

Drawing: the Point of Contact

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Thank you to my husband Anton, with the biro line on your mouth. In ways we could not have foreseen when this project began, this work has been your labour too. I dedicate these pages to you, and to our son, who was born while I was writing and put the writing in its proper place.

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Til Anatole og Anton

Abstract

This thesis is a study of the point of contact between pencil and paper during certain acts of drawing. It comprises three elements. Firstly, five ‘drawings’ which together raise the central question of the thesis: what arrests me, in the manner of a Barthesian *punctum*, about the point of contact between pencil and paper (and their proxies) in these particular drawings? These drawings are in evidence through written accounts introducing each chapter, and they are: (1) a practice of ‘half-blind’ life drawing; (2) a line drawn around the internal perimeter of a house; (3) several voice recordings made while walking in the dark; (4) a biro line drawn across a bed sheet; (5) a row of ink blots at the foot of a page. Secondly, the present document, which shows the endeavour of answering this question. Thirdly, a display of artefacts left over from the five drawings and the writing, which pose a question at the close of the thesis: when the writing is completed, what is left of the drawings that set it going?

The present document is undertaken ‘drawingly’: employing a methodology and form learned from the point of contact at its centre and developed as a mode of enquiry adequate to this *punctum*’s apparent resistance to being named or wholly analysed. Building upon Jean-Luc Nancy’s characterization of a working drawing as a search for form, Derrida’s description of the ‘aperspective’ of the drawing stylus, and Laura U. Marks’ analysis of haptic visuality, this methodology lies at the intersection between the blindness associated with drawing, the association of vision with knowledge, and the association of creative work with not knowing. It is characterized by moving forward with acute attentiveness and close proximity to the object under scrutiny; paying myopically close attention to associations when and where they arise; accepting and thematizing the fact—and the risk—that such a perspective restricts the view of an end-point, of the wider imaginative and critical landscape around, and indeed of a blind spot at the centre of the object; and heeding the prospect—and, again, the risk—of ‘surfacing’ from myopia into circumspect analysis. Like Nancy’s working drawings, the completed thesis is proposed as a working document that bears the marks of the search for form it constitutes.

In these terms, the present document arrives at a description of the point of contact as a figure for the ultimately frustrated attempt to consummate or cancel out some experience that is felt to be excessive. Finally, the document itself is proposed as such a figure, a proposal that in turn revises the original assumption that the *punctum* is the point of contact in drawing, instead revealing this point of contact as a highly wrought description of some further object that remains unidentified and unconsummated, but somewhat changed by being described.

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Foreword

There are five things here on the desk: a roll of drawings, a blunt pencil, my computer with a digital folder of voice recordings, a bed sheet once marked with a biro line, a row of ink blots at the foot of a folded page of handwriting. Of the many drawings I have made over the past several years, all but these I have been able to put to rest. Something about the point of contact between pencil and paper arrests me in each of them, and I cannot understand what it is—especially where no pencil nor paper is involved and yet I still perceive the involvement of something like them. If I can isolate this point in each of these drawings, one by one, then gradually I might arrive at an understanding of what it is that so arrests me, and in this way put these drawings to rest.



Fig 1. The five drawings on my desk.

Chapter 1: The life drawings



Fig 2. Detail of one of my half-blind life drawings.

1.1

The scuffed sheets of cartridge rolled up on my desk are the drawings and notes I made over a couple of autumn months four years ago. I had joined an evening life drawing class because I never seemed to draw any more. I have not looked at the drawings much since, but I remember the class well.

Each session opened with a couple of very quick poses, then some five or ten minute exercises focusing on light, tone or line, and then work would begin on a final half-hour pose. Before embarking on this final drawing we were reminded of how to mark up our pages to avoid making errors of measurement or composition that might only surface when it was too late to correct them. We should hold out our pencils against our view of the model, horizontally and then vertically, and use these impromptu rulers to measure with our thumbs a set of relative heights and distances between landmarks about his body: shoulder to knee, for instance, shoulder to toe, and head to navel to hand. The task was to plot this network of points onto the page and elaborate them into a composed and proportioned image that should resemble, in the end, what each of us saw of the model from where we were standing.

The drawings I produced in this way always seemed to lack something, and it took me a while to understand what. Certainly I was out of practice, and to look at, the drawings were not all they could have been. But it was not a problem of looking, it was a problem of touch. The drawings lacked what I realized I must have come to the class to enjoy: the soft fur and scratch of the lead with the grain, the time spent against the page, the tugging and coaxing and scraping of form—there was none of this. Instead, before the encounter had

even begun I had constructed an invisible apparatus of sight-lines to articulate the gap between the model and my eye, and between my eye and hand and page: an apparatus that hardened the network of landmarked points and the features between them, extracted them, shifted them through the air and delivered them onto the paper. The apparatus seemed to get in the way, or seemed to thicken the air and make that get in the way, with the effect that the model's body and my drawing were held apart by the very lines of sight that were meant to bridge them. The pencil darted about in the air like a scalpel or a beak, pecking at the paper rather than burrowing into it, and without those sensitive and spontaneous excavations, drawing with a pencil didn't seem such a compelling thing to do.

When I went back the following week I drew in a different way. I looked only at the model, and never once at the page, until the drawing was done. I continued to work in this way, half-blind as I thought of it, for the rest of the drawing course. It was engrossing to draw like this. It seemed to seal up the gap between the object and the page and the eye, contracting all the imaginary apparatus into one point of contact that sees, measures and marks in a singular probing act which, best of all, is always only the burrowing activity that engages me most about pencil work.

The way I worked was to plant my eye at some point on the skin of the model, and at the same time plant the tip of my pencil at some point on the empty page, which from then on would refer to the corresponding point on the model's skin. Now paired against their surfaces, the eye would begin to root its way across the skin as the pencil began to root its way across the page. The tip of the pencil became the tip of the eye—a groping proboscis feeling its way about the soft form of the object and seeing only the little dot of its surface presently under description by the very end of the lead. As the eye moved so did the pencil, as much as I could manage, and in this way the eye navigated the page by means of

the blind point of the pencil, and drawing proceeded without my ever looking at the page nor ever losing contact with its surface.

Some weeks I would try to make the drawing resemble the model, and to do this I needed to be more strategic. Once paired against the page and the model's skin, pencil and eye had to move exactly in time with one another, because if either temporarily slowed down or sped up inconsistencies of scale tended to be introduced. If they both moved too quickly details might be missed that could not be revisited for correction later on, because I would be unable to find the place again. Every detail needed attending to at the very place and time it was first encountered. Burrowing about the surface of the page, the tip of the pencil maintained contact with the model's body only by the contact it maintained with the paper, so if it came detached from the page the body and the drawing would drop out of sight and could not be retrieved.

Sometimes I was able to adjust marks laid down very recently and very close by. It turned out to be possible to retrace a route just taken provided the muscles of my hand could remember the last few flexes of the fingers or the last adjustment of the wrist, and were able to repeat this sequence of movements in reverse. The memory of the hand offered a couple of inches of revision—a second or so—and this redress could be put to use strategically. For instance, I might find the junction between the model's knuckle and fingers comprises five paths short enough that each finger can be traced onto the page with each return trip to the knuckle brief enough and swift enough that the muscle memory of my drawing hand can render it all quite well. But it would be a different matter at more complex or multiple junctions of his body. What would happen when the forearm intersected the collarbone, escalated into a hand of its own and then needed returning to the collarbone to intersect it a little further along, such that the positions and angles of the arm, and the remaining length of collarbone looked uninterrupted by my foray through the

hand and back again? The muscles of my drawing hand would fail to remember a procedure as complex as this, and tides of error would be introduced. The form would end up flayed across the page, elements pivoting through one another at every junction. I would try alternative strategies: crawling the pencil along in a series of branching advances and retreats, or choosing the routes that might be salvaged by muscle memory and attending to them together, then accepting as inevitable that regions with sparse detail will disorient the pairing of pencil and eye, creating regions and contours that are irregular or indistinct; and that any route I choose might leave whole islands altogether unreachable, and corresponding gaps on the page.

I began to bring thread and masking tape with me to the classes, and later on blu-tac and drawing pins too. With these I would construct lines, regions and points to guide my hand as it moved blindly about the page. It meant I would spend the first few minutes of each pose preparing the paper, estimating the centre point and marking it with a drawing pin, or taping thread onto the drawing board to bisect the page horizontally and vertically and give me four quadrants into which I could divide my composition. Sometimes I would measure the model with my thumb held out against my pencil, as we had in the first class, and plot certain landmarks on the page in blu-tac before I began to draw, so I could elaborate the reference points later on by touch. The more intricate the apparatus the more accurate a picture I was able to draw, and with practice I learned to obtain a drawing that quite closely resembled its object. The tip of my eye and the tip of my pencil were still paired as before, and they would still move about their respective surfaces in time with one another, but now my hand was obliged to the guides as well, and had to get used to subtly stretching time, or stretching space by speeding or slowing its movement. The correspondence of hand and eye had lost its closeness. It had become only one of a complex of correspondences that included the skin of the model and its relation to the flatness of the page, my memory of how I had divided up the page and its relation to my

view of the model, and how all of these related to the feel of thread or other apparatus that would sometimes, unexpectedly or otherwise, cross my path. By this stage I had noticed I was losing interest in assembling these ever-more complex guides. There came a point, I felt, that I might as well just be looking at the page.

