

STREET CAKE

experimental writing magazine

issue 81

part 1



contents

issue 81

part 1

COVER: morphic rooms - history again ii

amy marques - love letter

carl alexandersson - the syntax-semantics interface

cole beauchamp - the lifecycle of a PET

anita bell - midwifery

mw bewick - big hi from the planning dept.

david bond - the mystery of the robotic lobster

leia butler - add a little bit of body text

lee campbell - 'piss off' (1999) biro on photocopy

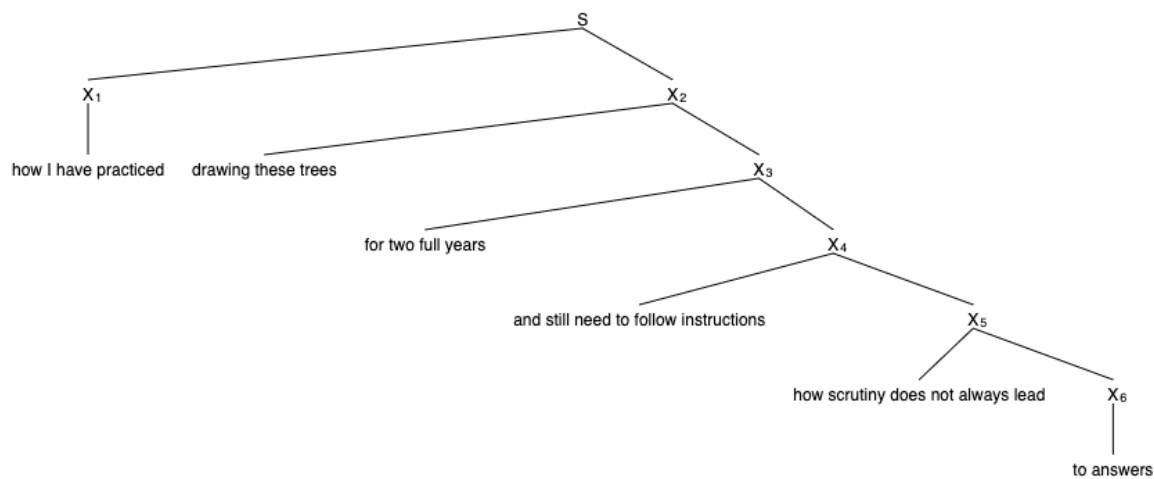
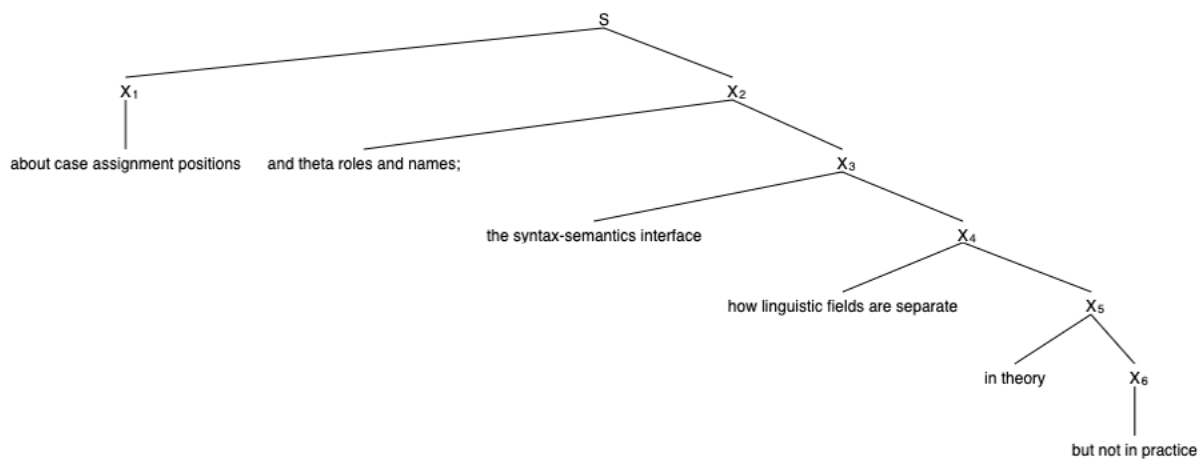
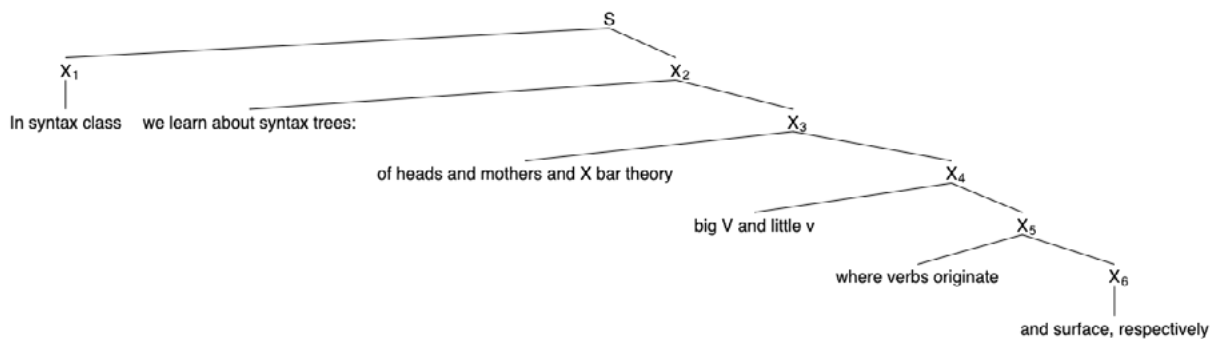
anneka chambers - after grace

