he moved home, but having heard him fiddling, twiddling on his strings between Netflix and having a smoke in a rare fit of inspiration, I thought this could be fine. He might make something here. There was nothing else to do. A single room with a stove, a cot, a wide, rough work table. A beat-up sofa. A tepid mini-fridge. One single-socket outlet in the kitchen. But there might be something here in the cold. A snap, a change. We lit a candle lamp with the last of my phone battery.

I got up twice in the night to check the wood stove, convinced the fire had petered out. I crawled back into the cot, yanking the thick quilt from under Adam's belly. He wrapped around me, his toes icy, and I folded my arms tighter over my chest, willing them to catch fire. I found myself wriggling away from the sharpness of Adam's body, all elbows and knees curled around me, then wriggling back further from the stiff cold of the wall, caught in an impossibly tiny space in a shrinking bed.

I woke up sore. I cupped my hands together and exhaled deep into them, and the stirring woke Adam. He blinked up at me and for a moment, I thought he'd reach for me and pull me back into the sheets. Instead he said it was time to get to work. He claimed the sofa for himself and set about tuning the guitar. I made over-easy eggs that browned to a fry on top of a pale toast. When I tried to ask if we might have left the orange juice in the car, he scowled and said to leave him alone. He'd be silent until sunset. This was the rule. I probably forgot the juice back at his Mom's, either way.

I poked at the wood stove and fed it contents from a pail the owners had provided, stuffed with wood bits of every size and coverless, waterlogged paperback books. I withdrew the book I borrowed, a thick volume of poetry, and sat at the hard barstool at the long table. Adam's guitar plunked, plucked, and he ran over scales in a stretching, clumsy yawn of his fingers. I sat facing the tiny, rusting sink, the tiny porthole window into the forest. I couldn't stare at him working. That was a must. But I imagined him glancing at the knot of hair on my head. I wiggled and adjusted the waistband of my sweats, pulled down the hem of my sweater. I tried to pause after every poem, like a chewing, a mulling, after a rush of pages blurred into an unwanted story, a crooked bucket of scenes that stuck out in the authors' pondering. *Machine-throb heard by the whole body. Tucked sleeve of a one-armed boy. Swallowed up and all hands lost. Fire engines.* I read and promptly forgot the story of them.

Outside, the punishing rain had frozen over and a soft snow drifted down easy. To the east, a view of a browning hill, the west, the branching path to the woods and the path to the car, and a higher window in the slanted ceiling, a white blot leaking thin light. Behind, Adam sighed, happy, at simple sounds and chords. A patchwork, a search. Not a song yet. He gasped, aha, oh my *god*. Edie! An hour into picking tones here and there, he wondered aloud, Like, wow, do you *hear* that? I asked him what he was looking for. How was that going? The writing? Adam went quiet.

"You can't ask me that right now. It's not half-fledged, even. Let me figure this out."

Morning passed with endless loops of chords, Em-C-G-D, and E minor for Emma, how clever, little licks and runs he couldn't handle and would abandon with a loud "*fuck!*" He snapped at me to stop drumming my fingers, but I hadn't noticed except for the bright red blotch on my thumb where it'd hit the countertop. I curled up tighter, perched like an owl, on that stool. I was perfectly still, so as not to creak the floor or the chairlegs.



Afternoon brought no new lyrics. I stared down the anthology, willing the poems to block out the stuttering riffs, but the unfinished songs fractured lines and pushed Merwin's enjambments, and I couldn't hear or read a word. I thought I'd packed another thing to read, a novel, something with narrative. I pressed my fingers to my temples and pinched in little circles. Progressions of hums and chords, the same note over and over louder, then softer. I reached for my headphones, but kept the volume to a whisper, so low I could hear him grumble, "Well, sorry to bother you," and I put them away again.

I heated a can of soup for lunch, but Adam wouldn't touch it, just put a stony grim line on his face, gave a fast shake of his head. Not now. I sucked up the noodles from the edge of my mug, trying not to slurp, quiet as I could.

Feeding the wood stove, I carefully tossed the tinder in its rightful places, erecting a tent of sticks and rolls of paper over a dense core of pulp and log. I closed the hatch and looked into the bucket, eyes blurring from the heat, heavy from the drone of the anthology. A dark splotch of lettering, a headline in all caps. I picked up a paperback, a dusty magazine, and brought it idly to the table.

In a copy of *Outside*, joyful faces climbed mountains, clean of sweat or traces of exertion. They wore bright bandanas around their heads and raised their hands above their heads in front of vistas. Headlines with cozy, ethereal titles: "A dirtbag's guide to sanitation" and "The man who wants the world to hear whale songs." Maybe this is how he pulled it off, I thought. Bon Iver rummaged through the garbage. I took a knife from a drawer and sliced, careful and slow, from the pages. An op-ed about syrup sales. A block-letter ad for a mom and pop store with a sinking roof. Help wanted notices—tree climbers wanted!

Adam had stopped playing, I thought to pause and start writing something down, but when I swiveled around in the chair, I

found him reclined, head nestled into the crook of his arm, napping.

I fixed BLTs for dinner, his request, and a can of three-bean chili. I nudged him awake and asked, was it time to talk again? He smirked and asked me, did I hear it? The way the guitar hit the cabin walls? No, I said. But I'm not the second coming of Bon Iver, so what do I know? What do walls sound like?

He woke up the next day early, and I woke up to his guitar, sour-tuned, and Adam hissing curses at a popped string. Your love's allergic to the cold, I said, cocooning in the cot, willing the thin pillow to muffle him. His runs and lines were the same, a soft thrum then a hard note, like a hammered note on an old piano, a kid's glee at finding the highest note on the far right, hitting it with popsicle-slick hands. Over and over, I remembered it. Pillow failing, I sat up in the cot, draping the quilt around my shoulders, scrunching my toes in the tent of sleepy warmth. I asked him what he was thinking, what was he working on? He didn't answer. I looked out the window. The world outside was thick and white, the brown hill now a blank slope without shadow, the lower forest a whisper-soft blue. I watched him narrow his eyes to a spot on the floor, strumming hummingbird flutters with an open neck, note-less, sexless, empty, like the motion itself would make an empty space or question mark more meaningful.

He looked up at me staring and frowned. Do you *mind*? I wanted to throw something. I did. But I sucked in my bottom lip. I wiggled my hands and found their flickers of warmth. I got up and the blankets pooled around my ankles in a defeated plop.

I cut those out for you, I said, if you need any ideas. He growled, do I *look* like I need ideas? Okay, okay, I get it, I said. He turned to the wall, curled up over the guitar, like he wanted to draw up another wall in the tiny one-room space. I shuffled to the bathroom. I ran warm water onto a worn washcloth with a forlorn spot, bleached naked of dye. I pressed it to my face and

sank into my palms. I'll get out of your way today, I murmured. I left the cloth in the sink. I went out, pulled on another pair of socks, my boots, my parka. I grabbed the leather-topped gloves and the gym bag with the rifle, hooking it over my shoulder, and walked out without another word. The door closed and I could hear him start to play again.

When I jammed the spare pink hat over my ears, it smelled like hockey tape and dog hair. I walked a ways down the path, coughed out the odor, pulled the hat off and stuffed it into my pocket. What kind of hunter shot a pure black anorak or a clean sherpa hat? I willed myself taller, less a bear, and hugged the sky-blue gym bag against my hip. I pulled the parka hood over my head and the wind pushed through the down. The cold was hard and sharp at my neck. Nestling my nose under the neck of my sweater, I trudged along. I kept moving. I moved slow, my boots leaving slug-trails, my footprints blue in the shade of laden pines.

Whispers of snow fell to the thinning path. Little thickets and threads of dry reed peeked up and broke the sheer white of the way ahead. I wondered how likely I was to get lost. I wondered if I would find my way back, if the snow swallowed up my trail, would Adam come and find me, pale and purple-lipped, tilted sideways into a drift? He would call someone if he had the bars. I could see the snow sway and dance but I couldn't hear the wind. The stillness of morning in the cabin was somehow louder than the woods. I pressed my boots hard as I could into the drifts, willing the crunch of my heel to call out to the woods that I was there. I searched the trees to see if my passing would startle the warblers, the hares that burrowed beneath the bramble. Nothing called out, nothing moved, just the shake of the storm in the branches.

Feeling neither brave nor fearful, I unzipped the gym bag and pulled out Adam's dad's rifle. I held it by the throat, my fist over the chamber, fingers far from the clutch of the trigger. Casings

rattled in the bag. My heart patted a little harder, the gym bag and the trees more dangerous than the dead metal in my hand.

Go try a hunt, he said. Forget the license. I'd never gone, never shot anything, not even the cans and bottles his Dad lined up with his sister, who I'd watch pop-pop-pop a handgun with gleeful, sick precision. But I wasn't that kind of woman. I wasn't even from there, a D.C. transplant in a Midwestern college town. I'd never had my own snowshoes. I'd never won money to spit it away. I'd never known an album by heart, just the lyrics, a handful of melodies. I played piano as a kid and gave up twice. I stood in the snow and thought of all the what-not's and what-if's until a wind hit my eyes, they started to water, and I sneezed, and the shriek pinch of it barely registered in the thick of the woods. There was no echo, no reverberation, just the snow and a sharp jab at my chest. I looked up. Nothing. I pulled the hood away from my ears. I heard the hiss of the snow finding mottled, wet ground. I waited for a sound, the snap of a twig or a branch, the crunch of something stirring, moving its way closer. I willed a deer's knotted antlers to come out and fight me. I wanted to know how it yelled. What did it sound like when it was scared. I willed the bullet into the safety-locked gun. A tiny click.

I figured then that Bon Iver—formerly named Justin?—was an idiot. Adam said he'd dealt with the wolves, that they howled and stalked the door, left prints on the windows, their noses and paws. He was alone with a gun through the whole damn winter? Did he catch his own food? He shot at the deer? Did Emma catch his deer for him? Did she shoot and miss? Did he come to hear his work, only to find a cabin in painful quiet? He didn't have a working fridge? He didn't have a girlfriend anymore? But he made something out of nothing and a cabin, rent-free. Are you sure? Just Bon Iver and his sound.