*

Throughout the life drawing course I was engrossed, I believe, in the experience and sensation of drawing. But at the same time I was gripped by the detail of the drawing process. Every little aspect of the process seemed to me a completely new invention, and moreover seemed to bristle at every turn with obscure significance, as though every aspect were a metaphor for something unknown, or at least not visible from where I stood. Perhaps if I could stand somewhere else I would be able to see. Perhaps this is why I was so anxious to store in my memory every peculiarity of the process: the strategies, restrictions and obligations, the precision of the matching of pencil and eye and surface and skin, and the ranging of touch and sight; what was missing and what was there in excess. Perhaps I wanted to store them so that I could be among them again at another time, from another vantage point. Whatever the reason, these reflections nagged and nagged at me until the effort to remember them, and the anxiety that I might forget them, began to distract me from the drawing altogether.

When this happened, maybe two or three times in the course of a half-hour drawing, I would stop work, scribble a note at the right-hand edge of the page, and then resume drawing. *Braver lines*, reads one note: *through space*, | *launching forth*, | *not blind* | *in the dark*. Coming across such notes now, a few years after they were written, it is difficult for me to recall what I must have meant. In some of the notes this difficulty is compounded by

the handwriting, which is scrawling and ambiguous: was it *launching forth*, or *launching form*? *Not blind*, or *not island*? In any case I remember how these scrawls were put onto the page. When I needed to write something down I would fix my eyes very keenly on the model's skin and, without moving the pencil from its position on the page I would feel my way towards its tip with my left hand, which until then would generally have been propped at the top edge of the drawing board to keep it steady. The left thumbnail would press against the tip of the pencil, oriented in the direction of its movement, and then, eyes still fixed in place, the pencil could be lifted up from the thumbnail marker and away from the page. From here it was easy enough to feel with my right hand the right edge of the page, scribble the words, locate the thumbnail again and go on with the drawing in the direction indicated by its orientation. It took a greater effort of concentration to hold my eyes exactly still throughout the operation, and perhaps they did wander a little without my noticing. Little gaps or interruptions in the line were no doubt also introduced when I made these notes, but these were a small price to pay if I could shed the distraction of trying to keep everything in mind.

But it would accumulate again, and more than once I stopped drawing altogether and left the studio early so no more would come. On the walk home, drawings rolled up under my arm, I would try to go through everything that had happened, and sometimes, because there was more I was anxious to remember and I could not write as I walked, I would speak into my phone to record my thoughts. Once home with the drawings laid out across the desk and listening back to the recordings, I would consider everything at a pace I found acceptable: slowly and uninterrupted by the generation of even more.

Of course more comes anyway, even now that no drawing is going on. It seems to me that all this work has yielded two kinds of forms: the visible forms marked in pencil on the page, and the invisible forms of the processes that had created those pencil marks. Both kinds of form tend to germinate and become increasingly proliferate the more time I spend with them. I can look at the marks on the page and identify the body parts I have drawn, even if some are ambiguous or sparsely described. But if I study patches of pencil marks close up, or squint and take in whole compositions at once, I can also see resemblances of things I had never knowingly drawn, like seeing particular pictures in clouds or blots of ink, but more concerted somehow. If I look at it long enough the scribbled joint of a knuckle, for instance, resembles a copse of trees, then a root system or a junction of roads, then a clump of eyes or mouths or parts of ears, and now foliage again. One image shifts into another, sometimes swiftly and sometimes gradually and partially, so that distinct pictures might coexist or temporarily borrow one another's parts. But the same is true of the other kind of forms, if form is really the right word to use: the invisible impressions and ideas that have collected around the drawing process. Although I cannot see their forms they are palpable enough to grip hold of in my imagination, and I can spend time with them. As I squint and scrutinize them I have found they bristle with resemblances in just the same way as the configurations of pencil they left on the page. The moving tip of the pencil becomes the tap of the seeing eye of a white cane, for instance, which taps a line or taps a reservoir that leaks and spills, or it grazes the surface of the ground at the risk of harming its ocular membrane, which becomes the scratched tip of the pencil again, and so on. These invisible forms and their analogues move through and across one another in my mind, coexisting, borrowing one another's parts, reinforcing, changing and tempering one another as I watch. As they continue to proliferate, the bonds between them multiply and thicken and spread out, attaching to one another at the edges and from inside. One idea splits into many more, each of these diverting through paths of their own, some closer, some further away, some vanishing only to reappear, strange and familiar, later on.

*

It seems to me, as I write, that these resemblances are to be taken seriously. If I can follow their proliferation I might hope to approach whatever point they circle around. There is no directing the course of their growth, but there is something familiar about the way they grow that leads me to the looming impression—a kind of heavy inkling—that they are all describing the nature of the very tip of the pencil, and the particular kind of contact it makes as it moves about the page. Just this tiny thing. A dot. I am surprised it has enough mass to pull me towards itself.

Meanwhile the inkling is so heavy, and slow, and familiar.

Perhaps, instead, it is the inkling that pulls me towards itself, and not the dot. If it is, then following the course of these resemblances might yield a description of something else altogether, which from here remains unknown—and this something else will have been what arrested me in these drawings after all.

1.2

A theologian loses his sight¹. He learns to make his way¹ to work¹. By sound, smell, the movement of air on his skin¹ and the tap of the cane against the pavement he learns to track his position on the ground with some precision. Meanwhile his mind is in the air, so to speak, picturing himself as a moving point on a memorised¹ map of the route. As long as he can keep his movement along the ground and on the map in time with one another, he knows where he is. It becomes difficult when the two topologies suddenly cease to correspond. An obstacle on the pavement can throw him off course completely¹. With the white cane he can move around small obstacles without losing his bearings, but with larger or more complex obstructions it is a different matter. A car parked across the pavement, or worse, one car after another parked at unexpected angles, are structures that risk introducing tides of error into his course as he tries to follow their perimeters back to the route he is taking. Turned through all these angles he might still know more or less where he is on the memorized map, but not which way he is facing¹ (Hull, *Touching the Rock*, 90-91).

Loses his sight. His story reads like a parable, although the lesson it teaches is unclear.

He learns to make his way. I imagine he *makes* his way more than I, who can see, make mine.

To work. The object(ive) of his drawing. His walk produces not the line of his movement but his arrival at work.

The movement of air on his skin. Not only by sound, smell and the movement of air on his skin. Hull is one of many blind people who experience a phenomenon called facial vision, or echolocation. It is a physical sensation that makes you aware of objects in your immediate vicinity, given certain conditions (such as quietness and concentration) and, for Hull, provided that the objects are “about as bulky as a tree trunk or a human body” and no smaller (*Touching the Rock*, 22). He explains: “The experience itself is quite extraordinary, and I cannot compare it with anything else I have ever known. It is like a sense of physical pressure. One wants to put up a hand to protect oneself, so intense is the awareness. One shrinks from whatever it is. It seems to be characterized by a certain stillness in the atmosphere. Where one should perceive the movement of air and a certain openness one becomes aware of a stillness, an intensity instead of an emptiness, a sense of vague solidity. The exact source of the sensation is difficult to locate. It seems to be the head, yet often it seems to extend to the shoulders and even the arms. [...] The sense of pressure is upon the skin of the face, rather than upon or within the ears. That must be why the older name for the experience was ‘facial vision’” (23-24).

I wonder if his account sounds the way it does—conversational, open to possibility, feeling its way—because it is composed in the moment of speaking.

Then again, perhaps I hear these qualities in his account only because I know he spoke it into a tape recorder.

I would like to know if he spoke to an imaginary listener as he recorded, or just to the tape.

Memorised. I watched a film once of a child's sight being restored. While he was blind he would race around the house, every orienting marker—doorknobs, lampstands, the plant pot on the windowsill—landing at his fingertips just as he expected. These were his pivots and he would ricochet from them and navigate his home with reckless precision. The film showed him running down the stairs and out of the door, excited to get to the hospital for the procedure.

Once home from the hospital, his restored sight seemed to blank out what he knew about his surroundings. He stumbled and tripped, his turns were miscalculated, his feet and fingertips weren't where he expected them. He had to learn to make his way around all over again.

Blind, bind.

Many years ago I heard a woman on the radio telling the story of her grandmother leaping and dancing arabesques through the fields as a little girl, delighted that the proud day had come for her feet to be bound. The irony is so concise I now find myself wondering if I have misremembered, and it was fiction after all.

Was it Emily Prager's short story "A Visit from the Footbinder"? It describes much the same thing happening, only it was set in the China of 1260 and the child scampers around a palace not the countryside, while her elder female relatives shuffle and walk with canes. Her story was criticized for perpetuating "the opposition between Western observer and Eastern 'object,' reinforcing a readerly politics of domination" (Newman, "The Readerly Politics," 6).

Exotics, erotics, "visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable" (Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 184).

"The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This 'not knowing,' this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come" (Levinas, "Time and the Other," 51).

Throw him off course completely. “Consider the *traceur* who in refusing to stay within the limits of what is considered normative, welcomes the obstacle that forces an arabesque about-turn mid-flight, the vertiginous somersault of a flow folded back over into eloquent coils or perilous freefall” (Cocker, “The Restless Line, Drawing,” xv).

Which way he is facing. There is a game children play. One puts on a blindfold and is spun around and around by the other children, slowly to begin with and then more quickly until she no longer knows which way she is facing. As she begins to stumble the other children flee and she runs after them, hands outstretched, following the sound of their voices until she has caught each one—or else gives up, unties the blindfold and restores herself to sight. She knows that the knot is within her reach and she can untie it at any time¹, but she also knows that if she does it will bring the game to an end.