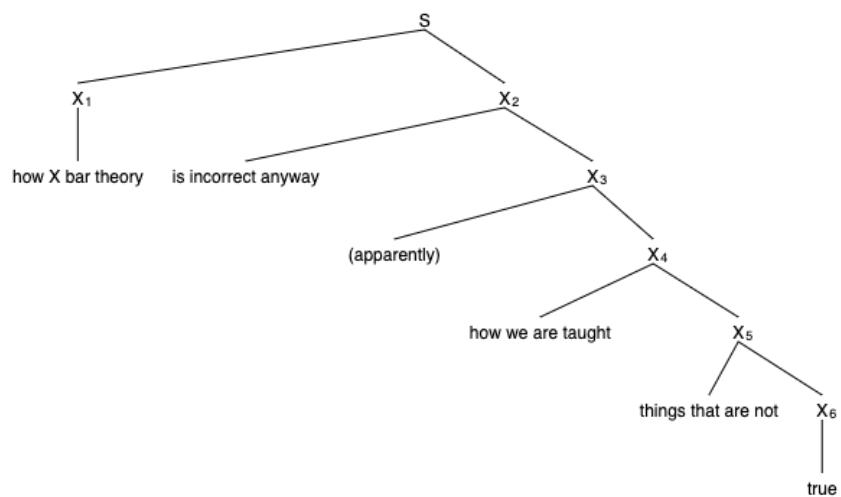
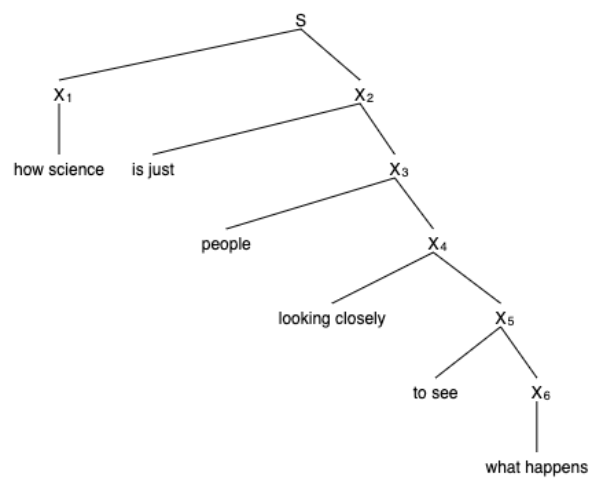
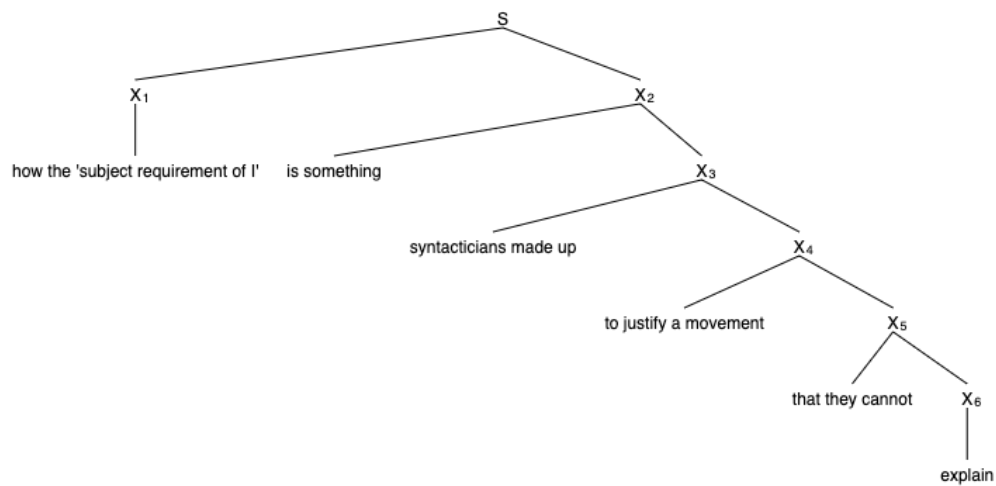
rebecca dempsey - containers for stories

