

Response

a journal for new work

Response Issue 04

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

We hope you enjoy this new work.

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

But, bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along as an artist without the use of one or two sciences. This may well arouse serious doubts as to my artistic capacities... But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world cannot be adequately recognized by people who do not use every possible aid to understanding.

— Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*

It was a number of months after I started working in Leon [Harmon]'s lab that the computer scientist, who worked with Leon on the MoMA print, stopped by to chat with Leon. That was the first time I met him. I had already completed a series of my still graphics. I was talking out loud to the computer, not uncommon with computer users. Besides talking to the machines, users could be seen kicking and hitting the computers, out of frustration. I was complaining and saying, "I wish I had more software here," and then I heard a voice, "Well what would you want?"

— Lillian Schwartz, *in an interview with Chris Garcia with Jon Plutte*

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Tom Aikens

If Oddly, I Am Myself

My therapist asks me to clarify.

“I mean she left. Fuck her. She was never there. I could count the times we spoke on both hands. She won’t acknowledge it. She never takes responsibility for any of it. With both of them gone what else was I supposed to do?”

I zone out. Next is cursing, rage, rationalization and then the shameful walk back. When I get going about my mom it’s always formulaic masturbation, buildup to blowout, relief but no comfort and the mess behind is my life and I’m covered in it.

Stop. I didn’t mean to couple those thoughts—I opt to clarify: “Look, I don’t want to fuck my mom. But Jesus Christ, *fuck* my mom.”

She nods.

I will see this itemized on my bill. \$135 to Mr. Opus: validation.

Thanks Mom. That’s your fault too.

My therapist also gives me a bag of mushrooms and a note to read before I eat them. These items are not on the bill. My therapist is a pragmatist. She accepts cash.

Later I stand in front of an unmarked pink granite gravestone in a rich city and I’m making a peanut butter and banana sandwich. Cemeteries in rich cities are often as beautiful and well maintained as golf courses, and typically easier to get into. The air is thick with fresh cut grass smell and the out of sight doppler hum of lawnmowers roars and fades into the soundtrack of summer.

Here is as good as any place. I sprinkle some mushrooms onto the sandwich, fold it up and dig in.

If you're trying to fix yourself, you need to put all your options on the table. I've done mushrooms before, but never for purpose, never for science. I suppose that's why I never got anything more than dumb fun stories out of them. What's a trip without a destination?

As I eat, I read the note.

"Eddie,

I understand there are parts of you that need relief. Right now, you think there is a part of you that needs peace with your mother. Follow that and listen. Follow that and be kind. Follow that and be grateful. I think you will discover what you really need and find your *self* along the way. Be safe."

Disgusting. They taste like peanut shells to me. The gritty husk in my teeth, the brittle brown paper—it doesn't crunch, it crumbles into pieces and now I'm grinding my teeth through it. The rest of the sandwich goes down harsh as burning love. I taste bile and feel my temperature rising.

I pull out my phone to check the time but I'm not really looking at it. Inside, I feel the mushrooms like a cartoon bomb in my stomach, but as long as it's still ticking... I dial my mom's number. Straight to voicemail. Her voicemail message was just a digital imitation recording of the Star Spangled Banner played from a vinyl record.

"Mum, give me a call. It's Eddie. Your voicemail is so fake, God. Do you even own a record player? Anyway, call me back. I need to talk to you."

Time passes. I lean my phone against the grave and sit in front of it. She'll call me back.

I just notice that I don't think there have never been flowers here. It's just dirt. The groundskeepers turn the loam to keep it free and clean but that didn't stop the moss and lichen wrapped around the base. The pink stone crowns out into an empty bald face with no expression on it except for the one dark eye of my sleeping phone.

What would I say to her now if I could? I pull up a picture of my mom on my phone and reset it down against the grave.

“I want to forgive you because I think whatever I feel towards you is holding me back from being able to maintain a healthy life with good boundaries and meaningful relationships.”

Yeah, right. Nobody talks to their mom like that. I look at her face. The phone looks back.

“I hate you because you’ve never participated in my life and never tried or showed you wanted to.”

No one cares. The phone remains unmoved.

“You blame me for Dad’s death and I think you’re right.”

And just like that, the phone rings. *Oh ho, someone’s listening.*

“Eddie, what’s up?” she says. “What’s wrong with the Star Spangled Banner, you were a soldier. Yay America. I don’t have a lot of time, is this important?”

“Hey mum, yeah. Hey look, I was talking to my therapist today—”

“Oh, that kind of thing. Can you make it quick, honey? What’s going on?”

“Look, fine. I need to know why you left?” Each word seemed to come out slower than the last.

“Left what? Honey, Eddie—can we do this another time? I’m trying to get my tire fixed.”

I can hear her lighting another cigarette and another time brings me a vision of a little boy reading a book in the backseat of a Mazda coup swathed in smoke and Genesis’ greatest hits but I wave it and the smoke away. An early warning — smoke, fire and all that jazz.

“Mum, no. I need to understand some things, I need to know why you left after Dad died.”

“Oh Eddie, fuck off with that, that was 20 years ago. This is what’s so fucking important to you, right now? Right this instant?”

“Yeah, mum, yeah it is. What the fuck, why’d you leave?”

“Why’d I leave? Oh god, why did I leave? Why do you think I left? Why’d you join the army when I came back? You’re the one that left. I came back and I stayed. You never came back; you got all weird and became a fucking mental case with your therapy and your bullshit closure. Eddie, you don’t heal by picking open fucking scars. Why’d I leave? And what’s wrong with my voicemail?”

“Your voicemail? What, no, mum — why’d you *leave*? Is it because...?”

“Eddie, do you think it might be because maybe you killed your fucking father? You run off, join the army, see the world, kill some other fucking people, ruin other people’s lives, try to kill —”

“Mum,” I started but the rage boiled in my stomach and I felt sweat and heat like I was dipped in acid, “I didn’t kill Dad. It was a heart attack; it was a goddamn heart attack. Why’d you leave?”

“— self, but you failed at that and now — Eddie, I know it was a heart attack but you caused it. You’re always late, you’re always screwing up — homework never in on time, late to class, skipping class — you stressed him out like you stress me out and now you hate the Star Spangled Banner but you fought for the country, you’re all fucked up in what’s important what’s not. “

“You never talked to me, not really. Hello? Mum, Mum! Please stop talking over me, listen and please answer. I don’t have a lot of time.”

“Eddie, I don’t have the time for this either. Look you know I’m sorry I said that, I didn’t mean you killed him, even if you — umm even if — anyway, what’s it to you right now?”

“Why can’t you answer? I’ve never asked you before, why are you so angry about the question?”

“Why am I angry? Because you, you, you never — what? — you just left. When I came back and you never asked or talked about it to me but now, suddenly now, out of the blue you call and you’re like fuck the Star Spangled Banner, you’re a bitch and why’d you leave as if you —”

“Ma, this isn’t working. You’re not listening. I’ll call you back once you fix the wheel.” I say. Click.

Her face fills the screen and man does her smile just fuck with my head. *Like the literal definition of juxtaposition.* I lean it back against the grave. The face is replaced by the number again and the phone vibrates. It vibrates and I vibrate and I’m shaking now.

No, I don’t want this now.

I stand and pace until the phone stops vibrating, until I stop shaking, until her face comes back to the screen. I’m sweating now and nauseous. Her face does not jibe with what I’m feeling now. *I am not feeling good.* I look around for anything else and the tree behind the grave catches my eye. It waves to me.

A dogwood. I smile. A vision of my dad high out of his mind plays on the back of my eyelids and I blink rapidly, catching the memory in strobe lights: ‘no tree that mourns the passing of time like a dogwood. In spring it blooms beauty, white and yellow flowers that flicker like flames in sunlight but you can get fucked if you go near it when autumn succumbs to winter, when those overripe berries slip out of the tree and splatter on the ground like wet clumpy orange dogshit.’ Dogwoods were my dad’s favorite tree.

I squat down and pull up a picture of him and set it against the stone. He should look me in the eye when we’re talking.

I tell him, “You and I are way too similar. Like I’m some extension of you.”

He and the phone are silent.

“Of course you are, you’re dead. I know, I know, I get it. I am an extension of you, I know how genetics work. In, uh, in theory-ish. You left a lot of things unfinished, you know.”

Usually, I identify a happy smile on that face but now it looks a little embarrassed. Like Aw shucks, whoops, didn’t mean to die! He’d raise his arms and then flip me off.

“Fuck me, what is this?” I don’t want to imagine that, “No, fuck you. Did you mean to die? Were we so bad—was I?”

A family walks by, *very* fast. I wave at them — *they must be in such pain, how tragic* — and turn back to the blank stone and my phone.

“No, let me stop you. I don’t really get to get answers to those kinds of questions, do I? Not ones I want to hear, probably. Well Dad, closure is for quitters and it’s official — you quit, or your heart did. But now I’m left with questions and my therapist says I feel like I have to fix all your shit because that didn’t quit—but that’s not true either, mum sure as fuck quit, didn’t she? I’m stuck with her. It’s like none of us to get to move on after you did.”

I squat in front of the grave.

“Where does your life end and mine really begin?” I ask and I feel something reach out to answer. Inside, it’s inside and I close my eyes, fall back on my ass.

Don’t fight this, I will the thought, *let go*.

I do.

At first, I just feel light on my eyes and it’s yellow and orange and I let myself be pulled further in, following my breath deep into my lungs and down below. The colors deepen a lazy wave of tangerine, salmon and then gold. It washes into fancy and obscure — a tide of ochre, crimson, emerald, azure, ink, sin — until they are a million million points cells and I go deeper still until the cells are vast chains of molecules and then atoms and then deeper, past quarks and bosons and into the still smaller spirals where this no real color just the impression of a shape — into nothing BUT IT IS LOOK-

ING and *don't look at it, don't look at it* — if I look it I am certain it will SEE me and then become AWARE of me being aware of it and once it knows that I know that I know it exists I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN—so I open my eyes to leave but instead I split in two.

I sit in front of an unmarked grave as the sun stretches shadows.

I watch a boy cry in a white pickup truck at night. He grips a flannel jacket and cries. Soft and shaking to great sucked in panting and then choking sobs with gobs of snot dribbling from his nose as the grief moves through him like a river.

I float in the space between the grave — which is now — and the truck — which is then. But time is gone here. Here, both are happening but I'm drawn to the truck and to the boy.

He looks at me and says “I miss his smell.”

He doesn't stop crying with me there, he is unashamed but I look away. I can't bear to meet his eyes. I don't question this. *Not yet.*

“No, it's ok. I'm ok to cry. I'd be a bad son if I stopped crying, if I let go. Hey look at me, its ok. Honest, it's ok.”

I look at the jacket instead. “If you let go of what? That?” I ask and nod at it.

“I was such a bad son before this, I never realized how much... I was so close to moving past being this way... this pain — you know? I deserve it.”

“Can I see the that?”

“You won't try to take it from me, will you?”

“No, I just want to look at it. My dad had a jacket like it too. I haven't thought about it.”

“Look with your eyes, then. I can't let go of it. Not for a second, not for anyone.”

I lean in close to him to look and the smell of the jacket and truck wash over me. A mix of cigarettes and beer and weed and sweat but it wasn't any of the one thing, it was the combination of all of them. All the different scents woven into one that was just his (*Dad*) and I thought I would never smell it again. I felt sick and started to cry.

"Are you a bad son too?"

My phone vibrates and I vibrate with it. The part of me that is at the grave answers it without thinking. I can see it's getting darker.

"Eddie, what kind of sick game is this?"

The sun is setting behind the tree and I close my eyes to the glare of it and flip back to see that memory of the boy with tears on his face.

I look at him, tears flowing and nod.

"I am a bad son. I'm not playing any game, I'm doing everything I can to understand and forgive. But holy shit, do you make it hard mum." I say and then I laugh. My therapist will bill me for that, I know it.

"Forgive what? Forgive me? You're goddamn right you're a bad son. Forgive me? For what?"

"Hey mum, I'm in the middle of something, let me — "I hold up a finger to the boy and mouth *hold on* to him.

"You should be apologizing to me. You're bad news, Eddie. Even today, I got a ticket and then the truck blew out on the highway and then — "

The truck. The truck — "Hey mum wait, I just need you to go back. The truck — where were you night he died? Do you remember when I came home?"

"Go where? What are you on? Are you crying?"

“I’m at the grave but also I’m at the then and I’m kind of reliving it so right now I’m also at the truck but with myself, you know? And you — ok please will you make this part easy. You never came out that night, did you? I don’t even think we spoke that day, did we?”

