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## WHAT ABOUT THE UNDEVELOPED CAMERA? THE SITUATED IMAGE OF CARE

*Toby Blackman*

### ABSTRACT

This critical-creative essay explores the spatiotemporality of my father's dialysis treatment, drawing from the discourses of material culture, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and architecture to examine the situated image of his care. Photovoicing decentres the writing subject; my father's photographs image the sites and situations of treatment with discussion drawing out that which lies within and without the image. Attending to the entanglement of meanings formed in discussion of the image — in the spoken word, transcription, and the page — this essay writes site in the intervals of my father's treatment. This work reveals the relational, human, nonhuman, and collective assemblage of care, and the distributed ecology of its architecture.

## I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S HAPPENING

I pour myself a drink — a Vintage Manhattan — and settle on the sofa for my first listen of a new album, *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* (2023) by The National.<sup>1</sup> The opening track, 'Once Upon a Poolside', featuring Sufjan Stevens on piano, draws me in and centres me. I am present for the entire album. I don't move from the sofa, reach for my phone, or let my thoughts wander away from the work.

I can't keep talking, I can't stop shaking  
I can't keep track of everything I'm taking  
Everything is different, why do I feel the same?  
Am I asking for too much?  
Can't hear what you're saying<sup>2</sup>

*First Two Pages of Frankenstein* is a gentle vulnerable work which seems to speak directly to me on this day, in this moment, resonating with my thoughts, fears, and doubts. It seems frontman and songwriter Matt Berninger is speaking in turn to the listener, his fellow band members, and himself. Berninger speaks (sings) directly to not being able to write, to doubting he will ever be able to write again, and to the doubt-filled muted void of depression, pivoting around the relational spatial qualities of intimacy.

This is the closest we've ever been  
And I have no idea what's happening  
Is this how this whole thing is gonna end?  
This is the closest we've ever been<sup>3</sup>

It is an emotional first encounter with an album exploring kindness and expectation, time and space, material culture, and practice and performance. This work interweaves my encounter with the *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, threading and rethreading lyricists' and listener's lines with particular attention to the relational, the embodied, the sustaining, and the careful.

## SPLIT-SECOND GLIMPSES AND SNAPSHOTS AND SOUNDS

I keep what I can of you  
Split-second glimpses and snapshots and sounds  
You in my New Order t-shirt  
Holdin' a cat and a glass of beer

I flicker through  
I carry them with me like drugs in a pocket  
You in a Kentucky aquarium  
Talkin' to a shark in a corner<sup>4</sup>

I had bought Dad a disposable camera earlier in the year and asked him to show me what he saw and what he looked at, both during his dialysis treatment and in the intervals. Turning the camera over in his hand, he had asked himself, 'What do I see? What's in my life?'. The digital scans arrived today. I wasn't ready to look at them. Their beauty and the raw unfiltered poignancy of the situated image displaced my thoughts and almost entirely overwhelmed me. 'Like drugs in a pocket', I carried them with me into the album.<sup>5</sup>

Split-second glimpses and snapshots and sounds<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the rate of decline in kidney function had been gradual. The 'split-second glimpses and snapshots and sounds' recording Dad's kidney function — glomerular filtration rate (GFR), millilitre per minute, and breathlessness — first appeared low in 2021.<sup>7</sup> The warning signs — weight loss and low appetite, trouble sleeping, confusion, and shortness of breath — had come in and out of focus over time, signifying multiple realities and conditions, forming a syncopated rhythm.

Once the body's resistance was overcome, failure accelerated.

1 The National are a North American indie rock band who formed in 1999 and comprise five core band members: Scott and Bryan Devendorf form the rhythm section on bass and drums respectively; Aaron and Bryce Dessner are the multi-instrumental, compositional section on piano, keyboard, and guitar; Matt Berninger as the frontman and also lead songwriter with his wife (and silent band member) Carin Besser.

2 The National feat. Sufjan Stevens, 'Once Upon a Poolside', from *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* (4AD, 2023).

3 The National feat. Sufjan Stevens, 'Once Upon a Poolside'.

4 The National, 'New Order T-Shirt', *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* (4AD, 2023).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.



Figure 1. Maybe We Should Bury These, John Blackman, 2023.