A whiff of smoke. Somewhere in the middle of this naked wildness, behind an open door of solitude, someone lit a fire. Imagine that. Another one of Bon Iver's dead dad's cabins. A

whole industry of loners, wanting to be found. I hoisted the rifle and pointed its nose to a hole in the treetops. I held it all wrong, I knew, the butt of it under my arm and not notched secure against my shoulder, and I held the length of it higher, pointing at the sky.

Bang, I growled, muffled, choked by the curtain of snow. Bang, louder. I wondered if I had traveled far enough for Adam not to hear me, or if he heard, not the gun he might have expected, but me, safety off.

Bang. The thick silence was something I could beat. Bang, screeched in a higher pitch because we weren't on a naked, open mountain, where the noise would shake and travel, but under the cover of a foot of snow in Wisconsin, and we were buried at least until Sunday, and I wasn't going anywhere except the cold and damp and the empty cabin, where I had nothing to do but chop poems. Adam wanted an album. He'd make an album. Adam would make 11-hundred on the 11 worth of songs. Bang became another word, I wanted to make the trees echo. We would have money back for dresses and flowers and buckets of Christmas lights. Adam could wear a damn bow tie if he wanted. Fine. A blue jay bolted out of hiding. My throat was hot and torn, and I had half a mind to scoop up a mouthful of snow. I turned around.

When I came back to the cabin, I found clusters of candles lit here and there, and Adam at the kitchen stove, watching a pot muster a boil. I shimmied off my boots, pulled tiredly at my sodden socks, double-layered, plastered to my shins. He watched me and offered a little smile. He asked about my walk. He figured pasta was fine for him to get started until I got back. I asked him if he'd been productive. Adam smiled and helped me shrug off the coat, heavy with water, and hung it on a nail in the wall. He kissed the top of my head and took my hand in his. He said it felt good, what he was working on was still a work-in-progress, but something real was gonna come, maybe tomorrow. He figured "For Emma" started with just a bounce back and forth between two chords,

and he'd felt them, going back and forth, and he was playing with lines here and there, until it rushed out like "Flume."

I stared at the table, bare. No clippings or scissors, no piles. Did you read them? Did they give you any ideas? Adam's smile thinned. What?

No firefighters, crickets, or tree-climbers wanted. No cyclists or haunted furniture mirrors or the ghoul in the attic. They crackled in the wood stove. They cluttered the waste bin. There was a jar of pasta sauce on the table, the cheap kind, and a sheaf of notebook paper, a single line surrounded by hatches of lines and storm clouds with thick underbellies.

"Emma isn't a person. Emma is a place that you get stuck in. Emma's a pain that you can't erase." - J.V.

Fuck you, Emma.

## Jinni in a Neti Pot

When spring takes the shape of summer, she resumes her ritual. Waking in the dark, sometime after five in the morning, with a rupture—a cut in her nose, a healing scab tugged open in the throes of sleep—she darts to the bathroom, cell phone in hand, to sit on the toilet lid and plug her bleeding nostril with crumpled up corners of tissue snagged from the tissue box propped up on the edge of the pedestal sink, playing the latest in her never-ending queue of digestible narrative soundbites while she waits for the blood to dry up.

Unable to skip past the streaming service's ads, she sits through the same old thirty-second bit and mumbles along with the narrator.

*...in part by JinniMed. With JinniMed's patented neti pot, you can better embrace the wellness of care, rid yourself of the harsh OTC treatments that make your allergies worse, and reduce your carbon footprint with our recyclable packaging and reusable neti pot. Wish that all your sinus problems could go away? Go waste-free. Try Jinni.*

In these groggy moments, she tends to drift into a dream state where the voice she echoes takes the shape of a pair of lips, full and peachy, with a set of teeth that glistens with a slick sheen in the morning light, while a pair of disembodied hands—are they hers?—pulls through the fog of make-believe and cradles a small, sky-blue Aladdin's lamp, steam billowing out of its curved stem, the lamp's translucent blue swirling together into the cream of warm saltwater within until it feels light as air, soft hands growing warm...

“Done in there yet?” he asks her, his gravelly morning voice seeping through the closed door. To her, he sounds tired, his voice still shaking off the crust of sleep. Her reflection in the mirror presents a dimly lit visage of blood trickling from her nose down her fingertips, past the crimson tissue, and plinking onto the cool tile below.

“Sure,” she says, and tugs the door open. “Give me a second, though.” The cool air from the hallway floods the stuffy room as he steps inside and blinks at the bloody sight before him.

“Oh no,” he says, the shortest of laughs warming up his morning voice. “I’ll come back in a bit.” She mops up her mess and tosses the tissues into the trash can. “No, it’s okay,” she addresses the floor. “I can sit on the couch.” She grabs a handful of clean tissues and her phone, the narrator’s voice pulsing against her palm. She ducks out from under his outstretched arm before he can even begin to protest.

On the couch, many minutes later, he kisses her goodbye—lips to forehead—and wishes her a good day.

“Or at least a better one,” he imparts—sheepish smile, blue eyes bright—with a salutatory wave before shutting the front door behind him, bringing her back into the last stretch of fleeting darkness brought on by early morning.

~

Countless tissue boxes later—her one remaining reliable unit of measurement to indicate the passage of time for the foreseeable future—she holds an ice pack up to the bridge of her nose while reading a manuscript on her laptop, legs crossed under her as she leans back on the couch, when the doorbell rings. The mailman walks past her open window, carrying in the air a lingering soundbite of the local public radio’s routine crisis coverage as she heads for the door.



A brown cardboard box addressed to her from a warehouse across the country sits on her doorstep. She rips the packing tape open with the serrated edge of her mail key. Inside the box is a smaller one, rectangular and white, with an image of its contents printed on its exterior. The wax-coated white box shimmers in the light, and she can just barely make out a raised etching that traces the outline of the product's name and a cartoonish figure of a Casper-like ghost—a cheap rendering of a genie—dressed in a whitecoat with its smoky arms crossed, grinning at a speech bubble overhead that reads:

*To clearer days ahead,  
from JinniMed.*

She heads inside and tips the inner box over the kitchen table. A small, ceramic pot—a milky smear of watercolor blue—like a miniature watering can clatters out of the box along with a mountain of recyclable saline packets and a leaflet printed in heavy card stock that, when unfolded, spans the entirety of the tabletop. It takes her longer than it should to realize that the leaflet provided wasn't one for offering instructions on how to use the product itself, but rather an advertising spread for the various other accoutrements for the neti pot JinniMed just so happened to produce to aid consumers like her in all matters regarding the cleansing of nasal cavities. How is one supposed to learn how to use such a contraption? With intuition? Innate common sense? Some inexcusable experience she was supposed to have lived through in her formative childhood years so she could recall precisely how to use this exact thing? The questions take the shape of the sharp puncture of his buried voice—*use your brain, it's not that hard*—that irritating acidic earworm still latched in her head likes to repeat the things he felt provoked to say on a regular basis, to the point where she'd been able to predict exactly what he would say next.

No—*he* is not here. *He* is in the past—whatever amorphous, untouchable thing that fails to be. She remembers that the she who stands before the pile of saline packets at the kitchen table is capable of determining where to go next.

She spends the next three tissue changes turning the leaflet at every possible angle to find some semblance of instruction, intermittently changing out the reddening clumps of toilet paper in her nose that plug up the recent leak. The only indicator of guidance she manages to find in her complimentary leaflet of product placements is a warning, flagged by the familiar exclamatory mark in a rounded triangle—

*Do NOT use tap water. Flush nose with filtered or boiled (then cooled) water.*

As she heats a pot of water on the stove, she embarks on a Google quest for information. She props her phone against the edge of the bathroom sink and watches a stream of autoplaying how-to videos compiled in a “suggested viewing” sidebar of her results. She makes careful mental notes and pauses the tutorials every seven seconds—the time it takes to rotate a tissue to the next clean corner—to imitate the hand models’ pixelated movements in the mirror with the empty neti pot. In time, the rehearsals begin to take the shape of muscle memory as the ceramic pot grows warm in her hands from cradled use.

She removes the boiling water from the stove and waits for it to cool down by gently tugging the most recent gummed-up tissue out of her nose. The bloodied crust had dried and formed a ring-like coating around her nostrils. In the mirror she can see, dangling inside the crook of her nose, an overhanging scabbed patch, and with some sort of cathartic stirring of justice, she slowly peels off to reveal a raw surface of skin and nose hair that registered the passing sensation of breathing again.

Spring into summer. Something about heavy pollinating brings stinging tears to her eyes. She despises it—them—both seasons happening back-to-back, an unending stupor of numbness brought on by a calm, unassuming breeze. She's come to hate the motionless shift of late-stage spring, provoking memories of an exodus of cherry blossoms and canopies of worms inching along hairlike strands of silk that descend from the lower tree branches with the intention of amplifying her fear of too-tiny things creeping up along her skin, a wave of goosebumps invisible to her eye—*it's all in your head*, he likes to say, dark brown eyes telling her to look straight into his and tell him it's not real; *no, not say it, tell me with your eyes, your eyes can give you away*—

She gave up—back then—on trying to anticipate when spring shed its skin revealing that sour-heated summer; a summer spent stuck indoors, always at work, always at home, never anywhere in between except for the car—the last safe pollen-free zone—where she felt the most alone, the most content, the most herself, the most likely to entertain her silent wish to drive along I-95 and never stop, not even stopping at the last stretch of land before plunging right into the sea. But to step outside would remind her of who she was again, what she'd been running from, and the pollen and ragweed and mold and all of her summer irritants would be waiting for her every time she was forced to stop, who she knew there was no choice but to get back in that car and head all the way back to him—*and preferably at a reasonable hour this time*—or else the questions would come and never stop until she somehow was capable of saying all the words he expected to hear but would never admit to not knowing until she'd already said the wrong answer. So much work, so much time spent in that car, killing time before she had to fill up the tank and retrace the whole way back.

Using the mirror as her guide, she picks crudely away around her bloodied nasal passages, plucking scabs out of her nose until she hits a patch not yet healed. She tilts her head back and angles her

cavities toward the bathroom light, surveying the terrain devoid of blood amidst the prickling whirlpool of brown hairs giving way to darkness. She waves one hand over the cooling water and, no longer feeling the hot steam rise, dips a finger in to test.

Fresh in her head, she mutters the mantra of YouTube steps like an incantation as she prepares the neti pot for her initial rinse.