“You’re at the grave or you’re in a truck? Oh my god, today of all days — fuck — you mean after he died, when you freaked out in the car after who the fuck knows where you’d been all day? You let me be surrounded by everyone else in the family and deal with all the questions and then you came home and cried in the car. What could I possibly have wanted to say to you? You made this all about you.”

“So, you did see me — why — man, you did not make it easy at all and it’s such a hard time to be asking this, I don’t even know how to explain but why are you so awful?”

She hangs up on me.

From the truck I can see her now, in the house, watching from the window. I can see her face. *What an unexpected feeling.*

“Why won’t she come out?” the young self asks.

“I thought she was awful. I don’t know. I’ve never known.”

“But that’s not true. I can see it. Look —” he points, “She’s just hurt too. She’s probably still crying.”

Hmm, I wonder. If I have a part that won’t let go, she must have a part in the same place. *Ugh, no!* I feel a tug on my sleeve and another part leans in and whispers, “If we feel pity for her, then we have to forgive her and I don’t ever want to forgive her.” From here I can see more. Some nod, others shake their heads.

“Forgiving her isn’t the point!” another calls out.

“What are you?” yet another asks.

“I’m... the me?” I say and hang the high note on the eeeee. “And what’s wrong with feeling compassion for my mom? I don’t hate her you know. Not really—I just, I wish I could forgive her.”

“Forgive her? For what? For leaving me?”

“For leaving you or me?”

“Stop,” he says. I hear a murmured echo. *Stop. Stop. Stop.*

“No. I want to forgive that and for being a shitty mom and being mean and everything else. Do you remember what your dad told you about loving people? How you love them for who they are, not who you want them to be?”

“Yeah, that’s the only way he could be in love with such a shitty person.”

“Sure, that’s probably true but either way, she is who she is. It’s not going to change. I—”

Oh no. A realization comes up on me. “I don’t need her to change or to be anything else to me. I can forgive her. Holy shit, she’s not even the problem.”

You are, I think. Fuck. I mean I am. Oh god.

Not God. Me.

No! I stare at the self that doesn’t want to forgive her. He shakes his head but that look comes across his face. He knows. He’s looking at me. It’s not me though. It’s through me.

Something blazes behind me, something immense and beautiful and powerful and unburdened as I turn to look it, I realize just how good a job I’ve been doing, how good we’ve all been doing—how all the power that’s ever existed is here now if oddly, I am myself—no, just self, and through self *it is*—

Thank you.

Did I say that?

I breathe on my fingers — *is this talking? Talking out loud?*

Am I crying?

I feel my face. Is this what I'm feeling? My fingers shape the outline and curve of my lips, and trace the lines at the corners of my eyes.

I open my eyes. I am in front of the grave with no name on it. It's night. I should feel something; instead all I am feeling is *feeling*.

Adam Graaf

Patients

But, bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get
along as an artist without the use of one or two sciences.

— Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*

I. Welfare Check

We'd responded, lights and sirens,
to confirm what police suspected.

There was no need to look,
listen, and feel for breaths,

check for a pulse, or
start chest compressions.

Her death was not a panicked fall
or a long illness helping ready

loved ones to be without.
Hers was an evening in bed:

a nightgown, a blanket pulled to her waist,
a lamp, a water glass on its coaster, and a book,

still open and held, still, by fingertips
purpled from lividity, as though

her final thoughts pooled near
the page's words, a passage

she mistook for sleep, leaving behind
the world she'd been reading to escape.

II. Resurrection Story

Ten years later, I try again
to write a man alive.
I imagine it this way.

We pull the cot, carrying the man, from the ER,
load him into the ambulance and drive,
lights and sirens, in reverse to his house.
We carry him, on the backboard,
to the landing where we found him.
We unbuckle the straps that roll up
into our hands, like yo-yos. My partner
puts away the bag, the valve, the mask,
while the man's chest pushes my arms upward.
The man's chest pushes my arms upward,
his chest pushes my arms upward
and upward again, again, again.
I feel the man's ribs snap
back together, and the defibrillator is silent.
It powers down before my partner presses On.
I pull off the pads. The man is agonal
or he gags or I miss some life
still in him as I remove the airway.
My shears scissor his shirt whole, and words
re-enter my mouth, I suck in the gibberish:
.ssergorp ni RPC.SLA gnitseuqeR.eriF ot 3A
The shine in the man's eyes returns
to my penlight, and my fingers move
from his neck to his wrist.
We pull off our gloves. We walk backwards
down the man's stairs, his foyer,
I close his front door.

I try to write it again this way:
ten years later, I imagine
a man alive.

III. Blood Draw

I'd learned to trust addicts. They knew best.
So when the man agreed to let me try, I listened.
My right arm's no good. He straightened his left,

unfolding a map of his dependence: saddles and draws
of scars bordered freckles and track marks that dotted
a vessel-less plain disrupted by lakes of dark bruises.

We searched. *Those roll*, he said, as I palpated
along a ridge of knuckles, then a peak on his wrist.
And I just shot up there, which meant the site was tender.

Here, he said, pulling my hand to his forearm.
Through this scar. And he coached me to go deep
till the needle was at a drill's angle. He was right,

and together we watched each tube fill from
an oasis, a vein for both of us to use.

IV. Post Mortem Care

We strip a man we'd tried to save,
record belongings next to his name
as though he still owns them:
six one-dollar bills, a money clip,
tissues, a pocket comb, loose peppermints,
a nail clipper. A nurse works loose the clasp
on a watchband while I lift the man's head
to free a necklace. We tug at what's left
of the shirt EMTs cut, pull off socks,
cut away one pant leg, then the other.
I work off a silver band, twist the ring
across knuckles and over skin
that settled around it, before dropping it
into a urine sample cup, which I'll tuck
beside the man, for safe-keeping
on the long mortuary cot. But now,
as we roll him, to sheet the plastic shroud
beneath him, the air we'd bagged into his lungs
an hour ago escapes as a sigh, as though
he's bored with this and ready, to move on.

V. Signs of Healing

At a crosswalk near St. E's, within sight of the hospital,
and medics who pulled their ambulance out of traffic
to help my wife—bleeding, dazed, unable to walk—
onto a cot, and after they secured, loaded her,

the man who drove the van into her sped away,
a hit-and-run—like the one I'd responded to
years before, a woman sitting upright on Mass Ave.,
pushing hard against the roadway, straining

against pavement as though she might lift or slide herself
away from pain and blood, a tire-scuffed pant leg
I cut away to expose a purple-red depression
where her tibia should've been—and that night,

not able to sleep, not having a plan, I walked Brighton
searching for a van, a dented hood, my wife's hair
snarled in its grill; instead, I would find strands
knotted at the small of her back when I towed her dry

or caught in her knee brace's straps. And later, much later,
after she explained why she'd teased out a jumble from her brush
— *Throw this in the garden. Birds like it.* — I find them again,
tangled in the dirt and twigs of a fallen nest.

Caitlyn Griffin

Building 32

On our second night out together, you take me through MIT's campus. I tell you I've never been before, admit that for a Massachusetts native, I have not seen much of where I come from. You tour-guide me through Cambridge, through the campus deserted with cold, point to buildings where people pay to research important things. We wander toward the Ray and Maria Stata Center, and I note the clumsy way it falls over itself, consider its slabs of window and steel competing for all the best angles, its slits of unexpected space.

I recognize it as a woman, constantly turning a head full of paned glass, the full of her flourishing out, forming a door. All of this is true until she pulls back into herself, the performance becoming too much, even for her.

I wonder if I've ever seen a building pucker like a body before, reveal what is under the fleshy bits of someone looking to invite people inside, smart men with glasses.

I am so wrapped-up in architecture I do not notice I'm climbing after you, walking the steps of an amphitheater placed like an after-thought. I catch its steepness against my heels, turn back to look at the curved rows that stack on top of each other, small trees planted as patrons against the brick. There is no show going on, and we are alone, but I can't help laughing at what has still found me, here with you. Theatre is immersive like that, everything a kind of performance if you sit and think about it long enough.

Later, I Google the construction process, find out
the Stata Center replaced Building 20,
whose use was always labeled as *temporary*,
the amphitheater just beyond its walls, *flawed*.
Of Building 20, a professor once said, "You might regard it
as the womb of the Institute. It is kind of messy,
but by God, it is procreative!" I don't know why
this offends me, why I'm not surprised the comment
comes from someone who doesn't know my body,
that building, its empty theatre the way I do.
I don't know why I picture myself in the center
of all the grey concrete, in the dark,
monologuing as to why a woman is not a house,
her body not a temple, procreation not a profitable return
for men who are so quick to build and destroy,
who only have one idea of what ancient coliseums
can hold. You clap slowly, are watching me bow
to no one in particular,
my figure bent
a perfect ninety degrees.

Fezziwig's Christmas Party

My first was in a theatre; I don't count T,
the school bus where we sat
with kindergarten hands in kindergarten laps,
one of us asking if the other knew
what kissing was. A peck, mirroring
what we saw our parents do each morning, quick
giggles passing through the gaps of tiny teeth.

I don't count the numerous girlfriends, the numerous
sleepovers: two of us behind a paint-peeling shed,
an office over a garage, our bedrooms
where we made our dolls do it first. All of us
playing the same game, fourth-grade tongues tangling
like tentacles, deep-sea octopus girls —
sloppy, eager.

And still, I don't count A, my first boyfriend.
Both of us sixteen, filled with everything
we figured we were supposed to be doing: saying
“Fuck,” moaning, planning the impossible Forever.
The first kiss against the posts of his bunkbed,
he took a sweaty hand and turned my face, *Come here*.
My dad, honking the horn outside,
June bugs chirping a weak, darkened applause —
I had done it, I guess, and felt no different.

When D reached for me then, half a year later,
I figured my knees would buckle in, me,
a woozy marionette with sugar-floss strings.
I grounded myself with a grip of his hair, figured
I would buoy in this slow-motion moment until I died.
Here, I knew those other kisses had not been it. No,
these had only been hazy rehearsals, exercises
in executing, playing at bodies touching other bodies.

The first, this first, was shadowed by stage light
around the corner, muffled between canvas flats, still
so close to the audience, to cast members
only a puncture of plaster away, coarse threads
and glue. We waited for our cue, where I would storm
out, delight in the performance of leaving him;

I played the fiancé I lost to self-indulgence,
to greed — so of course it would happen this way. Slow
lean, half-smile, my body trembling
in stranger's clothes, in transient space.

Ms. Widow Capet

Maggie is stretched into all the things I am not: tall, she towers against the makeshift backdrop of a Boston theatre like a gentle skyscraper. An improve Shakespeare show, I see her making good the promise I knew I would never keep. She eats a mock dinner, hides behind ferns for an audience laugh while I watch, wanting more of Maggie to react to. It is a Saturday night, out with new friends, but I am paying only to remember.

From my center stage seat, it is final year of undergrad. I pose with a pastel wig for a photo, all the graduates pressed into the make-up-room of the Fine Arts Center. The wig, bleached a powdery blonde, slips from my head like a bad fit, coils into braids that billow through spaces of pink ribbon. I choose it on purpose, which is sad because Maggie is here, and awkward because everyone knows the wig will always be hers. Senior year, I am still without any main stage shows, no castings to warrant the hunger that still hollows me dry. Finally now, I am in the running: Marie Antionette, and there are only two. Maggie leaves our callback in tears, has a feeling the role is mine, and isn't it too bad? The list posts in the morning, and the familiar absence of my name reminds me of Maggie's disappointment in an empty bar.

It is now, but no different than before, so we embrace after her show. There is an obligation that comes with seeing old faces, eye contact made in the same sort of church where both of you used to pray. I tell her she is making all of this work, and Maggie laughs. She tells me I'm wrong, pouts, because we both know this is how it's always done. The two of us will go home, our same degrees living in two different spaces: one, hidden in a dresser drawer, the other, framed in glass like a glossy confection. I picture it as something towering, a shiny cake in all its splendor, too decadent to not show off the balcony, share with the hungry people holding their forks, fogging the glass.

Emergency Broadcast System, Or Other Kinds Of Small Endings

In class, I scribble a piece on losing my best friend: she is swimming between blue, and pink, and white space, unfamiliar here. Usually a listener and never the subject, too sweet to be stretched into stanzas, she is lost now and indifferent, gasping, pushing against the transparency I have been saving for myself. When it is finished, read aloud, I realize I am still writing love poems.

Walking home, heading to the train station, I pass a skinny boy with blonde hair – yes, there are more of them, everywhere. He is standing on a stoop that he doesn't own, and I know this because into his cellphone, smiling, looking up at a window he says, "Hey, I'm outside. I'm here," and I can't stay long enough to see who lets him in. I feel like I've witnessed something important, the moment where this he and his stranger become something small together.

