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Other Disseminations

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The day the conference is cancelled, I take the money I would have spent on Wisconsin cheese curds and fries, and I use it to buy bags to grow potatoes in. I'd never imagined that potatoes could grow in bags, but an ad that keeps appearing in my Instagram feed fuels this dream. In the picture, potatoes spill out of a green felt bag—they tumble, abundant, from their sack of soil. I imagine my own hands, cutting open the bags at harvest time, pulling potatoes from the dirt. I dream of plants that could be more productive than I. More potatoes than space inside their seven-gallon bags, more potatoes than the volume of their soil.

As the dates of the cancelled conference approach, my university sends everyone away to their separate homes, and my dream of potatoes in bags grows into a plan for a garden. By the time the first day of the conference arrives, I've spent the refund of my first night's stay on the materials that I'll need to build two raised beds. By then, I've been researching specifications for a solid week, comparing plans from DIY blogs, checking over the tools that I have at home, scrolling through lumber yards online, cross-checking prices between Home Depot and Lowes, reading up on COVID precautions at each store, getting a curbside pickup order ready to place. Even my walks around the block are research trips, as I size up the construction methods of my neighbors' garden beds. The wood, I conclude, needs to be cedar so it doesn't rot. Fence pickets are the cheapest option, and they come ready-cut. The corners will need support from posts of some sort. Any solid piece of lumber should do—the standard eight-foot length, divided, will make four corners for two square beds. At the curbside pickup, I trade my conference room for eight fence boards, a pressure-treated 2x4, a box of wood screws.

I'm supposed to be in Milwaukee networking with fellow compositionists, but instead I'm on the phone with Jennifer the horticulturalist, who explains the ratio of topsoil and compost I'll need to make

things grow. Instead of plotting out which panels to attend, I'm planning which plants I'll sow, calculating volumes of dirt. With the money I would have spent on accommodations for the next two nights, I buy a 100-foot garden hose, and 600 pounds of soil.

I'm supposed to be meeting leaders in my field, attending presentations, taking notes. I should be moving between the rooms of the convention center, halls crowded with thousands of other scholars, each of us gathering a whole bibliography of ideas. Instead, I walk a few quiet blocks to a colleague's house to borrow some seeds. She keeps the packets in a strawberry box, a little library to flip through. I pick a few—French radishes, collard greens, cherry tomatoes, hot peppers and kale. I make mental notes as she tells me which ones I should start as seedlings indoors—at night, it's still cold.

In this chilly spring, had I travelled to Wisconsin, I'd hoped to take a walk around a lake, maybe try out a trail or two. By the third day of the conference, I might have been ready for some time away, and, if the weather wasn't great, I'd heard the Milwaukee art museum was worth a visit, too. By the time the last day of the conference came around, I'd hoped to glean not only a sense of my scholarly field, its conversations and debates, but also a sense of the city, the state. I'd drive home through the still-unplanted fields of corn, back to my Lincoln, Nebraska, house, with one more day to prepare for the start of classes after spring break.

Instead, each day I take a walk around the block where I live, circle back to end in my backyard. In November, I planted bulbs there, nearly too late. Now the first daffodil has grown so tall that it has toppled over, its stem unable to support its weight. How could we have known then, forcing bulbs into winter soil, that spring would hold us here?

My students, too, have returned to their homes, to whatever gardens have or haven't been planted yet. Each day I struggle to imagine a way to split our classroom into tiny squares and scatter them across Nebraska's plains—to Seward, to Sarpy County, to Blair. The semester I'd planned for in winter is no longer there, and I haven't prepared my students for any of this. Every moment that I'd hoped to create in class feels too large, too strange for the space of our separate screens. I write ideas for online lessons out by hand on post-it notes, on index cards. My desk is covered with too many possibilities. What do they know already? What do they need to learn? I could have asked these questions at the conference too, might have returned to the remainder

of this semester with freshly seeded ideas from across the composition field. As it is, I work from the things I have. I try to sift my syllabus down, and turn it over. As the weather warms, I rake the soil.

I've been counting out time in semesters for so long that I'd forgotten about seasons, about days. I try to conceive of how much sunlight can fit in a workday, how often it rains, or what that means for the garden I'm imagining.

When the time is right to plant the seeds inside, I pour the seed starter mix into trays. It isn't soil, but something lighter, made to give them the best chance at life. I level it, just a couple inches deep, and use the back end of a highlighter to make impressions for the seeds. I pinch them out of the packet and spread them over the palm of my hand. They're smaller even than I imagined they would be. When I count them, I plan for their deaths. What is the mortality rate of tomatoes, collard greens, peppers, and kale? I can't find any projections; nobody online seems to know. I figure seven seeds, or maybe nine, should yield a healthy plant or two.