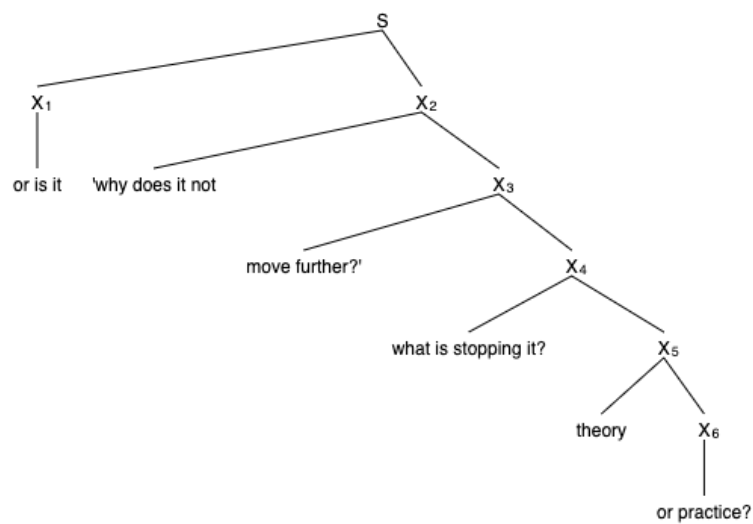
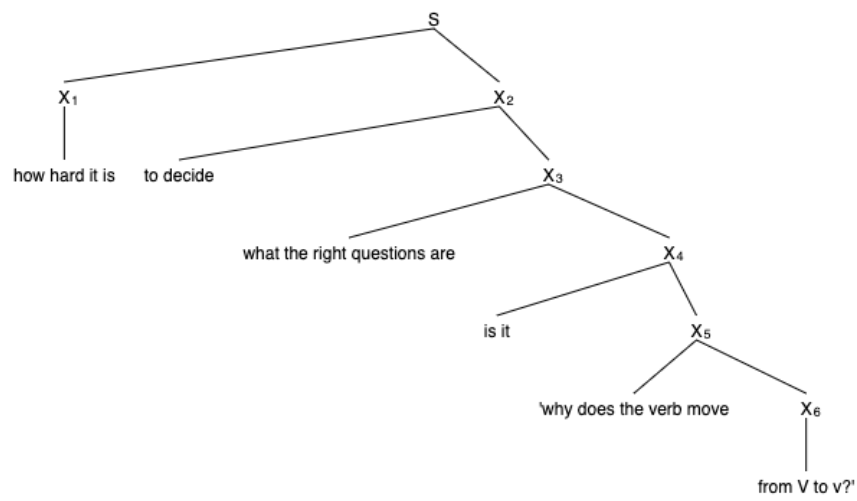
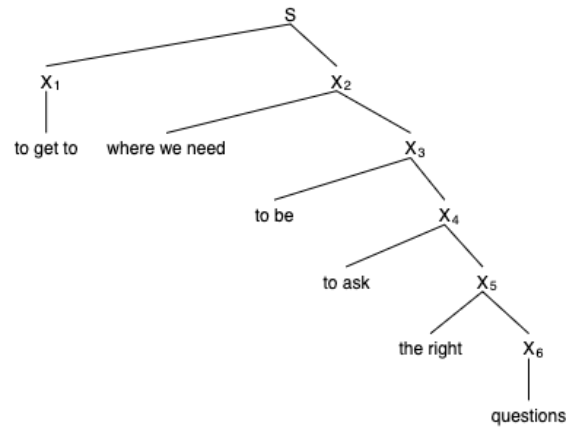
rob fromberg - my correspondence with todd snyder



The Syntax-Semantics Interface







The lifecycle of a PET

Definition.