As I board behind the cab of a green-line train, I promise to make a piece about this almost meeting – but I am still re-writing my poem about my best friend, and am too distracted by the fact that when I arrive back home, my bed will still reek with dampness from the body of a boy I met online, from the disappointment that I am not comfortable with him sooner. I look into his eyes and see nothing, too aware he is like the ocean, know I am sinking fast and have let myself do it. And it's here, in all this hard swimming, I know I am losing what it means to know someone.

Eliza Jerrett

Strange Noises Coming From Different Angles



Please use the QR code or enter <https://bit.ly/3GyWlBu> in a web browser to view this work.

Krisela Karaja

Dear Fibonacci

You, adept at coding hallmarks of nature
and I, keen on codifying Hallmark, Netflix
into personal law. So many highland Scotsmen,
kiltin' for Christmas wives and I

keen on cracking hallmark codes in internet flicks.
Fib me not — I ready myself for debauchery,
crooning to be a Christmas wife, as I
pour maths o'er Python, tip a cup of Java.

Fibonacci, I steady myself for your surefire sorcery.
You, a magician decoding hallmarks of nature—
pore over snake coils and coffee grounds, conjure him
without personal flaw: a deus ex machina for me—

```
1  function percent_chance_of_bankruptcy_of_self
2  _and_cents_resolved_by_man(month_as_number) {
3
4  var dismal_month_of_withdrawal_from_festivities = 0,
5      single_awareness_month = 1,
6      month_of_minimal_luck,
7      month_of_sky_tears = 2,
8      month_of_blooming_for_everyone_but_me =
9      [dismal_month_of_withdrawal_from_festivities,
10     single_awareness_month];
11
12 if (month_as_number < 2)
13     return "miracles only happen after March"
14
15 while (month_of_sky_tears++ < month_as_number) {
16     month_of_minimal_luck =
17     dismal_month_of_withdrawal_from_festivities +
18     single_awareness_month;
19
20     dismal_month_of_withdrawal_from_festivities =
21     single_awareness_month;
22
23     single_awareness_month = month_of_minimal_luck;
24
25     month_of_blooming_for_everyone_but_me.push(
```

```
26     month_of_minimal _luck);
27 }
28
29 return month_of_blooming_for_everyone_but_me;
30 }

    percent_chance_of_bankruptcy_of_self_and_cents_resolved_
    by_man(in December (12))
    [0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89]
```

(Code adapted from Angus Croll, *If Hemingway Wrote JavaScript*, No Starch Press, 2015 (page 17).)

Clever Little Ideas

Rachel's mother always said that bad news is best received on a Friday. That way, the sorry recipient has the weekend to privately wallow. Of course, her mother worked in HR where giving bad news was half the job. Unfortunately, no mother or HR representative gave the Department Head this advice. Rachel's bad news came on a Tuesday, the hearing set for that Friday. That left her four days to wallow, all the while hiding the fact that her undergraduate career was about to come to an abrupt climax.

But finally it was Friday, the day of her hearing, so come what may, at least *this* part of her wallowing could end.

Professor Wagner's office was windowless and stuffy. Rachel fidgeted in her chair. It was metal, rigid. The kind of surplus chair found stacked high in church basements, or here, in an academic's office. On the other hand, Wagner's chair was neither cheap, nor surplus. High-backed, it's leather the perfect cushion for a tweed jacket. The department head of Anthropology was always polished, put together, and proud. There was another "p-word" that Rachel could use to describe him; it rhymed with trick.

Rachel thought a disciplinary hearing would have more pomp considering the circumstance. That perhaps a Dean of Students would be present to argue on her behalf. Instead, she, Professor Wagner, and a man she didn't know were crammed between books, papers, and dusty awards.

The folder in Rachel's lap overflowed with every relevant document she could think of. The original letter for the hearing, inviting her to "respect and participate" in the process; her thesis; the draft; and a legal pad containing notes she wrote before the draft, every illegible idea scrawled and splattered between the lines.

Her mother told her she should get a lawyer. Conversely, she also always said only guilty people needed lawyers. Rachel decided against counsel. She was innocent — and more importantly, broke.

“Ms. Rosewood,” Wagner began, “this is Professor Stranson from the Psychology Department. He is here as an unbiased third party.”

Stranson smiled and nodded once. He was young, clean shaven, and wore Levi’s, a stark contrast to Wagner’s bristly mustache, and creased khakis. Why had a psych professor been selected as her jury? Perhaps her public defender? Or maybe he was a criminal psychologist like on CSI, who would read into every twitch and pause? She self-consciously crossed and then uncrossed her ankles. Perhaps he owed someone a favor? Most likely, he offered the convenience of a psychologist without the hefty bill.

“Do you know why you’re here today?” Professor Wagner asked.

“I have been accused of plagiarism,” she said, eyes on the floor.

“Caught plagiarizing is more accurate,” Wagner corrected, his favoritism spewing with the specks of saliva being caught by his mustache. “Professor Mueller’s recent paper and your thesis are near-identical. And to steal from something as prestigious as *The Review*?”

And that was the root of it. The Anthropology Department hadn’t published anything noteworthy in years. Until Mueller stole her idea and published it in *The Review*. Now there were rumors of alumni’s opening wallets and possible new resources being provided. No doubt Mueller, and by extension Wagner, were both back in the limelight being wined and dined.

She came up with “the idea” eight weeks prior. Up to that point, everything she had written stunk. Trite, cliché, the type of ideas every undergrad comes up with. But not “the idea”. This one was good, it stuck to her mind like gum to hair. She thought about it in the dining hall, letting her coffee get cold. She thought about it during French, where she hadn’t bothered conjugating. She even thought about it at a party while a lanky boy poured her frothy

beers. Rachel knew it was a good idea, which was why she scooped up the first office appointment she could with Professor Mueller. She wanted to share the idea and see if it had legs, or if it would need training wheels for a week or two before taking off.

She remembers pacing Mueller's office, her voice fluctuating before she would briefly pause and stare at her shoes to refocus. The shoes were new, a recent reward for coming up with "the idea". It felt genius, even as she babbled it to Mueller.

As she hoped, he said it had legs. Strong, thick, sturdy legs a cyclist might have. Rachel rushed home, blowing off the lanky boy with his frothy beer, holing herself up in her dorm until the legal pad was full and a rough draft birthed.

Everyone told her writing her thesis would be terrible. That it would take weeks off her life. Like bad prom dates or hangovers from Burnett's vodka. They were to be struggled through, torn, rewritten, burned, rewritten again until all that was left was a jumbled idea spat on the page and turned in. It was said to be the worst part of senior year. Rachel didn't think so. She made it her bitch. At least, she thought she had.

After the initial office visit, she never consulted with Mueller again. A week before the paper was due, Mueller's article had been published. Her classmate had thrust *The Review* at her with eager hands, "Rach, you have to read this. You're going to love it!" She read it, but the emotion she felt wasn't love. It was hate. Hate at seeing *her* idea underneath *his* byline.

Blinded by rage, she decided to still turn her paper in. Marching up to his desk, determined to see the smug look on his face dissolve. It did not. Instead, he just smiled and said, "Thank you, Ms. Rosewood." Fuming, she stomped off. She assumed Mueller would give her an A and act like it never happened. It wasn't until the letter arrived in the mail that she realized two things: that she should have reported him first, and that Mueller was willing to do anything to protect his reputation.

She struggled to meet Wagner's imperious gaze.

“Professor Wagner,” she said slowly, fingering her folder. “If you could just look at my draft, at my notes you would see —”

Wagner held up his hand. “Drafts and notes can be fabricated, Ms. Rosewood.”

“I know, but if you look at the dates at the top of the page.” The words felt foolish even to her.

“Ms. Rosewood!” Wagner snapped, his fist coming down hard on the desk, a cup of pens rattling in support. Rachel’s gaze shot up at him, as did Stranson’s. He hadn’t moved much since then. *Why was he even here?* Professor Wagner let out a long sigh, “It will be taken into consideration, but...”

He grabbed the folder from her and tossed it to the side of his desk, directly on top of an ever-growing pile. “... at the end of the day, Professor Mueller’s paper was published a week before you turned yours in.” He shuffled the papers on his desk, sifting until he found what he needed.

Rachel opened her mouth to speak.

Wagner narrowed his gaze on her. Rachel’s mouth snapped shut like a well-trained dog. “— and if you’re about to suggest that he took the idea from you, it strikes me as odd that he would be the first person to come to your defense.”

“What?”

He handed her a piece of paper. She recognized the handwriting.

It is my understanding that Ms. Rachel Rosewood has been accused of plagiarizing from my recently published article in the Review. Rachel is the last person I’d ever suspect of plagiarism. While the content of her thesis was quite similar to my published work, I believe this appropriation was merely a coincidence. At worst, her behavior was that of an over enthusiastic pupil. It should not reflect upon her as a student.

I urge you to consider her merit and position. Offer her the chance to prove herself again so that this matter can be nothing more than a pause on her way to a no doubt, bright future.

Sincerely, Professor A. Mueller

She read the letter twice. Her tongue tasted bitter. *Accused of plagiarism?* He turned her in! She huffed. *Consider her merit and position?* Rachel wanted to kill him. To destroy his career. Take away everything he ever loved. How could he? After all the long hours pacing in his office. Helping her to refine “the idea” down more and more until it was crystal clear and perfect. He said it had legs. Strong legs. And what did he do? He spread them open and took what he wanted.

If she was honest with herself, what bothered her most wasn't the theft, but that he took her idea and somehow made it *better*. She read *The Review*, twelve times to be exact. His examples were stronger, his word choice superior. But what would you expect from a tenured professor? Still, she hated it, for the injustice and for the uncomfortable questions it raised: was the idea still hers even if *he* made it better? What was an idea worth anyway? And did his cheating invalidate his work? Or was the final product all that mattered?

For the last four days she had lots of questions and very few answers. Mueller had damaged her. He'd stolen her chance to have something to say to the university, to the world. Her chance to be profound, and to discuss the idea many years later, no doubt boring lanky boys. Instead of helping her, molding her thesis with his experience, he took it from her and put his name on it. Should she have consulted him more? Probably. Should she have turned in the paper? Probably not.

“He's lying.” She blinked back tears. Crying would not help. “I came to him with the idea. He took it. I had it first.”

Stranson coughed and cleared his throat. Wagner stroked his mustache.

“I have considered Professor Mueller's request for leniency,” Wagner said slowly, “and am willing to offer you a second chance. If you can admit that you plagiarized your thesis, we shall end the hearing now and strike it from your record. You will then have four weeks to try again and provide a thesis by your own hand. Do

that..." he paused. "... and we can look past this unpleasantness. You'll be able to resume your education and graduate as planned."

Tears welled up in the corners of Rachel's eyes.

"However, if you continue with this narrative of Professor Mueller stealing your work, of *telling* people Professor Mueller stole your work, we will have no choice but to continue this hearing. If found guilty, you will be branded a cheater on your transcript, will not receive credit for this class, and *will* not graduate with the rest of your class."

She was shocked, but not surprised. No expulsion? Wagner knew the truth in the affair, and just wanted to hush it up. He probably would have stolen "the idea" too if he could have. *Stuck up bastard.*

"You have one hour to think this over," Wagner said, rising to his feet. "Afterwards, you will give your statement. How we proceed depends on you."

They edged past her on the way to the door. Wagner's gut nudged her from her seat. Both men gone, Rachel threw the letter on the desk and cried.

As was often the case, coffee was the only solution. Something about roasted beans and an extra shot of espresso (or two), mixed with creamy milk reminded Rachel that the world kept turning. The coffee shop was just across from the Anthropology building. She sipped her cappuccino and considered her dilemma. Every option sucked. If she wrote a new thesis, she knew it would be crap. And if she decided to fight, could she really beat Mueller?

"May I sit?" Professor Stranson asked. His voice jerked her away from her dark thoughts, and she raised her head to look at him.

"Sure." She sat up straighter, crossed her legs, and then uncrossed them. What kind of psychological trick was he about to play? According to her mother, shrinks were no more than strip mall psychics with slightly nicer offices.

"Have you made a decision?" Stranson asked.

“I went with the cappuccino.” She held up her cup.

He chuckled. The man had a nice laugh. She’ll give him that. He was younger than most professors, and far more attractive. She wondered if he ever banged a student. Did he spread them open and take what he wanted, too? Hopefully his victims at least got something in return.

“Either way, I’m in a lose-lose situation,” Rachel mumbled. She didn’t want to start over. Not after all those long hours. It was such a fucking great idea. The words came so easily.

“Starting over isn’t so bad,” the professor shrugged.