She can untie it at any time. “*Naturally* his eyes *would be able* to see. But they are *blindfolded* [...] not naturally but by the hand of the other, or by his own hand, obeying a law that is not natural or physical since the knot behind the head remains within a hand’s reach of the subject who could undo it [...], as if he chose it, at the risk of a fall¹” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 13, emphasis original).

Fall. I have wondered whether he means ‘fall’ in the biblical sense too, when things were first lost to words.

One of my half-blind drawings troubles me (*Appendix I*). It's not the fact that the leg looks mauled and out of joint that offends me (after all the jaw looks fractured and pulled away from the skull and I don't mind this), it's that the leg looks wrong in the wrong way. The rest of the body is compelling, precise, sensitively explored, and the many anomalies resulting from my blindness on the page coax from the body a heightened sensitivity of its own. She seems to be lost in thought. Then a leaden foot is planted, her only contact with the ground, the pencil ragged now and nearly blunt. It gets the spacing wrong, and the spacing looks all the more wrong because the angles are fairly right. I know I drew the legs last. Perhaps I had lost interest by then. Perhaps I knew by touch or sound that the lead had got too thick and its lines would be bad for the body, but I wanted the body complete so I went through the rest without much care.

Then again, perhaps the trouble is not the drawing but the fact that I'm looking at it. Perhaps the trouble is that I'm looking at it and wanting it to look good.

Earlier, I wrote: "There came a point, I felt, that I might as well just be looking at the page" (this document, 7).

John Berger wrote about looking at the page and seeing the demands of the drawing; demands that must be, in some way at least, demands to look good:

"Then, quite soon, the drawing reached its point of crisis. Which is to say that what I had drawn began to interest me as much as what I could still discover. [...]

And I call it a point of crisis because at that moment the

success or failure of the drawing has really been decided.

One now begins to draw according to the demands, the needs, of the drawing. If the drawing is already in some way true, then these demands will probably correspond to what one might still discover by actual searching. If the drawing is basically false, they will accentuate its wrongness” (*Berger on Drawing*, 8).

The tip of the pencil is something like an eye moving along the surface of the page[|]. With a focal length of nil it watches the black deposit of graphite dragging[|] from its tip and adhering to the page, seeming all the blacker because there is no light to see by at such close range. There is always only this[|] black. Whatever it draws[|] onto the page, however the speed and orientation of the line might change, the little spot under the scrutiny of the pencil’s eye varies very little at all. The surface of the eye collects scratches[|] and marks as it grazes[|] the page, of which some must surely damage its sight[|]—sight so blunt it is nearly touch[|], sensing nothing of the ground behind it or ahead[|].

An eye moving along the surface of the page. Derrida imagined what the pencil might see, pressed so close to the page, and he found it deeply myopic. From the “aperspective of the graphic act,” the stylus is blind both to the form that precedes it (the thing it sets out to draw) and the form that follows it (the drawing that will appear on the page) with the result that it sees nothing but the immediate present of its “originary, pathbreaking moment” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 45).

The black deposit of graphite dragging. “Here¹, to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or let it seek and find itself)—a form to come that should or that can come through drawing” (Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, 10).

Here. Here, on this page too.

This. This, the black of this ink too.

Whatever it draws. Or writes. Imagine that when you write there is always only this black: the myopic tip of the pen, or the short-sighted eye of the I-beam cursor, blinking (I... I... I...).

The surface of the eye collects scratches. I wonder if it hurts.

And if it hurts the page as it grazes the surface.

As it grazes. “Consider the cows, grazing as you pass by; they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, they eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so on from morning until night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, but he cannot help envying them their happiness – what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal” (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 60).

Some must surely damage its sight.

“Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur
das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind
wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt
als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.
Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers
Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind
wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts
Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das
im Tiergesicht so tief ist.”

*With wholly open eyes a creature sees / the Open. Our eyes alone are as if
turned about and wholly ranged about / as traps that shut its clear way out off. //*
*We sense what lies outside from animal / countenance alone; newborns even / we
turn about and force them on their backs / see artifice and not the Open, set / deep
within the animal. Rilke, Duineser Elegien: 8th Elegy, translation Anton Viesel.)*

Sight so blunt it is nearly touch. As he constructs an analogy between drawing and blindness, Derrida writes less about the absence of sight than the presence of touch. The stylus is a staff of the blind that feels its way, providing a tactile proxy for sight, and the fingertips grope about the page “as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a Cyclops or one-eyed man”; this lidless eye is “a miner’s lamp” whose light makes inscription possible (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 3). Throughout his account of blindness, the conflation of movement, touch and sight is never out of reach.

Sensing nothing of the ground behind it or ahead. “Proceeding on our way things fall into and out of sight, as new vistas open up and others are closed off. [...] Thus the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving along them” (Ingold, *Lines*, 87-8).

Running through space as if running a risk. Derrida describes the blind men in the drawings of Antoine Coypel. “Like all blind men, they must *advance*, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk. They are apprehensive about space, they apprehend it with their groping, wandering hands; they draw in this space in a way that is both cautious and bold; they calculate, they count on the invisible. It would seem that most of these blind men do not lose themselves in absolute wandering” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 5).

Of the many allegorical drawings of blind men¹ in *Memoirs of the Blind*, some move forward alone, with no cane and with arms outstretched, fingers groping ahead¹ of themselves. They are deeply closed into the dark, into the touch of the immediacy of the place: a picture of exquisite closeness¹ and excess of sensation¹. This must be a kind of wandering, and it is portrayed as nothing good¹. The blind men in these pictures have in their minds’ eyes not a map of their surroundings but a hope of sight restored. This is why these men are drawn: to show the miracle of vision, coming into the light¹, the salvation of enlightenment¹.

Allegorical drawings of blind men. Derrida points out that “the illustrious blind of our culture are almost always men, the ‘great blind men,’ as if women perhaps saw to it never to risk their sight” (5).

In a note he adds: “Sure there are blind women, but not many, and one speaks about them, but not very much. They are saints rather than heroes” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 5, note 1).

Fingers groping ahead. Ahead. “To anticipate is to take the initiative, to be out in front, to take (*capere*) in advance (*ante*). Different than *precipitation*, which exposes the head¹ (*prae-caput*), the head first and ahead of the rest, anticipation would have to do with the hand. The theme of the drawings of the blind is, before all else, the hand. For the hand ventures forth¹, it *precipitates*, rushes ahead, certainly, but this time *in place* of the head, as if to precede, prepare, and protect it. [...] Anticipation guards against precipitation [...]” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 4).

Exposes the head. Sometimes, wearing a scarf on cold days, it occurs to the blind theologian that he could equally go about with his whole head covered, not just the lower part of his face (Hull, *Touching the Rock*, 53).

“And so with my forehead I ran against the wall thousands and thousands of times, all day and all night long, and I was glad when I banged myself bloody, for this was proof that the wall was beginning to harden” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 165).

Vertiginous somersault, perilous freefall, bang your head
bloody, graze your eyes.

The hand ventures forth. Once I blindfolded my eyes and tried to make my way around without a hand venturing forth to protect me. I wanted to see (to *see*) what it was like. My feet were heavy. The whole body stiffened like a divining rod; hips, shoulders, hands at my side all monitoring the air for the sensation of something sharp, some point, approaching. I thought of nothing but the softness of my face suddenly exposed: what could pierce the skin, put out an eye—

Finally my body came to behave perfectly in accordance with its limits, and I met my most natural conclusion on the floor at the foot of the stairs.

A picture of exquisite closeness. For example, Antoine Coypel, *Study of the Blind*, Louvre Museum (*Appendix 2*). How wide open is his eye, how much surface it has.

And excess of sensation. “I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details” (Borges, “Funes the Memorius,” 104).

Portrayed as nothing good. The blind lead the blind into a pit: underground. Luke 6:39.

Coming into the light. Hull, a Christian, concludes his memoir: “If a journey into light is a journey into God, then a journey into darkness is a journey into God. This is why I go on journeying, not through, but into” (*Touching the Rock*, 192).

The salvation of enlightenment. Laura U. Marks writes about touch and the occlusion of sight, and points out that lacking sight does not mean lacking insight. She writes that the analogy between seeing and knowing depends upon a conception of sight roundly questioned by the feminist and phenomenological lines of thought that support her account (*The Skin of the Film*, 133). Because it can perceive over distances, she writes, sight has come to be understood as the sense most separate from the body, the most cerebral and the most suited to objective observation, in contrast to non-visual senses consequently thought of as natural, prediscursive or not cultivated (132). And from there, the disembodied, all-seeing eye of vision has become associated with the objectifying gaze that propagates a separation between subject and object (162). There are other ways to attend to this separation, Marks writes, if we can approach it by means of insight brought about by the occlusion of sight (191-193).

Certain compact video cameras designed to be concealed when worn, or slid into keyholes to spy through doors, can be held in the hand like a pen. You can pretend to write with one as though it were a pen¹, though it leaves no marks on the page. The writing only shows when you watch the video back. When you do, the first thing you notice is the noise, which is very loud indeed and describes a movement much more rapid than you would have attributed to handwriting. It sounds urgent, even frantic¹, more like some animal madly scratching through a wall¹ for a morsel of food than a pen working along the page. The sound is all the more compelling because it is encountered almost entirely in the dark, and seems to come from nowhere. The video is completely black, broken with intermittent gasps of silent light where the pen has come up for air between words¹. It is quite impossible to identify among the scratches and intermittent gaps the words you were writing.

Write with one as though it were a pen. I have tried this many times.

Urgent, even frantic. Is this what I put my pen through? It is a surprise to find my handwriting, which is fairly neat, producing such frantic movement. When I write, and when I read it back, the movement is concealed by the words it forms.

