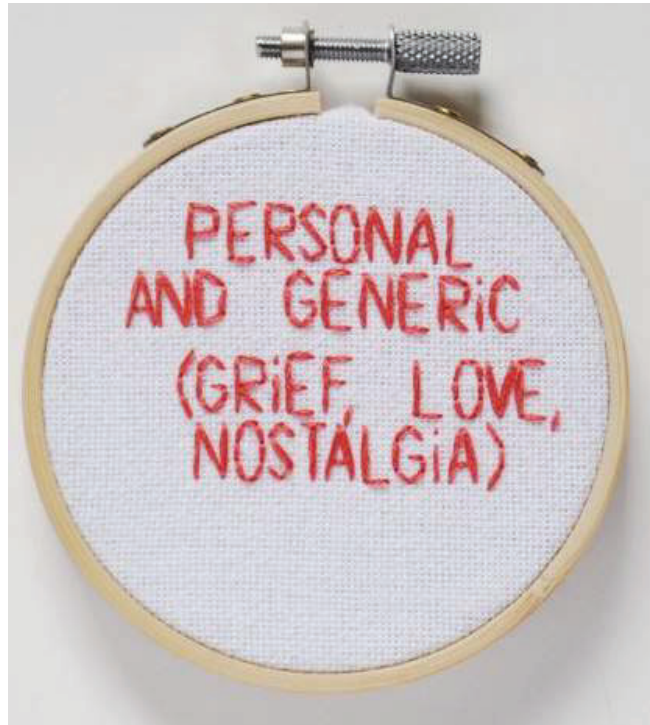
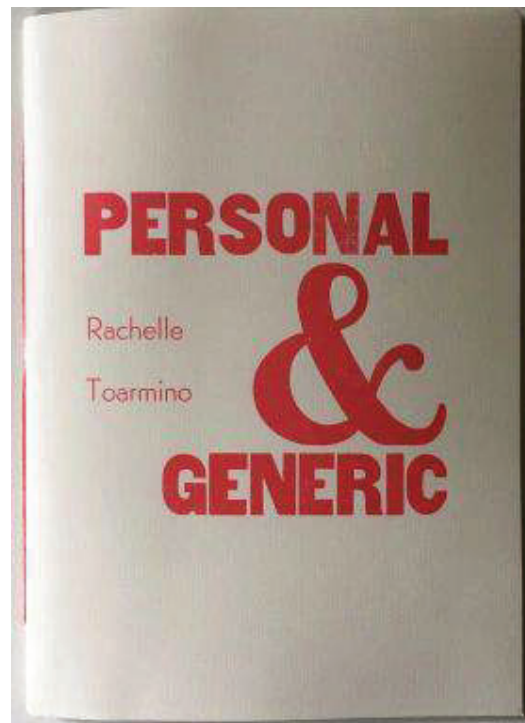


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READER

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*An Interview with  
Rachelle Toarmino*



**The works in *Personal & Generic* were originally displayed as an art exhibition at Sugar City in Buffalo, NY and then later became a chapbook published by PressBoardPress... How did these things come about?**

Every February arts collaborative Sugar City organizes a project called Fun-a-Day. The idea is to do something creative every day, either a skill you want to learn or something you want to improve or force yourself to focus on, and sometime in March, there's a gallery showing of everyone's work. People get really into it. It helps us get through the Buffalo winters.

Patrick Riedy, the guy who operates PressBoardPress, is a good friend of mine, and he approached me about doing a chapbook after seeing my progress with the project about halfway through.

**Where did the title come from?**

Originally I called the collection *Everyone Ever* because it was intended to accompany my next chapbook, *Everyone*. One of the smaller poems (weird to think of a poem as small and not short) says, "personal and generic: grief, love, nostalgia." Patrick and I began to work with this as a title instead because it seemed to say the most about the experience I had with the project itself. Creating something, intending it to mean one thing and then watching it generate new meanings and associations once it was introduced into the gallery, made that something both personal and generic. Like how grief means something particular to every individual person, but it becomes something more unhinged when we start talking about it, depending on the listener's experiences with grief or lack of grief.

I also realized about a third of the way into the project that at the end of March I would end up with twenty-nine embroidery hoops of my own work, so I decided that they would be gifts for friends. Something about someone owning an object-poem of my work felt very personal and intimate, and exposing that feeling over and over to friend after friend made that feeling get loose and become generic.