*—Empty saline packet into pot*

*—Pour cooling water in*

*—Fill to line*

*—Cap*

*—Let sit*

*—Look for the cloud*

*—Tilt head forward, to the side*

*—Let the water run*

~

Her first impression is one of burning. Making its way up past the bridge in her nose to the brain, where she could venture a guess as to what would happen if salted water were to make contact with the sensitive tissue there. It burns in the center of her forehead and at the inside edges of her eyes. Tears gather and leak out in little dewdrops while she holds her head steady on its side, angled forward, holding her breath and pressing the neti pot's stem into one nostril, waiting for water to come out the other side. A tear makes its way to her open mouth. It tastes salty, though she can't quite tell the difference between the taste of her own bodily fluid and that of the neti pot's.

She hears the front door open, a rattle of keys, clattering of metal against the doorknob, a sigh.

“You home?”

She's afraid to speak. Nothing in her online tutorials mentioned the possibility of interruption, the necessity of speech. She musters a low hum, hoping it translates as assent over the noise of thick saline droplets plinking in rapid, inconsistent succession against the sink.

It is at this moment when she registers the reflection of her expungement in the mirror. Thick blobs of reddish-brown clots have slipped out the open nostril and dangle heavily over the sink. She can hear his footsteps moving closer to the bathroom door. Bobbing her head over the sink doesn't shake the red line loose. As she spots the doorknob turning, she clamps her mouth closed and blows nasal bubbles back into the neti pot.

At last, the string releases, splattering the mirror and freeing a stream of water-logged phlegm out the clotted end. The door cracks open. She sticks her heel out to block the door from moving another inch forward.

"Everything okay?"

"M'fine," she mumbles. "Allergies." As soon as her mouth opens to pronounce the "a," the suspension act that built the delicate gummy dam between the nose and the throat snaps. Saltwater leaks down the back of her throat. The burning succumbs to drowning. Her reflex is immediate, a swift lunge over the lip of the sink as she coughs up spit.

"Oh. You got my gift."

She glances away from her reflection to see his own gaze lingering on the neti pot angled just under her nose. Mirrored eyes meet, but he's nice, looks down and disappears.

What remains in the neti pot—frothing cesspool of backed-up snot and salt—drains down her throat and she coughs it all back up. She learned a trick when she last had the flu, that sticking her finger in her mouth just enough to provoke a gag can dredge up

what's trapped in the throat. She hacks the leftover slush into the sink.

When she surfaces, she catches her reflection again—puffy red eyes streaked with tears, green snot bubble stuck to her lip, a fleck of blood hovering over her mirrored collarbone.

“Is that supposed to happen?” he presses his head against the door, one wide eye peering in.

She breathes in and opens the door a bit wider with the corner of her foot. He leans gently in to rest one hand over the sore part of her back, holding her steady. Throat waterlogged with a post-nasal drip, she waits until the passage clears to ask him if he can smell the stench of stale copper pennies in the air.

## ESCHATOLOGY, UNRAVELING

Opening and closing portals score:

Find a portal.

Open it up.

Step inside.

Pose a little.

Step outside.

Close it up.

Seal it good.

Repeat.

Delicate fortitude

Sadness piling up

Pyramids

Rage

Kindred botanicals

All alone on Easter

Consumption and the smell of me

Language

Rage

I ran out of tremors:

justifications.

Your alibis:

fascism, numerology.

Coincidence - solar plexus - lipstick - dirt.

Going away then coming back - lipstick - dirt.

Trainwrecks as blessings.

Unbecoming me.

Lakeshores bring me lakeshores.

Hours rain.

The barn - the buds - the rocks - the car - the cows - the ghosts -  
gone away - all the way - god is:  
hard.

Falling asleep while praying:  
former lover,  
salvage me...

The sudden awakening of new conjugations - configurations -  
dirt.

Slackline - gold thread - beside you - beyond me - beneath.

Lantern light to illuminate:  
camping equipment, cave dwelling ants and crystals, my  
beloved's face.

What to call a place as it starts sinking.  
And once it has sunk?

My father's body is so unreal.

A cosmology of storm clouds.

Guilt.

She pounded at his golden triangle with her dull pointed spear. At  
last, something (somewhere) clicked, and from within the center  
of their beingness spewed a silky white beam which rose into the  
air...

...then fragmented into a shower of a million jewel-like droplets.



A most pristine droplet fell gracefully upon the center-point of each partner's brow.

Tears - torn fabric.

A smell - a scent.

# GAY ASIAN PRAYERS

Last night I prayed  
that three poems would come to me in sleep.  
In the middle of the night, I awoke—as I do—  
to the phrase: “gay asian prayers,”  
and I thought: this will be the title of my book.

I started turning over lines while half asleep,  
but I knew that they were trash so didn't bother  
turning on a light to write them down, and in the  
morning I remembered: gay asian prayers,  
and wrote down in my notebook:

GAY  
ASIAN  
PRAYERS

with my full name underneath it,  
and drew a rectangle around the whole thing  
so I'd remember it's a book.

Then I wrote down two lines; the first was:  
gay ass paradise, the next was:  
gay asian pears. Then I thought of nothing  
for a while, waiting for another line to come,  
and when it did it was:  
Gabriel Azriel Percival; and I knew that Gabriel  
and Azriel were angels but forgot if Percival was one,  
so I googled it, and he's not;  
he's just one of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

# WHEN I HEARD MAUREEN CRIED AT SOCIALLY-DISTANCED BRUNCH

the weight of a child in this world  
seems unbearable for several reasons  
the least being our current situation  
the greatest being climate chaos  
but in between  
there's the next one hundred years  
& I feel like planting flowers in a circle  
in the spring & this will be my home  
where friends will bring me food  
& things to build a shelter with  
& it will be an art piece &  
a poem to all the mothers of this world  
& I can't promise that I'll stay inside the circle  
but the point is: the earth is living  
you are it  
& life is good &  
keeps on going  
& finds a way no matter what  
until the world ends  
from an asteroid  
*but that's not even it*  
because in truth  
you're not a body  
you're a crystal  
made of stardust  
& the sun's a living creature  
& she'll take care of every crystal baby  
even when the earth is shot



## Like Anywhere Else

Somewhere, it isn't raining. Somewhere water doesn't braid off the roof, twist down, flood the grass. Somewhere we aren't cradled in the hush. Though I can't quite imagine it. Not here. Here is where it rains. Here is where we time our outings in accordance with the clouds. In the little breaks we scurry, beetle-backed under our coats, to our cars, across the street, down to the grocery store. You can ask around how long the rains have been falling and you'll get different answers for your trouble.

"Since Tuesday," says Mary.

"Since forever," says her son, Quin.

"At least eighteen months," says Toure.

We have been noticed by the world at large. Of course there are those who point out that in the Bible, God rains on the spoiled so that He might flood the world and restart it pure. How boring. I'd like to point out that so far, aside from a few basements, lawns, and the Arco on Caesar Chavez — a clogged storm drain — we are not under water. We are not a rotting corner of sin. We are like anywhere else.

Still, it has been soggy-footed enough for some of us to leave. In fact, I've been alone for a month now, perhaps more. It is hard to tell how long, as I've pointed out before, because with the rains come monotony. If there is anything harder to split and pinpoint within, I don't know it, or couldn't tell you now.

~

“I saw her packing their car and I didn’t think much of it,” says Mary. “Just overnight stuff, you know. Her parents have a cottage somewhere in the mountains.”

“She gave me a pack of gum, a whole eighteen-piece pack,” says Quin. “I still got eight pieces left, but I’m saving those.”

“She came over and told me she was going,” says Toure. “For a second there, I thought she was gonna ask me to come along.”

~

In the very beginning, the rain was normal of course. We live in a part of the world famous for it. But a few weeks in, we wondered. Then we began to break the single-day-accumulation, the number-of-consecutive-days, the total-annual-precipitation records. They tripped some kind of alarm in the central nodes of the national conscience. The news stations dispatched their reporters. Soon there were fluffy, handsome people in company-branded rain gear sloshing down our most inundated streets and reporting. Rain-ageddon. Splash Town. Puddleland. But even they left, after a while.

Before Erin left, too, I spent a week of vacation converting the back half of our garage into an office. I framed a new wall, I cut a rectangle into the pink siding and fit in a new door. I cut another square for a window. I cursed through hot afternoons sawing plywood sheathing to fit a shelter that was sagging and crooked after a hundred years of rot and neglect. I never got the pieces right, everything hopelessly out of true, and sang out my frustrations, fuck you, as I sweated and itched under the rain of filth I knocked free from the ancient beams. Every night I came in and promised her, sweaty and stuck with sawdust and spider silk, that it would turn out well. That in the end, it would save us money. That it would indeed be beautiful, that it would relieve us from the crowding we so often felt, cooped up in our house, working from home, elbow to elbow, as they say.

Back then I thought that was the only thing wrong.

I still go out there now, every day, to work. Though the wifi is weak, though the walls remain half covered, though spiders rappel on long pulls of silver floss. I go out there even though the house is empty and all my own. Who knows when she will return. I need a change.

There's a feeling I sometimes get, fourth or fifth cup of coffee, that someone, somewhere, is seeing something I've created. It's a light trample over my projected soul. It's nothing, of course; it's the caffeine, no shit. But it's impossible to logic with feeling, though we all try, don't we, and I carry the belief with me almost like a wish. Because there's a moment when I feel someone's attention tip-toeing over my work, an article on shared mobility, or a round-up on what the Stars of Thought have said about driverless cars on this week's batch of podcasts — I write for a future-obsessed transportation blog — and I think that if I can muster confidence, the writing will shimmer under their eyes. They will come away changed, at least a little, by something I've put out, and they will write to me, and they will offer me an assignment, or even a full time job, in Los Angeles or New York, or any of the lesser cities between, away from the rain and the grey. And then it will not be me escaping like she did. It will be me moving forward. They will send a driverless car that I am due to review. It will convey me out from under the clouds.

Most often, though, when the feeling of footsteps comes, I imagine the people seeing through my lines and knowing me for a fraud. For the fact that I report out of a half-finished shack. That I piece together flimsy quotes with surface research and hover always around keywords that promise a higher listing on Internet searches. That my wife left me. That most of the time I feel cold. That I have a bump on my arm that hasn't gone away in weeks and itches at night. That I'll drink, if it's in the house, until I fall asleep, belly aslosh, head ablur.