Polyethylene terephthalate (PET). Volume 500 ml. Weight 9.9 grams.

Baby toy.

You hate travelling in the car so I'm dreading the eight-hour flight. Of all the toys I pack, the one you play with for ages, that you tilt up and down, smack against the tray table, pop in and out of your mouth, is my half-full plastic bottle.

Invention.

DuPont engineer Nathaniel C Wyeth was issued a patent for the PET bottle in 1973.

Rocket.

Your favourite song in nursery is "Zoom zoom zoom, we're going to the moon." At three, your favourite game is making rockets from plastic bottles, cardboard and masking tape. At eight, numbers and letters mean nothing to you, but the Educational Psychologist is amazed how well you can count backwards. "Lift off," I explain, before challenging her conclusions on your supposed lack of intelligence.

Growth.

Worldwide, every day, 15 million single-use plastic bottles are used.

Weapon.

You don't like the new school we've put you in. "Bartholomew is so annoying!" You describe his endless prancing about, bragging, disrupting class, lying about how he has sung in front of the Queen. I don't blame you for hitting him over the head with your PET bottle at lunchtime. I hold your hand as the head teacher explains that everyone has different needs,

that patience and inclusion are key values of the school, that violence is not accepted. That while you're good at making friends, not everyone else has learned how yet.

Dada art.

There is no plastic bottle.

Lava lamp.

Oil. Water. Vinegar. Food colouring. Baking soda. On your bookshelf, a growing army of rainbow-coloured PET bottles. It's the first science experiment that ever works for you. I don't have the heart to stop you, face animated, voice fever pitch as you pour in the baking soda, bottle after bottle. "Watch this!"

Waste.

Single use plastics constitute 40% of all plastic waste.

Incubator.

Things like the lifecycle of butterflies and how plants grow make sense to you. You cut PET bottles in two, growing watercress in the bottom half. It wilts when you forget to water it. You graduate to lettuce, but slugs and snails devour your seedlings once they're planted out. At fourteen, you strike on the idea of using the top half of the bottle as a cloche. Soon there are four spindly tomato plants sprouting yellow flowers outside. You pop cherry tomatoes into your mouth like candy. Science is the only GCSE you pass.

Export.

Less than 10% of everyday plastic is recycled in the UK. The bulk of it – 540,000 tonnes in 2020 – is exported to other countries.

Shower head.

Your apprenticeship as a dog groomer leads to a job at eighteen. You love tidying the

instruments, laying them in straight, even lines, smoothing out the blankets before the dogs arrive, cuddling them before they are washed. The smaller dogs cower in the shower, so you fill a plastic bottle and gently stream water over their heads, laugh as their quick tongues lick away the water pouring over their noses. Things you don't like: the noise of the blow dryers, the mushroomy smell of wet dog, clipping their nails, the way your boss bites out commands when she's stressed.

Recycling.

Sorted. Cleaned. Shredded. Melted. Remoulded. PET bottles can only be recycled a limited number of times. The plastic degrades.

Energy.

It starts with a weakness in your arms. Picking up the pets becomes tiring. You don't admit this for months, until you nearly faint at Sunday lunch. I pull out your childhood ear thermometer and yes, you have a fever. Your glands are swollen. You've never been particularly alert to pain. I put you to bed, email your boss and set a bottle of Lucozade by your bedside. It's nice to be mothering you again.

Decline.

The average weight of a 500ml plastic bottle has declined nearly 50% in the last 15 years, to 9.9 grams.

Absence.

