

## TWO PROSE PIECES

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FROM *FOR ANOTHER WRITING BACK*

**Elaine Bleakney**

This is the beginning of talking to you: deer in the yard. Every window in the house to see. The woman is out walking the dog. The man at night.

All winter I saw the house on Cedar and its dilapidated twin, hidden by cypress. What I wanted first was solid and red but until I saw them both it wasn't choosing. Then it was my blindness for one as the other hanging. I could almost see my pattern in the snow.

Snow is right: slowing sight way down so our dog can walk us in. Her stepping clears us to each other. If it snowed all night the neighborhood is buried, awake. We go between two streets into the clutching trees and I lose her for a second.

A boy we know lights up inside his house every time he hears the garbage truck. He sees the man swoop down, an arm at the curb. He sees his own house from the outside. He tells his mother he wants to be the garbage man when he grows up. This is Will: soon he will be almost too fast for us to see. For now he's inside at home or at Danya's.

Where it's not even knowledge about others. Maybe one or two facts. The woman who brings the mail in her truck: she waves or says something about *I like that dog*. I get to keep her, waving as she sifts for our house and our name.

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Then in the same month the grass under the snow lightens and parts the darkest version of where we went quiet, driving to the store.

The housewives on television gather in one of their houses to receive racks of clothes. They try talking nice. Paul and I eat pizza, anxious for the moment when they turn to the camera. How they camera-speak is mean and approximate to what they say to each other as they fly through the clothes. I saw a hawk build her nest and Ingrid waited with me, sniffed around. A sediment of ice went in with us, cracked the grass where I wore snowshoes, boots with teeth. Some of the housewives are nice to the camera then this gets boring. Someone making the show has to sharpen a nice one or get one to enlarge herself in insecurity over another.

When I get the mean woman at the checkout at Oleson's Paul says think of how long they're standing on their feet. They stand all day: he's right. Then I also think there must be a place in their minds to float. One of them always smiles and I want to ask how it happened, if it's the resin of some kind of work or was it born in her? My parents have money from my mother's parents, and their parents before, who went in for railroads and oil. While my father's father was the millwright, the one watching as if it would be endless—steel tubes needed from the #7 mill. Where my towheaded father started and my mother in a pinafore dress are part of the river valley transported where they happened to connect. And here. The phrase came from my father's father: *back of the hand*. From my mother and my father how they set up, their time and its textures extended. When I have money worries, I pursue money, then there's some *don't worry* conveyed. The woman at Oleson's in this, all the women there and the swiping plastic card with us. What could I make within their care.

FROM  
FOR ANOTHER  
WRITING BACK  
**Elaine Bleakney**

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There was a spider hanging, stricken in its nest or another's, when we first arrived. It was impossible to strike it out, about to try for work in the town. A spider makes a vulnerable portion to life. This one was far out in the path. As if we weren't so exposed, we went out, stayed inside, read. Mornings I used coffee to write poems in the house.

Living in a new town north of everywhere—at first, like going out for reading. Then Paul got a substitute teaching job at the high school when the Spanish teacher started her maternity leave. I would go walking with her along Pabeshan. The lake tusked in its ice. At lunch, Paul would sit in the faculty lounge and come home with ideas about them. We would drive out for beers in Bellaire, define each other, play music, lose the best way home.

At a certain point in every walk Ingrid would snag a branch to feel her own bad teeth. Then, turning the corner onto our drive, she'd skim into the banked snow. Swimming, I would yell, falsetto, swim: there isn't much except how to be inside where our acts are deliberate, burning, and cause no one else pain.

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The spider's web stretched available along yet indirect to the path. In all the images I returned to it. Sunlight fixed and a dune rising to our faces scratched with pine. I called it the moon. The spider's body left in. It's almost too random to bear, how I meet you, how you travel here.

If you travel here in summer the town will turn to art shows. The same one, nearly every other week. Someone makes and plots all winter how she will get the summer people buying. Mostly cottage or sailboat paintings. I worked on my poems then sent them to places I could find on the internet, journals akin and apart to where I was. We go looking into these places. To judge. Then we turn on the radio and hear about the Green Beret who launched himself outside of us, now his younger brother joining up. Their parents in which house? Consistently, a drone we don't hear. Our drone.

Will you read on? For my tension, in your own interconnectedness. The deer caught up in the way I walked: woman with the dog, woman with the man, man with the dog, fawn in the yard, two, learning to walk. Their travel (seeing them) is listening.

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When my mother gets to the house her mother is dying upstairs. She runs a bath for her. Why has no one clipped her nails? They clipped the hook in the tailbone where my neck hooked under the lake. Don't touch me here. This is when the doula Mara turns Paul outside of me to say it's time. Call Kristen now. Kristen is here in the dark with her stethoscope listening to him in my hips. She walks me back to the bathroom to the bed to the floor where we try dropping myself to help him down.

Then it breaks.

She takes the stethoscope out again to hear his heart. Time. Then the squat then the bed, hot. Paul scalded in me. Hot, wrote my friend Jennifer, hot, bomb, hot. I can't shut Mara up: again, push, yes, this one, again. Kristen in her eyes my thought. Paul. The stink and winter outside.

Kristen looking at Paul: how do we turn the heat up this isn't fine and Paul running up to the box. Mara cheering shut up. Making Paul tea. It should have happened now? Paul updating into the phone shut up. Apple juice from a straw. Our dog under the table her bones heaped. Sip. What hours are. Now? Someone's afraid.