A friend sends a link to the day's news. Some good, some bad, she says. The latest projections suggest that Nebraska won't run out of hospital beds. The latest projections, as April begins, suggest we'll have 424 deaths. We tell each other it isn't very many, all things considered. I don't know what "all things" we're considering, only that if I'm cautious, I might plan my way around my fear. I drop the seeds into their places, and cover them.

The herbs I planted in the fall remain the same. The thyme, timidly slow to grow. The basil, a bit too leggy, but still green. They've only ever lived indoors, under artificial light. But my seedlings need that incubation now, that place beneath the bars of UV bulbs. As each day lengthens, warms, my herbs will need to adjust, in their terra cotta pots, to the outside. I'm cautious with their lives, I've done my research, prepared a plan that will ready them for this new environment. I'm setting their pots in a sheltered place on the porch just a few hours every day. The gardeners call this hardening. It's not a metaphor; the plants need to form sturdier stems to withstand the elements. Otherwise, even under the generous light of a real sun, after all these months of UV bulbs, they'll die.

Is it softening we need to learn then, as we move our lives inside? I've been cross-stitching, rows and rows of exes in colored embroidery thread. When I reach the end of one shade of yellow, I move on to the

next. The pattern is a sunflower, like the ones I plan to plant along the front of my house. Sometimes the thread snarls as I try to pull it through the cloth. If I'm careful and slow, I can untangle it and continue the row. More often, I pull it too quickly, too tight. The knot holds and I have to cut the thread. When the light in my living room grows too dim to stitch, I try to be still instead. I haven't learned how.

My most-Googled phrase: "how long will it take seeds to sprout?" Refining the search terms doesn't yield a better answer. The tomatoes I've planted may take anywhere from five to twelve days. Kale and collard greens take four to ten. Peppers, depending on the heat, might take seven to twenty-one. And some varietals still fall outside that range. Already I've checked the seeds I planted seven times today. My partner calls me a constant gardener. I call myself impatient, check on them again.

Nobody knows how long we'll wait inside, though we Google to find graphs that project a peak—a line we've come to associate with relief. I filter the data by country, by state, by month, by week. Here we are, waiting for the day when the very most people will die.

How long should we distance for? When will the toilet paper restock? How long can the virus live on plastic, on paper, on skin? How long will it be until everyone knows somebody who's died? The first sign that a seed is alive is not a leaf, but a looping thread, the folded stem that senses a bit of light, then lifts the great weight of two cotyledons above the earth. The word cotyledon comes from the Greek, meaning cup-shaped cavity, bowl, or dish. This suggests that the cotyledons are vessels, containers to gather light. Their new green tints purple as the UV spills over them. They tilt to catch it. A botanist might explain that a cotyledon is both embryo and leaf. After the cotyledons, the next leaves to unfurl are called "true."

The doctors check for a fever before they begin their work each day. From my home, I email each one of my students, subject line: checking in. I call my parents, text my friends. How are you doing? I hope you're well. I inspect my seedlings for signs of health. Are their leaves upright? Are their stems straight? Are they straining too hard towards the light? My peppers show no signs of sprouting, though the tomatoes, collard greens, and kale have each begun to grow. Online, I read about how quickly they could fail. Is the soil moist? Too wet? Too dry? I learn that even watering could disturb their tender roots.

For weeks I ferry my seedlings back and forth from beneath their UV lights to the afternoon sun of my porch. They grow stronger in their

trays. When it's finally time to build the garden beds I've planned, I spread out the tools I'll need—a drill, a measuring tape, a pencil, a saw. I lay out the cedar fence pickets and mark their length—six feet. It's the distance we keep from each other now, the length I estimate when I pass neighbors on a walk, stepping off the sidewalk into the grass, the length of my father, lying down, for some unknown reason, on the ground. I cut the pickets in half, surprised at how easily I can divide them. My father taught me how to use a saw so many years ago. Did he know that now, with a border closed and 1,400 miles between us, I'd be measuring out three-foot lengths, forming right angles, driving the fasteners in?

At the scale of these three-foot-square garden beds, it isn't efficient to plant in rows. But the plants, like us, need to keep a particular distance. The tomatoes I've seeded require twelve inches. The radishes, only four. In 1981, the gardener Mel Bartholomew, an "efficiency expert" pioneered a method meant for gardens sized like mine. In square foot gardening, you mark out each block of soil in a grid, then seed each square as densely as the plants you've chosen can afford.

I've been missing my friends in New York, with their far-too-few-square feet apartments, their far-too-precarious jobs. It's hard to believe I lived there just a year ago, a place we call the epicenter now. When we talk each week, they tilt their computers to the window so that I can hear the sound—pots and pans banging, a vuvuzela, voices cheering, howling, the clamor of an entire city of squared-in people who spend what hope they have in a single synchronous 7 p.m. sound.