“Sometimes, you would hear them arguing. Who knows about what. By the time any of that gets loud enough for the neighbors to hear, it’s a different language, you know? Old stuff they rehash, or whatever. Inside stuff. I tried to put on Octonauts when it got to be like that. Quin didn’t know about things like couples fighting. His dad has never been around. And my thing is, why let him know that’s how those things go? Like let him think it’s better than it is for a little while longer.”

“I don’t chew gum every day. I wait three or four days between the pieces. Cause it isn’t allowed at school, you know, and Mom doesn’t like me to have gum anyway. She says I always swallow it, and mostly I do. You aren’t supposed to swallow gum cause it stays in your stomach or your intestines, or whatever, forever and it like all gloms together and becomes this wet, grey rock in your body and one day you have to poop it out when it’s so big that it can rip your booty in half. I don’t know if I believe it or not. But I definitely don’t want a ripped booty. If I would just get gum, like once in a while, then maybe I wouldn’t always want to swallow it.”

“One time, I don’t know, maybe a week before she left? Erin comes over and we’re sitting on my porch, and she’s swinging her knee back and forth, like she does when they’ve been fighting, and it’s knocking mine, and I don’t pull mine away, like usual, I just let it stay there, cause every time she knocks mine I can feel how warm hers is. And I need it, you know? Like it’s filling up some tank I got inside me that’s mostly empty by that point. And she says, you know what I’ve been thinking? And I’m like, no, I don’t. She says she’s been thinking about lasts. How everything in this world is going to have a last and most of the time we won’t know it. Like she’s saying probably Mary can’t remember the last time she picked up Quin now that he’s so big. So I say, sure, I guess that’s true. And anyway, I just keep thinking about that.



Her knee against mine. Lasts. I don't know when she'll be coming back. I don't know how I'm supposed to find her."

~

I've developed an exercise. The first moment I feel someone tiptoeing over my soul, I close my eyes and imagine a house being erected in a time-lapse. Or a ship, sails and rigging, setting out from a harbor into the yell of a bright day. A tree, twisting up through shady undergrowth, leaves aching for the sun, and making it, in the end, to bank its joy. And I think that when I have these things in my head, building and growing and setting forth, it makes me shine to whoever is reading me.

And I start to tell Erin this, my theories, the exercise I developed, when she calls me. She is on the road. Miles thrumming under the tires of the car we bought together, a Subaru Outback, because it had all-wheel drive and that would be good for the weather we secrete up here. Rain and snow. A safe, high-centered car. And she cuts me off and tells me that it's sunny where she is, somewhere in New Mexico.

New Mexico? Who does she know in New Mexico?

She doesn't know anyone but she has a place by the railroad. She says she's going to mail me a little jar of sand. It's sand she dug up with her hands from the median in front of the house where she stays. It's all sand out here. Dry and drifting.

You have a house?

A room in a house, she clarifies. It's week to week. The sun dries out her bones and yesterday, yesterday it rained. A hard, tantrum of water that the earth caught and threw back, today, in wildflowers.

So it's even there? So it's everywhere?

A day doesn't make a storm, she tells me. Two days, a week, two weeks even. This, she can handle. This, she can do. She's finally drying out. Her bones, the cotton string that runs through her.

But what, I want to know, am I supposed to do with a bottle of sand?

She doesn't say anything.

And for another thing, you always said that nothing ever happened to us and so you had nothing to write about in your poems. Doesn't rain count?

Not if it's every day.

Not if it's everyday? Do me a favor and listen to yourself.

~

"Sometimes that girl would catch me on a cigarette out the back porch. Mostly those days where your life feels like a clenched fist. Where you feel like all your kid has done all day long is yell at you, and I'd always tell her, I'm quitting. Just one more, and then I'm done. And she was always so kind in that way that she said, good for you, you know? Like she actually believed me. There's just something about a cigarette. Every little step is the same. Like a ritual, that crackle, the breath of smoke. It's comforting."

"My teacher used to have this thing where we put out these little plastic rain gauges on our porches and then we kept track in a notebook and then at school, we'd compare our numbers. So then we started to see which neighborhoods had the most rainfall. And ours, Sunnyside, always had the most. It was pretty funny, for a while, but he doesn't make us keep track anymore and mine's still out there, but it's overflowing. All of them are."

"I got a box in the mail the other day and it was from Erin. It had a little perfume bottle in it full of sand. I poured it out on a piece of

paper on my dining room table and it smelled like the girl. Now, when I eat, I like to take a fork and rake little patterns in it like it's my fucking zen garden."

~

There's a leak in the office. But of course there's a leak in the office. I never finished the job. Water comes in through the window frame, the seams in the door. It needs gutters. It needs patches in the roof. I sit there and do my work — Five Ways to Change Your Commute and Save the Environment — as the water slicks under my feet.

I still come out, though. Every day. My house remains dry, but there I am. The water pools and collects upon the cement pad. I write in my rain boots.

I tell myself it's comforting. That there are a lot of apps out there that are designed to make just such a racket. White noise, they call it. But then I slip standing up from my desk and I twist my knee. A yank that feels watery. It's pain, washes of it, that send me hobbling into the house. I go into the bathroom for the Tylenol and then I flip up the lid to the toilet and I step back, all flickery, cause there's something in the bowl. I have this feeling that it might move. It's this grey lump, about the size of a box of butter. It looks worn, clammy. But it doesn't move. It's still in a way that only dead things and rocks can be. It's a rat, I see, by the rope of a tail that curls up toward its little nose. It's on its side, it's floating. The rains, I assume. The sewer backed up with the run off. All those rats, for years living underground, forced up people's toilets only to die for the trouble, stuck under a lid.

I had a friend who used to work for the city. One of her jobs was to steer a little camera through sewer connections, looking into each house it passed, finding the ones too corroded and clogged. She called herself the shit detector. The one thing you don't want to know, she always said, was how many rats there were in

our pipes.

And here is the proof. I imagine that rat, swimming in the lidded pool of my toilet bowl, eventually dying of exhaustion while I was out in the shed, tapping on a wet keyboard, and I am sad for it, for how trapped it was. I think I should tell Erin, but of course I don't. There isn't a need. She isn't coming back here. She's stopped calling.

I sheath my hand in a plastic bag and reach into the cold water. I pull the rat out, as stiff as if it were cast from metal, and carry it out the back door, limping because of the knee, into the prattle of the rain, and over to the side of the house where we keep the bins lined up like sentinels. Quin is there and I catch him, stuffing another piece of gum into his already full mouth, and he asks me what I'm doing. I look odd, in a t-shirt, with a plastic bag over my hand, in the rain. He, like all the kids, has adapted. He is in something called a muddy buddy. A full head to toe rain suit. I've been thinking of buying the adult version but they don't make them tall enough. I hold out the rat and the kid's face goes white. The gum falls from his mouth — a golf ball of it — and he asks me if that is what he thinks it is.

I think so. But you should go easy on the gum, there. You might choke.

~

“Some of the plants have died. Take my front yard. The grass went yellow, then almost translucent, then dead. I told Quin and his friends, no more playing on the grass, cause it's all waterlogged and weak, and he told me, there isn't any grass left, Mom. And he's right. It's all this leggy, thick-stemmed shit that crawls across everything. This weed that used to find the thinnest gap in any stone I put down in my garden. I'd be the cruelest thing to that plant. I'd yank them out, cussing, until my hands were green with the juices. Now, though? It's nice to have

something covering that slick, drain-away mud. It's good stuff, really, and I don't know why I spent so much of my life trying to pull it out. At least it's tough enough that Quin can do whatever he wants out there. Anyway, from far away, when I'm coming back from groceries or whatever, it almost looks like grass. It's green, anyway."

"I got to the mail before Mom and there was a box for me, and I put it in my room and opened it up later, after she was in bed for one of her naps, and it was full of Orbit gum in all kinds of flavors. So then I stuffed a bunch, six or seven pieces, cinnamon, in my mouth and I went outside, so she wouldn't hear me chewing, you know? Until it was hard to bite down. And then Kemp, our neighbor, comes out with this grey thing in his hand. And it's from his toilet. And he's like old. He's almost as old as my mom. And he was walking funny, you know? Like it had hurt him to shit it out. All that gum he'd swallowed. Probably since he was my age. And he had to throw it away in the trash can because it wouldn't flush down the toilet. It was disgusting."

"I used to think that their fighting was something that meant they had passion, or whatever the fuck. Like they cared enough to go at it like that. Me? I won't even send back a burrito if it comes full of chicken even though I'm vegetarian. So them yelling and stuff? That seemed exotic. But she sent me sand, man. I mean, fucking sand. What's more elemental than that? I dated this girl who once told me she didn't even know if I even liked her or not. She said I was the hardest woman to read. All cause I didn't like drape all over her or sing syrup into her ears. She said, I don't even know if you'd fight for me. And I told her the truth. I don't like to fight anyone. Erin and me? We could be alright like that. Steady, like that. Like the sand she sent me. Like, raked altogether, in any kind of shape, in any kind of way, but still, you know, sand, or whatever. Stable. Listen, I don't know. I haven't lived any kind of passionate way. The only time I've ever been kissed in the rain is the day she left."

~

It's an incredible thing, what you can order online; what you can learn in the shimmering tunnels that crisscross the Internet. Only we don't. Only we're looking at what our first girlfriend did after high school. Researching adult rain suits. We got too many tabs open. Thirteen different Pornhub clips, each no longer than a few minutes, toggling between flavors of slapping flesh, agitated, pinkening, ripe groans — which one will lead me home and fill me with a moonshot of satisfaction, sink its teeth into my hunger and tear away my ugly side.

Study a photo, just the one, of the night me and Erin met. A camping trip, friends of friends, on the tip of Mary's Peak. Not much of a tip, it couldn't even puncture the clouds. I didn't pack right, it was part of my charm, roasted a steak on a stick, drank cheap beers. And when it rained, and it rained all night, my tent failed, my sleeping bag filled. I left and found her sitting in her car, running the engine every so often to keep the battery alive, praying to the heater. I sat in the passenger seat and we talked and drew in the window condensation until we fell asleep. Woke to blue skies and our friend, the mutual one, the conduit, taking our picture from the side. There, so baby-faced, grainey film, actual film, embarrassed by what everyone assumed we'd been up to all night but hadn't, bright coats that are in fashion again, smiling.