FROM  
FOR ANOTHER  
WRITING BACK  
**Elaine Bleakney**

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Someone in the room's afraid. Kristen and Mara reading each other and Paul then I'm pathetic. Then hope. Then another dim revolting wave. I can't animal I tell Kristen when she's an eye. She knows he's lodged. I don't know or leave it says the tide. She's reading me stay here okay.

This is when there's no one below. I can hear them. Dry and reading theirs to sleep. I don't have to feel too far to prick the fear around us hours and hours. This baby's coming. He's not. I can see his hair says Mara. Then Kristen uses her fingers. Catheter. (When?) Wait don't push now.

I'm supposed to use the wave but it's not right. He's already made, can I go to sleep says my face into Kristen's and she lets me have this one cold drop. Don't mean it again or you'll be fire. Push. Yes. I have to smear you Mara. There's no one else in the storm or the house.

I'm going to break your tea bone neck. Then Paul's voice. Look. Look now. His brain falling out his brain between me now his shoulders then Kristen's on me suctioning out his nostrils mouth on his mouth. The placenta foals. We're this? Then tucked on me his mouth he's so. He's so.

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I'll try for the silence in my family. My father and his dad on a porch in Pennsylvania, making ice cream. They're bent and caught in the picture with neighbors gathered around a box. Their shirts tucked. My father has a wide smile toward this going on. There's a man down the street. The way this photograph does not include him makes me go to my dad where he tells me about seeing the man, who was dropped down the stairs as a baby, out walking in snow. Hello, Mike. My dad to him where I am small.

Snow never fell where I was. People would ask my sisters and me if we'd ever seen it, be excited for us at this loss. I would get confused: I think I did see? Once we drove up north with snow in mind: how in its own darkness flakes started, the dry pine needles right before, how one could want to curl up or know about deer bedding down. Or have the words. "Have you ever seen snow?" I would look into a face to find room for something already there: another question: are we together where we don't have to be moving forward? My father drawn hard in his older brother Pete. Pete breaking off the porch to buy Mike some candy. Like someone belonging somewhere else.

I couldn't get too close to thinking about it without falling everywhere. Then I had other places, ones to hold closer if I could close around. We moved when I was twelve. When we landed, the palm trees slashed across the airport lights. It took some looking before knowing they were made to stand it. I could be at my new school where "popolo" meant black. I could learn how this was closest to the Filipino kids, the darkest ones, or jokes about them, or later I could hear a respect pocked in. But this took too much time. One morning the house next door was gone. The next, a haole family moving in. Brighter than us—was I feeling this by then? We opened the door and their three or four kids, the boy holding back, the eldest daughter, girls with the right hair. How I went to sap for a few days. We were lining up in them trying to figure who was in grade what. Then one of them asked if we knew Jesus. My sister fell one morning in the garage and I saw my mom rush, my dad, and I could feel the tight pack of air we took for each other down the road to the hole where the tourists watched the result: air-froth splattering the rock bitten by air and salt. The repetition.

In the photograph where my dad is a young man kneeling to help they haven't cranked the box for making ice cream yet. My grandfather is a surprise: skeletal almost like he was in the chair except here, crisp clothes. A hat. Where are the women? My son's in my lap. I'm reading to him the book he goes for before he goes to sleep. The white noise swirls. When we get to the page where the bunny's in the corner with dandelions or drift: there he is. Where he's been and he wasn't before. We read. I mean we trace him to us.

FROM  
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Most of it was planned: rows of us to the teacher. The playground. The synagogue next door. Rebecca was wild for me or anyone. She had green eyes. Reina was her best friend; Reina was my best friend but there was something in me wanting to see what would drown. When I shoved my younger sister she would bite. Janie or Cara shoved me down in the pool. Janie's parents had a black pool like a cave made wrong on purpose.

There was a cluster of us always there, each year, for anyone walking in: writing our name and grade and address. After we were done someone took our stack and froze each card with us inside a balloon. We stood on the field and watched them lift. An ocean washing up in me for another writing back. Most of us had started in the room where she would dim the room and we would go quiet for her on our mats. There was a big day of sending our balloons up and not being able to keep it.

It didn't stop. One year on the news they said the plastic rings linking all the soda cans together were strangling turtles or fish. Beth P. heard from someone who found her card, or she won something when I thought I had? Her mother was divorced. I would say 'fuck' and play with it in my mouth then wonder if I could spit it all day and be the same person if I never slipped at home.

They still move with each other in my mind. All of us and the two sets of twins—how they would separate or not depending on something they didn't need to express. My mother stayed connected to some of their mothers when we moved. Years passed. I found things out: Joe had trouble with drugs. Cara was a dancer. Adam (did you know him) was dead. I remembered his best friend to him. Reina screaming Why are you lying? A panic in me like where it drew a cube in math around where I could be called.

Coincident to each other, we belonged. In the field we set off our balloons. The splitting mass, groups, then ones by threes and twos, then ones higher, still not solitary where we could see or begin to stop: our heads raised, one lost oneself soon. When I type in one of the more unusual names from my class she's there. In her public list of friends are more. One has photographs she's posted and left open—she looks tired and holds, smiling, three kids. In another she's rested, the same smile, her hand on a mantle in rows of photographs she's picked. She lives there. The valley where I entered too.

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Once I entered, I couldn't explain. To be employed is to parse anything else. He was kind. I had a part. During the hours at my desk in midtown my father read mysteries in his chair and looked up when a deer stepped in absent to where I was.