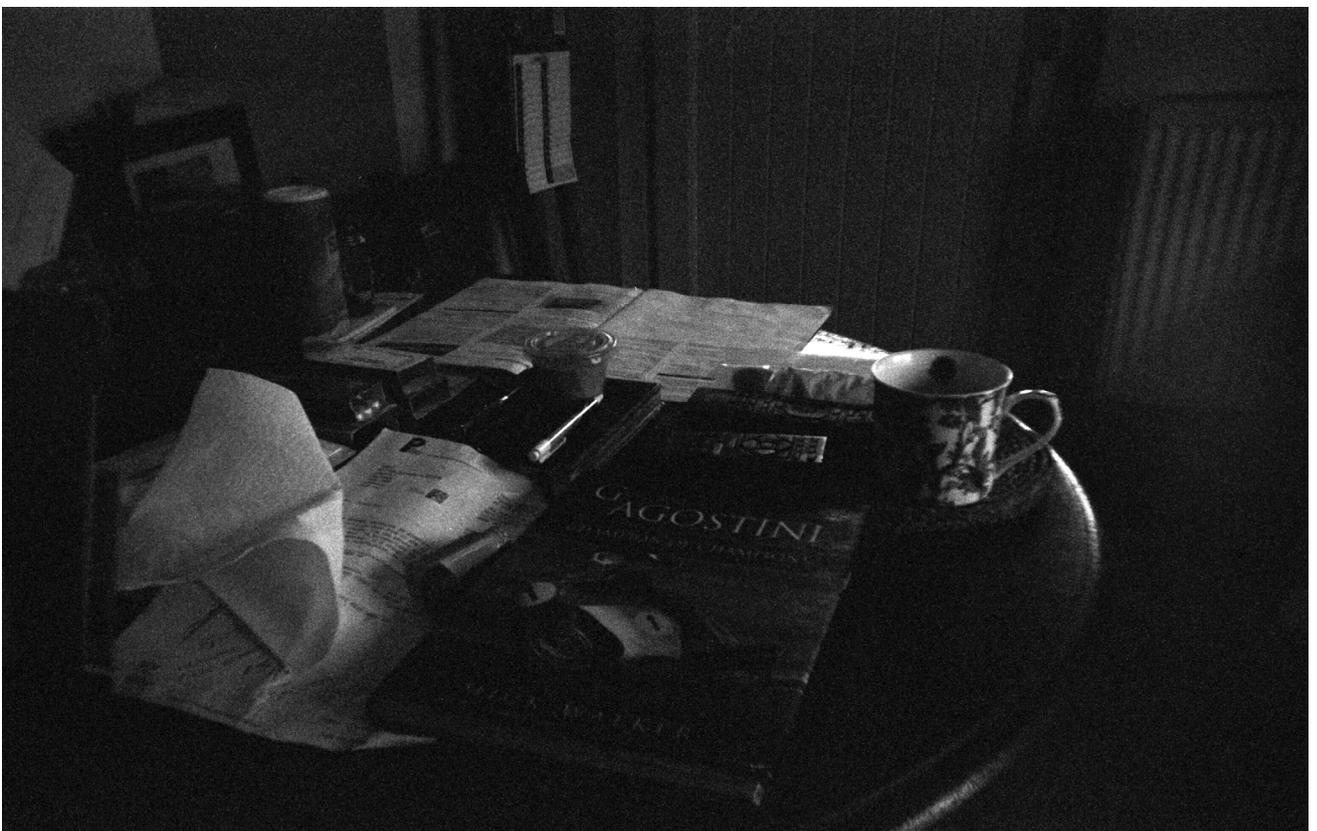


Figure 2. There's No Way You Can Attach Me to That, John Blackman, 2023.



Figure 3. I Don't Need White Lights Blinking, John Blackman, 2023.



Figure 4. Wipe a Smile on the Shatterproof Windows, John Blackman, 2023.

Dad was admitted to the Royal Cornwall Hospital for observation and exploratory testing of the heart, kidney, and lungs in 2022.

διάλυσις	dissolution
διά	dia
λύσις	lysis

διάλυσις — ‘dissolution’ in Greek, from διά (dia) meaning ‘through’ and λύσις (lysis) meaning ‘loosening or splitting’ — is the process of removing excess water, solutes, and toxins from the blood in people whose kidneys can no longer perform these functions naturally.