Your fever continues. Your gums bleed. So many tests, more and more invasive. Bone marrow biopsy. Spinal tap. By now we are braced for the worst, sipping fizzy water in his artificial smelling reception. A long line of glass bottles. No plastic in sight. Hushed steps into his office, where the words come like a pelting of stones: acute lymphocytic leukaemia. You are calm, so very calm, when you ask, "What now?" I want to claw the doctor's face as

he talks you through chemotherapy. I hate the way he clasps his hands, the smell of his cologne, the crisp white collar of his shirt. You leave optimistic, the prognosis is good, but I tremble with rage. You're twenty, for Christ's sake. What is twenty years?

Longevity.

Plastic bottles can take up to 450 years to decompose.

Big Hi from the Planning Dept.

The-se a-re no-t false dichotomies jus-t
the won-der of no-t under-stand-i-ng
an-d every-thing be-i-ng

remnant

cut-up

scrap

Eve-n be-low the house-s or the i-nk
a-re pre-scient new-type for-mulations
“so-ciology” “re-ward” – The-re come-s time
i-ts op-ed living clean break-s Ran-dOm cities
to-pical queries of modern-i-sm

Yo-u a-re read-i-ng between the line-s a-gain
i-n muff-led commis-sions a-nd suspend-ed

i. spa-ce

ii. spa-ced

iii. spa-ces

i-t i-s a-lmost reveal-i-ng
a-lmost the-re the vert-icals of con-cept
a-lmost guess-work a-lmost a though-t.

The Mystery of the Robotic Lobster

I first became aware of the mystery of the robotic lobster when I was selling calamari door to door. Business wasn't going so well, mainly because I didn't have the funds to invest in a refrigerated vehicle, or even a sufficiently large bag of ice. I considered moving my operations to the Antarctic, but after a thorough market analysis, which cost me my house, two of my organs, and several organs of close family members, I resolved that there wasn't a strong enough business case.

What compounded an already difficult situation was that the particular town in which my business was located had only one season – summer - and it was 300 (sometimes 500) miles away from the nearest port. By the time I had picked up the calamari, driven back to town, and set up shop, it had usually gone off.

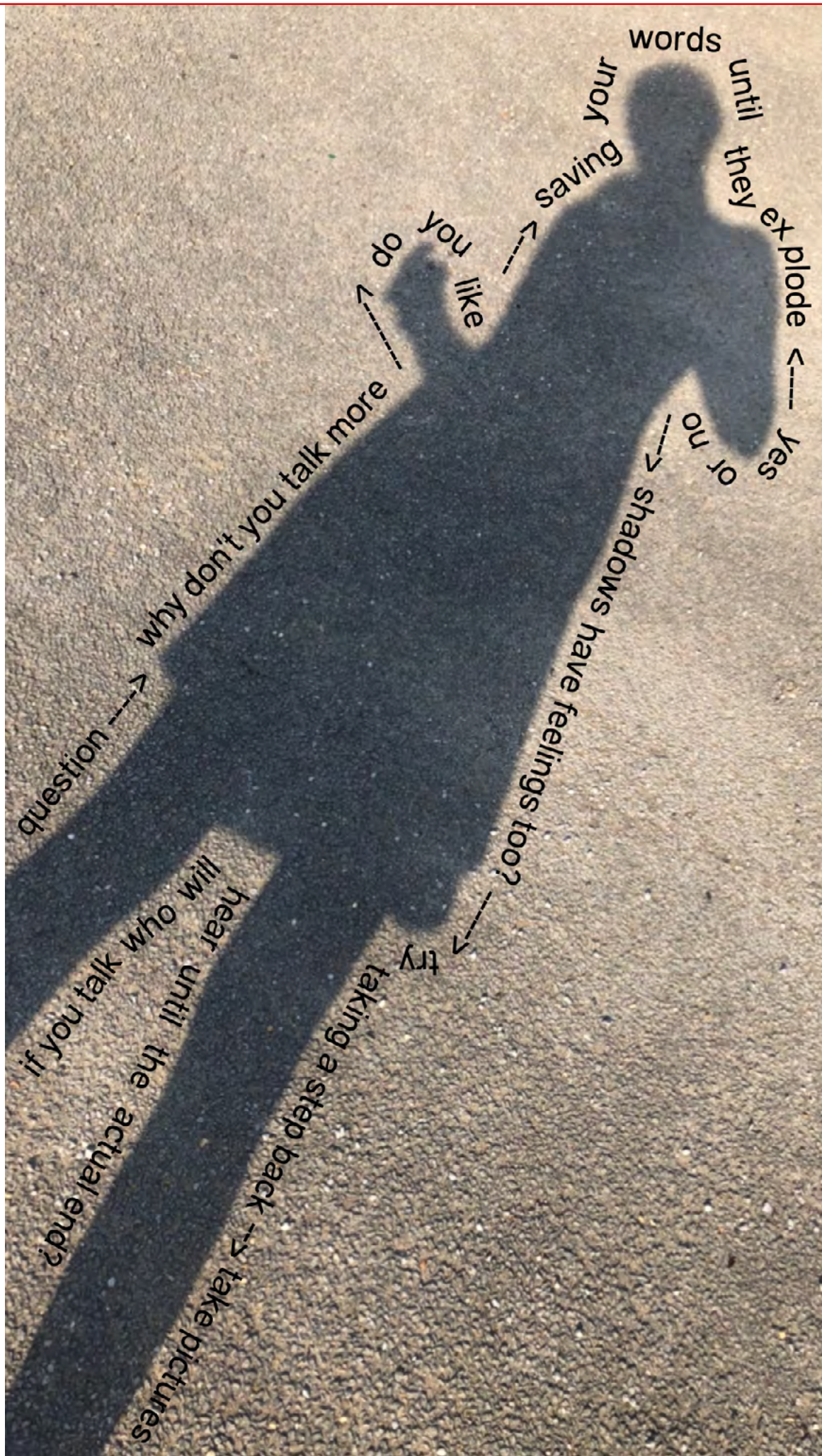
Often, I thought about changing careers, but one day a talking dog warned me against it, and naturally I obeyed it blindly. The dog explicitly told me to continue to restrict my calamari business to the town of Keith, or misfortune would rain down upon the lives of myself, my ancestors, and my descendants.