There is a way out of it, though. If you look for it, in moments of calm-headedness, there's real things online, too. Like videos on old sheds and foundations. Like hydraulic jacks and pumps and sheets of plywood sheathing. Like boxes of screws and nails they call sinkers. And caulk. Tubes and tubes of splurting caulk. And if you have time, and nobody to go inside for, and a raincoat, and gloves, you can spend hours and days. You can raise up a flooding shed and patch it dry. You can wash out the spiders and dirt. You can run electricity and Cat 6 cables — it's all there, online — and

set a heater running. You can feel the structure sigh and tick as it dries out. You can listen to the rain. You can sit in something that is as hot as the desert and you can listen to the rain.





# Catastrophic Thinking

what in this world as it is can solitude mean?

— Adrienne Rich

In our sixty four-day beards  
we moon over those

things we would have  
cursed in the before times.

A neighbor mowing her lawn.  
Poor restaurant service.

Potholes. Slow walkers. Pants  
stained with popcorn butter.

You knew and did not know.  
Like, you'd eaten sourdough

but you hadn't created life  
in a blue plastic bowl.

We all understood  
the absence of the voice

in ourselves, but we hadn't  
colored mandalas

as the air conditioning  
tip-tip-tipped in the driveway,

drawing a pool specked  
with breeding mosquitos.

Everything's other than it is.  
Daffodils that bloom

from a single chestnut  
will spin the world

in yellow fire. Or maybe  
the flame was there

and we have just grown  
unused to it. Remember that

your parents were unknowable  
before they were the people

most known to you  
and least accessible.

Now they're dead. If not  
then you worry, or wonder

whether they'll die in this.  
Who hasn't drafted a eulogy?

*In this moment. In this dark  
time. With all this happening.*

What is *this*? Hell has a name;  
we know it. Hell can't be

what's happening. I didn't make  
this happen—how could we?

Admit to your therapist that you  
forget the names of months

and it becomes clear: living  
is preconditioned on death

and that fact compresses  
our time, it dilates so

the months pass like days,  
and days feel like years.

The lucky, in each moment,  
have a spectacle of sensation

that draws back another  
layer of self-knowledge

and it's this ignorant  
flapping at pinwheels

that allows us all to go on,  
each day together

in solitude. Sure. I have  
certainly been here in hell,

not for so long but before.  
There's a line in Psalms—

*commands the sun, and it  
refuses to rise; and*

*seals up the stars.* How  
can we be just alone?

Do we know who we are?  
A mirror has two faces;

the city has thousands;  
a home in mourning has

none. Solitude will always  
try to break itself

against another. I check  
my email constantly,

looking for another voice  
to break open my voice.

Isolation—the sound of it  
may have more the feeling

of a quarantine, a plague,  
but it's as if the initial, lawful,

panic-wrecked closure  
has reemerged as

a black-winged sun, stunning,  
perpetual, encompassing

more than knowledge. Solitude!  
As invasive as any strain

of human existence could be.  
Pent up in front of the fan

with its blank gaze  
pouring out, I dream

about the Xerox machine  
at work, close-talkers,  
  
and the cairn of dishes left  
after friends would leave  
  
and to which you'd say,  
holding my hand, they  
  
can wait until tomorrow.  
You haven't uncovered  
  
the mirrors yet. I haven't  
boxed our wedding photos.  
  
You and I have always  
been catastrophic moons,  
  
paired bodies that never  
really touch but cannot  
  
be out of contact. There  
is no conclusion coming.  
  
Not one that I will come to.  
Not by myself watching  
  
reruns of *House* dipping  
Cape Cod chips  
  
in yellow mustard  
drafting nana's obituary,  
  
no. No more than the dog  
will ever tell you where

some trash has pierced  
its skin, between the rough

pads of her paw, which  
she will extend bashfully

and will draw it back before  
you find the thorn

in her silken hair, the burr  
or pale cracked piece

of a broken mug. A little  
whimpering, yes, puppy eyes,

and a stain spread out on  
the floor, not for the first time.

# Coast

Purposes and desires can be vague because their achievement or satisfaction conditions may have vague boundaries.

— A Golden Shovel for Delia Graff

The wind and pigeons run at cross-purposes  
when I scatter white bread on the sand and  
before I sit down to write you about desires  
I ask out loud, as if you were here: what can  
observation alter in the heart? I'd like to be  
one of the gulls circling, circling, casting vague  
shadows through the April fog, because  
the tidiness of the world depends upon their  
hunger. Invisible, it is its own achievement;  
an urge that marks its own end, like love or  
at least like the momentary satisfaction  
that passes for love in these conditions.  
Am I reaching out or filling time? It may  
be that hunger circles us all, it must have.  
But like a chronic pain, the circuits are vague.  
It pecks at the edge. It leaves only boundaries.





## *ESC // ESC // ESC*

I hit at it frantically. Trying to cancel my last keystroke. Trying to abort a mistake. Fuckups flutter into my rushed typing, often with no consequence. Almost never memorable. Yet, I can't stop the adrenaline of worry. My dread for a *fatal error* message that spells out death to the base file. I can't escape the scene where my boss pulls me into the middle of the office. Demands to know why I billed nine-point-seven-five hours for *file recovery*. My humiliating defense, knowing I actually spent sixteen hours working late into Wednesday night. How I would sweat under the jurors of fluorescent lights. Even after I've bypassed disasters, sometimes I will cringe while driving home. Gasp at the thought of being fired. The road, briefly eclipsed by a flash of the six-figure principal on my student loans. It haunts my every keystroke. I would shrug this all off as a melodrama, but there are moments when I know I'm not alone in my agony. Like twenty minutes after 5:00p, when the coffee pot comes back to life in the nearly empty office. Or in the middle of the day, when my work is interrupted by the *tap tap tap* from the keyboard a few desks away. *ESC // ESC // ESC.*

## *I play abacus with the number pad*

Sixty-thousand dollars from the loan request plus five-thousand dollars in change orders equals a voicemail left by the owner on the contractor's answering machine. Subtract two days of no follow up call brings the total to a site visit from me. Separately, I subtract three hours in driving & thirty minutes of documenting bad news from my time making dinner this evening. To make up the difference, I add one stop at a convenience store for frozen pizza on my way home.

## *Shift + Right-click + “Copy as path”*

*Rather than send files over email, you can send paths to those files. Navigate to the file on the server, then hold shift and right-click on the file. In the drop down menu, select “copy as path”. This has many applications, like sharing files with your coworkers without using up your email’s memory.*

If I were to open my work email on vacation, I would send a note to myself. I would send a path to this place : tiny island of nine-thousand square feet; haughty evergreens that screen my campsite from the lake; the silhouette of Brian in the clearing at the dock, just in sight from my hammock. I would send a note with this path, so that when I return to the deadlines, to the nights that end between the trying hours of disbelief that I’m still at work & existential doubt that humbles my fingers, I will have an email in the archives. A path to a how-to on staying alive until the next vacation.



## Collages

I was inspired by the way the prompt exposes and exploits the indistinguishable margins of vagueness, and in my responses I've cut away the visual context we'd normally rely on to grasp the *significance* or magnitude of a thing. In some instances, I've replaced the original context with a substitute. My intention was to push vagueness toward new meaning, but not to get there. A disembodied hand placed in the middle of a blank piece of paper begs for meaning. Some see it reaching, while others see it pulling, grasping. You might imagine what for, who with. The blank piece of paper a series of vague adjectives, its meaning dependent on whatever mood and preconceived ideas we bring to it. Each of these responses attempts to distort context in order to push into the discomfort of vagueness.



Drink, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982)



*Hands*, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982 and *Reader's Digest*, April 1964)



*Hands*, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982)





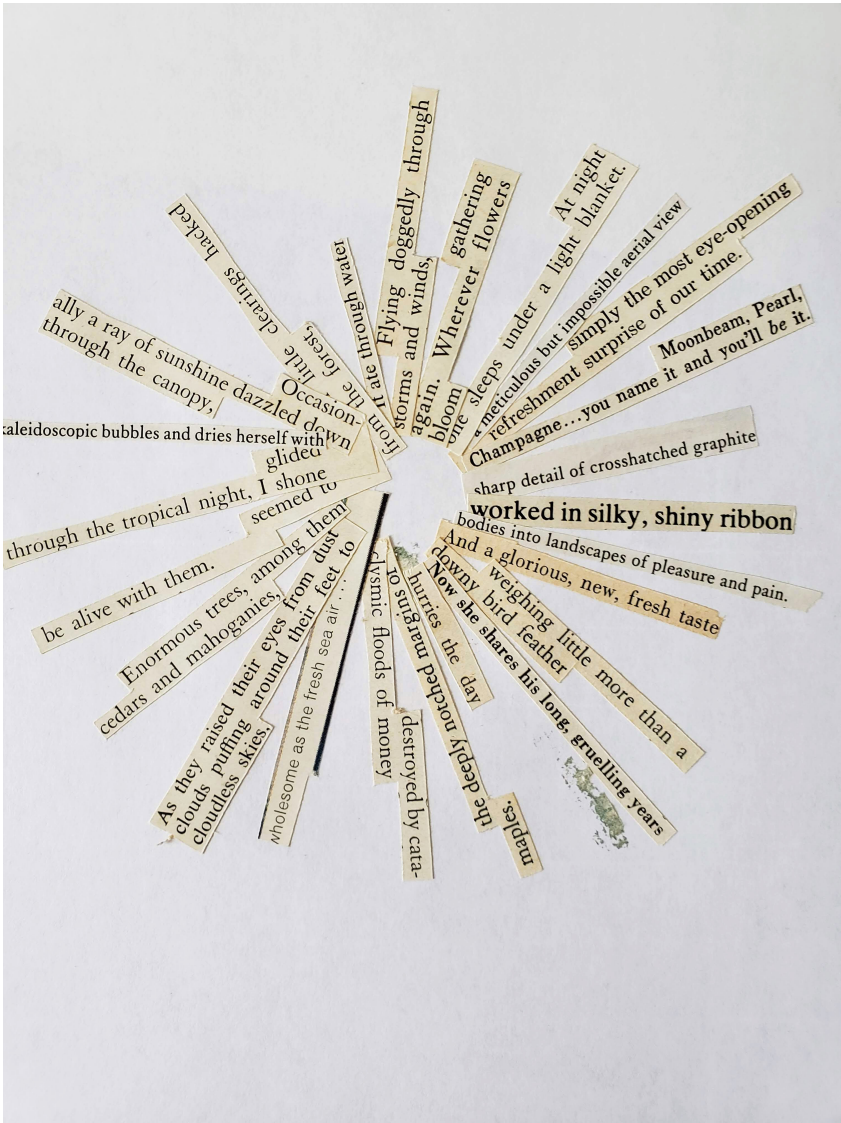
*Drink*, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982)



Vague Marketing, Collage (Images and text from Sunset Magazine, Jan-Dec 1982)



*Water Salt and Weather*, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982)



*You Name It and You'll Be It*, Collage (Images and text from *Sunset Magazine*, Jan-Dec 1982)

## Grandpa was a Jeweler

It was the first time my sister and I were both home for Christmas since we were kids. We're both home at our parents' request because they're finally preparing to move to a retirement community in Palm Springs.