Dialysis treatment, or renal replacement therapy, is a permanent measure for Dad, forming a permanent spatiotemporal construction. Due to age and multiple co-morbidities, transplant was not option. Scleroderma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) have intersected with kidney failure to disrupt the circulatory and respiratory system; the internal equilibrium of water and minerals (sodium, potassium, chloride, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, sulphate) has shifted. Bodily rhythms and flows have slowed — liquid pooling, tissue hardening.

#### INTERVAL 1: IF I MISS IT, I’LL VISIT

In the photographic darkroom, continual movement and flow — of bodies and hands, liquid and light — is deliberate, calm, and sustaining. Stasis results in liquid-marked negatives or prints, overly dark space in the image. Time and space are bound together in the photographic process and practice; movement and agitation are vital.

What about the glass dandelions?  
What about the TV screen?  
What about the undeveloped camera?  
Maybe we should bury these<sup>8</sup>

Whilst hospitalised, my dad is hyperfixated on writing a will, fearful of passing without one in place. Neither my brother nor I want to claim situated objects and dismantle the relational assemblage of our father’s home (Figure 1). ‘What about the undeveloped camera? Maybe we should bury these.’<sup>9</sup>

#### INTERVAL 2: THERE’S NO WAY YOU CAN ATTACH ME TO THAT

Something went off on its own  
My dumb automatic chit-chat  
It’s not what I meant to say at all  
There’s no way you can attach me to that<sup>10</sup>

Folklorist Katherine Borland argues that ‘to refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution’, explaining ‘for the very fact that we constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories’.<sup>11</sup> I turn this over in my mind as I write the image, drawing out my ‘dumb automatic chit-chat’, and attaching my dad to its authorship.

Borland further suggests that ‘by extending the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation, we might more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research’.<sup>12</sup> I pick up the telephone and talk to Dad about why, what, and how I’m writing his image, the interpretations I’m forming, and the aspects, framing, and elements of the photographs which resonate with me.

8 The National, ‘Eucalyptus’, First Two Pages of Frankenstein (4AD, 2023).

9 Ibid.

10 The National, ‘Tropic Morning News’, First Two Pages of Frankenstein (4AD, 2023).

11 Katherine Borland, ‘That’s Not What I Said: Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research’, in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 1997), pp. 412–22 (p. 414), doi:10.4324/9780203435960.

12 Ibid., p. 421.

A black and white image of my father's table (Figure 2), his personal effects arranged across its surface. An empty mug to the right edge bisected by the larger radial edge of the table, picked out in the low sun. A biography of the Italian motorcycle racer Giacomo Agostini is prominently centred in the bottom of the image — *Giacomo Agostini: Champion of Champions* (2004) by Mick Walker. Dad's calendar hangs from Mum's easel, centre top, setting out the scheduling of his dialysis treatment and exploratory hospital appointments alongside a date for his beloved VW Passat to receive Waxoyl treatment at his local garage in Camelford, North Cornwall.

### INTERVAL 3: I DON'T NEED WHITE LIGHTS BLINKING

I've read, returned to, and thought about architectural theorist Katie Lloyd Thomas' writing on material and relational practices several times over recent years. In 'Between the womb and the world', Lloyd Thomas draws from French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's discourse on technical objects and systems, exploring 'relationality as itself a process'.<sup>13</sup>

I don't need ice machines  
I don't need speaker systems  
I don't need white lights blinking  
I don't need you to witness  
I don't need your forgiveness  
I don't need anything, but I do<sup>14</sup>

Lloyd Thomas argues that relational assemblages of care are 'constructed and specific', 'constituted through material processes that are particular to this system that is human, non-human and collective'.<sup>15</sup>

Dad suffers anticipatory anxiety in the intervals of treatment and panic attacks during haemodialysis. He receives haemodialysis three days per week — Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday — with each session lasting around four hours.

I don't need you to witness<sup>16</sup>

The process is hard for him and hard on him (Figure 3) but Dad refuses to allow sufficient fluid to be drained to ease his breathing and better enable sleep. He has not talked to his nurses about the anxiety or the panic he experiences.