“I have my proof. I can fight this.” Rachel said, she wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince, Stranson or herself.

“Is it worth fighting a Department Head? Two well-known, tenured professors?”

“It’s not fair.”

“Tell me about it, I’ve been denied tenure three times. I’m the low man on the totem pole. Why do you think I get dragged into these hearings?”

She looked into Stranson’s eyes. They looked tired. Maybe he wasn’t that young?

He downed the rest of his coffee and rose to his feet. “And I even come up with my own ideas. But that’s life, rarely fair.”

Rachel watched him leave. It wasn’t fair. But did that matter? She hadn’t written her thesis for publication or fame. When she read Mueller’s paper, she still turned in her thesis hoping to at least get an A, and maybe a reward if she didn’t make a fuss. She just wanted to be done with it all and move on.

Rachel looked at the clock. Her hour was almost up.

The elevator leading to the third floor took too long, so Rachel used the stairs. Her feet were heavy. Her jacket was heavy. Her

thoughts were heavy. She opened the door to the hallway, her steps deliberate. The stitching on her new shoes had begun to fray. She smiled. Those shoes were supposed to be her reward for her clever little idea.

Professor Wagner's office door was wide open, the light spilling into the hallway.

Rachel paused and took a deep breath. She lifted her head. Held it high. She'd get through this, after all, she had legs, didn't she? And maybe she had something far more important to say to the world. The words were the easy part, it's the ideas that matter.

"Ms. Rosewood, are you prepared to give your statement?" Wagner asked, her folder lay open in front of him on his right, Professor Mueller's statement on his left.

Rachel closed the office door behind her.

"I am."

Sabina Lindsey

the brain fogged up,

temporal lobe
sticky, and static
mouth missed the message,
meant to look but the tick
stopped, still somewhere,
silence somewhere,
there's knowing the skull
is full is knowing
when the synapse ceases,
blood and neurons

slow veins rupture,
redistribute yourself
in the sequence,

and never nullify.

error

the ghosts look like codes I can't ever wrap
my skull around, always hollow head,

hint at the sequence hit at the silence
of the room, smashing fingers on keyboards

until the spirit goes empty, letters empty
tongue says so much when no one is watching

the brain go sick, when no one can hear
the insides of a cut mouth,

the body split into
cells, pieces like

putting yourself back into the structure
you wish to bury

no one told you

to praise the cosmos,
question the sequence, linger on
language you wish to speak, sit in the silence
of not knowing, of never knowing,
scrape the cells, collect and code,
determine the variants and redetermine,
even when the dirt disintegrates, sky evaporates
inside of you, turns to ash,
here your brain is and always is.

what if I'm dirt

water, earth, stillness in the air
the whoosh of curls at sunset, tangerine and pink,

the warmth of sky, melts onto the skin
onto the freckles and into the bones
are gnawed at, spine snapped into fragments,

from memories I let linger too long, listened to the tar
in the insides of the brain rot,

but oxygen still cycles here,
how divine it is to exist in the molecules wrapped

up in the certainty of breath

what if I don't die even if I want to

the earth splits

the body halves itself,
screen blank again,
but somewhere you see yourself,
a pulp of flesh and cells, in the

black square, see yourself as whole,
as multiverse, as willing,

with no witness
but the quiet

Grace Mattern

New Hampshire Diary, 2021

November 5

I sit as close as possible to the firepit. The denim of my jeans is hot against my shins and the front of my knees, almost a burn. I don't back up.

Sun hits the tops of oaks at the yard's edge, leaves gone umber, brown, yellow. The October Red maple my children and stepchildren bought me for my 60th birthday is aflame with late color. I see it through small gaps of the dense blue spruce, planted decades ago as a miniature in the corner of a perennial bed. Now the tree is 30 feet tall and 30 across and shades a wide swath of yard and much of the garden. When it was planted it was shorter than Eric, my late husband, and my then 13-year-old son.

The last of the light through the maple's leaves makes a second sunset.

November 9

All analog here, pen on paper, a journal I made by hand, paper folded in signatures of six, holes punched with an awl from my father's old sail making business, bound with a coptic stitch.

Another day outside to watch the sun go down in "the new dark" as David, my now-husband calls it. Except it's the same dark it's always been, only earlier on the clock, creeping closer and closer, then backing away.

This morning we saw eider ducks, floating in Provincetown Harbor, their winter spot. Then we spent hours in the car, moving from tides, marshes, reeds with plumes like sun-lit lanterns, high dunes hiding bush-fringed ponds in low spots, the ocean at the edge, hard pounding blue Atlantic, to this corner of hay fields and pastures squeezed between expanding house lots.

A goose from the farm pond across the street lifts into the sky. When Eric was dying the geese flew past the second story windows of his sick room every day at dusk and he would be angry that another day was gone.

David is playing guitar.

The roar of tires on the state road beyond the trees is a backdrop I sometimes pretend is surf on a beach. The sun sets north of the old silo in the farmyard down the road, almost done with its slide south. Clouds line up to be pink and then dusk blue and maybe a slash of gold at the end.

November 12

When I was a young mother I read Annie Dillard's "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" and learned about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. I didn't understand the quantum mechanics, but I understood the uncertainty at the core of life, what we can't know about how particles behave in relation to each other. What we can't know about what comes next.

In response I wrote a manuscript worth of poems, mostly about trees and time. Trees are among the most certain things in my life, how they form a dark line on the horizon, how saplings sprout in my field, poised to take over unless I cut them back, how ageless the stand of tall white pines appears.

November 16

I plan to alphabetize my poetry collection. By last name.

I plan to have a shot in my back to relieve the pain from arthritic disks.

I plan to do yoga.

I forget the Yiddish for the saying my late mother-in-law told me when Eric died. But the English is clear — man plans, God laughs.

I don't believe God laughs, but I don't plan on my plans either.

November 17

The pines are silhouettes against a night sky paled by moon. This is a certainty, how much of the moon's face is visible tonight, a predictable cycle of darkness through sliver and lop-sided half orb to the full face that will happen tomorrow. And then reverse, the phases of diminishment to disappearance.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle led me to the observer effect, which tells us we change what we look to measure by the act of looking.

But not on this scale.

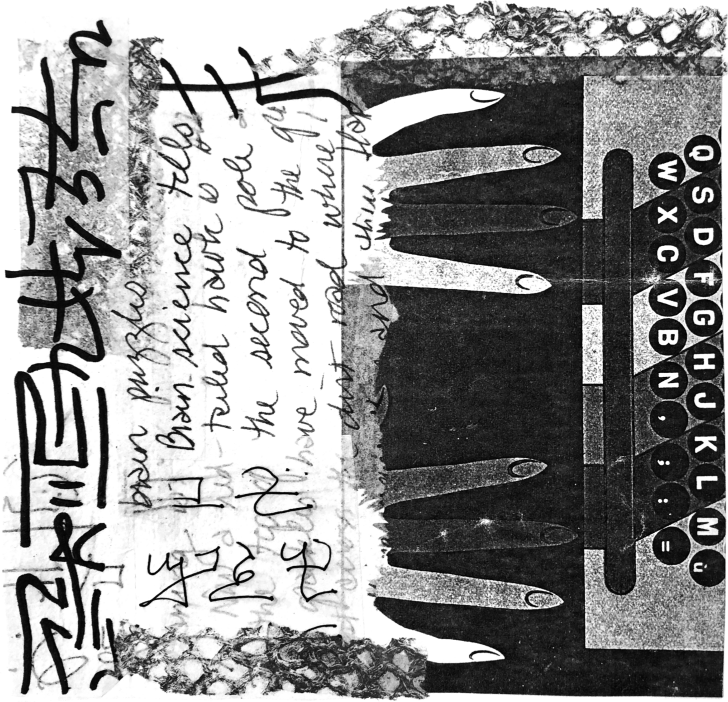
I watched the moon in the weeks after my sister learned she was dying and all that changed were the angled edges of moonlight boxes on the floor under my window.

November 19

A final bump of the full moon slips behind the horizon of trees across the pasture. The window is pearly with raindrops from last night's front. The morning is cold after a too-warm-for-November day yesterday. I loved the sun anyway.

There are bluebirds and juncos in the fields — I see them flit in and out of bushes and bare trees as I walk. The bluebirds' range has moved north as the earth warms. We used to skate on the ponds nearby on Thanksgiving weekend. Now we swim well into October. I pay attention to my carbon footprint and work to expand the range of trees, a beautiful and effective means of carbon sequestration. But I still enjoy the warmer days, the extended season of swimming and porch sitting and mowing leaves from the lawn to mulch my garden.

The balance — resistance and replenishment. I write by hand.



November 20

The sun is gone, a smear of blue-gray cloud capping the gold left in the sky. My mood is that smear, not even a mood, just common grief. What's hardest is how grief wasted the day. I wandered from yard to study to porch and finally asked David to sit in the faint warmth of the sun with me so I wasn't alone while I cried.

The red berries I pick for the Thanksgiving table remind me of the years when I first planned decorations. The mock setting of the table to be sure we have enough room for the chairs reminds me of how many fewer chairs we need. Measuring tablecloths reminds me of the blue cotton one Eric and I bought the first year we hosted Thanksgiving. That tablecloth ended in the basement of the barn as a rag and then I ripped it into strips to keep down weeds under a mulched garden path.

"You live your life and then it ends up in the trash," my brother-in-law said when we finished cleaning out his and David's parents' house. The cases of the book written by their father, the stacks of yellow legal pads filled with notes, the packs of black binder clips, the piles of dementia-collected magazines from their mother, all in the pile for 1-800-GOT-JUNK.

At least the old tablecloth was used in the garden.

November 21

The grackles are back. The pack of them swooped across the pastures and in and out of my yard all summer and now into autumn. They huddle on the wires strung between the poles that march up the road to the west, dairy Jerseys to one side, beef Holsteins on the other, two different farmers.

I watch the smaller birds stop to eat the barberries, flutter under the roof of the porch, sit on the line we've strung to dry our wet-suits and towels.

Research tells me this is good for me, to write by hand. It engages the brain more fully, the work of forming each letter, the physical act of scripting meaning as my brain puzzles out what is underneath the words.

Now a red-tailed hawk sits on the top of the second pole and the grackles have moved to the grasses just across the dirt road. They startle and flap as a cloud up into the old maple in the front yard, the low sun silvering their wings. The hawk is still. Chipping sparrows move through the bushes close to the house. The birdsong that was absent when I came out on the morning porch is here now, another warm November day.

Research also confirms that engaging in deep, uninterrupted work, makes me happier. Rather than scatter myself across screens, if I sink into a single task I am more creative and get more done — or maybe that's not the point. I feel more fulfilled and isn't that enough of a measure of what's good and worthy?

November 22

I know the science of trauma, how our brains can bury overwhelming episodes of harm or store them as triggers in our body, as memories detached from narrative so they flash back as single scenes of fright.

If I could write software for our brains it would be a program to modulate what hurt us before it hurts us again or hurts someone else. The vicious chain of harm too often slaps wild and loose and wraps around others.

November 26

David learned during a CME course that 25% of people have a manic reaction to a significant loss. When Eric died I worked, worked out and wrote. My role as the director of a statewide network of rape crisis and battered women's programs mushroomed into multiple national projects and leadership positions. I was Vice Chair and Chair of two different nationwide organizations. I traveled to meetings weekly, small groups of thought leaders to address the overlap of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect or how to transform shelters to adopt more trauma-informed policies, how to influence the federal government to give us more funding.

When I wasn't working, I trained for and competed in sprint triathlons. I regularly placed in the top three in my early 50s age division and won more than once. My body was a slim frame of muscle and grit. I sustained myself on lean poultry, salad, red wine and marijuana.

I wrote a book of poetry chronicling my first year of grief, then got it published. I met David at the first reading I did from the manuscript. I was a hot fire that pulled in whatever was loose nearby then combusted.

Now, 15 years later, several major additional losses on, grief is sluggish and unfocused. It wakes me with a dread pit in my gut and digs holes I trip into. Or thunderclaps smack over my head and I turn to find a safe spot.



November 27

Winter stopped by this morning. I woke to crusty snow and a hard wind that blew the front door open during the night. It was 52 degrees in the living room with the furnace pumping hard.

I didn't have my coffee on the porch. I rekindled the fire in the wood stove and David and I sat and talked about sadness and a new loss, so new it hardly had time to be anything other than a deep longing.

November 29

This is where I began, outside at the end of the day, the sun about to set, still north of the silo. Studies have found low angle sun in your eyes is the most effective to counter Seasonal Affective Disorder. Not that I've diagnosed myself as having SAD, but the November descent into much more darkness than light each day, here at 43 degrees latitude, never feels easy.