Some animal madly scratching through a wall. “It is digging its way through the soil as quickly as someone walking freely out in the open, the ground all around its tunnel rumbles even after it has moved on [...]. [T]he animal is not heading for me” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 185).

The black scratching of the video: was it heading for me? (Am I heading for myself?)

Come up for air between words. Where the pen has surfaced.

Come up into the light, enlightenment, insight, sight.

I imagine the pen drowning down there, asphyxiating, running out of air. And that it is a relief to surface—to come up for air. I imagine the eye of the pen widening to take in as much sight as it can before it goes back under.

Although really, the muscles of the eye contract in the light.

No roots are put down when moss grows¹, so patches can be lifted up and gathered with the hands or by sliding a trowel just underneath the surface of the soil. It is sometimes possible to pull it up in handfuls, like pulling hair, though this is a delicate manoeuvre which must be done slowly so that you can monitor the many resistances of the rhizomes it nests in the soil, and vary the direction of your movement so you tear as few as possible. You can hear the low sound of fibres breaking in the soil as you tug. Once collected, the fragments can be held in the palm of the hand¹ and carried to the garden¹ to be arranged on ground prepared in advance¹. Once positioned, the surface must be watered deeply and pressed down by treading over it with your feet, and if necessary, patches should be held in place with vertical metal pins¹.

No roots are put down when moss grows. Moss is a rhizome. “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point [...]. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overfills. [Its] lines, or ligaments, should not be confused with lineages of the arborescent type, which are merely localizable linkages between points and positions” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21).

The fragments can be held in the palm of the hand. Held in the hand, a tuft of acrocarpous moss resembles a small rodent¹, and can be stroked from nose to tail.

Resembles a small rodent. “A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments” No. 206).

Appraising the way the fragment was used by the Jena romantics, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy expand upon “what should be called the logic of the hedgehog” (*The Literary Absolute*, 44). Fragment 206, they write, compares the fragmentary work to a “small work of art,” having an individuality and totality of its own, but being “neither directly nor absolutely the Work” (43). Because it is a genre of plurality—that is, “to write the fragment is to write fragments”—an individual fragment is both complete in itself and indicates the completeness of the whole of which it is part (43-4).

Carried to the garden. You could leave the moss where you find it on the forest floor and still cultivate it. I wonder, then, whether it would still be the forest floor, or a garden.

Ground prepared in advance. To cultivate a moss garden from scratch, the area must first be cleared of all vegetation and plant debris, then the land must be smoothed to encourage branching and rhizome attachment, and contoured if necessary to eliminate any small depressions that might collect water. The surface soil must be loosened slightly with a rake just before the moss is laid down, to help it make contact with the ground.

The area cleared and smoothed, and lightly raked: I think of the presuppositionless starting point Edmund Husserl described when he began to work on phenomenology (*Logical Investigations*, 263). Imagine

lightly raking the surfaces of certain phenomena, and lightly raking the surface of the mind that might brush against it.

Imagine these surfaces bristling warmly in a manner that is almost feline, the way a cat presses the arch of its back against your hand to redouble your caress as you stroke it.

Held in place with vertical metal pins. The “logical and organized garden,” writes Jyrki Siukonen, is an enclosed place, familiar and cultivated—the place before the Fall—and it stands in contrast to the unorganized, hostile, even sublime forest with its limits unknown (*On Artistic Knowledge*, 2). “Attempts to understand the forest with the logic of gardening,” he writes, “are doomed to fail. Gardening is, especially in its domestic forms, something that can be learned from books, while in the forest you need knowledge that can only be learned by *living in the forest*” (2). In the forest “lies the root of poetical knowledge,” something which, like intuitive knowledge, resists being clearly understood by logical thought (2). He describes one such effort as an attempt to “clear away all obscurity and create an organised and reliable system of knowledge [...] by cutting off all ‘overgrown’ branches and end[ing] up with a tree of knowledge pruned into exact mathematical shape, like those seen in formal gardens” (3).

Kafka’s forest-dwelling animal takes pleasure in throwing off the covering of moss¹ that hides the way into his burrow¹ and rushing out, finding a place to hide, and there spending nights and days concealed and watching the only entrance to the home he has left unoccupied. “You may call it foolish,” the animal explains, “but it gives me ineffable pleasure; even more, it consoles me” (“The Burrow”, 170). How he pities the vagrant

animals who have no homes and are forced to wander¹ through¹ the moss and leaves outside, scratch and scavenge for morsels of food¹ and dart for cover at every threatening sound. It consoles him to linger outside his home and see how safe he would be within it. He draws an analogy¹: “It feels to me, then, not as if I were standing outside my house but outside myself while I am asleep and knew the joy of sleeping deeply and at the same time being able to keep a close watch on myself. In a certain sense I am privileged, not only to see the ghosts of the night¹ in the helplessness and blissful trust of sleep, but also to encounter them in reality with the full strength of wakefulness and the calm capacity to form judgements” (“The Burrow,” 170).

He is so pleased and reassured by this sight that he wonders whether he might ever go back underground again, or stay outside forever, looking on: “Matters went so far that at times I was seized by the childish desire not to ever go back to the burrow but to settle down here, near the entrance, and spend my life observing it, finding my happiness in perpetually realizing how securely the burrow, were I inside it, would protect me” (“The Burrow,” 170).

The covering of moss. “But then I am beneath the covering of moss, which I sometimes allow—so rarely do I stir from the house—to grow into the rest of the forest floor; and now all it takes is a jerk of my head and I am in foreign territory” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 169).

The way into his burrow. “A rhizome as a subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. [...] Even some animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7).

I imagine lightly raking the ground for all of these.

Forced to wander. “Poor wanderers, without a home, on the highways, in the woods, crept into a cranny in a heap of leaves at best, [...] exposed to all the harms of heaven and earth” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 164).

Through. The trail of the wayfarer¹ has “no ultimate destination” and “no final point with which they are seeking to link up” (Ingold, *Lines*, 81). The traveller or vessel navigating its way, on the other hand, depends upon some prior knowledge of what lies ahead; knowledge that “enable[s] the prospective traveller to assemble a route-plan, in the form of a chain of connections, and thereby *virtually* reach his destination before even setting out” (86).

For the traveller, movement is from one point to the next, “every port a point of re-entry into a world from which he has been temporarily exiled whilst in transit” (77).

The trail of the wayfarer. I wonder what trail the wayfarer leaves behind; whether they leave anything dislodged or displaced; whether they urinate or defecate, and if so, whether this is this in exchange for the sustenance they take from the ground, so that one incorporates the other. I imagine they move through one another, them and the surface of the ground.

What counts as littering?

“5.2 *Litter* is most commonly assumed to include materials, often associated with smoking, eating and

drinking, that are *improperly* discarded and left by members of the public [...].

5.4 *Refuse*. [...] Dog faeces are to be treated as if they were refuse when on certain descriptions of public land.

(Dog fouling is a separate offence from littering.)

5.5 *Detritus*, which comprises small, broken down particles of synthetic and natural materials, arrive at the site through the same displacement effects associated with mechanical, human, animal and natural actions, most of which also determine the distribution of litter. Detritus includes dust, mud, soil, grit, gravel, stones, rotted leaf and vegetable residues, and fragments of twigs, glass, plastic and other finely divided materials. Leaf and blossom falls are to be regarded as detritus once they have substantially lost their structure and have become mushy or fragmented” (DEFRA, *Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse*, 11-12).

“For here my blood seeps into my own soil and will not be lost” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 175).

Scavenge for morsels of food. “As he proceeds [...] the wayfarer has to sustain himself, both perceptually and materially, through an active engagement with the country that opens up along his path,” while the traveller, “cocooned in his carriage, would draw for subsistence on his own supplies” (Ingold, *Lines*, 76, 79).

He draws an analogy. How do you draw an analogy?

Effortlessly, according to James P. Blevins and Juliette Blevins. They describe analogy as “the core of human cognition,” allowing us to identify patterns and predict how they will continue, “to come up with new solutions to old problems, to imagine the world other than the way it is” (*Analogy in Grammar*, 1). They write that analogical reasoning “requires the discovery of structural similarities between perceptually dissimilar elements” and that such similarities “may be highly abstract, involving functional or causal relationships” (1). They go on: “And while the recognition of analogical relations may seem like a passive process, it is in fact an aggressive process, driven by a search for predictability. A systematic structural similarity independent of perceptual similarity can be extended to yield novel inferences about the world” (1).

In Blevins and Blevins’ framework, metaphor is a form of semantic analogy in which “relations between aspects of meaning of the analogue are mapped to those of the target” (7).

I think of the night sky that illustrates Max Black’s account of metaphor. When you read a metaphor, he writes, you keep in mind two groups of implications at once: all those associated with the first term of the metaphor, and all those associated with the second (*Models and Metaphors*, 39). Then you can prune away any implications that only suit one of the terms and bring into prominence those that suit them both, in this way elaborating the meaning of one or both terms. He invents his own metaphor to explain:

“Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen’s structure” (41).

Wouldn’t you miss things, if you looked through lines already scraped clear for the purpose? I wonder about all the hidden stars that cluster near those left visible by the scraped-clear lines, and how they might change the meaning of the visible stars if only they could be seen too. And I wonder about the infinite depths of matter that dust the sky—the distant bodies, the dull ones, the ones just dying and the ones nearly born, all those eclipsed by the brightness of the easy stars we see on a clear night and recognize from our charts. I wonder if the dust counts too, if it falls within a clear line on the glass. We cannot see it without a telescope, but it is still there. But more than this, I wonder about the lines, scratched in advance into the black, scalpel darting in the air and pecking at the surface. How do you know where to scratch if the form of the metaphor is still to come?