The bookkeeper's desk was next to mine. At first a smile for me shook out. She would move and they tensed. Someone took me aside: don't take her too hard. At first her smiles then swipes at me about the girl who had my position before. The boss went between us, careful, struck my sentences, asked for more. After a few months summer landed and he left Fridays smiling for his Onteora house.

I thought I had her. Where she unwrapped a sandwich every day her grown son on the phone. They had a private weather. She let me know his name. Then her notes on my desk in the morning: did you do this, Elaine? Elaine, what's this. Then scratch. Then asking me to answer and not answer the phone. After my last stanza, my teacher wrote "So what?" in red. There was no way back. Where did I think I was? A reader isn't home. It's warm where I am, he was saying, I have my ones to love.

The boss said please just work it out. His face watered to her happening like this again and before. I thought maybe she owned someone sunken in him then—where I couldn't begin to matter she was. When the planes hit downtown he had helped her down the stairs. The whole office helped. When I went to talk to her she said not now.

FROM  
FOR ANOTHER  
WRITING BACK  
**Elaine Bleakney**

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Everyone dragged. She set a pocket gargoyle face-out on her desk. I tried to be there as slivered and expansive somewhere else. Then why. I looked up 'Onteora' from my room in Queens. There was Twain, a summer house. Ms. Wheeler in a nearby chair. Children running. A view, a way to net and release any bitter thought. Twain looking hard to me then. If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything.

Elaine Bleakney's poems have been published or are forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *American Poetry Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and elsewhere. She lives in Florida and serves as *At Length's* art editor.

## OPTION 3

**Rachel Zucker**

is not always an option. Particularly if one has not read all of Austen, all of Wharton, all of one's favorite author. Or, if one admits to sometimes losing interest.

I wasn't sure what to make of the novel my husband had recommended. It seemed to me beautifully written but a story I'd read or heard or watched before. Not that I usually mind hearing the same story told twice.

One must be invited and even then interviewed and this does not go smoothly.

But, twins in love with the same person? Maybe I was just out of practice with novels. It wasn't as good as the blurbs proclaimed.

Honesty, in any case, not an asset.

This is the first page of *The Book of Nothing*; for proof, see the cover where I wrote: "The Book of Nothing."

One is not one of five invited to participate in Option 3. This rejection results in a life of productivity and other characteristic dilemmas.

Yesterday I wanted to begin writing a poem. The title was going to be "Facebook or the End of Espionage." The first line: "They already know all about you."

One said, "It takes a long time to recover from an Ivy League education."

By "yesterday" I might mean last year. This is a characteristic problem with reportage.

Many true things are difficult to say or offensive to others. Perhaps the idea of a "general audience" is itself fallacious or offensive.

*The Book of Nothing* is not intended for a general audience. Therefore I can say anything.

Option 3 is not intended for the general population and one is not the general population.

I got into trouble with a collaborative, collaged, lyric essay that I wrote with AG. We hurt B's feelings so we apologized and took out all references to her and B's not even her real initial, ha ha! Even so, she was shocked and saddened that I'd used her story as "creative fodder."

When one pulls one's first novel down off the shelf one thinks, "not bad" or, some days, "quite good, really" despite the fact that one's agent, friend, and significant other never liked it and it isn't published.

I take *The Book of Nothing* with me when I leave the city. It isn't heavy, is hardly anything. Even so, everything is changed.

One no longer calls a friend on the phone and says, "can I read you my new poem?" or asks another writer, "should I write a novel?" Instead one has, infrequently, sensibility workshops.

Once I told someone, "Poetry is my way of making sense of my surroundings, of observing—"

It is not about "reading America on the QE2," one said. More like a mountain range. This is the metaphor one used.

## OPTION 3

**Rachel Zucker**

I can't remember what that means.

Fodder: 1: something fed to domestic animals; especially: coarse food for cattle, horses, or sheep  
2: inferior or readily available material used to supply a heavy demand

*The Book of Nothing* is not a poem. It is also not not a poem. It is nothing, after all.

One is trim, fit and impeccably stylish.

Whereas writing prose, I said, "Requires that I shut out the world. I could be anywhere."

One attended the most famous college in the United States and, therefore, the world. But was not accepted into Option 3.

Supposedly Jonathan Franzen wrote *The Corrections* blindfolded in his basement. Or was that David Foster Wallace writing *The Girl with Curious Hair*? Jim Galvin said, "writing prose is just typing."

One is much more attractive than Galvin or Franzen or Foster Wallace. Cleaner, sharper, kempt.

*The Book of Nothing* effortlessly adopts a pastoral soundtrack. This is one advantage of being unintended.

I wonder if one changes when one leaves the city and goes, as I know one does, to Germantown on weekends and holidays.

John Ashbery is nowhere in sight but as far as I know, living. My friend Ilana has fluid in the tissue around her lungs and heart that cannot be drained. Also a tumor in her brain and several metastases. She is also living.

One does not have children. What is that like?

I knew something was wrong but didn't want to ask anyone for fear of seeming like the stupid city girl. The cow's belly was twitching and convulsing and her eyes were closed, her neck at an odd angle. The other three cows in the pen gathered around her as I approached and then scattered to the far edges when I came closer. Finally I worked up the courage to ask the young woman sweeping out the other pens and she told me that cow had been treated earlier in the day and just as she said that the cow keeled over and fell, with a thud, on her side.

One plays the piano. As a child, and, now, as an adult. One takes lessons and practices daily or almost daily. One might call this a "discipline" although that is not the word one used. When the playing or practicing is going badly, one can't complain to one's boyfriend—he will say, "So? Stop."