And so it was with a heavy heart and only one kidney with which I knocked on the door of the local Vicar, in the hope that I would finally make a customer out of him. As he stepped onto the porch, approximately four million and twelve mice ran out to greet me. They assured me there was nothing to worry about, and business would pick up soon.

I was briefly buoyed by their good cheer and merriment, until I realised that it had all been a ploy. As I stood there, staring at the clouds, imagining what *The Calamari Company* might one day become (perhaps even employing the mice in some sort of administrative capacity) they had eaten my calamari. All of it. And the Vicar had taken a blowtorch and melted my already waning bag of ice.

I damned them all to Hell, and, in a cruel twist, the Vicar kicked me repeatedly whilst reciting the mystery of the robotic lobster.

I lost consciousness soon after Act Two, and, owing to the trauma, I have no desire to hear how it ends.



**cannot
find the size
you are
looking for,
pi s s
o ff**

after Grace

a
pl a t e
of arising aroma
seats fatty
inflation



a
c up
one third
deep
drowns
thirst
in the shallow
end
of
hydration

No Shame in Broken China.

Containers for stories

This list could never be definitive but is indicative only, and proposes a few items for Ursula K Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, where there is always room for more.

- Lists of what bags ought to contain. Crossed out.
Rewritten.
- An empty book with crossed out lists slipped between the pages.
Because some ideas deserve second chances.
- A fountain pen in its case.
- Monogrammed handkerchief.
Inevitably your handkerchief will be stained
by the fountain pen. Don't mourn this overmuch.
- Two coins with holes punched through them,
to ensure your return from the other side.
- One pencil, chewed, broken, and taped together.
- A dozen credit cards, three licences, and seven passports
(or something else that looks like independence).
- Desiccated crumbs from snacks of past ages
(leftovers from when you marked your trail).
- Receipts printed on fading thermal paper.
- Used maps to found treasures for their return.
- Potential. A bag of potential energy recipes.
- Everything ever needed, neatly packed.
- An ancient purse full of dust and hope.
It will remind you this is what you are: the hope
of things to come bound in a temporary
manifestation of stardust.
- Determination, a battered orange, and a phone.
- Curses your foremothers used against their enemies.
- A tiny brass hinged box, scented of petrichor.
Not to be confused with your purse of dust.
Petrichor is the delight in the ground of your being.
- History, and its mistakes, highlighted.
- Advice and the resolve to reject it.
- A tool to break glass ceilings.
Pass this tool along as ceilings are repaired.
- Your voice, and a recorder.
- Truth, like a breath of fresh air.
- Truth, like tornado throwing up top soil until everything chokes.
- Lies, like stains on worn luggage.
- Keys.
- Another bag, which contains bags your ancestors made,
because you never know. You'll know.