Imagine another way to draw an analogy: a grazing of the surface, almost a caress, forging your knowledge of the ground as you move along it and not knowing what is to come. It would be a

peculiar kind of analogy, peculiarly singular, sensitive only to the skin of a single term rather than keeping one eye on one term and one eye on the other. Imagine the analogy is between *being asleep* and *being underground*. As you watch the surface of your first term—of *being asleep*—you would have to keep the surface of *being underground* very far away, in case its influence should bear upon the surface of sleep, and skew its character. How bold such a metaphor would have to be, committing itself into the dark as if running a risk, following a kind of heavy inkling—and the fact is, wherever it landed: well, then that is where it would be.

You would have to try so hard to stay on the side of sleep.

See the ghosts of night. “Metaphor is the dreamwork of language,” and its interpretation requires “collaboration between a dreamer and a waker, even if they be the same person” (Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 31).

Lying in bed at night I notice an inflection of thought, and I turn my attention to it sharply. In turning I discover there is nothing to grasp. Although it felt like the inflection of a coherent thought—something conversational or to do with making plans—all I feel now is a sensation

(of making a turn, to do with my shoulder I think), a certain geometry (angular, or meshwork), colour (warmth), and perhaps a particular temporality (of being in the middle of something?). The thought does not make sense. I try to pull it back towards me by feeling my way backwards through the present moment, in which I am thinking about the thought, to the moment just before, when I was deeply inside it. It is a delicate manoeuvre and it does not succeed. I cannot make sense of the thought. Although for a while I am able to dwell in the sensation and the warmth that was there before, nothing else returns, and soon even my impressions of the thought are unfamiliar and are receding further and further away. It is no longer anywhere to be found. It must have been the near edge of a dream or an idea I was nourishing half-asleep but which woke me up, and once awake I could not support it¹.

Earlier, I wrote: “It is sometimes possible to pull it up in handfuls, like pulling hair, though this is a delicate manoeuvre which must be done slowly so that you can monitor the many resistances of the rhizomes it nests in the soil, and vary the direction of your movement so you tear as few as possible (this document, 25).

I could not support it. Support, bear.

The memory of Funes the Memorius was exquisitely infallible. He could not bear the experience of the present moment, which was always “almost intolerable it was so rich and

bright; the same was true of the most ancient and most trivial memories” (Borges, “Funes the Memorious,” 101-102).

“No, I’m not the one, though I thought I was, who watches me sleeping: rather, I am the one who sleeps while the one who wants to deprave me watches” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 171).

I think of the poet Ruth Stone,
 who said she would sometimes
 have to race home to write down
 a poem as it chased her through
 the hills. If she wasn’t fast
 enough it would fly past her and
 she would grab it by the tail, pull
 it backwards into her body and
 transcribe it onto the page as she
 did so. When this happened the
 poem would come out backwards
 on the page (Gilbert, “Creative
 Genius”).

Why didn’t she just carry
 a pencil with her, and

some paper, while she
was out working in the
fields?

Perhaps the
poems needed
the rush.

A film by Shauna Beharry, *Seeing is Believing*, shows a photograph of a piece of fabric, shot¹ at very close range. The closeness means the shot is often out of focus, and is very dark indeed when the lens makes contact with the photograph. When the image is dark, it becomes grainy and even harder to see¹. Watching the video, most of all you are aware of surfaces: the surface of the lens, of the photograph and of the fabric, of the screen upon which the video plays, even the surface of your eyes¹. Of watching the film, Laura U. Marks writes “I realize that the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it” (*The Skin of the Film*, 127). Each surface is pressed so near to the next that there is never enough distance to see the whole of any object, to understand its geography, to understand the route being made across the terrain. You see it so close it evades your vision, but neither is there anything to touch¹.

Shot. Words also murder things (Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing”).

Grainy and even harder to see. Beharry is “using video to show the limits of vision” (Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 112).

“The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre it has something of a rooster’s horrible crowing” (Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 66).

But neither is there anything to touch. Marks writes about haptic visuality in the context of diaspora film and video, where the haptic answers a longing to return to the sensual experience of inhabiting an environment you have left behind. Where you can no longer touch the skin of a loved one, she argues, you can use the lens to engage with the touch of skin while engaging with the absence and incommunicability of that touch. The touch of lens against fabric is what makes the fabric inaccessible to sight: it is “so engaged in the present that it cannot recede into cognition” (*The Skin of the Film*, 191). Meanwhile, as much as haptic images “might attempt to touch the skin of the object, all they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves” (192). In this way haptic visuality affords a way of knowing that “implies a fundamental mourning of the absent object or the absent body, where optical visuality attempts to resuscitate it and make it whole” (191).

The films and videos she describes create the conditions for haptic visuality in order to inspire “an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision”: to acknowledge its unknowability, and keep its unknowability intact by establishing a relationship not of mastery but of mutuality (191). In this “bodily relationship between the viewer and the image,” “it is not proper to speak of the *object* of a haptic look as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image” (164).

Our neighbour had always been blind. He knew the roads around us very well. I believe the maps in his mind were drawn not from the air but from the ground: a series of memorized cues that told him the story of his route as he encountered them one by one. On the way home he would arrive at his gate, walk half a dozen steps further to our gate next door, tap it with his cane, and then turn back to his own gate and push it open. It was a habitual gesture, as practised and perfunctory as turning a key in a lock, but however briskly he seemed to execute the move he would never omit it. Our gate must have been the final orienting cue.

I know those roads too. We've moved house now, but I can go for long walks in my memory and there is still so much detail: the gravel in the shade by the gate, the way the road dips and the curb where we rejoin the pavement is too high for my son to lift up his trike and I help him, and then the green gates which some days we go through and some days we do not, then the jeep that parks on the pavement and we need to strategize to get the trike around it, then there is a dip in the curb where we can roll onto the road very easily when there are no cars coming, then the slight incline as we cross the road, make it back onto the pavement and walk close to the low brick wall, which is rough if we walk too close and can graze the knuckle of a hand holding a low handlebar, then the patch of driveway in the sun where there is space to spread out and play, and so on.

I imagine tapping a gate as you might tap a tree: drilling a hole into the surface until the sap begins to bead and drip,

and then inserting a spile to direct the fluid down the line.

Or tapping the skull to alleviate pressure, or tapping a line to listen in. He taps the gate, extracts from it his route and takes it home.

1.3

If I take seriously these wandering resemblances and the course they take, what is it they describe? Is it the tip of the pencil and its contact with the page? So far I cannot tell. What sense I can make of them is this:

Sight seems to be the main preoccupation. Sight, the absence of sight, shortness of sight, and the way touch closes in as sight depletes. This sightless touch depends upon a certain kind of movement that is exquisitely close, cautious but bold, carrying some risk (of a fall, of hurt, of loss) mitigated by the necessity or the pleasure of continuing to move.

Movement is slow, gradual, responsive to the surface it moves against, and such movement would seem to be generative, either revealing the surface it moves against or creating it: burrowing, pathbreaking, seeking a form that is yet to come, forging knowledge by moving along. And it is paced and careful, but it has a frantic and scratching quality too: something bloody, hostile, unorganized and uncontrolled, to do with excess, overgrowth and uncontrolled proliferation.

This closeness of touch, and its dependence upon movement, is held in check by another kind of sight that is wider, more distant, brighter, perhaps more still. Not blind but seeing. Not underground but overground, or high up in the air. Not asleep but awake. Not absolute wandering. These terms are not opposites exactly, nor foils to one another, but they influence one another. I want to say they long for one another, or long to be the same as one another, and they cannot, and this is what invigorates them.

Yes, a quality of longing is articulated here: longing, lack, mourning, absence, loss.

Meanwhile there are details of which I cannot yet make sense, nor can I understand how they contribute to the image of myopic movement and touch that is forming in my mind.

Details like these:

the difference between heroes and saints;

the biblical sense of fall;

what is exotic and erotic;

how a metaphor is made.

These details are so fragmentary I cannot grasp their contribution, but they are here too, and for the time being they remain left over—a kind of detritus, I imagine, and perhaps they will seep into my own soil still.

Chapter 2: The blunt pencil



Fig 3. The blunt tip of the pencil.

2.1

I have a narrow green pencil case that used to belong in my bag until we moved house and I began to work in this studio, and now it usually sits on my desk. I keep it here because it contains a particular pencil. To look at, the pencil is fairly unremarkable: it is about three-quarters of its original length, deep red with gold lettering that reads *Schwan*—*STA* before the words are unevenly covered with off-white eggshell paint I must have used it once to stir. But the very tip of the pencil is special. I no longer touch it, as though it were raw and I might hurt it, or by touching it I might alter the delicate balance of the surface environment with my giant fingers and destroy whatever life it incubates. More and more of the dust collected on the lead is lost each time I handle the pencil, and I want very much to keep it. The dust is part of a tiny landscape of scored lines and carved slopes which are all I have left of the last drawing the pencil made. Indeed, I have wondered whether this little graphite landscape is itself the drawing after all, for me at least, since I can no longer visit the last line it drew.

Its last drawing was a kind of portrait of our old house: a single line drawn all the way around the internal perimeter of every room, mostly hidden in the joint between the wall and the floor. Standing on the road outside and looking up, one could imagine the drawing suspended in the air: a great geometry of right-angled lines, magnificent in scale, as big as a house, but so fine they are almost invisible to the eye. Of course, nothing of the drawing can be seen from the outside, nor would you notice it inside the house unless you knew to look very closely.