A particular sound. When she fell, I thought, "Thud." I thought, "'Thud' is the name of that sound."

But playing the piano, even if it is a hobby, is about playing well.

In Music Together, where we take the baby to be surrounded by other babies all sucking on small instruments and whacking each other on the head with miniature drums, Steven, the teacher, explains that if we sing the curriculum songs to our children, at home, they might enjoy it. He brings his pitch pipe to his lips and blows a note. They will enjoy it, he says, but if you sing out of tune or even in tune but in a different key, your child will think it is an entirely new song. Even if all the words are the same. He blows the single note again.

The point is to play well.

OPTION 3  
*Rachel Zucker*

The cow had been treated for pneumonia and was lying on her side in the mucky pen. “One thousand pounds down,” I thought. Her breath was white vapor around her snout. “Labored breathing,” someone said. She grew quiet and still and then shuddered and relaxed. “Might not make it,” said the camp director who’d been called over by a counselor. “That cow’s dead,” I thought. “Might not make ‘till evening,” he said.

One writes prose when asked to. Or, when asked to write prose, one refuses. More and more one refuses. More and more one is asked.

Our friend has decided to decide whether to get married or break up by the end of June. He is racked with indecision and says, “what if the fact that I have so many doubts and am having such a hard time deciding what to do means getting married is the wrong choice?” I try to explain the idea of a “characteristic dilemma.” I say, “Of course this is a difficult decision.” It is June 28th, 2008, and I’ve been married for 11 years and 13 days. I don’t think I have helped our friend one bit.

One teaches graduate writing workshops and seminars and advanced literature classes and directs theses and sits on committees. One did not get tenure at the Ivy League institution and is relieved and seemingly happy with tenure at one’s present institution and with living in Chelsea with one’s boyfriend and going to Germantown on weekends. Swimming to stay fit, playing the piano and writing poetry and fiction and non-fiction prose.

I was asked to write a blurb for a book by a poet I know slightly. I liked the lines, “this room/ will always be the ghost of right now for as long as we carry it.” I liked the whole book, which had a spooky, sensual immediacy and an appealing male voice. But I think I should say no to writing blurbs: the process is stressful and overly absorbing.

Three years ago one wrote me a glowing response, via email, to my manuscript-in-progress. Later, I asked if this email might be edited and used as a blurb when the manuscript became a book. One agreed but asked to edit the email one’s self.

CNN online reported that a 7-year old boy went swimming for the first time with his family at a local pond. On the way home the boy seemed unusually tired and asked to lie down and take a nap. A few hours later he died, in his bed, from drowning. The story says unusual fatigue or changes in behavior can be signs that water in the lungs is preventing adequate oxygen from reaching the brain.

Did being denied tenure at the Ivy League institution feel like Option 3 all over again? Or was it one of those many occurrences people call “a blessing in disguise”?

I have decided to begin a series of prose poems about everything I can remember about my childhood. The idea is to distill snapshots of a past that seems to be disappearing as I watch. I have a lousy memory. This is a characteristic dilemma.

Does one call S one’s boyfriend or husband or partner? I can’t remember.

On long car rides or while waiting for food in a restaurant, my sons ask, “tell us about your dates!” I don’t remember how this started. I haven’t been on many, and they’re too young to hear the unedited versions. But these are the stories they ask for.

Does one’s memory degrade more quickly and more completely if one has children? Does not having children preserve one’s memories?

The director climbed into the pen and patted the cow’s belly and then kicked the cow. Not gently, not hard, in the side. He covered the animal with a blue tarp just as the Peapods and Seedlings entered the barn to pick up their backpacks.



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One notices when I wear makeup, so I do. But only a little. Just the kind and amount of makeup others wouldn't notice but one would and I try to apply it skillfully despite having so little practice with such frivolities. It is possible that one wears make up, but I'm not able to discern such subtleties.

"Yesterday I saw a cow die. When I called my friend Erin to tell her about it she said, 'Well that will end up in a poem.'" This is how I will begin the essay about teaching poetry workshops that I've been asked to write if I decide to write that essay. I might decline the assignment in which case I should stop wasting time thinking about how description is fundamental to all good writing.

There are at least ten frogs in a small pond near the house we're renting in Brunswick, Maine. When I venture near the pond the frogs stop moving and stop making sound so it is difficult to count them. For seventeen days I've been trying to describe the sound they make. The sound they make is nothing like "ribbit" or "croak" or any of the other onomatopoeias we use to indicate frog noises.

Finally, it came to me: they sound like a wide rubber band snapping once—a quick, low, single twang—a "bo-ing," reverb without consonants.

I believe one would like to receive a postcard with a description of the frog's real sound.

*The Book of Nothing* sounds a bit Buddhist but it is not or at least not intended as such although Buddhism or some watered down version of Buddhist principles—a kind of Disney-Buddhism—has seeping into Art's ground water.

They say memory is the spring that feeds good literature. Being somewhat impaired I can't say who "they" is or if, indeed, anyone said this. Let's hope it's not true.

I imagine one has many clear memories from childhood and somehow that this is related to one's precise and extraordinary vocabulary.

I have neither.

My mother asks: are you finding time to write?

My father: have you been doing much writing?

One's mother is also a poet though later in life. We've never spoken of this. Or have we?

I give my son a notebook for his 9th birthday. "What do you think, what kinds of things, what should I...?" He asks. "Nothing," I say, "unless you want to."

One orders organic greens with chicken. It is quite a lot of chicken. Years ago one ordered a *citron pressé*. I do remember that.