My father's renal replacement therapy is a relational assemblage — human, nonhuman, and collective.

### WIPE A SMILE ON THE SHATTERPROOF WINDOWS

If you're ever in a psychiatric greenhouse with slip-on shoes  
Wipe a smile on the shatterproof windows  
I'll know what to do<sup>17</sup>

I gave my dad a simple, analogue, Ilford disposable camera, preloaded with black and white, 35 mm HP5 400 Plus film and equipped with a 30 mm f/9.5 lens for this project. The images produced are situated — spatially, temporally, positionally — and embodied through eye-level photographic practice. The camera is operated manually, the image framed in a viewfinder. The film's contact sheet reveals a confident documentary approach to recording the relational assemblage of care's spatiotemporal site. A photographic, reverse-angle, 'smile on the shatterproof windows' of the Bodmin Renal Unit (Figure 4).

Send for me, whenever, wherever  
Send for me, I'll come and get you

13 Katie Lloyd Thomas, 'Between the Womb and the World: Building Matrixial Relations in the NICU', in *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity*, ed. by Peg Rawes (Routledge, 2013), pp. 192–207 (p. 194), doi:10.4324/9780203770283.

14 The National, 'Ice Machines', *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* (4AD, 2023).

15 Lloyd Thomas, 'Between the Womb and the World', p. 206.

16 The National, 'Ice Machines'.

17 The National, 'Send For Me', *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* (4AD, 2023).

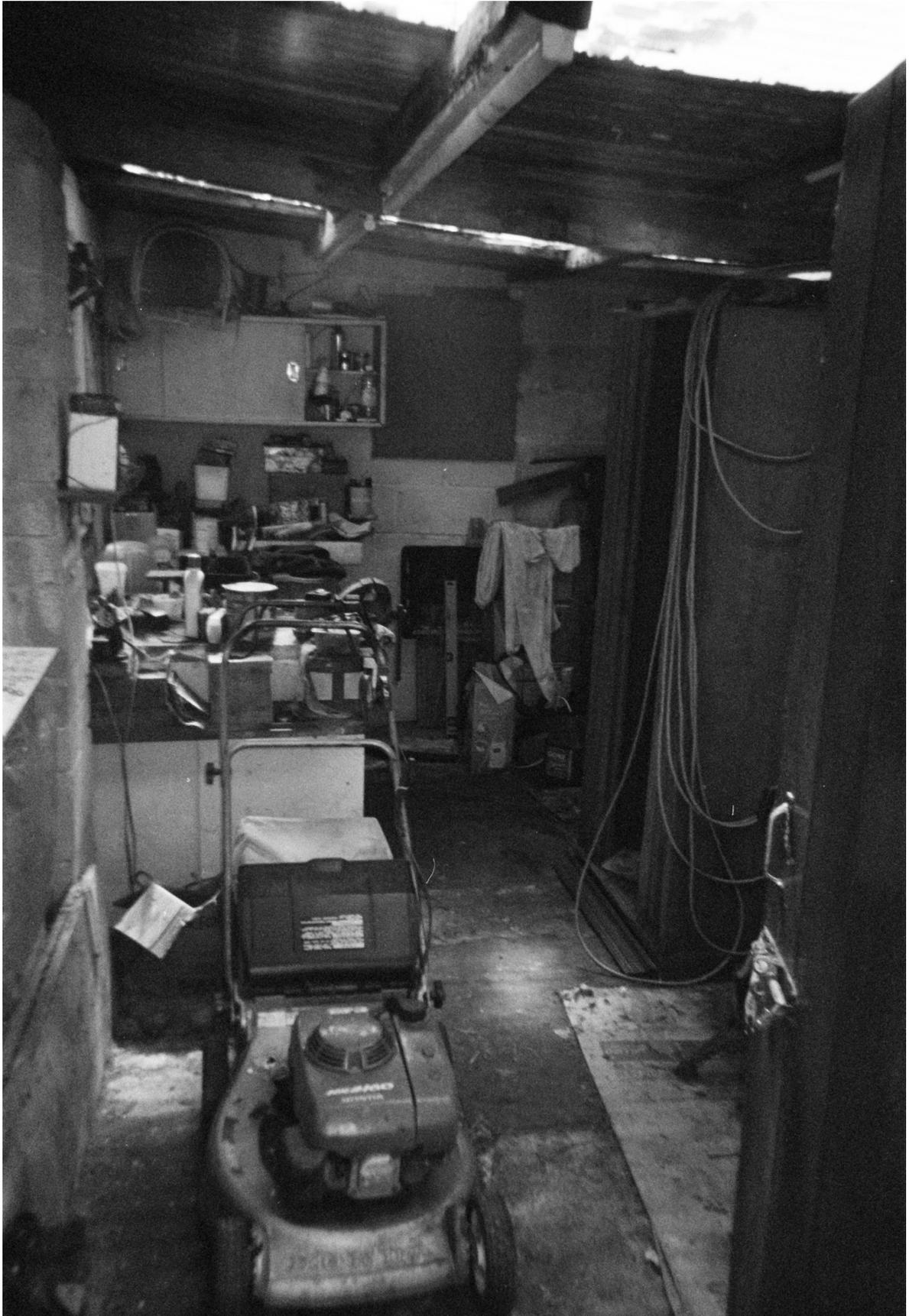


Figure 5. If You're Ever in a Psychiatric Greenhouse with Slip-On Shoes, John Blackman, 2023.

Send for me, whenever, wherever <sup>18</sup>

Dad photographed only one subject more than once, his lawnmower (Figure 5) — an image of care, maintenance, and sustained mechanical sympathy instilled in my brother and I in childhood and young adulthood. The fuel tap was always to be turned off on the lawnmower to ensure the system drained down and that deposits didn't accumulate and harden. Literary theorist Diana Fuss and architect and educator Joel Sanders suggest both architecture and psychoanalysis 'are cultural discourses of the seen and the unseen'.<sup>19</sup> The dialectic image extends the childhood conversation, formed in the constellation of what lies within the image and without, in the present and in the past. This work has sought to write site in the space and time of the dialectic image — in the intervals of Dad's treatment — revealing love, care, rhythm, and peace in this human, nonhuman, and collective architecture of care.

