

To Wander Through
Meg Miller

This morning immediately again sun but
during the day Strong easterly wind 23°-24° degrees

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But if I don't write things down I'll forget them forever, so I save passages and quotes, I accumulate obsessions and ideas. Here's one from Susan Sontag, writing about Walter Benjamin in her introduction to Benjamin's One-Way Street: And Other Writings:

Benjamin, of course, was both a wanderer, on the move, and a collector, weighed down by things; that is, passions.

For Benjamin, per Sontag, thinking and learning were forms of collecting: he wrote down quotes and excerpts in notebooks and carried them around, reading them aloud to friends. He dislodged fragmented passages from their original context, gathered them together with others, assembled a mass of them over time. In their new position inside of the notebook, in relation to each other, meanings shifted and patterns formed.

But this type of accrual can't be rushed. It has to happen slowly, over time.

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October 2, 2024. Collecting is a family gene, Aliko tells me when we talk on the phone last. Her grandfather was a collector, as is her uncle. When she was younger, she watched a short documentary about the artist Marlene Dumas and her enormous archive of source material, collected in thick black binders lined up on a bookshelf. After watching it Aliko started saving her source material, too.

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her collection.

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In the book, Bellamy describes the process of writing the book: writing is a portal that opens up, and everything she has read, seen, been, and experienced comes tumbling in. She leans into excess. She leaves nothing out.

In an interview with Bellamy, Lucy Ives, another author, suggests that Bellamy uses accretion as a compositional principle. She says, you organize facts rather than invent a plot.

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Step 1: Gather your reference materials, like a magpie. Whatever you're drawn to, whatever catches your eye — bring it back to build the nest.

Step 2: Attune your attention to what interests you. Your desire to seek out certain

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things is a signal worth taking seriously. (Collecting-as-thinking as a lifelong ordeal.)

Step 3: Connect these things you've collected, however disparate and seemingly unrelated, through your interest in them.

The adhesive force is your way of writing, not sensible connection, poet Richard Hugo writes.

Patterns form, but on some level everything feels — everything is — connected so I keep pushing more and more stuff in, Bellamy echoes.

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September 24, 2021. In my first email from Alik, there is nothing in the body. The subject line is "light essay" and attached are images of heavy, solid-colored curtains in blue, yellow, black, and pink. They hang along the sides of a square auditorium and stretch from ceiling to floor, wall to wall, such that no natural light enters the room.

They are from a project Alik is working on during a year-long residency at the Jan Van Eyck institute in Maastricht, The Netherlands. The auditorium, usually a central part of the institute, is mostly empty during the span of Alik's residency. At the summer solstice she leads a ceremony where she turns the curtains around, revealing giant rectangles of faded color where the light from the windows had hit the thick fabric, drawn tight for the majority of a pandemic-stifled year.

Later, on the phone, Alik describes them to me as Rothkos made by the sun.

What strikes me at first is how Alik considers the sun both collaborator and material. What strikes me later is how much of

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this piece is about waiting.

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While teaching a research class to graphic design students, I found myself reiterating that an art practice isn't just about the final piece, but also about the conditions that create the final piece. I said it so often that it became a ritual.

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April 22, 2022. I order one of the last copies of Alik's artist book, Made by Rain. When I get back into town from vacation, it's waiting for me in my mailbox, several differently-sized handmade booklets assembled inside of a transparent folder. The book documents Alik's project of the same name, for which she made scarfs, dyed them blue, and before the dye set, laid them out on a roof while it rained. Over time, patterns formed from the droplets.

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October 2, 2024. Alik tells me that her grandfather wrote the weather. He did it in notebooks, almost daily, for 24 years — from June 1979 to June 2002. Entries at first were very short: Jul 1, 1980 rain weather. They tracked not only the sun but also the moon, the latter always a parenthetical — (new moon) (full moon) (quarter moon). Most prominently, he charted the rain. In The Netherlands, on average, it rains 100 minutes a day, 130 days a year.

In later years the entries got longer, more detailed. Some tracked the temperature, the strength of the wind. Fragments of personal details appeared sometimes, rarely, glimpses of a life: May 6, 1990 This morning on foot to Handel and Esdonk... June 8, 1991 (Maartje from Janes wedding)...