For the first time ever my middle son reads a complete book. It is very short and has simple, straight-forward language. On every page several plot twists drag the young reader along—flying carpets, kidnapped princesses, evil sorcerers, a magic staircase. It is the first book in a series of more than twenty-five. These are books of something and something and then another thing happens. I want to hate this book but, like one's first lover, it must be honored. He reads haltingly—sometimes aloud, sometimes silently, often spelling out words like "laugh" or "smite" or "amongst"—"what's that one again?" he asks.

One goes to Paris, where I assume one eats in fabulous restaurants.

The baby's head smells like goat cheese. Not a bad smell, really, but not what a baby's head ought to smell like. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that it is difficult to bathe him in this house. One bathtub is much

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too big. One has sliding mirrored doors on a track. When I lean over the tub's rim to hold the baby steady in low water, the track presses painfully into my chest.

When in New York one favors La Luncheonette for dinner and once spoke to me derisively about how overly fancy food has become.

"Yesterday I saw a cow die," I wrote, beginning a micro-essay on teaching poetry. In truth, I began the essay 14 days after watching the cow die and have not made further progress.

I cannot remember if one paid for lunch. "I'll get the next one" is stressful if you don't trust your memory.

Yesterday I was informed that the proposal for a conference panel—a proposal on which I am one of five named participants—has been accepted. The panel has to do with representing the self in writing. Here's what I have to say about that: nothing.

One has the most beautiful stationery. Thick, creamy stock with one's name embossed in black on the note cards, address only on the back flap of the envelope.

The word memory comes from the Latin *memoria*, from *memor* mindful and from the Old English *gemimor* well-known, and from the Greek *mem ra care*.

Years ago I helped DT organize his papers and correspondence. NYU had purchased his archives. This is where I first discovered one's elegant stationery as one had sent several notes and letters to DT.

It feels disrespectful, uncaring, when someone forgets your name. For this reason and because I doubt myself, I will often avoid greeting someone I know but whose name I might not recall.

DT urged me to always, always date my notes and letters. One did not always do so and it made DT's archives more difficult to organize.

Memory is a funny word. It applies both to the power of remembering and to what is remembered.

One said one did not mind, at all, if I purchased similar stationery. Mine is embossed in blue and has lasted me ten years.

In Denver the air is thin and fragile. Even in the shade of trees I feel exposed to the sun's relentlessness. I am living, for eleven days, in my mother-in-law's home.

If one does not have children how does one's relationship to one's in-laws change?

I have nothing else to say about Colorado.

We've spoken about Art and Leisure and the Real World but I can't remember what we said or what conclusion we arrived at about the extent to which making art is self-indulgent.

*The Book of Nothing* will not address the purpose of life.

What is work?

After seeing the movie "Vera Drake" one said, "perhaps you should become an abortionist!" which did not, in any way, offend me.

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**Rachel Zucker**

The poet liked the blurb I wrote. The micro essay is still one line although I have changed “yesterday” to “today” for a greater sense of immediacy.

What is work?

I have registered my “treatment” for a reality TV game show with the Screen Writer’s Guild. It has been six weeks since the prospective agent promised to call me the next day. I am also waiting for a response about an essay I wrote about teaching poetry to very young children for a parenting magazine. Tomorrow we leave for Wisconsin.

One can wear one’s perfectly tailored suit forever; one’s figure is constant.

I didn’t know what to do next. Specifically I was suffering over the question of whether or not to return to the novel I’d started four years ago and dropped after 60 pages and two years or whether to work on my non-fiction memoir that five agents had praised and rejected. Or to start something new. Or not to write at all. Hence our lunch date just before I left town for the summer.

One said, “This is a characteristic dilemma.” One said, “I can say that with confidence because I also have this problem.” One said, “I no longer ask friends to comment on my work-in-progress, but I do rely on lunches like this which I call sensibility workshops.”

My friend AG says I’m a whiner. She is right. She likes to hear my new poems over the phone and loves to read me hers but finds my angst over what to do next extremely exhausting.

I have no new poems. Which exhausts me.

What is work?

Poetry is a way of connecting me to the world, of noticing, of placing myself. I said that to someone or while teaching or in an interview or else I read it somewhere.

My memory. This memory.

I am not in or of the world. Have no childhood. Feel as if I no longer even have my annoying characteristic dilemmas having misplaced or forgotten my own characteristics.

It turns out *The Book of Nothing* is unexpectedly plot-heavy.

Can one imagine the realness I feel when birthing a baby? I cannot adequately describe it.

I’ve never liked short stories; I prefer the novel’s more expansive intimacy.

One has the most beautiful diction. Exquisite.

I read somewhere that fetal cells remain in the mother for 27 years after birth. I can’t remember what conclusion or analogy I was about to draw from this fact.

It was disconcerting to run into one, once, at the pool at the Ivy League University. In one’s swimsuit. One’s body.

My body has a quality of excess, unnessariness, but is, at the same time, perfectly useful, productive.

OPTION 3  
**Rachel Zucker**

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One works hard to keep one's body constant. To play classical pieces precisely, correctly, and with proper form.

Feeling is *part* of the form, of proper form.

Of course you can't eat a diseased animal so in this sense the cow is wasted. If the purpose of the animal is to provide sustenance for other animals, which is not its purpose.

Fodder.

I have nothing to say about "the speaker." Instead I will go swimming in the pool on my husband's grandmother's property in Lakewood of the unmentionable state in my ill-fitting swimsuit, unshaved, untuned, slightly panicky in the goggled blue, the muffled solitude of submergence. City girl with poor form and pale, pale skin—spectacle for none to witness.