"And we're not moving with all of your crap," my mother told me over a phone call back in October. While I doubted the teeth of her threat of putting my surfboard, dresser, and books on the curb, I didn't want to test her.

So I'm here in San Carlos, shoveling through years of forgotten garbage. Together we manage to shove the pocket door open that separates our two childhood bedrooms. She plugs in the old stereo and lets whatever CD is in there spin. We wait for a tense moment, then smile when the sound of The Smith's fills both bedrooms.

We spend the afternoon laughing as we purge and reminisce over the relics of our childhood. A mountain of cardboard boxes completely full of Beanie Babies. A massive talking teddy bear that now sounds possessed when he says "I love you..." Old diaries, full of Oscar worthy teen angst. I unearth an old black jewelry box, the vintage red-headed barbie winking up at me from the lid. It's my sister's. I open it to discover a treasure trove of random teenage keepsakes, old perfume samples, a greasy separated lipgloss, a silver wrist cuff neither of us would ever pluck up the courage to wear, and a small gold ring set with a single tiny white pearl way too small for either of us to wear.

I pause, considering the ring briefly while a bubble of rotten jealousy rises in my chest. I pull the ring from its resting place

and present it to my sister. She turns and eyes it for a moment.

“Oh,” she says fondly, “is that the ring grandpa made for me?”

I confirm her suspicion and she looks on for a second and smiles. “I forgot about that...” she says, then my sister turns her attention back to the task, she pulls the lid off of a shoebox and examines the contents before tossing most of it aside.

I bristle at her reaction. She realizes what I’m holding, she just told me what it was. Doesn’t she want to look at it? To hold it?

## Grandpa was a Jeweler

I was five the first time we made the drive from San Francisco to Helper, Utah. My grandparents had retired to the quiet little farming community, and were getting a little too old to make the drive to us.

“Is it a big house?” I ask my mother.

“No, but I’m sure they’ll make room for us.” I watch the red rock formations grow larger through the car window. The town emerges from the hot sand and dust unexpectedly.

She was right, it was not a big house. Just two small bedrooms with a bathroom between them. An old fashioned kitchen and a living room, practically wallpapered with photos of my mother and her siblings either dressed in pastels or bleached from the sun from years and years past. Off the kitchen there’s a mudroom and a sticky backdoor I can’t open alone. I spot a handle on a cut out section on the floor. It’s odd, I’ve never seen anything like it. My mother tells me it’s the door to their cellar and grandpa’s workshop.

“Grandpa was a jeweler.”

My mother explains this to me as grandpa leads us down the old cellar steps. It’s dark and musty in his workshop until he flicks a light on from the other side of the shop. He rests a funny set of glasses on his head as he ties his work apron behind his back.

“Here,” he says, holding out his hand to my mother. She produces a tiny pearl ring and places it in his hand. He made it for my sister when she was my age. Now she’s eight, and the ring needs resizing desperately if she wants to continue wearing it. With an expert nod, the glasses drop from Grandpa’s head onto the bridge of his nose, he begins examining the ring for any other repairs that might be necessary. I giggle softly to myself, Grandpa looks up, and makes a funny face as he gazes across the cellar workshop at me, buggy eyed behind his jeweler glasses.

“Looks like it’s in pretty good shape...” He discusses details with my mother about how he’ll size it a little big for her so she gets more wear out of it, but not so big that she’ll lose it.

I watch as he goes to work, filing the ring in half.

Zig-Zig Zig-Zig Zig-Zig

The file sings as he works, then then with a jolt, it breaks through the ring. He flips his funny spectacles up and grabs a little box from a nearby shelf. He takes a bit of gold from the box and steps over to me by the press. It reminds me of a pasta roller, until he turns it on. The machine whirls to live, making such a racket, I watch, mesmerized as the little lump of gold goes through the gold roller, a little flatter each time it goes through. Seeing my interest and feeling funny, Grandpa grabs my wrist and brings my little fingers dangerously close to the machine. He cries “DON’T PUT YOUR FINGERS IN THERE!”

I scream, and attempt to snatch my hand away. My five-year-old strength leaves me dangling by my wrist as the lights from my

sneakers flash on the dirty linoleum floor. Grandpa lets go, as if surprised by my reaction and I retreat to the racks of sealed jars of grandma's cannery.

After reassurance that grandpa was just playing I resigned to pout a bit longer at my mother's side at the corner of the workbench. Grandpa tinkers with the ring, slips it down the sizer, then tinkers with it some more. When he's satisfied he places the ring in a vice, the tiny purl dipped in a small dish of water. Before he ignites his torch, he turns to my mother and me.

"Don't look at the light," he advises, and the torch sparks to life and my mother puts her hand over my eyes and draws me closer to her thigh. Apparently not to be trusted.

He shapes, buffs, and polishes the ring until there is no evidence that it had ever been split.

Once it's cool enough, he hands it to my mother for inspection who thanks him. She passes it to me and I slip it onto my own finger. My mother gasps, embarrassed, and my grandpa, amused, laughs. "Now now, little one, that's your sisters isn't it? Not yours."

We climb up out of the gritty cellar workshop and I watch as he returns the ring to my sister. She beams with pride at the tiny purl, and throws her arms around our grandpa. She holds her hand out, fluttering her fingers at me, showing off.

"Can I have one too Grandpa?" I ask timidly.

My mother mutters a soft admonishment, Grandpa just smiles and scoops me up into his lap.

"Let's see..." He scratches his chin. "Krissy was born in June..." He says, "Jessie was born in July?"

I shake my head.



“April,” my mother provides.

He screws up his face and sighs.

“Just like your mother,” he smiles sadly. “I’m afraid you’re gonna have to wait, little one.”

“Wait?” I ask, like it’s a foreign concept.

He’s good natured so he laughs.

“Yes, wait! Wait until you find a boy who wants to marry you. When he does, you tell him come see me.”

“Why?” I’m five, and not the best at picking up his subtlety. He laughs again.

“Because, Grandpa will make you a diamond ring. Like he did for your mama, and your grandma.”

I sigh. Sensing my disappointment, he begins to waver.

“Or maybe...Grandpa can find something small that would work...”

“Dad...” My mom says warily.

“Don’t worry Gloria, I’m talking more along the lines of diamond dust than a stone.” My heart leaps at mental image, diamond dust, I repeat inside my head. “But it might be a year or two...” Grandpa tags on, trying to appease my mother.

“That’s probably for the best,” my mother comments. “We want to hold off on more precious things until you’re a little more responsible with less precious things.” She raises an eyebrow, and immediately I think of the three lunch boxes, two sweaters, and thermos that went missing last year from daycare.

I start to protest, but the argument is lost before it even starts. I don’t have a leg to stand on and even I know it, so I go for the

single most sacred oath a five year old knows.

“Pinky promise?” I hold out my tiny little pinky. He chuckles and nods. Wrapping his pinky around mine.

“I promise,” he says firmly.

## Grandpa was Strong

The following summer was hot. The day we arrived in Utah is not different. In fact, it so so hot that my sister and I were surprised to see Grandpa working hard, painting the one side of their old weather beaten home. Grandma comes out of the door front door waving to us as we trundle up the driveway.

We aren't there long when the sun begins to set, and my sister and I are forced inside. The grown ups had made plans for the following morning, and we are sent to bed shortly after that.

The following morning, we rise early and all six of us pack into the Toyota Camry. It had been almost two hours in the car, double buckled with my sister to make room for my grandparents. I was snoozing against Grandma's shoulder, when my sister's voice wakes me.

“How much longer?”

She dares to ask. I watch our father's eyes flick upwards in the rearview mirror, a smile crinkles the corners of his eyes before he brightly says, “Five more minutes.”

Our grandparents chuckle. My sister sighs sullenly, before casting her eyes out the window. It didn't matter if it was five minutes, or five hours to our destination, dad's answer was always the same.

“It’ll be worth it,” Grandpa reassures us from the other side of the back seat.

Half an hour later, when we finally parked and piled out of the car at Moab National Park, we weren’t disappointed. The massive rock structures, the red dirt, and of course, the arches.

We spend all day chasing each other around the valley floor. Clouds of dirt and dust, the only marker for our grown ups to know which way we went. That afternoon we made our way up the trail to Corona arch.

On the cables my feet slip against the rock. The farther ahead my sister gets, the faster my heart races, urging myself to keep up, knowing I’m losing ground. Just when I’m about to call out, I feel his shoulder under my bottom.

“Need a little boost, Jessie?” I smile as Grandpa continues hiking the cables, supporting my weight. I giggle, leaning back until my body is perpendicular to the rock wall, dangling slightly from the cables as he carries me upwards.

Once we’re atop the arch, the entire valley is laid out in front of us. My sister, and I crowd around him as Grandpa points out familiar formations across the valley, places we would have to see, next time.

## Grandpa was Sick

The following summer rolls around as does our annual trip to Utah. As we make the drive through the Nevada desert I daydream about what we’ll do. More hikes, rock formations, this year may even be the year grandpa makes me my diamond dust ring.

When we arrived at Grandma and Grandpa's house, I immediately notice the place is different. I discover it's because grandpa isn't living at home with grandma anymore.

He'd begun having trouble with his memory. On several occasions my Grandpa had apparently called the police, and told them there were children being murdered in the street. He left the house in the middle of the night, when local police picked him up, he told them he'd just escaped a POW camp in Rheinberg and he had important information the US military needed to know.

