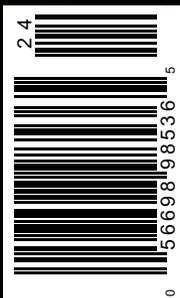


# Cabinet

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## INTRODUCTION

Rome was not built in a day, but could a magazine be produced in twenty-four hours? This was the question that the current issue of *Cabinet* was designed to consider. Inspired by literary precedents such as automatic writing, by the resourcefulness of the bricoleur making do with what is at hand, and by the openness toward chance that all artistic production under severe constraint must necessarily incorporate, the themed section of this issue includes contributions by twenty-four artists and writers who were given twenty-four hours—exactly—to complete a project that responded to a prompt sent to them by the editors.

On the one hand, this may seem like an exercise in editorial sadism, further exaggerating the time crunch faced by working artists and writers. Nothing could be further from the mission of a benevolent non-profit whose brief is purportedly to create the conditions for considered reflection. On the other hand, unburdened from some of the usual parameters for both evaluation (and self-evaluation), there is a kind of paradoxical freedom that accompanies such a radical constraint, one that encourages unorthodox forays in both subject matter and style.

Given the mechanical nature of the conceit behind this issue, it was clear that a set of loosely framed questions around daily time would be useful starting points, both for the contributors and for our readers. The staggeringly diverse responses to our prompts (reproduced at right) can be found on the following pages.

*Dear "24 Hours" issue contributor,*

*Choose one of the three prompts below as the starting point for your project. Bear in mind that all kinds of approaches and subject matter are equally welcome, including those that draw on historical, scientific, personal, literary, phenomenological, philosophical, sociological, medical, legal, economic, anthropological, spiritual, zoological, and botanical perspectives and/or artifacts, just to mention a few!*

*As stated before, contributions that use text, image, or hybrids of the two are all acceptable, as are unorthodox formats, including diaries, charts, graphs, receipts, calendars, advertisements, budgets, menus, correspondence, and lists.*

*1. Consider different ways in which daily time is kept or administered—from the daily planner to the structure of mealtimes, from the ringing of church bells to our hygiene habits—and how they form and inform our experience of day and night. Specific episodes or incidents are as welcome as broader or more speculative considerations.*

*2. Depict a day in which dayness itself—its temporal structure, its specific length, form, or limits—was specifically brought to the fore. This can be a day from the past, or the very day on which you are doing this project. Feel free to draw on your personal life or on historical materials.*

*3. Choose one of the four following divisions of a given 24-hour period—morning, afternoon, evening, night—and create a project that considers or inhabits its particular "being" or "mood."*

*We look forward to receiving your projects.*

*Cabinet*

On the day I am to write this piece, I am awakened a little before six by my older daughter, who calls to me from her room—“Dad! Dad? Are you here?”

Barely. I fell asleep about three hours ago.

Francesca’s mother and I are in the middle of a divorce, and rest does not come easy these days—there is too much to do, too much to think about.

The little girl’s question—a call in the dark—is, in effect, a question about all that. About what she calls the *separación*. Who is here in the house? she wants to know. Reasonable enough, since the last five months have been disruptive in that regard. Answer, this morning: me. Her mother (Puerto Rican, hence the Spanish) put her to sleep last night, before heading off on a business trip; we effected the handoff in almost perfect silence.

I get out of bed in the dark and tip-toe to the girls’ room. “Sí,” I whisper (since the baby, Consuelo, is still asleep in her crib in the corner)—“estoy aquí.”

And bending down to give her a kiss, I wish Francesca a happy birthday. She is five. Today. It’s my mother’s birthday too. She is turning sixty-six. My mother and my daughter: birth, life, generations, anniversaries. November 10. Plus it’s the assigned window for my contribution to the twenty-four-hour issue. A felicitous coincidence, to be sure. I’ve mulled the question a bit, and am sure, once I get the girls to school, that I can come up with something good for my piece: cycles of time; matrilineal foldings; love and lineage. Something. It will depend on my prompt, which will come at 10 am.

By seven thirty, we are, all three of us, dressed, and we’ve eaten. Francesca requests a coffee-milk with honeyed toast (my breakfast too). On her bread I sprinkle a little celebratory colored sugar, and she munches on this contentedly under a banner I painted the night before: “Happy Birthday Francesca!” She seems happy enough. Consuelo eats the same toast, but prefers juice. They play together in the living room while I make a pair of lunches (and separate snack bags).

But when it’s time to go, Francesca pleads off: she can’t go to school today, she explains; she’s not feeling well. Really? Absolutely. Bring me the thermometer. She stands there with the little white thermometer under her tongue for a minute. Beep. Normal. We parley. The truth is, she *is* a little sick. Sniffles. Not sick enough that she’d have to stay home, but sick enough that she could. Further parley. “Francesca, I have to work today you know—if you stay home, I still have to work. Are you going to be OK with that?” She swears to me that she is. Fine then, why not? She has plenty on her mind. I certainly don’t blame her for wanting to hang out. And, to be



Francesca’s drawing: a monster with a giant tongue, behind a tree; the small figure to the left (two eyes; no face) is “a little girl” reaching out her hand to embrace the monster.

honest, I’d rather hang out with her than do anything else.