One was perfectly presentable in one's suit at the Ivy League institution. But still.

What I like is the long, underwater glide as I push off from the wall.

Now one teaches poetry and literature to graduate students in a good program that is not part of the Ivy League. One teaches a course on the lyric essay. One teaches a course on Perversity and Contemporary American Poetry.

What I like are the irregularly amoebic blue tiles along the bottom and sides of the rectangular pool. The chipped tiles, the black places where a tile is missing.

In the car my son reads to himself. Every once in a while he spells out a word he doesn't recognize. I like how the expansive possibilities of the first few letters narrow with each subsequent letter until the word, without context, takes shape, definitively, and becomes meaningful.

Yesterday I went to a yoga class to try to calm down. But the chanting and call-and-response prayer got me so agitated I thought I might start shrieking. After chanting we sat in silence, breathing, and then the teacher read a long passage to us from a book about the difference between experience and experiencing. It was both interesting and inane. Experience is between life and experiencing and experience is time-bound, on a continuum. The mind is a product of experience. Thought, a product of the mind. Something like that. The idea, I think, is to rid one's self of thought, of memory, of mind, of all time-bound experience so as to be [impossibly] present, so as to approach experiencing the here and now, but it was hard to follow because while I was listening I was thinking of *The Book of Nothing* and how I would describe all this which is a way of thinking about the future (now present) (yesterday) failed moment of experiencing.

Does one have any inkling as one experiences summer—writing, reading, thinking, eating, sleeping, in and out of the city, alone, with friends, perhaps once or twice in John Ashbery's company, that one is almost daily conjured and addressed? That one is invoked in *The Book of Nothing*, in New York, in Brunswick, Maine, in Denver, Colorado, in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, in New York, New York, in Greenport, New York?

I suspect the house we're renting is haunted. Last night I dreamed my husband was carrying a blond child about three years old. The child was crying. I took the child in my arms but could not comfort her. Then at around 5 am I heard someone say "Mother," clearly and out loud. The sound woke me up. I looked at the clock and then at my sleeping husband thinking how strange it was that I'd never heard him talk in his sleep before and how funny it was that he'd said "mother." Just as I was dozing off, I heard the word "Mother" again. It was not my husband's voice. I heard whispering in what seemed like the next room. I sat up in bed and put my ear to the wall that separated our bedroom from the room our boys were sleeping in—all quiet. And neither of them has ever called me "mother."

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One keeps a dream notebook and often writes about one's dreams.

Only now, while writing this down, do I make the connection between the child in the dream and my friend Ilana who is dying.

One has never talked to me about death. Not that I remember.

My mother forgets things. Small things like where she put her glasses or camera and bigger things like my husband's last name. But she denies this, "I did *not* say Gordon—you misheard me" or "you never told me that!" On the other hand, she memorizes long stories that she tells to rapt audiences.

How memory is equated with caring. "Thanks for asking."

One often asks about my mother. We've discussed my parents at length.

We have been away from our New York City apartment for eight weeks. Three days ago I took the baby there to pick up our mail on the way to this house in Greenport, Long Island. The baby seemed to have no recollection of our apartment at all and made no effort to see his room while I sat by the front door sorting junk mail. He has a limited memory. Some call this stage "the wonder years."

What the baby remembers is me. And his father. And his brothers. This is a survival skill, but annoying when I want to leave him in the care of others.

I still think of the pool in Lakewood as Emmett's pool. He kept it hot and after his heart valve replacement surgery walked along the short side of the shallow end for hydrotherapy. I think about sitting with his coffin in the basement of the funeral home and how I spent most of my allotted hour agonizing over the question of whether or not to open the coffin to see his body one last time.

What does one wear to a funeral?

I just wanted to move my body. To quiet my mind by moving my body—downward dog, cobra, jump or step the feet, forward bend, hands to the sun—not all that chanting and philosophizing.

In an email, Ilana told me that her childhood dog had come to be with her and had been by her side all morning. This was not a dream. Neither the dog nor the email.

One can die from poisoned berries. See the movie "Into the Wild," based on the book by Jon Krakauer based on the story of Christopher McCandless whose name I had to look up when I typed this three months later. In the original text of *The Book of Nothing* it says, "based on the life of \_\_\_\_\_."

More and more I am drawn to the literal; is this a fad? A developmental stage? A characteristic dilemma?

On my favorite radio show there is a piece about a woman in her 30s who asked this question at a party: Are unicorns still endangered or have they finally become extinct? The silence that followed was what clued her in.

Or perhaps I mean the surreal. It's hard to tell. I want to write like that but it feels conspicuously ornamental, like jewelry or a flimsy scarf that poets often wear. Self-conscious.

Now here.

Seven beds in six cities in eight weeks. Including the hotel in Newark near the airport when we missed our connecting flight from Maine to Denver.

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Now here.

To do:

The ocean.

A lack of childcare changes *The Book of Nothing*. Lessens it. Increases its appeal. The baby still puts things in his mouth and cannot be trusted.

One must be sleeping now. It is five AM. It is still 5 AM.

Last night on the way home—[the baby swallows stories, words, all my language with his promiscuous mouth]  
 —what was I saying?

At 4 AM this morning Ilana Stein died.

Perhaps it is a “notebook” not a book. One small note changing everything.