Of course, being the tender age of seven, I wasn't privy to all this information. Instead, my mother simply said,

"Grandpa is sick."

I feel my eyebrows knit together at this insufficient explanation.

"Well then...he should be home resting, right?"

"Oh honey," she says with the hint of a sad smile on her lips. "This is a different kind of sick. Do you remember last winter, when Krissy got the flu and had to live in the hospital so they could take care of her for a few days?"

I nod, still frowning.

"Grandpa is in a special type of hospital, where they can take care of him. But don't worry, we're going to see him tomorrow."

The drive to the assisted living home is short, and I'm the first to point out that it doesn't look anything like a hospital. We get inside, and while it still, doesn't look like a hospital, there's a smell. The numerous floral arrangements in the entryway mask it, but I can't ignore it. The nurse at the desk helps us to the memory care unit. She tells my parents the code and the door buzzes, to let us through.

"Room 224." I hustle down the hallway and find the door to the

room in question is open, Grandpa sitting at a table, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I beam at him from the doorway, he looks up sensing my presence, then turns back to his meal.

“Grandpa...” I say, he looks toward me again.

“Are you talking to me?”

I laugh, thinking it’s a joke.

“Yes, Grandpa! Who else would I be talking to?”

He looks around, as if trying to find an answer.

A moment later my family catches up.

“Charles,” my mother calls to him. He looks up, she’s gotten his attention.

“Yes?” He says curiously.

“It’s me,” she puts her hand on his shoulder. “It’s Gloria, I’m your daughter...”

I watch my grandfather sit up, look my mother right in the face, study her for a moment then he shakes his head. Worry passing over wrinkled face.

“No...” he sounds confused, he knows Gloria, he knows who *she* is but this person right in front of him, is not her.

I’m confused, wrestling with the impossibility of a father forgetting his daughter, when it dawns on me. If he doesn’t remember her, of course he doesn’t remember me.

All at once I’m crying. My sister takes my hand. She’s older, there’s something here that she understands that I won’t for years.

“Jessie...” she says my name as she tries to lead me out of the room. The sudden uptick of emotions disturbs the practiced tranquility of the room, and the tears just keep coming. My grandpa registers that I’m upset, he looks at me, befuddled, then offers me the other half of his uneaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I dare to look up into his eyes, he’s staring down at me, curiously, there’s no recognition there.

“Can you take her?” I hear someone suggest, my father scoops me up.

“No...” Grandpa says again.

“It’s ok, Dad,” my mother argues.

“No...little girl!” He calls after me.

But we’re down the hall in a matter of seconds and through the keypad door. I hear a loud thump and look up over my father’s shoulder, Grandpa’s face framed in the single pane of glass. When the door doesn’t give, there’s another thump as he tries opening it again. I watch his confused distressed face for as long as I can, but we turn the corner, and he’s gone.

It wasn’t long after that we would be making an unexpected trip to Utah. We would bury him six months later.

## Grandpa was Gone

Fifteen years later, I’m with my sister again in our childhood bedrooms, and I’m still holding the same small pearl ring out to her as she continues with her work. That rotten jealousy and frustration for her disregard mix uncomfortably in my chest. She realizes what I’m holding and just goes back to work? We spent half an hour talking about Beanie Babies, but we can’t even pause

for this? Don't we owe our grandfather at least that?

*You're being a little ridiculous*, I think to myself.

All these emotions over a bit of gold over a teeny tiny pearl. But as I stare, I have to confess to myself, that the ring is so much more than the sum of its parts. I selfishly think that the pearl ring means more to me than it does to my sister. The cruelty of the thought gives me pause, I don't want that to be true, or how I feel. To my sister, the ring is a gift our grandpa made her when she was a child, it belongs to her. But to me, it's a reminder of a promise, and my grandfather would never have the chance to keep.

I close my fist around the ring and think about pocketing it. It's just been sitting in this box for years, would she really miss it?

I look across the room to my sister, who cinches up another garbage bag and leaves the room to throw it out. I open my hand to consider the ring one more time, I run a finger along the golden circle, place it between with little cushions in the jewelry box, and let the lid tip closed without another sound.

After all, it's my sister's, not mine.





## In the Afterlife Delia Graff Fara Critiques Her Obituary

Delia Graff Fara, a noted professor of philosophy of language at Princeton University, died peacefully at home July 18 after a chronic illness.

— Pooja Makhijani

Okay, how vague is *peaceful*?  
*Peaceful* to whom?  
Did my heart not struggle-  
fight for each last pump?  
Did my lungs not strive,  
air-push against collapse?  
Did each of my synapses  
not scream? Even if relief  
was desired, even if tired,  
didn't this body battle?  
And *died*, yet here I am,  
in this article, in this poem,  
in my daughter's very cells.  
What of this word *chronic*—  
not able to encompass  
the lurking uninvited  
appearance at birthday parties,  
date nights, on a Tuesday.  
*Peaceful*, is this the last  
word for me? How did she  
die? *Peacefully*

Peaceful, I know is not included  
for me. Peaceful is for the satisfaction,  
the peace of those still living,  
whatever that means.

# Pierre's Desire

Pierre's desire for some champagne may be vague because of the vagueness in just how much champagne is required to satisfy it.

— Delia Graff, 'Shifting Sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness'

Pierre desires enough champagne  
to feel like the weight of his brain  
is a little bit less than eight pounds

little flamingo inflatable in the pool  
of all these worries Pierre desires  
one more glass large please pour

till the bubbles kiss the top over  
again little fishmouth bubbles  
and isn't that funny Pierre desires

more champagne probably  
the bottle empty now head fizz  
stomach fuzz a hotdog maybe

and why are there no hotdogs  
at places that have champagne  
is this tipsy acceptable paid

thirty dollars for the glass  
can Pierre act like an ass now  
thinks of his mother pursed

lips and desires more champagne  
eats the strawberries just in case  
they had sipped some up a surprise

treat Pierre thinks his desire  
can never be satiated it was unknown  
when he began thinking a glass

was the exact amount desired

## an answer to the question: significant to whom?

200,000 deaths and yet folks say its the same  
as the flu say its only 1 percent and yet  
forget that each of those tallies those numbers  
were more than a counter click all bone  
and tooth and mother people citing  
overreaction as bodies are buried  
in boxes alone oh just prisoners,  
migrant workers elderly just weak  
just nothing i don't know them  
my mother says nothing will change  
until everyone is affected until everyone  
loses someone until we all will know  
to whom this is significant

# Breakfast

Talking to Brooke about the concept of vagueness and say *my first lesson is always in specificity*. Don't say *cereal*, say *Cheerios*. Don't say *some*, say *half a bowl*, say *fifty-seven little O's*. Say *almond milk*, say *lactose problems*, let the reader relate. Maybe that is the point. We try to be so exact, ask a stranger to our breakfast table, to our chair, to our body, our breaths, our anxieties and triumphs. Perhaps we can't stand the idea of vague because we are desperate, because we are trying to bridge the gap between you and me because we are trying to cure the lonely.

# out of hand

when does the touch become a grip  
become a hold? when do we know

if we have a grasp on it, so slippery  
so easy to drop to be held and then not?

you know the one about the frogs  
being boiled not knowing the water

is hot. when does it become hot?  
when does it become the death

of us? when does the desire become  
the vice become the choice no longer?

what hand is the clock at? when does  
the turn back become impossible?





## About Our Contributors and Guest Editors

### **Lisa Allen**

Lisa Allen (she/her) is an MFA candidate in fiction at UMass Boston. She is also a freelance journalist covering topics ranging from finance to science. Her prose is published and forthcoming in *Ghost City Review*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Kestrel*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Levee Magazine*, and *Construction Literary Magazine*. Find her on Twitter: @LisaAllenNY.

### **Lex Kim 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.

### **Caitlin Ghegan**

Caitlin Ghegan received her MFA in Creative Writing from University of Massachusetts, Boston. She lives in Jamaica Plain with her partner, their cat Sylvia, and their chameleon Boo Radley.

### **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.

### **Kentaro Kumanomido**

Kentaro Kumanomido (b. 1990, St. Louis) is a conceptual artist and writer whose process-oriented research results in a wide-range of creative outcomes. Kentaro holds a BA in Anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis, as well as an MFA in Art Theory and Practice from Northwestern University. In 2018, they were awarded a

European Media Art Platform Residency at Stegi Onassis. They are currently a first-year MFA candidate in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University where they are also a 2020-21 Pearl Hogrefe Fellow.

### **Nicole-Anne Bales Keyton**

Nicole-Anne Bales Keyton is (at the time of writing) an MFA candidate for Creative Writing in fiction at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and is the acting editor-in-chief for the literary journal *Breakwater Review*. They also work as an editorial assistant for the independent nonfiction publisher, Beacon Press. This is their first publication.

### **Tim Lane**

Tim Lane is a writer and stay-at-home dad in Portland, Oregon. His work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Monkey Bicycle*, and *Maudlin House*, among others. His novel, *Rules for Becoming a Legend*, is out now from Viking.

### **Daniel E. Pritchard**

Daniel E. Pritchard is a writer and translator as well as the founding editor of *The Critical Flame*, an online journal of criticism and creative nonfiction. His work can be found or is forthcoming in *Pangyrus*, *Europe Now*, *SpoKe: a poetry annual*, *Harvard Review*, *Missouri Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Greater Boston with his daughter.

### **Forrest Rike**

Forrest Rike is a poet from Richmond, Virginia. You can find his poems published online at *Rum//mage* and *The Woove*.

### **Brooke Schifano**

Brooke Schifano received her MFA at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She's been a recipient of the Anne Fields Poetry Prize and has served as a poetry editor for *Breakwater Review* and *Fourteen Hills*.

## **Jessica Suderman**

Jessica Suderman is making her creative writing debut and couldn't be more thrilled! Having struggled most of her school years with reading anxiety and comprehension, participating in this journal's unique vision is a realization of a life-long ambition. Jessica holds a degree in vocal music education from Azusa Pacific University, where she met her husband, Stephen. They currently reside in Sacramento, CA, with their 2 cats, Daeg and Charlotte and black lab Theo. It is also where Jessica shares her passion and gifts by teaching elementary music, ballet, and conducting with the Sacramento Children's Chorus. Her greatest aspiration is to help all of her students discover and use their creative gifts to build an army of creative, expressive, and empowered free thinkers who will one day take over the world!