It had been a significant home. We had married there and had our first child. It was a two-up two-down house in a Victorian terrace, floorboards exposed to draughts, kitchen extended into the small fenced garden at the back and room for two bicycles, and later a tricycle, at the front. When we finally moved away it was in a rush, with so much packing and paperwork there was no time to bid the house a proper farewell, and I had an idea that if I drew around it I might be able to capture and gather up the excess of significance that made the house feel still heavy with our presence even when our boxes and furniture were gone. I expected the drawing to be a slow, meditative endeavour that would take hours. I thought that during these hours, the meticulous work of making the line would occupy my hands, leaving my mind to be whetted with memories that would wash through me in a great outpouring of emotion channelled through the tiny eye of the pencil. The line would be a kind of tincture: a particle dropped into the heavy air to make it all condense and fall flat—a sheet of liquid air—and it would drain into the seams of the house where the pencil would collect up every drop. The line would run the perimeter of every room, right up to the edges without missing an inch, hidden in the very crook of the joint between wall and floor so nothing would show of it once it was done. There would be no remainder. Every expression of these years imbibed through the eye of the pencil, and I thought that would be an adequate farewell.

But in the end, when I returned to draw the house a fortnight after we had moved away, there was very little wetness. It was not a meditative endeavour at all; it was distracted and unconvincing, and something was stopping it being slow.

I had been right about one thing: putting down the line was meticulous work. My hands were very much occupied, and all of my body in fact. In the strange silence of the empty house I had climbed the ladder to the attic, and where the brickwork met the carpet under the low rafters I had planted the pencil into the join, shifted my grip and tugged it the

length of the wall, shuffling sideways on my knees, and in this way edged along each wall and around each corner as I moved through the house. Sometimes at a corner my whole body bore down on the pencil, using it as a pivot to press against while I moved my knees and feet, exerting about as much force on its little spine as it could take. The shrill sound of the line often turned dull as the lead eroded away to the nub of the wood, so I took to slowly turning the pencil as it drew, using up every bit of lead in a machine-like torque before I would give in and sharpen it properly. It was never long before the lead was thick with a muzzle of dust and cobwebs that grew and dwindled over and over as the drawing went on, and sometimes needed scraping away when it stopped up the lead completely. As it edged the rooms the path of the pencil was constantly under revision, redirected by irregularities in the surfaces of the floor or the adjoining wall which accepted, resisted and interrupted its movement with pleasing variation. Where the pencil hit the head of a nail, where its route briefly coincided with a crack between floorboards that took it off course, where a patch of varnished brick caused the pencil to skid and stub into the wall and it marked the scribble of a collision on the floor: all these little errors needed to be met with their opposites in tiny movements that corrected them as soon as they arose.

It was meticulous work indeed, but it was always distracted. I could not forget that the house was no longer ours and there might be a key in the lock at any moment, and with it the need to explain my presence to somebody I did not know. I found myself rehearsing an imaginary explanation: that our lease was still valid, that we still had our keys, that I was there to retrieve some curtains we'd left behind, which in fact we had. There would be no mention of the drawing, which would seem ridiculous in company—and perhaps by then it seemed ridiculous to me too. I found myself wondering whether I should give the drawing a title. It occurred to me that people could come and see the drawing if they made an appointment with the estate agent and presented themselves as prospective tenants, though it would need to be arranged quickly, before it was let once and for all. I imagined them

touring the property with eyes skewed towards the skirting board, and wondered if everyone would manage to keep the secret, and whether it had to be a secret, whether it counted as trespassing, whether the line—or just the bits of it that showed—counted as criminal damage. With all this in mind it took some effort of memory, or perhaps even empathy, to position myself convincingly in relation to the memories I had expected to collect up drop by drop, and in the end I did a poor job of it. It was no good moving at a mourner's pace because I was not mourning. Where I had expected the flowing and channelling of memory and feeling, there was almost nothing.

The only thing like it was a growing uneasiness about the way I was moving the pencil. Something about it was difficult to understand. It had to do with speed. It was not impossible to proceed as slowly as I had planned, but I was unable or reluctant to do so. It was clear that in some way the drawing was not working, and to move slowly would have been to pretend it was: to pretend the pencil was collecting up the excess of significance that weighed in the air when it was doing nothing of the sort. I no longer understood the curious two-way valve of the pencil tip that had seemed so simple in my imagination: that in drawing a line *down* onto the floor something else should be drawn *up*—into what, a barrel of dry lead? Shuffling along on my knees the thought seemed ridiculous. I could not get the pencil to collect anything up, and worse still, there seemed to be nothing to collect.

Really, the uneasiness had begun the moment I had unlocked the front door, when the smell of fresh paint had hit me like a quadrilateral of white light where our old familiar home should have been. Treading onto the floorboards and closing the door behind me, and standing still, I found the paint had restored to the air the very same quality of unchecked possibility that had met us when we'd moved in six years before. To be given back this weightless air exactly when I needed it to be full: it was like a trick, a narrative trope, history's sleight of hand, applying its own tincture in the wet of the paint to flush

out our memories before I could extract them. I put down my keys and bag by the door where they used to go, and they seemed to pose there. I appreciate now that the drawing probably should have stopped there, before it had begun. I probably should have released the bag and keys from their pose, shot a final glance across the room and got straight back into the car, rather than going through the motions of drawing around something that so palpably was gone. But at the time, pencil in hand, disoriented, none of this was clear, and my disorientation presented itself obscurely in this uneasiness about the way the pencil moved, and my reluctance to make the line as slow as I had wanted it to be.

Meanwhile—and this I still cannot understand—neither could I bring myself to draw very fast. Most of the time there was nothing physically obstructing the path of the line, so it should have been easy enough to slip the pencil along the seam with the efficiency of a scalpel. But something that was not physical held it back. Even if there was nothing for the pencil to collect up, still there was something left over, tugging at the drawing and slowing it down. I cannot explain what it was about the movement of the pencil that gave the impression of floating in a channel with no edges, unbalanced and unsupported yet hemmed in on every side, as though at any time it might fall, but with nowhere to fall to.

Only once did the pencil move at a speed so natural I was quite unaware of it, and could not say today whether it was especially slow or fast. It happened as I drew around the final wall, under the window and towards the door. I felt very keenly how final my movements were: how the far window with its view of the garden was out of reach now, the bedrooms were gone, the attic shut away for good. It was the wrench of pain I had been looking for, the extent of it all at once: the house filled briefly with sound as I exhaled—a single note of breath—and emptied again. I picked up the keys and my bag and shut the door, one sharp tug, practised and perfunctory. Getting back into the car to drive away, I did not look up at the house to imagine the magnificent scale of my drawing, suspended invisibly fine

in the air. Instead, to my surprise, the consolation I had was the pencil that had gone through it with me. Held in the hand it was precious, a little warm vertebrate, its nose too raw to touch.

2.2

The nose of the pencil is worn flat and smooth, and its even shine is contoured by approximately parallel lines softly scored all the way down it. A fur of tousled wood curls around the left edge, still dusty¹, and at the right edge the flat surface curves heavily down to reveal a smoothed ridge also contoured with soft lines. Turning the pencil slowly in my hand so the lead catches the light reveals that its edge is very slightly tapered all the way round, like the convex meniscus¹ of an overfilled glass¹, as though the surface were the skin of a film¹ held taut by opposing pressures from above and below. The lines it has drawn into the house have been drawn into it by return: a correspondence¹.

Still dusty. By now the dust is almost gone.

Convex meniscus. I imagine the pencil upturned, and its lead a convex meniscus, wobbling in the light. The subtlest movement of my hand and it would spill over and collapse, no longer globular but wet.

An overfilled glass. An overfilled pencil.

Trying to imagine a vessel as narrow as a pencil¹, I think of a glass capillary tube¹, lowered vertically into water to observe capillary action. You watch, and a fine column of water is drawn upwards through the tube, the molecules of fluid tending both to adhere to the wall of the tube and to pull its surface flat. The confluence of these tendencies causes the

concave meniscus to steadily rise, only halting when its upward pull is equal to the downward pull of gravity.

A vessel as narrow as a pencil. Or a lachrymal phial, collecting the tears of mourners at a funeral.

I imagine the nose of the pencil concave, and then the noseless face of Clarence Lispector's cockroach: a globule perfected into something hard, a drop of shellac dried and dustless.

Once I saw a paint-specked A-frame ladder in the corner of a gallery, as though somebody had forgotten to put it away. It turned out the drops of paint were not accidental after all, nor even paint, but delicately inlaid fragments of pearl and precious stones, composed to appear uncomposed.

For decades Tony Smith used a single stick to stir the paint he would apply to the walls of his family home. Before he died he cut through it very beautifully, revealing in concentric rings the colour of every wall his home had known.

Some time before he had cut through the stick, his son, the artist John Smith, made a film called *Girl Chewing Gum*, in which a voiceover gives the impression that the spontaneous actions of an everyday street scene result from the instructions of a film director, every action met by its opposite reaction, or the other way around.

Capillary tube. Of course, this is the way a fountain pen works: the capillary action of a vessel as narrow as a pencil.

No longer able to speak or properly drink water, Franz Kafka became preoccupied with the stems of the cut flowers by his deathbed. I imagine his long, parched neck a stem, or a narrow tube of glass trying to draw moisture: and there is none. Did it help (did it quench his thirst) when he wrote in his final days: “lemonade everything was so infinite”? (Kafka, *Briefe*, 491, translation Hélène Cixous.)

As he wrote it out did he also drink it in?

The skin of a film. *The Skin of the Film*, the book that described watching a film as though you were brushing it with the skin of your eyes, mournfully, wishing it were touch (Marks, 127).