On the ferry home last night my son said “I hate you.” He’d battled with his brother over the crinkly white tissue paper around his cookie or his brother’s cookie, I’m not sure. He pulled away from me but I yanked him back. “Not safe,” I said. Evening on the ferry, half-moon, stars hidden.

Does one fear death?

The ocean again.

What would one wear to a funeral?

*The Book of Nothing* with its orange cover out in the parking lot, in the passenger seat of the rented Kia. Later, during the *shiva*, in the trunk with the clothes and diapers.

In Greenport, three houses down from the one we’re renting, two houses catch fire. It is amazing to watch. We watch. We watch. There is no one, thank god, inside. A neighbor lamely hoses down everything between her house and the one on fire. We watch the first house burn. We watch as the house next door goes up in flames. We watch as the volunteer squads arrive: Greenport, Southhold, Cutchogue, Orient, Riverhead. We watch as a special ladder truck arrives, as a firefighter is lowered onto the roof. We watch as he sits astride the gable and tries to cut through the roof with a handheld chain saw. The buildings burn.

*The Book of Nothing* is

The bad smell as the vinyl siding collapses away from the wooden bones.

\_\_\_\_\_ nothing if not

The stars last night, after a clear day.

A week ago Ilana Stein died.

One suggested I watch the movie about an abortionist (“it made me want to be an abortionist”), which did not offend me though the idea of one as an abortionist is so incongruous it makes me smile.

In one’s Armani...

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The baby has words now: wawa (water), haa (hat), zeze (zebra), heh (head), baw (ball), moe (more), nuh (nurse), tees (trees), as well as names: Mawma, Dada, Bruba, Bapah, and many animal sounds.

On the corner of 2nd and Webb, three houses from the fire, across the street from a graveyard, in a musty house filled with knickknacks and junktoys, screens off their tracks, doors swelled past closing—I sleep well. The nights are cool. The stars.

Does one sleep well or suffer from insomnia?

Ilana was a doula, which means she supported women during childbirth. Doula, from the Greek, meaning *woman servant*.

There are people who do not make trash. I have heard of them. Some of them live in Maine or rural New Hampshire. I am not one of them.

The city, city, city, city, city is so full of everything I want to be quiet can't can I get used to?

Two days later, called out of yoga, at the hospital waiting for A to have a cesarean. It's quiet. Too quiet. Will I be able to hear the baby cry through the closed door to the OR? I am A's doula. A is my client. In this case I am standing outside the closed door of the O.R. This is all I am permitted.

Ilana is still dead. October is almost over and I have not written a novel or part of a novel or a series of poems about memory. I have not written a micro essay about teaching. I have not written a micro essay about the line but have promised to do so. I wrote one new poem about waking up early with the baby but it's a silly little song-poem and its sweetness bothers me. I have not written an essay about Alice Notley or the email to the agent outlining the "what happened" version of my non-fiction book, which according to her is a weak on plot. I spent a few weeks making a 9-minute movie about J's homebirth and posted it to youtube. It's gotten 49,580 hits in the past 4 weeks. In this way it is (vastly) my most successful publication.

Does one consider one's audience before one begins? Is one frustrated or heartened by one's sale's figures? Does one consider them?

I did a reading, last week for a new political anthology, at the university where one teaches but one was not there. I was the first of ten readers and read my poem "To Save America," which I am sick of reading. John Ashbery read third. I felt bashful and girly in front of him. He has a large, square head and beautiful eyes. He left at intermission, after the fifth reader.

Does one remember how Bethany Yarrow once showed up for class in a white nightgown? It was a small seminar—"The Versification of Poetry"—at the Ivy League institution where one was my teacher. I wrote some terrible sonnets and sestinas for that class. I fooled around with the cute guy who ended up being a relatively successful actor and showed his cute ass in the movie "Laurel Canyon" and "Junebug." Did one know that? I liked how he liked my body, how he spoke openly of his admiration for my qualities, but I didn't like that he smelled like perfume and after a while I got tired of listening to him play the guitar for me in the middle of the night.

Years later I was hired by said institution to teach a residential college seminar I called "The Art of Poetic Dialogue" and commuted there once a week from Manhattan. Each week I walked through the campus and surrounding areas and felt my presence erasing my past. Not erasing, really, more like putting new wallpaper up over the old. I taught that class three times in three years and at the end of those years wondered if I'd ever really gone there as a student. I do remember the future actor's cute ass. I remember he liked my breasts.

My husband, who was not yet my husband or even a boyfriend, sent me one's book when it was first published. It was my junior year, and I was in Paris pretending to study photography. Really I was smoking hash and living

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with my boyfriend who was working at international law firm and studying for the LSATs.

Does one drink? Do drugs? Did one?

Jessica and Miles are in Paris right now. My mother is in India. My father and stepmother are in Hydra. It hurts a little to hear about it. To imagine one in some fabulous place eating fabulous food wearing fabulous clothes speaking with one's exquisite diction.

New York is gray and bleak and I struggle to find the words.

After my miscarriage in spring of 2006, my husband and I went to Paris anyway. We'd planned the trip to celebrate our tenth anniversary although it would actually coincide with our ninth. We expected to have a nine-month old baby on our tenth anniversary and be unable to go to Paris then. When the pregnancy failed it seemed too sad to cancel the trip also.

Has one ever wanted to be an activist?