On June 13, 2002, Alik's grandfather

DE wrote, very dark weather but not very long because soon there was sun again.

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September 24, 2021. In our first phone call, Alik pronounces zon, the Dutch word for sun, for me. The 'o' is long. It sounds like the English word for soon.

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To meander is to wander aimlessly and at random, to follow a winding course. A meander (n.) is also winding but more intentional: a carefully composed ornamental pattern of interlocking lines. I had seen a meander before I knew its name, that decorative motif that runs in bands around ancient Greek pottery, an angular interpretation of the bends and flows of a river. A sequence of squared spirals, all connected in a continuous line.

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July 26, 2022. Alik sends me photos of her own archive of source materials. Some of them are packed flat in thin cardboard boxes that stack on top of each other. These contain samples, textures, pigments, scraps of weavings, different materials. The other part of her archive is clippings, print ephemera, her own photography and writings. These are housed in thick black binders like those of Marlene Dumas.

There is a photo of these black binders stacked on top of each other in a single column. There are handwritten labels on their spines, which face outward. Alik has also printed the labels beside the photo so I can see them more clearly.

The way the words run vertically down the page reminds me of the first line of Tape for the Turn of the Year, A.R. Ammond's year-long, spiraling poem typewritten on receipt paper. He begins, this is the start

of a long thin poem.

1: Alik
To Colour
Textiles & Communication
Space & Time
Water & Geology
Weather
Yellow Yes
Grain, Vapour, Ray
1 cm = 1000 Year
Geo Poetica

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When I read Jean Toomer's Cane for the first time, I found myself noting down his descriptions of the sun. In Georgia, where a large part of the book is set, the sun is hammered to a band of gold. The sun swings low in one story; in another, it slips in behind a heavy mass of horizon cloud. The sun, again like some liquid metal, is molten and glorious and pouring down between the fringe of pines. During the day, light streaks down from some windows; at sunset it sets shop windows ablaze.

Cane is divided up into sections, which are marked by line drawings of half circles. These drawings have been likened to crescent moons, but could just as easily be tilted maps of the sun's path. By writing Cane, Toomer's "swan song" of Black folk culture in the American south, he is marking time, trying to record and preserve a specific place in it. He is also, inevitably, chronicling its movement on. In the background, the sun rises, burns, melts, streaks, slips, swings, then falls into dusk, over and over again.

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January 23, 2023. It's been 12 years since Alik first started working on Made by Rain. Twelve weather notebooks she's in-
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herited from her grandfather, documenting 24 years. Twelve months in a year, nearly two years since we started corresponding.

She emails me to say she wants to publish a book in 2024. She writes: The publica- tion as a year/cycle/etc...

We imagine a book that gathers together all of her source material, everything that she's saved over the last twelve years. All of the things she surrounds herself with while making, the material she thinks with and through, the patterns that make up her work, and that make up her self. It was all already there, in the binders and boxes catalogued on her studio shelf. Maybe you didn't know that you were making a book, but over the last 12 years, it got made.

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I often come back to this quote from a writer called Jordan Kisner:

When I love something, I am happy to circle it. Often writing to me feels like it's born out of circling a question or idea for many months or years and then sitting down and trying to figure out why I'm circling on it.

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October 24, 2024. During a lecture about bookmaking I'm giving to a friend's class, I play a video of Alikì in her studio while I tell the students about her work and this book she's been working on.

The video plays on silent and the students watch it as I give an incongruent voiceo- ver. Alikì's work has a lot to do with mate- rial and working with the weather, with the elements, I tell them.

We watch a close up of Alikì's hands while she re-orders spools of thread. We watch her hold up a piece of white fabric to the
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light, so that the pieces of sand woven in are visible.

She has this project where she lets rain make textile patterns on scarves, I say, and one where the sun bleaches patterns onto blue-collar work shirts.

In a shot of the floor to ceiling shelves that hold her archive, Alikì slides one of the boxes out from under the others and sets it on the table, carefully flipping through the material inside.

In another project she uses tide data to dictate an ever-changing weaving pattern...

The camera zooms in on a box of blue: blue weavings, blue fabric, blue moon chart. Sunlight streams in from large industrial windows behind her.

Anyways, I say, she has a big archive in her studio that she's been maintaining for many years, and now she wants to turn it into a book.

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