I make a point of being outside when I can at the beginning or end of sunny days, letting those angled rays in to fire whatever neurotransmitters will help me navigate the hours.

The finches who nest in the spruce warble, perched on outer needles. The crust of snow has stuck and the yellow of low sun is tipping clumps of grasses in the pasture across the road. Otherwise there is purple in the white.

Three bluebirds chatter and land in the bushes beside the porch. I'll hold this as happiness.

Shannon Fara O'Neill

Sunken Dreams (Nonfiction)

In the hospital room in St. Petersburg, Florida, I saw into our future: the kitchen table covered in bottles of pills with complicated names and confusing dosage times, you groggy, you weak, me standing helpless, the airless hospital rooms, the incessant beeping, the rattle of wheels outside the door, the anticipation when doctors enter, the exhale when they leave.

I said: I don't want this to be our story.

You said, smiling, high on painkillers: It's gonna be a helluva year.

I saw our future once before, still waiting on the fiancée visa, you in England, me here in Virginia. I tried to call it off. Decided I was going to ruin your life because you were younger than me, that at some point you would realize this was a mistake and we would get a divorce and I would be in my mid-40s alone, looking for love again. My story was wrong, but the ending was correct.

People ask me "Are you writing about it?" The "it" I suppose is "pain," is "surviving," is "loss." "It" is etched into me like a cave drawing for whoever comes after to find.

#

There is no one way to approach the loss of another human being, to express it, to relive it, to survive it. Everything must be thrown at it; loss is where science and spirituality coexist.

Science: Intellectual, practical, observational, experimental.

Spirituality: Feeling, sensory, an opening of the heart.

A few months before you die, we are in bed, the dog snoring between us and I know I will outlive both of you. I will be the only one who will remember this moment. I am the memory machine.

I observe you are no longer here, but I feel you are here. I don't feel the need to explain this to anyone, to prove it, it just is. Science could not save you.

#

Grief is a million images, moments, objects and memories forming one human being, now shattered, exploded, invisible yet visible. It is impossible to think of you in full, so I must recall you in small fractured memories.

Life is now unfamiliar, my body a home with an uncertain foundation, teetering.

First come the feelings and perception, thousands of little images and memories making one face, one body; a regeneration of a physical form who to the outside world looks the same, but upon closer inspection is a work by Chuck Close.

#

Life for me now exists in a parallel universe. There is me holding you in my arms as your heart beat through your chest in those last minutes, saying "I love you" for eternity. There is also this me, who wakes up every morning to the dog groaning and stretching on the bed, pads into the kitchen, dumps dog food kibble into the dish, slams cupboards, measures coffee grounds and water, turns on the living room lamp, opens window shades, scrolls the news, walks the dog. This me is willing herself through the day which will begin and end without you.

Before you and after you are touching, the center which contains you does not hold, time collapses on itself. You are here and not here. I exist in two places at once.

On my birthday, a friend sent a photo of me from nearly 20 years ago taken in Detroit. My hair is long, my dress is short, and my legs are lovely. I am holding a cigarette in one hand, a concentrated gaze out into the void. I can pinpoint the time of the photo, a week or maybe a month returned from our year in film school in Dublin where we met and fell in love.

Who and where is she, this young and beautiful creature, her arms wrapped around her torso hugging herself? I miss her hope and expectation of what is to come. I even miss her fears, miniscule in comparison to the reality of what will happen.

#

I have this recurring dream, it occurs in different settings, but in the one I remember, we are at a New Year's Eve party ready for the toast. I panic and ask the host, "What year is it?" She says 2017. I look at you, and, as we kiss, I know I must tell you that you have only three years left to live. Even now, when I look at photos, I think "What year was it?" and wonder if the cancer was there, how big or how small and how oblivious we were to the bomb ticking inside of you, inside of our life together.

#

You were more of a sci-fi and speculative fiction fan, with your love of the TV show, Dr. Who and the fiction of Haruki Murakami and David Mitchell. The unknowns presented excited your curiosity, but made me queasy.

Once, we watched Caprica, the prequel to the show Battlestar Galactica. Caprica is the story of the wealthy computer scientist who, driven by grief at the loss of his teenage daughter, inadvertently spawns the AI that will become the Cylon robots who will attempt to destroy humanity. After his daughter's death, he discovers she created an avatar of herself, which he downloads into the body of a robot, but something happens and the prototype AI becomes too powerful, too emotive, a force in its own right, a young soul trapped in hulking metal.

I think of this when the pictures of you pop up on the phone, especially the live ones where, for a few seconds, you are moving, talking, you are alive and all I want is more time, more you, more living and I wonder what I would do if science and technology made it possible. But that is the frightening next frontier of science and technology — genetic cloning, AI, virtual worlds. The want at the core of this science is heartbreak, love and loss that, in

turn, can break the world. It is the warning in every time travel film, a rupture of the space-time continuum will only destroy our present.

We already used up all medical science could provide, we were on the cutting edge, clinical trial, already testing the limits of your body, of cancer. Now your voice, your image, your thoughts, your likes and dislikes live on in digital places: iPhone photos, podcast episodes, social media. I see your face pop-up unexpectedly, a reminder of a memory the machine has deemed special, important, urgent. It is jarring to find you here, a bolt of lightning to the heart.

I imagine the algorithm like a ticker tape created inside a Big Ben-sized clock, a pinging, ticking mechanical brain dissolving our memories, our pictures, our life into numbers and dashes; removing all emotion, building a flat paper version of our life to exist in the netherworld.

After you died, I put my SIM card in your iPhone because it had more memory, now our texts, photos and contacts are merged and until this tiny machine is dead and gone and dust in a landfill, your mother will be “Mum iPad.” She is mine now, like you were once hers and I yours.

#

This phone, this information, this cloud.

All the texts you received sending love, sending strength, sending hope while you were in the hospital those last days are still on the phone, still pull at my heart, a reminder of the friends and family who never had their good-bye returned because you were too exhausted by dying to respond. Even now, I scroll quickly past them, avoiding the hope and love that was there, outside of the hospital room.

Maybe I guarded your energy too much, there were friends who wanted to see you, because what they needed was to grieve with us, to know that you saw them. It was the height of the first wave of the pandemic, and we all wore masks. I had to explain it was too hard for you. After one visit, you said, “I’m struggling with what to

say, can you help me?” and it broke my heart again, my heart which was already shattered anyway, a heel grinding into the shards.

It seemed impossible at the time that you were leaving me. I was in the kitchen when I heard a thud—the thud all mother’s fear, the thud of a body lacking control. I ran into the living room and found you on the floor next to the sofa. “I forgot,” you said, because why would you, a perfectly healthy man of only 40 remember that you couldn’t walk?

My brain keeps scanning through those days, looking for holes, for things I could have done better, different, faster. But cancer is always faster. Let me be specific: *your* cancer was faster. It is the nightmare story we all fear — a minor physical ailment, a doctor’s visit, a diagnosis, a death sentence. For you, it was the B-RAF Mutation and another number-letter combination I have since forgotten, both mean the rapid creation of tumors. The average survival rate of colorectal cancer with B-RAF was four months after detection. And what is four months on a calendar? A season. But you, ever the optimist, pushed past it and we nearly had two years. Nearly.

I have notebooks from the beginning of this journey, full of things doctors said at appointments, lists of things that were being done to you, until, eventually, I stopped because I was not the expert. I realized writing it down on paper does not bring knowledge or control, it could not change what was happening to your body. Writing it down could not save you.

#

These medical devices, these tiny machines, this science that gives us life and hope and takes it away. We used to laugh you were becoming bionic

Even as you were dying, I kept checking your blood sugar. You had a tiny quarter-sized attachment on your upper arm, it made your life so much more convenient. Obsessively, returning to the bedroom over and over to scan your arm with the iPhone like at the grocery store. You complied, as you always did, both us acting as if there was a future.

I was doing it because I knew how much perfect blood sugar meant to you. Giving you drops of Gatorade. I did not believe you would live, I had surrendered to death, but I wanted you to be comfortable. There is a razor thin space you stand on when someone is dying — willing suspension of disbelief they might call it.

After you died, the nurse took the insulin pump off your body, the size of my thumb. I put it in my dresser drawer, along with the bulky monitor you carried to control the pump. In the middle of the night, the first night without you, the tiny pump beeped every hour. In the morning, I tried to take off the back to remove the battery, but it continued its beeping, insistent. I put it outside on the back deck until my dad, the fixer of all things, arrived and attempted, unsuccessfully, to make it stop. Soon, I realized the tiny pump was looking for the homing device, the monitor. When I turned the monitor back on and your name popped up on the screen: “Daryl?” I had to tell these tiny machines that they too needed to let go.

#

I struggle to know if I’m more comfortable here, in this small city where we lived together for fifteen years, our friends, your career, the streets you’d zip around on your bicycle, the soccer pitches and friends who remember your kindness and tenacity. The memories run wild. I wonder if I need a new place, a fresh, clean slate? But “there” is a place where there will be no memory of you.

Browsing potential men, potential futures on dating apps, wondering who to conjure from phone to restaurant. Often, I meet them at places we enjoyed together, tiny restaurants, me reading the menu aloud, sharing food and always, for a moment I sense a blip in the matrix, see that where you once sat is now a completely different man.

#

I still cannot delete your Spotify account, your music, your choices, your likes mingling with mine. I'm sure there is a way to save it, to archive it, but instead I will continue to pay every month for the subscription. Our songs and likes together now, our favorite artists blending.

“Spanning time,” we always said.

I wonder too where all your thoughts and opinions went, all the knowledge you gained. The thousands of conversations not recorded, captured, remembered. All the moments you made another living soul feel seen and heard and alive.

Coming in and out of the pain-killer delirium you asked me “What’s the farthest apart we’ve ever been?” I told you it was when you were in England and I was here waiting on our fiancée visa paperwork, at least three months. “How far?” you asked. When I told you thousands of miles you raised your eyebrows considering something, satisfied you went back to sleep.

People told us if our relationship could make it through that separation then we could make it through anything. In order to cope with the distance, aside from daily phone calls, you started texting me whenever you heard Van Morrison’s “Brown Eyed Girl” as a sweet way to say you were thinking of me and that we would get through it.

The day after you died, we gathered in the garden of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts with close friends, masked, distanced. The sky was so beautiful that night, pastels and pinks. I somehow gathered my head and my heart together to assume a semblance of human form and I went to the museum garden to meet our

friends. I know I talked to people, I'm sure I appeared together, normal even, but know that what appears functioning is not a full person. Still part of me kept waiting for you to arrive and we all joked you would be running late as usual. As the evening wound down, music from a nearby wedding wafted over and I heard the strains of "Brown Eyed Girl." Through tears I choked out why I was so overcome. My friend Leslie comforted me and said, "That's the universe talking."

#

How can the human body and spirit manage the weight of love and suffering now equal to its absence? Gravity pinning me to the earth no longer seems possible. You (and that is to say we) are now scattered into a million parts and each day I must pull them all back together by both remembering and forgetting the moment when it exploded.

A friend laughed at my belief in the paranormal and I thought, but did not say, how nice it must be to have not met death and sorrow, to not crave being haunted by the man you loved.

Love and death work together, do what they wish to people.

In one of my favorite films, "Empire of the Sun," the protagonist sees the bombing of Nagasaki happen from a distance. He imagines the blinding light is the soul of one of his fellow prisoners who has died, horror and beauty all at once. J.G. Ballard, the author of the book, who based it on his experiences as a child, said that once you see the "ragged scaffolding" of reality revealed you see the truth and it is terrifying.

We grievors and trauma survivors exist on the other side, peering through an invisible sliding glass door we can open or close at will, voyeurs watching the comfort of false certainty of other lives.

#

This fall, a year after you have passed, walking the dog down the medians of Monument Avenue, the fallen leaves from the trees shin-deep, the lovely autumn sunsets haunt me again, hints of

blue and pink and orange and yellow. I want to return home and tell you about it. I want to walk in, take the dog's leash off, see you watching TV and say, "Wow, the sky was so beautiful tonight." Instead, I say it to my heart which is I guess where you live now.

Know that I have been scattered into moments over the last three years as our life slowly fell apart, one chunk at a time, a cliff crumbling into the sea.

There's me in the ER in Florida holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee after the doctor told us it was cancer that had spread.

There's me in the waiting room in Richmond after your first surgery, the surgeon telling me there are more small tumors on the peritoneal lining and I had to wait until you were conscious to tell you the cancer was beyond the tumor, beyond the liver.

There's me sitting on the couch watching TV and you come out of our office and say you have read the genetic report and you have the B-RAF mutation and "It isn't good."