Consuelo, however, wants to go to school. So Francesca—instantly answering to “mama” for her little sister—gussies her up in her jacket, and we walk out into a misty, warm morning.

For some inexplicable reason, Consuelo stops every three steps en route to the nursery to ask if there is something on her shoe—bending her ankles awkwardly outward to look at the soles of both feet while stopping pedestrian traffic on Broadway. There isn’t. But she cannot be persuaded of this. Freudian readings suggest themselves. I reflect on them while Francesca tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade her sister that she has not stepped in dog shit. We take a few more steps. “Mis zapatos!” Consuelo howls again. I am patient. Squat down. Explain that her shoes are clean. Show her. Walk two steps. Repeat. It takes about a half an hour to walk three blocks.

After we drop her off, Francesca and I stop in at a café for a cupcake. She asks me, her mouth full of orange icing, if she talked in her sleep last night (both girls seem fascinated by this idea, that they say things of which they are unaware). No. Not last night. She ground her teeth a fair bit, but I don’t get into that. Conversation edges toward the hard stuff, but we steer clear. The family. Probably new families, now. Give the whole thing some time, I suggest. We’ll see how it all works out. Meanwhile, I reassure her that I am her father, and I’m not going anywhere. She hangs around my neck, and

we make our way jauntily back to the apartment.

I check my phone as I take off our jackets, and my prompt has come (I can reflect on “a day that thematizes day-ness”—perfect for a birthday meditation), so my twenty-four hours have begun. But the awkward thing is, my writing time has just evaporated, since I am now sitting on the floor of my daughter’s room reading Longfellow’s galloping poem about Paul Revere for the second time. And there is no end in sight. I ask Francesca if she would be willing to let me work a bit, as we had agreed. She says that she’d rather not. Fair enough. I try the babysitter by phone, but there is no answer. Plan B.

I go and get a recent copy of *Cabinet* off the shelf (“Infrastructure,” as it happens), sit in my office chair, and pull Francesca onto my lap. “OK,” I say, “Dada has to write an article today for this *revista*.” I put it in her hands, and she leafs through the thick pages. “If you don’t want to play by yourself while I do it, I say we do it together. What do you think?” She’s amenable, and heads off to retrieve paper and pencils.

. . .

In what is probably the most memorable passage in *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss records the efforts of a Nambikwara headman to master, or at least enact, the occult power of the written word. This Amerindian leader can tell that real power lies there, in the relationship between the words on paper and the articulate voice of authority. He wants this power, and the pantomime that follows is tragic-comic. So much for literacy and politics. But what about the aesthetic dimensions of that same phonemic mastery? What about the sensory intoxications of the link between the moving tongue and the moving pencil? On all that Lévi-Strauss has little to offer.

My own sense, though, is that language sings before it can command. The Corybants, if you like, precede the emperor. No sooner could my daughters form a few crabby letters than they promptly became obsessed with the inscrutable alchemy that transmuted strings of characters into articulable sounds. And vice versa: they wanted to see their own vocalizations, however extravagant and meaningless, recorded on the page—and hear them read back. Was this about power? Not in any way that I could discern. It was about mad joy, the ecstasy of the moving mouth; and to this day they consistently greet the reliable, repeatable interconvertibility of invented text and voice with euphoric laughter and squeals of delight. These games, which can unfold for thirty or forty minutes at a time (often when I am interrupted at my desk, writing, and they burst in asking to “write” with

me), seem to fulfill multiple functions: the girls hear themselves heard, and see their own speech—see it attended to, considered, reiterated with conviction and a definite music; they see us *working together*, with words.

For me, there has been in all this the exquisite pleasures of what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls “philosophy through the looking glass”: a participatory and nearly angelic linguistic *délire*: a speech beyond language; a language beyond speech; the convergence of these paradoxes.

And so that is how Francesca and I fill much of the day (and page after page of my yellow legal pad). I take the pencil, and bend it to the page, turning to her for guidance as we curl up together. “OK,” I say, “what should we write for *Cabinet*? We have the whole afternoon—your birthday party starts at five.”

A choice selection from our work product follows, together with the picture she drew, sitting quietly at my side, while I typed up the first part of this little introduction (I finished it after the party, in the dark, sitting on the floor of their room as they fell asleep).

. . .

GAGA FICKEY MUNGEE  
WONKEY SATA BUBU  
FIMY LATTEE SIPPEY

PA-TA-CHU-TA  
FA-MUK-TA  
LACKITY-EE!  
FECKITY-OH!

MELEE-TITI  
Mm Mm Mm Mm Mm – LLLL!

FOAM—MM!

LEPS-TOAB  
TEXTEE—BUH!

STEPPEE GONG-GONG  
TU-SHA

STEBEY AUCHS—FFFFF

M-PAH, M-PAH  
CHU-CHU, CHU-CHU—BUH!