Earlier, I wrote “I wonder if it hurts” (this document, 18).

A correspondence. The skin of the pencil lead fluctuates in my mind, or flutters, or palpitates between concave and convex—

Palpitate, papillon, pupa, pupate. Pupae rising to the water’s surface to spew wings and take flight.

The skin of a dog’s nose is said to have a cobblestone appearance¹, made up of pores that secrete a thin layer of mucous when the dog is following a scent. This moisture causes airborne particles travelling over the contours of the nose to adhere to its surface, where they are absorbed into the skin or licked into the mouth and tasted. When the dog sniffs, particles are drawn through the nostrils and flow unimpeded into a compact system of bone folds inside the nasal cavity¹. These convoluted folds filter, warm and moisten the air, and expose it to an extraordinary quantity of olfactory cells in the mucous membrane that covers its compacted but expansive surface area. The inspired air¹ is able to flow through the nostrils unimpeded¹ because the contrary flow of expired air is channelled out through a separate pathway, exiting the nose through narrow slits to the side of either nostril without contaminating the scent being taken in. As it is expelled, the warm, moist air stirs up more ambient odours that might otherwise have been missed, and these are inhaled in turn¹.

The skin of a dog's nose is said to have a cobblestone appearance. When a dog lifts a leg to mark its territory on a vertical surface, it is to raise the mark of urine to the height of other dogs' noses (Shoulberg and Pinchbeck, "Common Diseases Affecting the Nasal Planum of Dogs").

Bone folds inside the nasal cavity. They are called turbinate bones: "convoluted folds of bone covered in a mucous membrane containing the olfactory epithelium (*Appendix 3*). The turbinates in macrosmatic animals (animals with higher olfactory acuity compared to low acuity microsmatic animals, such as humans) dramatically increase the surface area of the olfactory epithelium" (Bamford, "Canine Olfaction," 2).

The inspired air. Once it has been warmed and moistened, "inspired air then continues to flow into the more posterior ethmoturbinates and the frontal, maxillary and sphenoid sinuses," where most of the odour processing takes place (Bamford, "Canine Olfaction," 2). The flow of inspired air¹ during sniffing is distinct from that during respiration. During sniffing, the inspired air pools for a while in the convoluted folds of bone at the rear of the nasal cavity, and this "stagnant period" allows the dog to more effectively discriminate odours (Craven et al., "The Fluid Dynamics of Canine Olfaction," 939).

The fluid dynamics of this flow of air was measured using a three-dimensional scale model of the left nasal airway of a mixed-breed Labrador retriever cadaver, which had been reconstructed from several high-resolution MRI scans, allowing "physiologically realistic sniffing" to be simulated under controlled conditions (937).

The flow of inspired air.

“I’ mi son un che, quando

Amor mi spira, noto, e a quell modo

Che e’ ditta dentro vo significando.”

(I am one who, when Love inspires me, takes note, and goes setting it forth after the fashion which he dictates within me. Dante, La Divina Commedia, Purgatorio xxiv, 52-54, translation C. S. Singleton.)

“In Italian, the verb *spirare* indicates a double meaning of the phrase:

Love breathes into me, or, Love inspires me. Then I take note of that and signify that internal speech outwardly. [...] The ingression of the breath of love creates a reciprocal pull, an egression of breath in the form of poetry, moving outward from within” (Webb, *The Medieval Heart*, 70).

Ingression, egression.

But I want to know: was the pull perfectly reciprocal? If one could measure the weight of breath drawn in against the weight of breath drawn out, would they balance? Was Love’s inspiration perfected in the form of Dante’s poetry, with nothing left unexpressed?

Unimpeded. Then again: inspiration is one thing, but Dante could not have written his poetry had Love’s breath not been filtered, warmed, moistened (so to speak) and exposed to the extraordinarily complex and convoluted folds of his mind.

And these are inhaled in turn. Between the fourth and eighth centuries there developed a tradition of collecting up textual fragments as “raw material for other works, just as timber from old buildings was used for new ones” (Siukonen, *On Artistic Knowledge*, 1). Such collections came to be known as *silvae*, meaning forests or woods. King Alfred continued the tradition when he described gathering matter from the forest floor to construct a text of his own:

“Then I gathered for myself staves, posts, and tie-beams, and handles for each of the tools that I knew how to use, and building-lumber and beam-lumber, and, for each of the structures I knew how to build, as many of the most beautiful trees that I could carry” (King Alfred, “Preface to *Augustine’s Soliloquies*,” 436).

How does one handle fragments like these—the tools, the lumber, the beautiful trees? Are they held as Y-shaped branches of willow are held when freshly cut, the forked end lightly clasped in either hand, palms upward, thumbs lightly turned out? Held so, the branch is supported in a state of disequilibrium, and is sensitive to imperceptibly fine, unconscious movements of the hand, to pulse and perspiration. These are amplified by the finely tuned balance of the branch, which visibly twitches and dips in turn. Dowsing rods, said to locate underground seams of water, underground ores, landmines and so on, would seem to work in this way. Any inkling you might have, anything you think the rod might tell you: these hunches manifest themselves in your body without you knowing, and they are shown to you in the movement of the rod. Held thus, the meaning of a fragment wobbles in the light, and in it you see what you look for.

Or rather, in it you see yourself looking.

The surface of the eye is not smooth at all but pock-marked and creased¹. It appears smooth because it is veiled¹ with a layer of tears that lubricates the eye, allowing circumspection and making vision clear, uninterrupted and free from distortion. These are basal tears, which have a chemical composition distinct from those we shed in sorrow, which are different in turn from the irritant tears the eye produces to wash away specks of dust. For a long time it was thought that tears were secreted by the small opening¹ at the inner corner of each eyelid known as the punctum¹, but in fact the punctum is part of the eye's excretory system, draining tears into ducts¹ that eventually lead down into the nose. Only when the quantity of tears produced exceeds the capacity of the punctum does the excess spill¹ over the ridge of the eyelid and fall.

Pock-marked and creased. Tom Lutz describes the physiology of the eye in *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*: “The cornea of the eye has a far from perfect surface. It is pocked, wrinkled, uneven. Tears smooth out these irregularities in the surface of the eye and thus make possible vision as we know it. [...] this continuous teary surface layer of the eye is a liquid membrane both protecting us from the world and allowing us access to it” (67).

It is veiled. Veil, vale, vale of tears.

Lutz, *lutto*, mourning.

For a long time it was thought that tears were secreted by the small opening.

“Because the puncta are about 0.2 to 0.3 millimeters in diameter, and therefore

visible to the naked eye, they were very early on associated with tears, [and] were often assumed to be their source” (Lutz, *Crying*, 70).

For a long time it was thought that tears were humours squeezed from the heart to the brain by contractions brought on by sorrow or fear. The same contractions then helped expel “the brains thinnest & most liquid excrement” (Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, 145).

“By the late seventeenth century, the term ‘catharsis’ came to be used almost exclusively in relation to the evacuation of the bowels, and the adjective ‘cathartic’ meant powerfully laxative” (Lutz, *Crying*, 73).

Laxative, lax, lac, lacrimation, lactation.

Lac is a resinous substance secreted by the female of the scale insect *laccifer lacca* and used in the manufacture of shellac varnishes.

The sound of a baby’s cry can stimulate lactation in its mother. You can record the sound and listen back to it and it still works, if you need to express milk when you are separated from your baby.

If a baby fails to properly latch to the breast the milk ducts can become blocked. Milk collects behind the blockage, and because there is no way out the breast may become engorged, overheated and eventually inflamed.

“Prolonged screaming inevitably leads to the gorging of the blood-vessels of the eye; and this will have led, at first consciously and at last habitually, to the contractions of the muscles around the eye to protect them” (Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, 174-5).

I imagine the eye and the breast engorged and red, screaming for one another.

George Bataille’s erotic novel *Story of the Eye* establishes a cycle of globular substitutes, from eye to egg to testicle to sun; in the

process bringing forth a
secondary chain

composed of liquids:

tears, soft-boiled yolk,
sperm, urine, milk.

Roland Barthes writes

about these chains. He

examines the way they

are crossed and

interchanged, so that just

as one might break an

egg or put out an eye, in

the imaginary of the

Story one might “break

an eye” and “put out an

egg” (Barthes, “The

Metaphor of the Eye,”

124).

This mode of

doubled substitution, he

says, takes something

from the Surrealist

juxtaposition of imagery

but “is more concerted. It

is not a mad image nor

even a free image”

because the terms are

chosen, and chosen from

a finite and thematically
succinct series of
possibilities (124). The
result is a kind of
liquefaction. “The world
becomes *blurred*;
properties are no longer
separate; spilling,
sobbing, urinating,
ejaculating form a *wavy*
meaning” (125).

Punctum. “A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation [...]; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. [...] I shall therefore call [it] *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27).

Barthes is giving a name to the piercing interest he experiences when encountering certain photographs: “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)”; which punctuates whatever else the photograph presents; “shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (27, 26). It produces in him “something [...] like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (19).

I think of the arrow of Love the Stilnovist poets described in medieval Italy, which would pierce them with inspiration, through the eyes or

through the heart (Webb, *The Medieval Heart*, 72). And then they would have to do something about it.

Pricked by the *punctum* of a photograph Barthes says he is a primitive, a child, a maniac, dismissing all knowledge and culture and refusing to “inherit¹ anything from another eye than my own” (*Camera Lucida*, 51).