There's me trying to help you stand up outside MCV Hospital as you hold onto the wrought iron gate around the old White House of the Confederacy mansion next door as we tried to walk you into the hospital that last time.

There's me standing on our front porch with the hospice nurse who looks at me and asks, "Are you ready?" when the ambulance pulls up and they bring you into the house and the bigger guy lifts the gurney and says, "I've lifted a ham sandwich heavier than you," and we all laugh.

There's me watching your mom see you for the first time wearing her face shield, leaning over the bed stroking your arm and saying, "I'm here my sweet," over and over.

There's me gripping your hand as you struggled for your last breaths and I screamed and screamed until all our friends heard and rushed into the house.

I know some of the pieces of me will come back and some never will return, because now I know your life can stop while your body keeps going.

Milo Todd

Estranged

They say you smell burning toast before you have a stroke. But here, it just meant he kept burning toast. I often felt a flicker of relief before realizing it meant my death would now be by fire.

I lifted my mashed face from the pillow, my cheek cooling with spit, my heart defibrillating from the ebb of stroke scare. After the particularly bad sundowning Gary went through last night, I'd naively hoped I could sleep it off this morning. But as the smell got stronger, I knew I had to get up before the smoke set off the alarms.

I staggered to my feet from the flimsy twin bed of my youth and checked my phone. Six fucking AM. I told myself that at least this meant the weekend was already more than half over. It was Sunday. Stacy would be back in 24 hours, when I could drive into the city, work code, and pretend that I didn't have to return by evening.

"Oh," she had said six months ago, when we'd first met in the open doorway of Gary's perennial split-level. "I didn't know Gary had a son."

It twinged and then I was surprised that it twinged. So I just shrugged. "Yeah."

Stacy nodded to herself a moment, suddenly looking sad. She leaned toward me, as if Gary might hear her inside from two rooms away, "Jeopardy!" blasting uselessly from the TV. "I'm so sorry to hear about your sister."

A single frisson rippled my spine not because I knew what she was talking about, but because I didn't. "Thank you," I said, my kneejerk lust for survival. I was relieved when she seemed to take that as a cue that it was too much for me to talk about.

I put my vacant phone back down now, remembering it was too early for most of my loved ones to check in on me. I sighed and rubbed at my eyes with both hands, digging out the sharp crust from the corners. A shriek suddenly assaulted from downstairs.

I'd taken too long. The smoke alarm in the kitchen wailed out, quickly followed by every other in the house. It felt particularly rude that they could never coordinate.

I jogged downstairs and wound around to the kitchen, the wafts of char hanging a gray fleece in the air. Gary turned in his waddling shuffle at the sound of my thumping feet, slightly stooped, wrists crooked and limp before his chest like a rabbit. He seemed unimpressed by the alarms, his eyes instead only going wide through the wisps of smoke at my presence.

I'd rather die than be put in a home.

He did this to me every morning, every afternoon, looking at me in fear. And while I knew it was simply because he didn't recognize me, that he was just timid in his confusion, I found it cruel that the fates would allow him to look upon me in such a twist.

"I need you to move for me, Gary," I tried to say patiently as the alarms pierced into my eardrums. I wondered if his deductions would be better today than yesterday, but then I realized he couldn't hear me over the alarms, anyway.

I refused to call him Dad because he'd never earned that title. But I also refused to call him Mr. Thompson because that implied respect. The use of Gary might suggest familiarity, but it seemed the lesser evil. Something about it felt particularly awkward, and that's why I chose it.

He didn't move. He just stared at me with that subdued child look. It made me self-conscious in my undershirt and pajama shorts, the latter always so obvious whether or not I was wearing a packer. Not that he had the capacity to notice.

I elbowed him aside with as little force as I could muster, flipping the toast up from their slots with the worn carriage control. I

pinched one of the blackened slabs too fast and made contact with the coils.

Put a bullet in my brain before you ever put me in a home.

“Dammit!” I flung the toast across the counter in self-defense, snapping my hand through the air as tufts of smoke twisted around my wrist in bracelets. I turned to the sink and ran my thumb under cold water. I closed my eyes a moment, trying to find some sort of Zen in the middle of screaming alarms, my thumb soon nothing more than my own pulse.

After a breath, I opened the window over the sink and grabbed the nearest dish towel, threadbare as an old dog. I waved it beneath the alarm in sharp flaps.

He continued to stare at me with his watery eyes, still wide, feet still rooted in place where I’d shouldered him. The kitchen alarm stopped. In a few beats, the others quieted. I could now hear the ringing in my ears and wondered how long it would last this time. I worried about assaults to my hearing.

“I’m Eli,” I said simply, making no other gestures, the timid people-pleaser in me still wanting to save him from the embarrassment of asking. I wondered if it was ironic that he was the one who’d made me this way. I wasn’t exactly sure what defined irony, but I always pretended otherwise.

The timer on my phone went off for his first set of pills. Obnoxious in its moment to strike, yet pathetic in the wake of the smoke alarms. I tapped it off.

He took a couple of seconds to ingest my name before nodding slowly. I knew by the lack of light in his eyes that he was simply pretending to understand. For which of our benefits, I never knew.

He finally closed his gaped mouth, only to swallow and part his lips again in a dry film. “You remind me of my daughter.”

My shoulders slackened. I turned away to the toaster, forever debating whether I should finally throw it out, but I always worried what he would get into instead.

He continued to stare at me like a living riddle. I was never sure how much of it was the Alzheimer's and how much of it was me. I picked up the dish towel again and resumed waving it against the satiated alarm, knowing what was coming.

He tongued his dentures a moment as they slipped. "She was murdered, you know."

"Yes, Gary," I said, my flapping arms already weak from the world. "I know."

#

Family is forever.

The brain isn't a computer. Most people seem to think that it is, but they've been wrong before. In the Bible, it was believed that thought came from holy spirit being blown into a clay body. In the third century BCE, hydraulic engineering led the belief that the flow of different fluidic humors of the body destined our mental capacities. In the 1500s, it was the springs and gears of complex machinery. In the 1600s, smaller mechanical motions like pocket watches. In the 1700s, electricity. In the 1800s, the telegraph. By the 1940s, we finally landed at the gates of computer science.

But brains aren't computers. They can't store, they can't retrieve, they can't transfer, they can't process. You can't code a brain into working. This is because the brain is, generally speaking, empty. There's no information it can physically manipulate. There's nothing stored in our memories.

It makes me wonder what I'm doing here. I checked my phone again as I sat across Gary at the kitchen table, both of us feebly engaged in a jigsaw puzzle amidst the lunch plates I had yet to clear away. A classic kitten in a basket of yarn. I have no idea who bought the puzzle. Eighteen more hours until Stacy returned, and soon most of that could be sleep. Maybe she bought the puzzle.

The pieces slid across the plastic sheen of blue gingham, the tablecloth slightly tacky if I let my fingertips hold still for too long. The place smelled of dust and old wood no matter how much I tried to air it out, had been doing it even during the winter. I hated how scent was the biggest memory trigger.

You always forgive family.

We hadn't spoken in over 30 years. Everybody called me ridiculous for going back. I didn't know what I was doing there either. I felt a pull to do it, and that made me so disappointed in myself. I knew I knew better, and I spent many insomnias wondering why I simultaneously didn't.

I slumped a little in my hardbacked chair, still overtired, still unshowered, still underdressed. Last night's sundowning made me nervous to leave him alone for even a few minutes today. I prayed it wouldn't happen again tonight. All I'd done so far was smear some toothpaste on my burn and slapdash it with a shred of paper towel. I ran my tongue over the growing fuzz of my teeth and sighed.

A disobedient child is an ungrateful one.

I was finally starting to age like a cis person. It'd been 30 years of not talking, 10 years before of me trying, and 20 years before then of me suffering in silence. While I still looked decent for my age, the fountain of youth from late-blooming testosterone had started to recede. I found myself taking stock of my years and all it left me was more tired.

Gary continued to drag the puzzle pieces with his curled and arthritic fingers, sometimes succeeding in his matches, sometimes not, and almost never successfully picking a piece up. When he couldn't slide it most of the way to his designated spot, he abandoned it after several attempts with his excessive fingernails. The sharp, insistent sound of thick cardboard slapping against the gingham grated my senses. I was too tired to tell him that part of his problem was he was still holding the rest of the piece down with his thumb.

He stared intently at the pieces for several minutes without any movement. He finally looked up. His eyes went wide again, that fear response.

“Hello, Gary,” I tried to say kindly, though I knew my tone was flat. “I’m Eli.”

He nodded at this, as if he’d known all along. He looked down at the puzzle again. I thought our conversation was already over, but then he looked back up at me.

“You remind me of my daughter.”

“I know, Gary.”

“She was murdered, you know.”

“I know, Gary.”

I could feel myself waning in the moment, the puzzle pieces running together in their pops of color. I’d taken my shot on Sundays for almost 40 years. But now I couldn’t leave him alone for a minute. I had to rush through it on Mondays before work, making my new plummet day on Sundays, and I resented him for it. He’d still managed to upset my most primal needs by the end.

I thought about the pellets, that newer form they implanted in you so you didn’t have to do a thing for three or four months, but I worried my body was too delicate for something like that. I worried I was too old. Even the shots sometimes felt like a cruelty against my onion skin. I wondered at what age I’d stop, if I’d stop, and how I’d feel about that. I figured I wouldn’t care, as by that point I probably would’ve aged right out of gender.

I must’ve dozed off because the next thing I knew, I was startled awake by the sound of the doorbell, my head snapping upright in a jab of pain after it’d lolled backwards for who knows how long. Gary was gone, but I could hear “The Price is Right” blaring in the other room.

The doorbell rang again, quickly followed by a fistful pounding. I hissed as the blood burned back into my legs. I hobbled to the door, the pounding continuing.

A cop stared back at me through the screen door.

“Oh,” I said simply. “Uh... Officer.”

With all my hang-ups about coerced respect, I also knew when it was unwise to defy it. I dredged up the smile I kept for cis people and opened the door.

He looked to be about my age, though he probably wouldn't yet come to the same conclusion himself. He was an older salt, probably been on the force his entire life, probably followed in the footsteps of his daddy, and his daddy before him. One of those faces. One of those stances. Like he knew exactly where his place was in the world and, lucky him, it was near the top.

My brain fully woke in the jolt of adrenaline. I tried to play it casual as my eye kept watch of his movements. I didn't know yet if he was clocking me, if he saw something besides a white guy his own age. I suddenly became much more aware of my pajama shorts, of my lack of packer. Multiple things weren't working for me in this moment. But I reminded myself I was white, I was male, and I was in his bracket. If anybody had a chance to look unassuming to the double threat of a cis male cop, it was me. I hooked my thumbs into my sagging pockets to help distract from my lack of bulge.

He adjusted his belt as if it was part of procedure and then rested his hand near his holstered gun. “We got a call about a murder.”

I felt my nerves already start to fray within me. They'd eventually find out it was all a mistake, but I didn't want to deal with all the harassment until then. It would figure this would happen because a person who'd already made my life hell made one false phone call while I was doing what was arguably a good deed nobody else wanted to do because he'd been a dick his whole life to begin with.

I reminded myself to stay calm. I tried to formulate a plan, gave up, and said the only thing I could think of. “Pardon, sir?”

“A murder. Somebody at this address called 9-1-1.” I noticed that despite his words, he looked like he knew he was wasting his time.

I thought of what guys like him might do in a situation like this and then tried to replicate it. I put both palms to my eyes before rubbing them downward on my face with a groan. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that was my father. My apologies, sir. He’s not well.”

“That’s what I figured. Operator said it sounded like that on the phone. Alzheimer’s?”

“Yes, sir.”

His face seemed to soften for a second before returning to its old ways. He adjusted his belt again. “Well, he called 9-1-1.”

“Yes, sir. I sincerely apologize. It won’t happen again.”

He continued to stare at me, so I just stared back. I wasn’t quite sure what else I was supposed to do. I felt the cold sweat start to take the back of my neck as his eyes refused to leave my face. My smile faltered a little, so I plastered it back on too tight, my eyebrows raising slightly. I made the poor choice of trying to hold my breath while my lungs had other plans, bloating without release.

After another moment, his eyes flicked down near my waistband. I felt the anxiety sprain my solar plexus. I’d almost made it.

He pointed toward my crotch. “Your thumb okay there, buddy?”

I let out my breath, realizing my hands were back to my waistband. I lifted my clumsily bandaged thumb, rotating it slightly before my face as if this was a revelation. “Oh yeah. He burnt something this morning and I moved too fast getting it out of the toaster. Minor injury.”