<sup>18</sup> The National, 'Send For Me'.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders, 'Berggasse 19: Inside Freud's Office', in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. by Joel Sanders (Routledge, 1996), pp. 112–39 (p. 113), doi:10.4324/9781003014720.

## RESPONSE TO TOBY'S TEXT

by Naina Gupta

*Thank you, Toby – for sharing such a beautiful paper.*

*Your paper was like a piece of music as it moved through the different elements, and it resonated with me at a level that was very personal, because I too am watching my father slowly disappear.*

*To capture the rhythms of your paper – I diagrammed it. It started as a simple diagram and I repeated it a few times, each time, coming closer to the bones of the piece – or so I hoped. I could tell that with each iteration the process of diagramming was taking control and was losing some of its innocence. I dreamed about it and when I woke, I wondered if each of those simple empty boxes should have words from the text or should have a shape. It had started to assume too much space – it demanded that it should be freed from your words and then I knew I had to stop. A response, while a distinct object, should not, I believe, attempt to become a monologue. I had to curtail and limit it.*

*There are two ideas that captured my attention. I will call these the chorus. I think they alternate but I am not sure. I tried to see if they had a pattern in the diagram. The first is what I consider the main theme of the piece [movement, pooling, and hardening] as it encompasses stages of grief, stages of aging and I am sure, so many other things. The other is the tempo-spatiality of constructing relations through [sequencing, editing, arranging, juxtaposing...]. The fluidity of these relations has hardened just enough for you to be able to share this with me and us. In this way, rather than signal an end, 'hardening' becomes a moment for a new movement to begin – a way to construct new relations through the eyes or voice of the other. Thank you for taking me through that.*

