

Assignment Prompt

I am inviting you to add to the contemporary conversation about language/s by zooming in on a particular encounter you've had with language to investigate and explore an aspect of your relationship to language from your own personal, particular, and peculiar context.

I'm asking you to write about something that is interesting to you, to write about something you care deeply about. I'm asking you to open up a process of questioning and then write a conversational essay (or story, or series of poems) that shows your thinking on the page: develop a critical, contemplative, and reflective exploration on your topic that narratively and stylistically unfolds your insights about a specific question that addresses your particular encounter with language.

I ask that you also keep in mind the larger social, temporal, cultural, and educational context from which you are writing. Your experience in the world gives you access to this context. It's always a good idea, however, to think *with* somebody: another writer. Gilles Deleuze reminds us that "...writing is a flow among others." Write, then, in the company of one of your others. I supplied you with a few quotations to think-write with on our first day together; I will add a few more here at the bottom of the page. You are not limited to these quotations and are free to find your own writer to think with. Choose someone who can offer you a framework, someone whose views prompt you and guide you toward a different way of "seeing language" and how it is implicated in the various ways we navigate and negotiate identities in everyday life.

Let me say this bit again: write about something you care about. Find out more about that thing you care about by writing through its complexities. I am asking you, above all, to produce knowledge, to take us into a scene of writing that will reveal insights about your experience with language. I'm inviting you to add to the conversation and let us know what you think about the topic and how, from your perspective, we might know about or experience language differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities of language, I invite you to help us see and experience language, uniquely, by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the preconceived representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about language.

The Epigraph's Thread

Words are a pretext. It is the inner bond that draws one person to another, not words.

— Rumi

I found a knitted sweater in the bottom of a box.

I don't remember putting it there, but I slip it on anyway. It smells like something from my childhood that I can't name, but it's comforting in this new house. It's scratchy, woollen maybe, but I like that, especially when it fits as if it were made just for me. I run my hand down the intricate design, collarbone to hipbone. I can't figure out how I'd let something so striking slip my mind and vow to never forget it again.

It's dinnertime. I take it off so I don't stain it and leave it atop the cabinet across from my bed. My roommate, whose name I can't quite recall, says it looks like I've made a shrine to it. I laugh but don't refute it. I'm not sure why.

At night, as I lay between cold sheets, my eye finds the neatly folded sweater. It's just as I left it, but something's different. I roll over. I don't want to think about it now. It's easier to shut my eyes and sleep.

(It's still on my mind.)

It sits on my cabinet until the next night.

The house is so quiet it feels empty, but I'm used to it; I don't sleep until I hear the birds sing. To feel less alone, I put it on and lay there. Something about the scratchiness bugs me now but I force myself to ignore it. Maybe it will build character.

I find a loose thread by accident. I can't help but fiddle with the hem—my mom says it's in my nature, whatever that means. I want to take it off again but rolling the string between my thumb and forefinger is oddly soothing, so I don't.

(Time quickly passes when you ignore it.)

The sweater has changed something about me. My roommate told me so with something deeper than sound. Words may cut deep after all, but so do turned cheeks, unheeded looks, and teeth on bottom lips.

So I take it off.

(I tell myself I don't need it.)

(Then again, I've never been honest with myself.)

Sometime later, I put it back on. The loose thread is still there. It's frayed now, split at the end like a hydra. The sweater pricks and bites my skin, yet I can't help but keep it on. I even take a picture

of myself wearing it and put it on Instagram, but no one seems to understand it like I do despite it being my most successful post to date.

A stranger sends me a DM. They want to know more about it, but I can't explain something that's become a second skin, so I block them and delete the image.

(I shouldn't have to break down the obvious.)

It's a Sunday night. Mondays are my worst days, so I slip on the sweater and pretend I like the pain.

(I really, really don't.)

The smell is back. I feel sick and I can't say why. I feel weird—wistful maybe—but I can't say how.

I want to know, though.

(I think I'm lost now.)

I fall out of bed.

At first, I don't understand why. Then I realize it's because my chest is fluttering beneath the wool like a platoon marching out of sync. It's the urge to know—the urge to connect and understand—building to a crescendo so strong it leaves me with tinnitus, so I grab a notebook to prod and pick until I can figure it out.

Despite smudged ink along my palm and the words I leave behind, there's nothing there when I return to the beginning. Every page is empty like I had done nothing at all.

I tear it apart. Even the cover is gone when I'm done.

I wrap my arms around my knees and hug myself, digging my fingers in just above the elbow. I can't decide whether to rip off the sweater yet or let it try to comfort me.

(I don't like either option.)

I can't sleep, not even when the birds try to lull me down, so I put the sweater on and walk. I walk until the sun starts to rise. Until my world wakes. Until all I see is green and blue and brown.

Then I look. There are glistening pebbles along the river shore and a plastic bag stuck in a weeping willow, blowing like a flag. I listen, taking in the wind through the branches of ancient trees and the gentle caress of water against stone.

I dip my hand in the creek and feel it weave between my fingers like I'm a passenger in a car with their arm held out of the window, desperate for the same freedom as a bird. Then, I cup my hands and taste the raw, unfiltered mineral, desperate to feel connected.

Still, something's missing.

As I find balance on the bank, soaking but content, I notice the string has almost tripled in length. Without further thought, I pull, freeing more and more until it's a foot, two, three, four. The itch, the pain, worsens with each tug but I am determined now.

My heart stutters—a staccato of fingers against limbs.

All that's left is the cuff of my sleeve.

As the last bit of yarn scrapes against my palms, between raw fingers, I suddenly realize my mistake. I don't know how to knit. I can't reconstruct this. I've ruined the sweater in my haste to know more. To know how and why something so simple makes me feel so many things at once.

The other end of the string falls. It's fully unravelled now at my aching soles.

I sit and gather it into my lap, trying not to cry at my own stupidity. Instead, I hide my face in it, hoping it'll swallow me whole. At least I won't be alone.

It doesn't work.

I sit, as still and silent as if I too were another one of the rocks along the shore.

Then, I suck in a breath. It smells like my favourite scents, like campfire, pine tree, and Earl Grey tea. It hits me that the itch is gone, and so is the pain. In fact, the string is now as soft and harmless as the petal of a fresh blossom.

I don't understand it.

A sudden gust almost takes the string, but I grab it last second by one strand of the hydra-head. It flows like the bag, like the river, like the water between my fingers. It's so long it doesn't seem to end.

Then it twirls and bucks and splits, each head separating faster than my frantic hands can stop it. Soon, all I have left is a singular strand.

A thread.

A connection between one thing

to another

and another

and another.

So I come to understand, the sweater was never mine. Not truly. It came to me in my time of need, but it wasn't meant for me to keep. It was a reminder. A reminder that I'm never truly alone. That I'm always connected to someone—to something—no matter how lost I feel.

So, I relax my grip and watch it get carried away by the wind knowing it will never leave me. Not in any way that matters.

Nothing touches you quite like a simple, subjective truth. Maybe it was found in the line of a song heard at a party, in a quote scrawled across the side of a building you've driven past, or in an epigraph found inside a well-loved library book. Its origin and discovery are ultimately unimportant. It is the message's intrinsic worth to the reader that holds the real value—an "inner bond" interwoven through the places we never see, but always feel.