**How did you select the lines you embroidered? Are they parts of longer poems or do they stand alone? Or perhaps they become a poem when they're collected all together? Or... I could stop guessing and just ask you the question...**

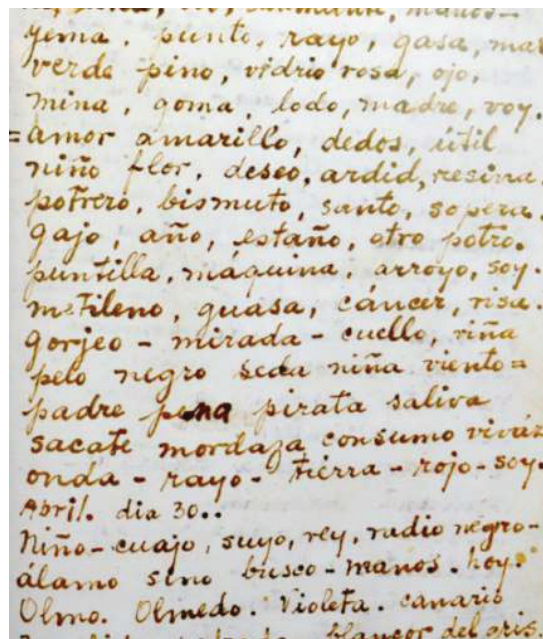
The lines were originally written to be standalone pieces, with each frame acting as something finished. I'm usually more of a maximalist when it comes to writing, erring on the side of inclusion, but that can be challenging for poetry. I'm certainly no stranger to 140 characters or less, but the physical limitations of the embroidery hoop and the time commitment of sewing forced me to be more economical with my words in this new way.



Later on, some of the hoops began to seem like they belonged with other hoops, and I collaged them into longer poems, but the project began as an experiment with selection and shutting up.

**Who/what are you inspired by in terms of art that uses language? Or language that uses art?**

When I came up with the idea for this project, I was inspired by a few artists whose work made me think a lot about the intersection of reading and looking. I had been reading Frida Kahlo's diary a lot, especially the pages where she'd paint these long lists of words, and I kept getting caught up not only in the way her words interacted together, but in how moved I was to look at her handwriting.