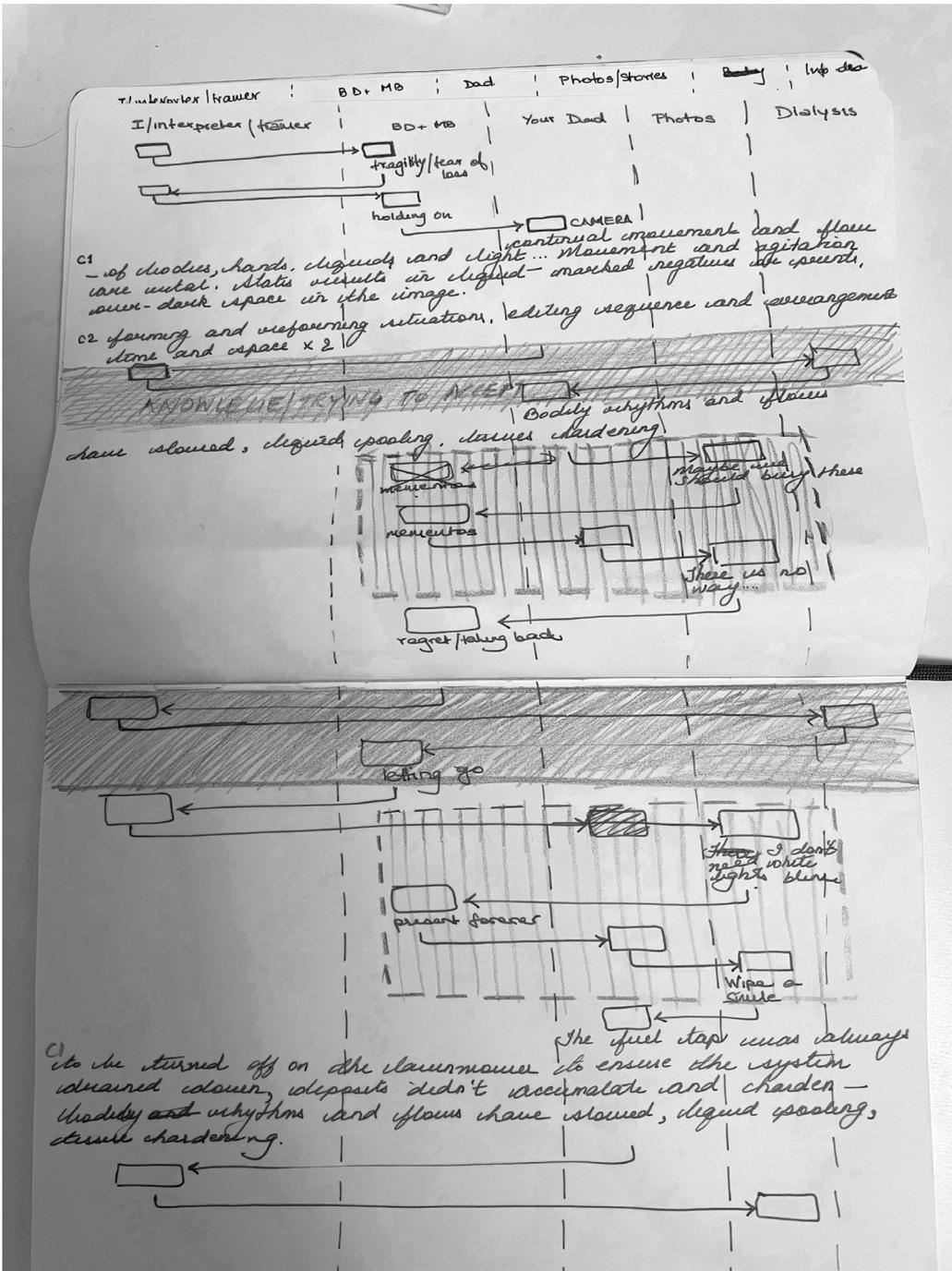


Figure 6. Diagramming the response.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Toby Blackman*

Toby is an architect and artist conducting teaching and scholarship at the intersection of architecture, film and photography. Drawing on the discourses and critical practices of site, writing, feminist film theory and photography, his work explores the embodied, hidden, and ambiguous temporality of architecture. Toby studied Architecture at the University of Edinburgh and Architectural History at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, building on learning across Fine Art (Painting) and the History of Art (Varndean College, Brighton), Photography (Oxford Brookes University) and Film (London Film School). Toby has exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy Annual Exhibition, and his work was Highly Commended in the 2019 Blueprint Architecture Photography Awards and 2022 Architecture Foundation Writing Prize. His writing has been published in *Architecture and Culture*, *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, *Site-Reading Writing Quarterly*, and *Visual Studies*. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University.