My Correspondence with Todd Snyder

On Thursday, September 1, 2022, at 8:40 AM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “Welcome. Take 15% Off Your First Order.” When I opened the message, I saw that the first sentence said, “Welcome to the family.” These greetings made me feel warm. Also, the 15% discount was, I thought, a generous and kind touch.

On Saturday, September 10, 2022, at 12:00 PM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “Flannel Season Starts Now.” Although I have never been particularly fond of flannel, I had not been aware of this change in the season nor that this particular time of year was called Flannel Season. After seeing this email message, I felt more fully informed, and I appreciated Todd Snyder’s taking the time to let me know.

On Sunday, September 18, 2022, at 7:01 PM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “TREND ALERT: The Gentleman’s Track Suit.” I find these sorts of timely, breaking-news email messages to be extremely helpful in two ways. First, they assure me that I will not be left out as the world becomes aware of an important event or, in this case, societal change. Second, such email messages give me an opportunity for meaningful participation in the happening, which is quite exciting. I have never worn, nor considered wearing, a track suit, but the notion that I may be a gentleman is attractive to me, so I am considering my options for next steps.

On Friday, September 23, 2022, at 7:02 PM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “We’d love to hear what you think.” The period at the end of that subject line lent it a certain solemnity that caught my attention. Yet, I was not sure I could formulate the words to express to Todd Snyder what I think.

On Sunday, September 25, 2022, at 11:34 AM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “Your Todd Snyder return.” I appreciated the use of a lower case first letter for the word “return,” so as not to make too outsized an issue of what could be seen as a failure. The message began with this paragraph: “We’re sorry your order didn’t work out. Let’s get your return started.” My gentleman’s track suit fit reasonably well, but ultimately I felt that I was not ready for the designation of gentleman implied by my wearing such a track suit. And although I hesitated to return it, not wanting to hurt the seller’s feelings, keeping the suit in my closet would have felt like a reminder of my deficiency. I decided that in the interest of my heretofore honest and forthright and mutually beneficial relationship with Todd Snyder, I should return the garment. I must confess, however, that I was a little taken aback by the opening words of the email message. I could not decide whether they were low-keyed yet friendly, or whether they were brusque, perhaps even dismissive.

On Tuesday, October 11, 2022, at 6:05 PM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “TREND ALERT: Velour.” I was glad to be apprised on this trend, which I had not previously known. The velour shirt pictured in the message looked lovely, soft, and comforting. The shirt was called “The Tavern Shirt,” which was alluring because I had always

imagined it would be pleasant to sit in a tavern. However, after my last experience with a trend alert, I wanted to give this more thought before acting.

On October 18, 2022, at 5:02 PM, I received an email message from Frank & Eileen with this subject line: “You NEED our new California Shirt Jacket!” Because Frank & Eileen produce clothes only for women, and because of the imperative voice and expressive use of capitalization in the subject line, I forwarded this message to my wife, lest she did not know about her need for this garment. However, in a note accompanying the forwarded email message, I asked her whether I should write to Frank & Eileen and let them know that we do not live in California and so might not be the right recipients of this piece of correspondence.

On Thursday, October 20, 2022, at 8:10 AM, I received an email message from “Alejandro at Todd Snyder” with this subject line: “NEW ARRIVALS: My Picks.” The message included a photograph of and signed message from Alejandro. I have heard people use the phrase “taking [something] to a new level,” or “the next level.” Perhaps that is what is happening now in my relationship with Todd Snyder.

On Friday, October 21, 2022, at 7:00 PM, I received an email message from Todd Snyder with this subject line: “DROPPING NOW: New Era x TS ‘The Camel Cap Collection’.” Despite the baffling, at least to me, wording of this subject line, the message itself, as I’ve heard people say, “blew me away.” Oh my god! These caps are made of nubby wool from Lanificio F.lli Bacci! They feature chain-stitched logos of several different sports teams! And they have a low-profile fitted silhouette! Awe. That is the only word I have.