I was between my pregnant and non-pregnant size and very anemic; it was hard to dress nicely or feel attractive. But I felt lucky to go to Paris, lucky to be healing after months of bleeding that necessitated a second D & C. We stayed at a nice but modest hotel in the 6th *arrondissement*. I went to the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the *Jeu de Paume* and made notes for a sophomore literature course I wanted to teach called "First Persons." Mostly what I remember but wish I remembered even more was that we ate at Guy Savoy. Guy rhymes with "bee" not "buy" and Savoy rhymes with "blah blah" not "hoi polloi."

David Foster Wallace hung himself.

This morning I woke up and thought, "Ilana, are you *still* dead?"

One is not a vegetarian. Is John Ashbery? I doubt it but don't know why. When I think of John Ashbery I imagine him eating venison near a fire in a small restaurant in the Hudson Valley. Is this a form of character assassination or a way of caring about someone?

Are one's shoes comfortable or simply fabulously fashionable?

I don't actually remember attending the Ivy League institution. I have mental pictures but somehow these are like index cards with crib notes of stories I told myself. Sitting in the underground library with its stale air. The way my body feels as I rouse myself from sleep to answer the unexpected doorbell when I know it is my strange lover and know what will happen if I let him in. My boyfriend's flannel sheets when he was just a boyfriend, a guy I was fucking with no intention of marrying. I liked knowing his roommate was there, in the next room as we made love.

A few years after graduating from the Ivy League institution I attended a tribute reading in honor of Elizabeth Bishop. Jorie Graham helped John Ashbery onto the stage and John Ashbery cried when he read Bishop's poem. Did I dream that? No. But I can't remember when or where it was and which poem of Bishop's Ashbery read. It was at least 10 years ago. Ashbery seemed old then. I remember thinking, as I looked at him, he's next. But he wasn't.

One was my teacher. Because of one I read *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by John Ashbery. I read James Schuyler and Jorie Graham and fell in love with poetry went on to a good graduate program and later taught courses at the Ivy League Institution and at other schools and published books and gave readings and this makes me a poet.

Ilana was my teacher. She said, "it's always nice to begin by washing the laboring mother's feet." Because of her I have cleaned up vomit and pee and applied counter pressure and sang and moaned and slow danced with



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naked pregnant women and sweet-talked nurses and pressed on spleen six and watched nine babies be born and this makes me a labor doula.

One likes to hear about my doula work. One does not seem afraid of birth or of the body even though, to me, one seems very far away from anything having to do with birth or babies or the female body.

I gave my books of poetry to Ilana as gifts but I doubt she read them. This has to do with the problem of a general audience. Everyone either has or was a baby or both. Few read poetry.

I bear no hostility. One was not one of the members of the committee of the Ivy League institution who voted to award all the poetry prizes to others. One was not the professor who later told me, in confidence, that my submission engendered active debate. Some members, he said, liked my work best of all, but others said it wasn't even poetry.

The summer has disappeared into our digital photographs. All those houses and hours on airplanes. The ocean.

It's funny how they called it "Option" 3. When it wasn't really an option.

They said I could choose between getting a dilation and curettage in which my cervix would be dilated and all fetal and placental material would be scraped out of my uterus with a curet or I could wait to miscarry naturally in which case I would eventually experience strong cramps and bleeding. This is an example of a choice. Of two options.

During the course of one's lifetime the pendulum of popular opinion has swung away from the idea of homosexuality as a choice and toward the idea of sexual preference as being inborn. This summer a study found striking similarities between the brain structures of gay men and straight women. Is one aware of this research? Does one care?

Orientation. One's orientation. My orientation.

Remember the time in one's office when one agreed to write me a recommendation and said, "I don't like [ ]'s work but I'm glad she writes those poems so I don't have to"? I realized one did not really like my poems either but did like me and that would have to be enough.

The City blocks out almost everything. I am.

Meanwhile: Obama, the economy, famous and less famous suicides, the Library of America publishes Ashbery's collected poems on the day the baby I miscarried would have been two years old and my living baby turns 16 months and two days. So what?

Like a fish I grow to fit my environment in this case apartment in which I sit at my computer and listen to the MP3 of Cat Stevens singing "if you want to be me, be me" while I do not write anything for my panel about the complex relationship between self and poet and do not work on my novel or poems about memory or from memory or about the line in poetry. I do not write about Ilana Stein or John Ashbery one of whom is alive and one of whom is dead or about David Foster Wallace or Charles Bernstein's daughter, Emma Bee Bernstein, both of whom committed suicide this fall or about Alice Notley who was not my teacher but whose poems amaze me and who said, "There has to be a way to talk about oneself without narcissism" and said, "That's only one story: what you remember."

Pick a particular. Other. Option. By which I mean the one I choose. Against which the self. Similar brains. To discuss ambition and/or friendship against the tide or threat/promise of a general audience. To think of one and therefore the self. Think of summer in late Fall. Of the ocean while on the 11th floor in an apartment in Manhattan. Option "one." Option you/me. Option 3.

OPTION 3

**Rachel Zucker**

Rachel Zucker is the mother of three sons. She is also the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Museum of Accidents*. With poet Arielle Greenberg, Zucker co-wrote *Home/Birth: a poetic*, a hybrid genre book about birthing, friendship and feminism. Together, Zucker and Greenberg also edited two anthologies: *Starting Today: 100 Poems for Obama's First 100 Days* and *Women Poets on Mentorship: Efforts and Affections*. Zucker recently finished writing a lyric memoir and several shorter prose pieces. In addition to writing, Zucker teaches poetry at NYU and at the 92nd Street Y, works as a birth doula and childbirth educator and keeps a strange, observational blog called w(her)e. You can find more information on her website: [www.rachel-zucker.net](http://www.rachel-zucker.net)