Everything else is asynchronous now, a word I hardly knew before. I plan lessons, reply to discussion posts, record videos that might be for tomorrow, for yesterday, for next year. What day is it? What tense is this? Perpetual present. Already history. Stasis. Slip. Only my garden happens slowly, growing at a speed that I have to believe is real time.

When the garden beds are built, before I fill them, I stand inside each one, where my plants will be. The space is small. The beds smell of fresh-cut cedar, and their edges are unsanded, rough. For the moment, the color of the wood is warm, though I know that rain and sun will silver it. I pour the dirt one forty-pound bag at a time, tipping it, unwieldy, into the wooden frame. I follow the ratio the horticulturalist described to me: two bags topsoil, one bag compost. I stir them together in the beds, then repeat. The boxes hold more earth than I'd ever imagined they might. When they're finally filled, and all the soil mixed, I mark out the square-foot-garden grid with twine.

I arrange my garden beds like I might a middle school seating plan—taking into consideration who will do well beside each other, who won't get along. My tomatoes will thrive beside onions, but they'll struggle next to beets. I consult a chart that calls those plants "antagonists," and I imagine them bickering, tossing pencils at each other in the back row. I account for height—for the view each plant will have of the sun, not the board. If I plan it all just right, I believe, my plants just might survive, even succeed.

My students are doing alright, as well as can be expected, at least. They turn their essays in, mostly on-time. They're tired, worried, sad. They tell me over Zoom how they miss their dorms. I confess I don't miss my office much, its windowless fluorescent light. Every afternoon now, as the sun rounds the corner past the shade of our neighbor's house, I carry myself outside.

Had I gone to the conference, it might have led to new collaborations, projects, research groups. Here in Nebraska, I've been investing in older relationships instead. The first friend I made here grew up in Wisconsin, and her family is still there. Her father keeps a garden, though she doesn't know when she'll be able to see him next—his health fits what we've learned to call "high-risk." She has one winter squash left in her pantry from the harvest that he gave her from his garden in the fall. The flesh will have spoiled by now, but we hope the seeds will be enough. We meet over Zoom, and I watch through the webcam as she splits the squash open, scoops the seeds from the center, and pulls the threads of flesh away. The seeds are flat, and firm, and pale. She spreads them out on paper towels across her kitchen table, which has become her office too.

Some days later, she shows up in my backyard with a baggie of now-dry seeds. We rake mounds of soil, squat six feet apart, press the seeds just one inch deep into the earth.

The root of dissemination might be the same as seed. Instead of looking it up, I walk around my garden, pull a couple weeds. My calendar tells me that the conference is long past; soon the semester will be too.

I still don't know when the disease will peak, or what that will really mean. My extensive research doesn't really explain how it is that potatoes grow, though by now I've planted dozens in their bags. There's a gap in the literature. A gardener might plant a seed in there. As a scholar, that gap is the place where I'm supposed to write.

When I check on my potato plants, I imagine those little animations that we watched as kids in science class, the ones of cells subdividing—I can see the soft seed potato splitting into two, then four, then eight, sixteen, thirty-two, until its wrinkled skin stretches tight and new.

Of course, I know by now that potato plants have leaves, and thick stems too. So my theory expands. I imagine the sun filtering down the stalk like those fiberoptic cables someone invented to bring sun into the subway system in New York, enough light for a green park underground. I imagine that potato plants might work that way, leaves like funnels to catch the sun, stems like fiberoptic cables full of condensed light, streaming live to the tubers below, so that they swell like small sun-balloons, pushing the dirt aside as they grow.

My research suggests that I should use that dirt to hill up my potatoes, which means that as they get taller, I'll keep burying their stems. Every inch of progress that they make toward the sun, every inch closer to escaping their bags, will plunge them, in slow motion, deeper underground.

These days, our bodies pass without a funeral six feet down into their graves. A friend texts to tell me that all of gardening is about loss. If this is true, then I'm planting my losses, tending them. Across the country, other gardens are planted, and some grow. People have taken to calling them victory gardens, as if this were a war. If I were at a conference, I'd point accusingly at the rhetoric, but at home, I think about our grief: each day we've lost or lived, the days ahead. Several years from now, with this pandemic past, will I call this my first garden, a beginning, or my last? For all the planting that I've done, I still don't know much about gardening, though I know the lengths that I will go to keep something alive.

On the last day of the semester, in a fit of screen fatigue, I flee outside. There, in my backyard, I find the first squash sprouts, where we planted them. The seedlings are huddled together, their cotyledon leaves already spread, a cluster of them, far too close. I've done the research and I know they won't survive that way. But I can't bring myself to thin them. I watch them, still as they are, and I imagine how they might grow.