## **Megan Waring**

Megan Waring is a poet, playwright, and fiber artist who currently resides in Boston. She is currently earning her MFA in poetry from the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she teaches. Her work is forthcoming or published in *Rattle*, *Salamander*, *Entropy* and *Nailed Magazine*, among others. Her second co-authored play, *Archer and the Yeti*, was produced by Greene Room Productions in October 2019.



## Notes Regarding This Response

### Lisa Allen, *Contributor*

I made a series of lists while I read Graff's essay. Keywords; derivative keywords; questions. I was interested in vagueness—specifically, the idea of a character haunted by vagueness. My idea for the story was vague. I fixated on the flowchart as a structuring device. I like flowcharts. They're reassuring. When I make a flowchart, I like to imagine I have mapped all possibilities and outcomes and found the best path through them. I wrote down a question this vagueness-haunted character might ask and a flowchart branched from it. A story was supposed to grow from the flowchart but it didn't happen that way. The whole process felt ungrounded, disembodied. I made another list: "Ideas to bring sensuousness to this." That list arrived at the idea of two friends on a camping trip. The bullet points grew longer after that, the setting accumulated detail, voices emerged. The mushrooms were a turning point. They spread their spores and supplanted the flowchart structure. The fungal world gave my characters access to alternative logics, space to explore ambiguities that eluded them elsewhere.

## Caitlin Ghegan, *Contributor*

As always, I will live and die under the pressure of deadlines... I want and need to change this aspect of my writing practice. Working on this for W&R definitely is a gentle reminder of that, which I really appreciate.

You gave the prompt forever ago, but time slipped by, and I wrote 8/9 pages of this between 5:30 & 11:59 pm before the deadline, hence my texts to you begging for 15 more minutes of forgiveness.

I sometimes put on different “shoes” of experiences / styles to write different pieces, try different voices, and leaned into my experience working with Joe Torra and our conversations about sound—I tried to really dig into that element for this one, music being an aspect of the characters' situation... put on my headphones and thought of Drew [Bevis] with his hours-'til-the-deadline stare into the computer screen...

What I loved most about this was that by thinking through the prompt, I actually found the story of a situation I'd struggled through in previous, unfinished and unsatisfying drafts. It made me realize that, given a different prompt, my characters might have moved in a very different way, moved by very different motivations. I know I'm often referring to the concept of “the situation and the story,” but I really didn't have a story before I encountered the elements of the prompt, but rather just a situation. I had no idea what these characters might do when put into the confines of the space they were put into, until I let those tensions sit with me... satisfaction/dissatisfaction, importance/triviality... how do these characters feel when confronted with those frictions?

In the fury of writing this with only hours to go, I didn't know what my characters were gonna do until I put on my headphones and really thought about how they were feeling in that particular

space, in that particular moment. And that felt really, really refreshing to me as a professional over-thinker and generally super-anxious human.

## Nicole-Anne Bales Keyton, *Contributor*

When I received the prompt for this issue, I knew I wanted to use this space to write around the lingering imprints of an emotionally abusive relationship. I've written poems about it. I've written a string of computer code that randomizes the order and appearance of each line of said poems (though I think that made dealing with the matter itself so much worse). I've told the real story at a slam contest. I've even written a fragmented narrative where, in every scene, the main character can be found hovering over a toilet, vomiting up all the little things I'd hated about that relationship that, over the years, still clings to my subconscious.

Don't ask me why I'm such a masochist—you already know the answer (it has three letters and rhymes with FART).

How is it that all these vague profound questions and comments I had no response for back then—glaring red flags in someone else's narrative that I can collect and wave as a signal to the author that yes, I spotted them, see how easy that was?—managed to inflict such deep, detailed scars on my mind and body until I can no longer recognize my own scent, my own reflection in the mirror? Will I ever be able to smell the spring breeze again and embrace it as a moment of liberation?

Every day, I keep asking myself when the labyrinth of my own recursive responses will end, or when the ex-shaped ghost manipulating the neural puppet strings in my mind at every pseudo-familiar situation will hang limp enough for me to reach overhead and sever the strings. Perhaps, in writing about getting

rid of a chronic nosebleed, I've given myself a place to write my way out.

### Tim Lane, *Contributor*

When I first got the email from Danny I thought it was a scam. A poorly run scam, to be sure (how was he going to make money off of this?) but a scam nonetheless. The vast majority of writers spend their time casting out their work, hoping something lands, and mostly reeling back in polite rejections. In this case, the fish just jumped in the boat. It was, once I came around to the validity of the project, incredibly affirming and freeing to be solicited. But I don't tend to write in response to things. Mostly I find prompts pump anything I write full of direction and voice I have no idea what to do with. This case was different. I tried something. I read the material and then sat with it. Usually, I rush to the page. In this case, I didn't. I read the material again. And then I tried to not look at it too closely. I let something come out of it, almost from the corner of my eye, and then, one morning, as I sat on the porch and drank coffee as it rained, my first line came to me.

### Forrest Rike, *Contributor*

The primary source of inspiration for my submission came from the Delia Graff quote. I liked the idea of exploring the context-dependent significance of my job. The keyboard was a great frame. It's a universal tool that has many different applications. The way anyone uses it — whether for leisure or work — can manifest in so many ways. To this end, I used the keyboard as a frame for my meditations on work, both my personal grievances and general satire on office culture. This prompt helped me



challenge my poetics. The keyboard put a contemporary art spin on my process. I also appreciated the feedback aspect of the process. Initially, I wasn't sure how to utilize the feedback, but after digesting it over the last couple weeks, I'm really pleased with how I was able to elevate "ESC // ESC // ESC." This is much to the credit of the insight offered by the readers.

### Daniel E. Pritchard, *Contributor*

A prompt about vagueness can only get you vaguely-related responses. We're all trapped in our own little cages right now, pecking around the feed, ringing the little bell of the internet. Now we eat ice cream out of the container at ten o'clock, both of them. Now we know why the caged bird binges Tiger King. Now that's what I call music. Now we're caught inside these vague boundaries of cognition and signals, bodies and logins. Sometimes I think the difference between a bot and a person is how much I can trick myself into projecting interiority. Maybe your life is falling apart, you're losing your home or someone you love, or both. How much of what could you possibly want that's enough to fill the desire for this not to be your life anymore? On the equinox, a crescent moon grew long and tallow as it dipped and seemed to fish the river near my house, which the indigenous people called the *Quinobequin*, the meandering one. It must mean something that a river, no matter how aimless its path, will end in the ocean. It doesn't mean anything but I insist on its meaning so now it does mean something. I want the vagueness of the world to just hold off for one minute, just long enough to tie my friggin' shoes. But can I even tell how much to knot them?

## Jessica Suderman, *Contributor*

As a human being, there is always an underlying pressure that comes with putting something of yourself out there. Artists, no matter their craft, are somewhat used to doing this. Composer, Eric Whitacre, said it best when asked if he still felt nervous before a performance. “The terror of performing never really goes away. Instead you get very, very comfortable being terrified.” By creating something, be it a sentence, a photograph, a symphony, whatever it is it contains at least some fraction of its creator. And if we want to share what we’ve created we have to put it out there to be seen by someone other than ourselves.

And that’s scary as hell.

There’s a type of intimacy in sharing what you’ve created, and it is different from anything else. But this unique vision Danny had, to bring a bunch of creatives together, throw them all the same prompt, and step back to let the magic unfold is just that, magic. I say that because the process of creating, often solitary and based on the individual, is blown open to include a community of creative strangers on the same journey together. While we didn’t interact during the process, the question I have desperately been wanting to ask my colleagues since August 3rd is, “So what did you do with it?”

For myself, the word significance stuck out to me and brought me around to the ideas of worth and value.

Danny, you joked at the beginning of this process in an email asking the question, “Why do we need another goddamned journal?” And his answer, the need for more art, is an obvious and legitimate cause. The genius of the whole thing is, the journal itself becomes a work of art, a creative narrative for 2 prompts. The pieces that contribute to it are like facets in a diamond, each one unique and essential to the overall beauty of the whole work.

## Megan Waring, *Contributor*

I was first drawn to the champagne but stayed for this idea of what a word does mean, what it could mean, cat-got-your-tongue and how do I tell someone anything, and no matter what you may not know EXACTLY what I mean. I spoke with Brooke and told her how I was not sure exactly what any of it meant and she showed me a collage and so for the last poem I decided to go with that. My interpretation of her interpretation of Delia Graff Fara. Did we get closer or further from understanding her?

## Daniel Elfanbaum, *Series Editor*

It's very exciting and gratifying to have successfully made it to a second issue. It feels like an important milestone, a way of saying that, perhaps, this crazy train will continue down the tracks at least a little while longer. The project is so fun for me to put together, and I hope it has been fun for the contributors to work with and against, too. Especially now that the contributor pool has expanded beyond folks I knew personally, *Response* feels like it's starting to become what it wants to be. And of course it would be only at the end, when I'm scrambling to collect updated bios, write this little note, design the cover, and so on, that I learn that we not only have some very well-published people, but a debut publication, too! Warmth in a pretty hopeless time.

I'll admit I was not familiar at all with Delia Graff's work prior to the research ahead of this issue, but I feel very lucky that I did: if you have the time and inclination, I strongly recommend reading the whole essay. I'm well out of my undergraduate days of pretending to play at philosophy, but this was a lovely return, and one that felt rather timely: regardless of your politics, it is now more clear than ever that the meaning of the words we use

depends in part on the *subject with interests* that is speaking them, and keeping that subject and their interests in mind becomes vitally important.

I'm very proud of the work included in this issue. For the folks whose work I've been familiar with for a while now, it's been wonderful to see them respond to this prompt and use it to filter and transform the things I know them to do so well. For the folks I hadn't worked with before, it was wonderful to greet some new work, get to know some new voices, and hopefully provide them with some kind of fun (and publication, if nothing else).

A friend of mine asked me if *Response* was going to be a quarterly thing, and though it's not, we'll still try to publish more or less on that schedule. I imagine we'll be seeing Issue 3 sometime early next year. We might even figure out how to do marketing before then. We may even hire someone to do a real book design. But we'll see what happens in November, what the world looks like in December, how people making new art are feeling in January. It doesn't seem like this global pandemic is going anywhere, but neither are good people making good art, so —