“Sounds like he’s getting to the point where he’d be safest in a home.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “A home.” I said nothing else.

He seemed to finally be bored of me. “Well, you take care now.”

“Thank you, Officer, you as well. I appreciate your service.”

This seemed to give him some extra swagger as he walked back to his car. I watched the back of his head, suddenly wondering about his father, and his father before him. The choices made amidst expectation. I flashed my cis smile one more time as he backed down the driveway, waving with my injured hand like a flag of defeat before turning back into the house.

I clasped four of my fingers with five of the others, my breath rippling. My heart finally released, kicking my adrenaline into a small panic attack. I closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing, in out, in out. I'd be more okay in a minute. Or perhaps just a little less bad.

Once I could fake a hold on myself, I walked into the living room for Gary. I'd slept through the late afternoon and it was already almost time for his dinner. But Gary was nowhere to be found, the television continuing to blast its audience participation and ruh-roh sounds from wrong answers. I had no idea how long he'd been missing. I jogged around the house, calling his name.

I gave you life, and you should spend the rest of yours thanking me for it.

I finally saw that the door to the attic stairs was a few inches ajar. I once more slowed my body, my breath, and took the stairs with care for myself. My eyelids were getting heavy with sleep again.

Gary was sitting in the corner near an open cardboard box. The dust of the attic engulfed me, musty and tickling. A swollen photo album lay in his lap.

“Hi, Gary,” I tried to say softly, not wanting to scare him in all the ways I could, though mostly by this point it was just me existing. “What're you doing?”

He turned his head the best he could with his old spine. I couldn't see his face well enough for the usual look of panic, but it was probably there. He didn't say anything at first, so I walked closer and crouched down, knees popping, and looked over his shoulder.

A medley of pictures of an 8-year-old in an Easter dress stared back.

“This is my daughter.”

I hated those pictures of me. “I know, Gary.”

“She was murdered, you know.”

“It’s time for dinner, Gary.”

#

It was one of those days for spaghetti and jarred sauce. But as I watched him struggle, I realized how cruel this choice had been. He didn’t have the dexterity to twirl it around his fork, taking him at least a minute each time to wrestle a suitable mass together. He opened his mouth wide, lips inexplicably out, long before the fork would reach him. It was all in vain, as the wreckage would inevitably splat back onto his plate in a wet lump, spraying bits of red across everything in a five-foot radius. I told myself that my penance was I had to clean it all up, anyway. The dishes, the table, his clothes, him.

You’re so selfish. Always have been.

He eventually began to attempt single strands with varying success. Whatever he got to his mouth he would slurp with a loud gusto, perhaps beyond his reasoning, perhaps to announce any success he could get these days. I tried to tamp down my disgust behind a placid face.

I wasn’t sure if what I felt was ageism versus resentment versus fear of my own mortality playing out before my eyes. This could be me in 20 years. I was seeing my future and I didn’t like it. How much of one’s future could a person change in spite of their parents? Sometimes it was hard to tell what was genetic and what simply got blamed as such. I’d spent my whole life trying to not be him.

The sharp acid of manufactured tomatoes filled my nose. I was quiet, chewing mostly on the left side of my mouth. I had two crowns on my right and it'd taken me so long to come up with the money for them in my youth that I'd formed a habit. The first generation of those crowns were long since spoken for, back in the poverty of early transition, but I'd never bothered to recondition myself.

How could you do this to us?

After a particularly loud slurp, he looked up from his plate for the first time since we sat down. He froze again, eyes widening, mouth hanging halfway through its task. Gnawed bits of pasta spilled out. He quickly retaliated with a slurp-and-chew motion that did little to stop the deluge, though perhaps it was more to keep his dignity intact. His gaze didn't leave me.

I swallowed my mouthful. "I'm Eli."

He nodded like this made sense. I clenched my jaw and waited. I could already feel the impatience welling in me higher than usual, goaded by exhaustion and the police scare. I wanted out so bad. But I was here and I had nobody to blame but myself.

"You remind me of my daughter."

I ground my teeth tighter, twinging the hinges of my jaw, knowing I was doing the exact thing of my youth that caused my crowns to begin with. Only back then I could blame my inability to control myself in my sleep. I thought about the dental school treatments I suffered through, how I'd needed to pay for it out of pocket. The misgendering on top of it all, the inability to definitively call it out making it all the more frustrating. Nearly every bad experience of my life could be traced back to him in some way.

"She was murdered, you know."

I slammed my fist on the table, silverware clacking dully against the tacky gingham in a single jump.

"Goddamn it, Dad! You can't kill someone who never existed!"

I hated how he just sat there. I hated how he didn't react. I hated how he just kept staring at me, unmoved even by my outburst. He wasn't scared of my outburst. He was only scared of me. Of me existing, of me taking care of him, of me trying to be the good son when he denied ever having one to begin with.

I hated how no matter what state he was in, he was always invulnerable to my needs.

But then I saw a dim light in his eyes start to grow, his face inflating as if holy spirit was indeed blowing life into him. His color warmed, his skin sagged less, his wrinkles smoothed a little. And then, there he was. I knew my slip of the tongue then, calling him Dad. But it had triggered a lucid moment in him.

This was it. This was the first time he saw me in the six months I'd been there, if not the first time in my life. My heart beat hard, my breath catching in my throat. I didn't know if I was seized or just scared. He looked at me, actually looked at me, for what seemed like a whole minute. I wondered what was going on in his head, what emotions or regrets or surprises or questions. Where had I been all this time? How had I been? Was I okay? Was I still mad? Why was I here now? Had truly nobody else wanted to take him in? Did I forgive him? The questions burned through me as quickly as I felt they were for him, endless and expansive and full of promise, full of everything I'd ever wanted.

Then he finally spoke his carefully chosen words.

"... Did it hurt?" He was surely talking about my chest, the way his eyes flickered between my flat undershirt and my face. But it didn't matter. It didn't matter what he meant in his question because I meant what was in my answer.

"Every day."

I waited for his reply, feeling the surge of emotion run up my neck, into my eyes, the pressure bearing against the walls of me in a way I hadn't felt since I'd first left. I'd finally gotten a chance to tell him. And now, all he could do was respond. He couldn't hide from it any longer.

But I saw the light in his eyes quickly slip back under, his body slumping into its usual deflation as the holy spirit left him. And then he was gone. Back to his spaghetti. Back to the confines of wherever he resided.

I felt empty in a way I never had before. Not cleansed, just hollow. There was a particular cruelty to this act of fate. And based on how long it took us to get to those precious seconds, it was likely our only one. I refused to ever call him Dad again.

Was that it, then? Did that count as an act of love? Out of all the questions he could've asked, out of the 30 years of unknowing, that was the one he chose. Out of all the opportunities for celebration that littered my landscape, he'd chosen to focus on pain.

I'd wanted things to be better, and now I knew they never would be. What I'd hoped for was something I couldn't have because it'd never existed in the first place. The stupidest goddamn part of me was human, holding onto that chance.

The alarm on my phone tittered for another round of pills. I put down my fork and closed my eyes before tapping it off. I got up and went to the kitchen counter behind his chair, staring at his bald spot a moment before unnecessarily reorganizing his vials in their neat little row. He was back to his spaghetti, me seemingly no longer in existence now that I was out of his sight. I plucked out his painkillers and held the vial in my palm like a baby bird. I stared at it longer than I needed to.

He'd said he'd rather die than end up in a home. Would that make such an act forgivable, then, even if I was doing it for myself?

He coughed his half-opened cough, forgetting how to swallow, his lips flapping in their usual sputter. I glanced up at the back of his head until he stopped.

It's like you've murdered my child.

I resented the word he chose, always had. Murder implied violence. I looked at the pills and knew I was not a violent person. But violence could be quiet. Violence could be Gary. I resented him

choosing grief and then mourning that grief as if it was my own doing.

I felt the exhaustion come upon me, allowed it to overwhelm me. It'd been waiting the whole time. I realized I'd been as ridiculous to come here as everyone had said. I felt like a fool now for myself, in the face of my loved ones. But I also knew they'd welcome me back into their arms the moment I returned, and I would tell them my exploits, and they would listen, and they would say they could see why I did what I did, even if they couldn't quite grasp it. I realized how much I missed them.

I opened the vial, digging out only the two required pills. I just didn't want the chance of prison hanging over my head the rest of my life. I refused to let him haunt me anymore. If the brain was a useless computer, then what did any of this matter to either of us? If the brain was organically empty, then why was I trying to hold him in it, of all things?

Brains don't hold experiences, brains become experiences. They're directly molded by what we go through. The stimuli, the observations, the punishments and rewards. The bad news is rough pasts can wreck our functions. The good news is it's never too late to reshape things. It just might take a lot of work.

I pulled out my phone and stared at the blank screen in my hand, ready to call Stacy about rest home options. Maybe that makes me a bad person. I want to say that I wish I was more sorry, but I don't think even that's true. Maybe my brain has finally started to change.

About Our Contributors and Guest Editors

Tom Aikens

Tom Aikens is a construction project manager and without this would have no other creative outlet beyond email. He is also a member of Warrior Writers, a non-profit organization that helps provide a means of expression to what is otherwise inexpressible for veterans and other survivors of war, and has had poetry published in their last two anthology collections.

Nicole Arocho Hernández

Nicole Arocho Hernández grew up in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico. Her poems have been featured in *The Acentos Review*, *Electric Literature*, *The Academy of American Poets*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *I Have No Ocean*, was published online with Sundress Publications. Her second chapbook is forthcoming with Glass Poetry Press. She is the Translations Editor at *Hayden's Ferry Review* and an MFA candidate at Arizona State University.

Kristin Brown

Kristin Brown studied Literature at Colgate University and Rhetoric/Composition at Portland State University. She now lives in Portland, OR, where she has joined workshops at the Attic Institute, Corporeal Writing, and Tin House Writers' Workshop.

Kate Galloway

Kate Galloway grew up an aspiring writer in sunny California. She moved to Boston with her cat in 2016 to pursue a Master's in Publishing and Writing from Emerson College, and has stuck around the city despite the snow. She doesn't do much (or any) writing of her own these days, but she does help publish books for a living.

Adam Graaf

Adam Graaf received his MFA from the University of Massachusetts Boston. He is the recipient of a 2013 New England Poetry Club award and a 2015 Academy of American Poets prize. Adam was twice nominated in 2015 for a Pushcart Prize

and was a finalist for *The Iowa Review's* 2016 Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans. His work has appeared in *apt online*, *CONSEQUENCE Magazine*, *Ibbetson Street*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, and elsewhere. Adam is also the winner of *The Tusculum Review's* 2017 chapbook contest for *Militaria*.

Caitlyn Griffin

Caitlyn Griffin is a Boston-based poet who teaches English and writing at Berklee College of Music and Northeastern University. Her work has been published with *Southword Literary Journal* and others, and while she has done a very bad job of getting much writing done during the pandemic, she does indeed hold an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Eliza Jerrett

Eliza Jerrett lives in Somerville, MA. She has published poems in *Rumblefish Quarterly*, *Ohio Edit* and *Ghost City Review*, and has had installation work featured in *First Night Boston* and *Decomp*. She is an annual contributor to the Boston Poetry Marathon. She wants to know your secrets.

Krisela Karaja

Krisela Karaja is an Albanian American writer and a graduate of the MFA program in Creative Writing (Poetry) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. A former US Fulbright Student Research Fellow to Albania, Krisela's research interests include contemporary poetry in the post-communist, democratic transition and comparative literature in English, Albanian, Spanish, and Danish. She enjoys exploring romantic norms depicted in popular media, and her writing can be found in *Fast Funny Women* (Woodhall Press), the *Multitudes* series (Container), *Write on the Dot*, *Sabbat Poezi*, *Pa Fokus*, and *Albanian Voices*.

Sabina Lindsey

Sabina Lindsey is a Boston based poet interested in the many complexities of loss, motherhood, romantic relationships, and the relationship with the self. She is currently an MFA candidate with a concentration in poetry at the University of Mas-

sachusetts Boston, where she also received a BA in Theatre Arts. Sabina is often daydreaming about anime and the moon. Her work can be found in *Sad Girls Club Lit*.

Erika La Forest

After acquiring her English degree from VCU, Erika La Forest moved to Texas in the hopes of becoming a hill witch through osmosis. Like most of us, she dreams of owning a goose.

Grace Mattern

Grace Mattern's poetry and prose have appeared widely, including in *The Sun*, *Brevity Blog*, *Calyx*, *Yankee*, *Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere. She received fellowships from the NH State Council on the Arts and Vermont Studio Center and has published two books of poetry. Her recent work explores the integration of image and text and she focuses much of her creative energy on studying and making collages. Her activist work addresses violence against women, anti-racism organizing, and environmental justice. Her writing and art can be found at gracemattern.com and on Twitter and Instagram @gracemattern.