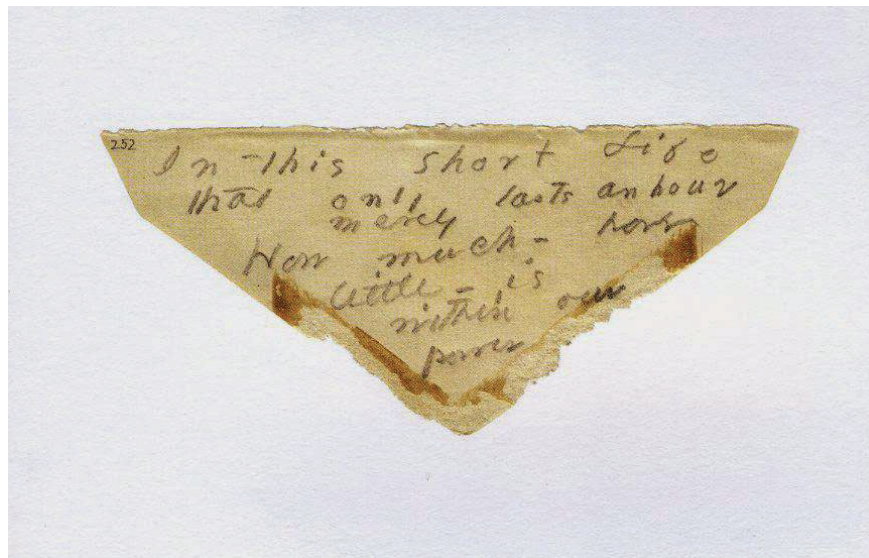


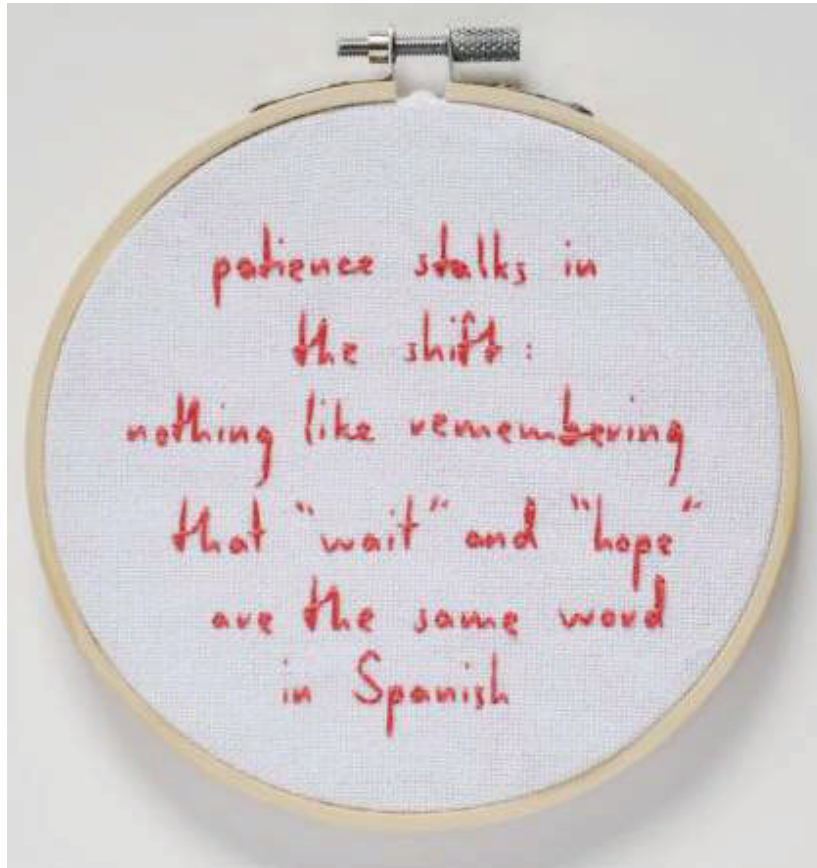
I'm very grateful and proud to be living during a time when sharing poems can be as quick and easy as sending a text message, but I also think there's something uniquely intimate about seeing someone's handwriting that is lost in type. I think of the moments with my students when someone forgets to put their name on a worksheet, and I ask the class, "Whose is this?" and they all always know. For this reason, I chose to embroider all of the text in *Personal & Generic* in my own handwriting.

I had also been getting into this visual artist Roni Horn, who took lines from Emily Dickinson's poems and created these sharp installations out of them for a project called *Earth Grows Thick*:



And then, of course, there's Emily Dickinson herself, whose envelope poems made me really excited about what happens when a poem can exist as an object – not just something to look at or read, but to hold, touch, keep.





**This is one my favorite pieces from the book!**

**I read online somewhere that you lived in Spain for a few years?**

I spent three years working in Spain as an ESL teacher – first two in Madrid, final one in Granada – and my current day job is teaching Spanish at an elementary school in Buffalo. I didn't know any Spanish before my stint abroad, and learning a new language through the lens of English had me experiencing something akin to childlike joy when I encountered these little details. How beautiful it is to consider that waiting is a form of hoping is just one example. In the same way, I was constantly inspired by my Spanish students, who had to speak English with me in order to communicate, but who sometimes did not have the skill or vocabulary. One time, in an art class I was teaching, a student explained a swirl to me as "lines hugging."

Kimmy Walters has a great poem where she writes, "you can only be told how / eloquently you express grief so many times / before you start to feel like a pain farm / the solution is to learn another language / and speak it like a child forever." When you're exposed daily to the absence of language and the frustrations that follow, it seems like a miracle that we can express ourselves at all.

**This is another one of my favorite pieces.**



**Do you think it affects the way you relate to the words when you have to sew them together by hand? Do you think you feel them more?**

I think I actually felt them less, although I often thought about the sensation of feeling them less. In his new book, Ben Lerner talks about this phenomenon in linguistics called “semantic saturation,” in which you repeat a word over and over until you become uncomfortably aware that it’s just noise and sound. I spent so much time sewing each individual letter that I felt something similar to that. I became very conscious of the awkward fact that words and letters are just lines, and I felt like I was pulling them apart.

**Your poem, ‘You Up?’ has been a really popular part of our new KINETIC issue! Can you talk a little about the writing of that poem and how you came up with the idea for the format?**

“You up?” is all about the thoughts and memories and ideas you want to share with someone when you’re falling in love. It took form as a zigzag because I wanted to somehow express a tidal waxing and waning to the movement of those thoughts, the way they move in and out. I wanted it to feel sleepy, but like the poem is fighting sleep.

**Thanks Rachelle :)**

**Personal & Generic is available from PressBoardPress now  
You can follow Rachelle on Twitter \***