Shannon Fara O'Neill

Born in Michigan and raised in Dearborn, Shannon Fara O'Neill is a writer whose fiction and non-fiction often addresses the history and identity of Arab-Americans and the cultural divide in American society around issues facing Arabs and Muslims in our shifting political and cultural landscapes. Her writing has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Asian American Literary Review* (AALR) and *Mizna*, among others. She earned her MFA in Fiction at Virginia Commonwealth University and has an MA in Film Studies from the University College Dublin, Ireland.

Jacqueline Rosenbaum

Jacqueline Rosenbaum is originally from "all over" New York and is currently working as a Marketing Assistant for Macmillan Learning in Manhattan. She received her MFA with a concentration in Fiction at the University of Massachusetts Boston in 2020 and graduated from Vassar in 2016. She has been

published previously in *Haunted Waters Press* (Fall 2018; granted Runner Up in Fiction contest), *Adelaide Literary Magazine* (April 2019), *The Merrimack Review* (Spring 2020), *Response* (Issue 03), and *High Shelf Press* (Issue XXXI).

Milo Todd

Milo Todd (he/him) writes novels and short stories focused on trans history, trans experiences, and trans bodies. His work has appeared in *SLICE Magazine*, *Foglifter Journal*, *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*, *Home is Where You Queer Your Heart*, *Emerge: The 2019 Lambda Fellows Anthology*, *Writer Unboxed*, and more. He is a Novel Incubator alum, was selected as a Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction and a Pitch Wars Mentee, and received residencies from Monson Arts and Tin House. He's a creative writing instructor at GrubStreet and a fiction editor for Foglifter Journal. You can learn more at milotodd.com.

Notes Regarding This Response

Tom Aikens, Contributor

I have closer to 50 pages of notes and thoughts and ideas that came from the prompt and struggled to find a way to tie both quotes together. I couldn't settle on anything — ranging from fiction about army zombies and Donald Rumsfeld, to confronting sentient social media, and somehow landed where I did after bashing my head against the wall. The part I appreciate most is exploring what took me from “Well, what would you want?” to “You go to war with the army you have, not the army you want” to loss/acceptance/forgiveness and how do you move on from those things. I deeply appreciate the opportunity as well as the insights gained.

Krisela Karaja, Contributor

My first thought in response to the prompt was to run to my notes/creations from the digital poetics course I took with Dr. Lillian-Yvonne Bertram at UMass Boston. For one of Dr. Bertram's assignments, I created a poem using code from page 17 of Angus Croll's *If Hemingway Wrote Javascript*. This creation was one of my favorites and resulted in one of the most honest pieces I've ever written, in which form and function were properly united. I wanted to tap into the honesty that the constraint of poetry-as-computer-code gave me, and so I took Croll's code once more and used it as a starting point for a different poem — the one showcased here. My writing is often a result of my intellectual and emotional obsessions. It's no surprise then, that my obsession with the (stylistically obsessive and repetitive) pantoum was my go-to form. Additionally, I'd just watched *A Castle For Christmas* on Netflix and... boom, this poem.

The process of creation — from the initial query of interest from the editor, to the poem-creation process, to reading/processing feedback, to deciding what revisions (if any) to implement — was invigorating, as it was reminiscent of our writing workshops at UMB (indeed, these “notes” remind me of the revision letters I wrote in some of our classes). After receiving feedback, I made light edits to the poem. My reasoning was the following, as I wrote in an email to the editor:

I wish I knew how to have the code make the computer explode! In all honesty, the code is a gimmick as I'm the worst coder with the slowest computer that can't have anything other than Microsoft Word installed. That said, I wrote the poem with a sense of peace about the code — it's the form, and its function is to mirror the gimmick of Hallmark/Netflix Christmas movies. All pomp and circumstance and (likely) so little substance and use! (I think — as I'm unable to run it with my lagging computer). Alas — a constraint of the computer Gods!

That said, I think all this poem is trying to be is what it already is: smoke and mirrors. It's taken me many years to think that a thing is done, but I think it's done!

I think future poems in this style might lean more into the code-as-poetry, but I was wary of it becoming too flowery after the pantoum at the onset. It's supposed to be saccharine, yes, but something about the simplicity of the code language when contrasted with the opening pantoum helps me stomach it more. Maybe too much code-as-poetry with this subject matter would be sensory overload — saccharine to the point of heaving? Hallmark movies are saccharine but yet I'm not left heaving at the end. There's still a seductive — if ridiculous — charm. Also, something about the sound makes me think that this is as it should be. My ear has a feeling.

I did add line numbers for the code part, to help it seem more “official” (a Hallmark movie needs a handsome hero; this poem needs some nice numbers before each line of code). Nice little face lift.

Sabina Lindsey, Contributor

The prompt given by *Response* was so fun! At first I felt intimidated by the subject matter because it's not what I usually tackle in my work (or so I thought). A majority of my poems explore the complexities of loss, so at first I felt a bit stuck on where to go with the prompt because my brain was stuck in technology land for some reason, but then I started to push myself. I found myself connecting this idea of science and technology to the body and all of a sudden it all clicked for me. Once that click happened, I felt myself wanting to continue the prompt even after my initial poems were submitted. There is something so fascinating about the loss of self, especially when thinking about the physical self. The body is our catalyst. It's what drives us. It is ESSENTIAL to our very being. The body is our machine, and just like a machine, it can malfunction. I loved delving into the ways in which that catalyst can be manipulated and ultimately destroyed. This prompt really pushed me to explore what I had already been exploring in my work, but from a different angle, so I'm stoked I got to be a part of it.

Erika La Forest, Contributor

These prompts got me thinking about ownership and authenticity in art.

If a computer generates a painting is that really art? I don't know, but I'm sure there are several subreddits dedicated to the evils that are AI generated artwork.

But what about beyond using a tool to generate art? What about the idea of something. Who owns that? If I read Hemingway and my sentences start shrinking, and my protagonists start drinking, am I stealing from him? Or is it just homage? Perhaps part of a lineage?

I admit, my story drifted a bit from these original themes. As I explored each idea, the character of Rachel started forming in my

mind. I think that's okay. To borrow (steal?) a quote from the great Ray Bradbury, "I'm not in control of my muse. My muse does all the work"

Grace Mattern, Contributor

I wrote directly in response to the prompts. Musing on the role of science in my creative work, and analog versus digital art, turned into the diary format I settled on. I journaled about the science I knew, writing by hand about the neuroscience that's shown the benefits of writing by hand, a meta-exploration that carried through into the collages.

Through my work in the movement to end violence against women I also know a lot about the science of how trauma affects our brains and bodies. The major source of trauma in my life is untimely loss, so I wrote about grief, and the modulation of that grief by the beauty of the physical world. These are not new subjects for me, but finding my path to this piece of work through the prompts was unexpected. My heart and hands and brain brought me here.

The creation of two collages to accompany the text was also a response to the prompts. As a writer and visual artist interested in the integration of image and text, I wanted a visual compliment to my prose. The explicit prompt about making art with a computer informed both the necessity of creating a handmade visual accompaniment, and the images in the collages themselves.

The entire concept of this journal is appealing to me. As a member of multiple writers' groups and online artist communities I'm used to seeing and sharing fresh work. But as drafts, not published work. The idea of an expedited process to publish writers' and artists' responses to prompts is an affirmation of the pleasure I get from sharing and reading new work. Creating a journal full of raw expression is brilliant and inspiring. Kudos to Danny for his great work and vision.

And speaking of prompts, I send out a writing prompt every Monday, to writers I've met at workshops and conferences over the years. There is zero expectation of any kind of response, though occasionally someone will email me how they responded. I think many of the Monday prompts just get ignored or deleted. No matter — the prompts are tiny gifts in the universe of email. If you want to be added to the list, you can DM me on IG or Twitter @gracemattern.

Shannon O'Neill, Contributor

After we received the prompts, I did a little research on both Bertold Brecht and Lillian Schwarz and looked for ways they spoke to each other and, ultimately, to my own personal experience. Here are some notes I took along the way. Part of my process is a little like journaling. I keep the prompt and/or what I am examining at the top of the draft essay as for guidance until, eventually, I delete it. Looking back, I can see how these ideas and themes started to merge and I could form my own:

Brecht and Epic Theater and *Verfremdungseffekt*: defamiliarization effect, “distancing effect.” Brecht: “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about time.”

- direct address
- song
- stage lighting
- transposition of text

I think of how distant I feel from fiction right now, cannot bear to read it, let alone to write it. The personal is where I am, the idea of picking up a book of some reflection of the life being lived seems absurd. A defamiliarization too far.

But even when attempting to “write this down,” to write the truth, there is so much fiction in it, the weaving of story, the pixels getting jammed up to reveal the emotions we already are conditioned to feel and understand. I will tell you this, no amount of empathy can prepare you for what it feels like to go

through it. So why do I bother to approximate my pain for anyone else to feel? The need to throw everything against the wall and see what sticks.

#

Reading interviews with Lillian Schwarz and how she used mixed media to express herself. Something she said about film, putting the colors down to see what survives or keeps deepening? And all the suffering she went through after being exposed to radiation in Japan in the 1940s and how it impacted her children and grandchildren. The way these things are passed on genetically and all we know and still cannot stop. Being outside now, the beauty of the VMFA patio, the sun still encroaching, tempting incineration and skin cancer, trees older than me, listening to music on my phone (“The Day I Tried to Live,” Soundgarden, Chris Cornell gone too) wondering how I landed here. This sci-fi reality.

Thinking of how our digital worlds collide and now are necessary in so many ways. And her time in Japan with polio, paralyzed, unable to create, to paint but deeply meditative and in those spaces she created. And because of her partial loss of sight she had to move to new mediums.

Milo Todd, Contributor

When I first received the invite to participate in *Response*, I hesitated. I found it a clever idea, but as a perfectionist who agonizes over his work until it’s wrenched from his hands, I worried I wouldn’t have the chops to produce something decent in such a short amount of time. I had to remind myself of what I remind my students: there is never a finality to a piece of writing. There is no true completion. Writing is constantly in flux and imperfect because it comes from us, imperfect and ever-changing people. So I went against my anxieties, said yes, and waited to see what I’d do. My writing response ended up based on word association, mainly toward “science,” “computer,” “number of months,” “every possible aid in understanding,” frustration toward computers, and “What would you want?”. I kept landing on Alzheimer’s, specifically the brain as (not) a computer, and the story shaped from there.

It was a great experience seeing what I could come up with in such a short amount of time. Regardless of how my piece is received — or how I feel about it myself — I'm glad I participated in *Response*. It's in these opportunities of discomfort and challenge that we grow as writers.

Daniel Elfanbaum, Series Editor

I was having a drink last night with Nick Snow (my friend and the proofreader for *Response*) at one of our favorite watering holes in Harvard Square, and he pointed out that *Response*, at least the way it's currently set up, is a lot of work. I agreed completely.

It made sense, doing things this way — centralized, theoretically automated with the help of a few computer scripts — for issue 01, and then we sort of carried on for issue 02, and then issue 03 really broke things, because the work in that issue — precursors, in some ways, to the similarly “form”-breaking works in this issue — meant we (I) had to entirely rethink the way the journal was going to be put together.

But this is all a good thing, even if it means that it's now April and this issue was supposed to go out in January.

Response will, by necessity, change after this issue. We're probably at least going to change the physical form of the journal (we are no more immune to rising print costs than the rest of the publishing industry — but fear not, there will be some sort of printed artifact for you to hold on to). We're probably going to try and actually put together some kind of subscription thing, even if it's just an address list and we'll have to hope that people remember to Venmo us. I will have to get more help. But these are all good changes. And necessary changes.

What *won't*, change, however, is the point of it: the point is, and was, and will be so long as this project continues moving forward, to encourage *new work*, and I hope you've found the work in this issue as new and exciting as I have. Every time someone writes in

their notes, or says in an email to me, that the prompts or the constrained timeline (which we hold our contributors to, if not always ourselves) made them think about their work in a different way, or in fact *do* the work in a different way, I feel like we've succeeded. At the end of every issue, when we ask that issue's contributors to recommend their writer and artists friends for the next issue, and then those writer and artist friends show up and make some new work themselves, I feel like we've succeeded. And I'm really fucking proud of what's going on here.

So I hope you've enjoyed this issue as much as we have putting it together, enjoyed engaging with the work as much as we've enjoyed thinking and talking and, you know, "responding" about it, and I hope you'll look forward to the next issues — in whatever form they make take — when that time comes, too.