Refusing to inherit. But the word *punctum* is an inheritance. He makes no attempt to dismiss the knowledge and culture sedimented into the word when he lists its extra meanings: “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27). These meanings appear in his writing like discoveries unearthed with delight, dug out of the soil and found to be still working, ready to be put to use. To greater and lesser extents each of these meanings inflects his argument in generative ways. Is this accident? Luck? A cast of the dice? Would *any* of its meanings bear further scrutiny in relation to his argument—the lacrimal punctum, for instance, which he does not mention?

Where does the balance lie between writing meaning *into* the word and reading it *out*? This I want to know.

Barthes can never really say what so arrests him about a particular punctum, and perhaps if he could it would dull the sting a bit. He writes: “What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (*Camera Lucida*, 51). But now and again he

puts a photograph away only to recall it some time later, and *then* the punctum makes itself clear. Ultimately, he concludes, “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes” (53).

But what catches my eye is the line just below: an account of Kafka smiling and saying “We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes” (53).

Did Kafka write things to drive them out of his mind? To measure the weight of breath drawn in against the weight of breath drawn out, and hope they cancel one another out? If he did, then perhaps it *did* quench his thirst when he wrote about the lemonade, drinking it in as he wrote it out.

Did he long, in the end, for a perfectly empty mind?

Funes the Memorius must long for a perfectly empty mind, for his is perfectly full. Trying to fall asleep he imagines himself “at the bottom of the river, being rocked and annihilated by the

current” (Borges, “Funes the
Memorius,” 104).

The sad thing is, at the
bottom of a river there is
relatively little current. It
might be dark there, with
little detail or novelty (is
this his hope?) but the
current would do his
body only slow and
muted damage, no
annihilation. He would
be better off at the
surface, rushed against
all the life and foam that
would hit him there,
even though it would fill
his head still more.

Draining tears into ducts. You can sometimes prevent tears draining from the eye with a medical device called a punctal plug: a collagen or silicone implant usually smaller than a grain of rice, delivered into the punctum with forceps. It offers relief from dry eyes, which can happen when your eyes fail to produce the basal tears they need to stay lubricated. Your eyes become irritated and your vision blurry, but the tears you produce to soothe them are the wrong kind; they are too watery to form a film over the eye, so more and more tears are produced, and all

drain away through the puncta. The more tears are produced the drier the eye becomes, and blocking the puncta can stop the tears evacuating and help the eyes remain lubricated (Ervin et al., “Punctal Occlusion for Dry Eye Syndrome”).

Does the excess spill. “Each eye reproduced the entire cockroach. Pardon me for giving you this, hand holding mine, but I don’t want this for myself! take that roach, I don’t want what I saw” (Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, 51).

Her writing is the holding of the reader’s hand, sometimes to settle her fear, sometimes to settle ours, sometimes to bind us to her for the length of the story so we cannot encounter her suddenly and think her mad. And always—until the end at least, with the taste of the cockroach and the passion, hands quietly clasped on her lap—she holds our hand to get rid of what she writes.

Scent survives best where conditions are cool, moist and shaded from wind and direct sunlight. Under these circumstances residual scent can still be present some days after its source has passed through the area¹, especially pooling in still water and clinging to vegetation in the shade. If they have not dried out in the heat or dispersed through the air, vapours that have risen in hot weather sometimes fall back to ground level when temperatures drop in the evening, although they are often displaced some distance by the time they descend. When searching for somebody lost, a tracking dog does not follow the route the subject took but rather the path of their scent, and it is the work of the dog’s handler to understand and interpret any environmental conditions that might have contributed to the displacement of the scent so as to correct for¹ its movement.

After its source has passed through the area. I think of dogs pissing at the height of the other dogs’ noses. How contrived of them, I think, to aim their spray. And

how contrived to have nose surfaces resembling cobblestones, meant, like pavements, to receive the smell of piss.

What is it about the *studium* that brings to mind spraying at the height of the other dogs' noses? The *studium* is the name Barthes found for the general interest you might take in a photograph: an interest broadly in line with the intentions of the photographer, and expressly distinct from the *punctum*, which pierces him with some personal significance unforeseeable by anyone else. To recognize the *studium*, he wrote, "is invariably to encounter the photographer's intentions [...] but to experience them 'in reverse'" (*Camera Lucida*, 27-28).

With his cobblestone nose.

What can the other dog learn about the dog whose spray it smells?
How much of a dog can be read back, in reverse, from its smell?
The height of the hind? The smell of the urethra? The condition of the bowel? The contents of the stomach? The food most recently eaten? The nose?

Michael Fried uses the word 'theatrical', not 'contrived'. He finds in Barthes' idea of the *punctum* an implicit preference for antitheatricality. He writes: "for a photograph to be truly antitheatrical for Barthes it must somehow carry with it a kind of ontological guarantee that it was not intended to be so *by the photographer*"

(Fried, “Barthes’s *Punctum*,” 553). He goes on: “The *punctum*, I am suggesting, functions as that guarantee” (553).

For Barthes, no feature of a photograph can prick him if he thinks the photographer meant it to. He needs to find these things lying about, as though indifferent to him, as though he did not exist to behold them. They must not pose. Then, he can work from them his own private adventures. He uses the word ‘adventure’ of photographs that attract him: “*advenience* or even *adventure*. This photograph *advenes*, that one doesn’t” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 19).

It is just occurring to me that perhaps the way the pencil moves, and the way a drawing is a search for form, and the way the search for form can be seen on the page without exactly showing itself to be there: that perhaps all this is antitheatrical, and that perhaps this is why Fried’s writing interests me so much, when I find, lying about in his book, a reference to nature posing: “la Nature, toujours prête à *poser*” (*Nature, always ready to pose*. Fried, “Toward a Supreme Fiction,” 102, quoting Caylus, *Tableaux tirés de l’Iliade*, 36).

The idea that nature should be posing to be drawn: it is a brief reference, but it is enough. Now I have an image of nature posing, and the image pierces through the text

Fried has laid at the height of my nose, and through the image of the spray and the cobblestone nose, and the image of Dante writing out what he breathes in, and they are skewered together with this image of nature posing¹.

Nature posing. Caylus did not mean to suggest that the nose of a dog poses as a cobblestone pavement, or that the spray poses nose-height as though it just happened to land there.

Or, for that matter, that the quadrilateral of white light where our old home should have been was a trope of history's narrative.

“But when I opened the door my eyes winced in reverberations and physical displeasure.

Because instead of the confused murk I was expecting, I bumped into the vision of a room that was a quadrilateral of white light; my eyes protected themselves by squinting”

(Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, 29).

What did Dante mean when he wrote, in a letter to Can Grande della Scala, that the *Divine Comedy* should be read like the Bible? Did he mean that his words were things and his stories were events, as real as anything that ever happened? Or that the divineness of the poem was its greatest artifice—that “the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction”? (Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove,” 129.) If the latter, then you would need to read the poem as though it were scriptural while all the time holding the word in inverted commas: “Such sympathetic skepticism requires of the reader a kind of sophisticated naïveté,” writes Peter Hawkins when he summarizes Singleton’s argument, finding the *Commedia*’s likeness to the Bible to be “perhaps the poet’s most sustained tour de force, his supreme fiction” (Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, 56).

It was in the air, so to speak, and he just took note and set it forth on paper. And however complex and convoluted were the folds of Dante’s mind, he was at pains to explain how closely his pen followed the line he was dictated: “di retro al dittator sen vanno strette” (*follow close after him who dictates*. Dante, *Purgatory*, 24: 59, translation C. S. Singleton).

Strette: close, but also narrow;
 constricted on all sides. His pen scores its
 line along a narrow channel, in the dark I
 suppose, seeing only what Love dictates
 and nothing more.

Strette makes me think of Italo
 Calvino's most terrible invisible
 city, the one all underground,
 with earth and damp clay instead
 of air, and there are still people
 down there somehow living.

And of John M. Hull,
 the blind theologian,
 when he longs for rain
 to fall inside a room so
 that he can understand
 where everything is as
 he can when it rains
 outside. "Rain," he
 says, "has a way of
 bringing out the
 contours of everything;
 it throws a coloured
 blanket over previously
 invisible things"

(*Touching the Rock*, 25-27).

Just before his reference to nature posing Michael Fried had also written about naïveté—but the naïveté of the thing being seen, not of the person who would see it. *Naïf* was the word Diderot used to describe figures in paintings, and actors in theatre, who appeared so absorbed in thought or action they showed no awareness of being seen by the beholder, in contrast to the self-conscious figures he deplored in theatre and in painting alike, which seemed to pose in an artful way. Fried quotes the way Diderot describes *le naïf*: “C’est la chose, mais la chose pure, sans la moindre alteration. L’art n’y est plus” (*It is the thing, but the thing itself, without the least alteration. Art is no longer there*. Fried, “Toward a Supreme Fiction,” 100-101, citing Diderot).

Somewhere between these two studies of supreme fiction, the sublime naïveté of the thing seen encounters the sophisticated naïveté of the person who would see it, and their encounter is a kind of mutual looking away.

It is just occurring to me that perhaps Dante’s claim to anagogy is at root a gesture of antitheatricity, or a guarantee of absorption, when I think of the way the pencil moves, and the way a drawing is a search for form, and the way the search for form can be seen on the page

without exactly showing itself to be there: and it seems to me that all this is at root naïve.

Correct for. It has been shown that “viewing an emotion can induce subtle changes in the muscular activity of the face of the viewer, even if the stimulus is not consciously registered” (Trimble, *Why Humans like to Cry*, 150).

It has also been shown that “contracting the muscles of the face [is] enough [...] to increase the subjects’ feelings of anguish” (Lutz, *Crying*, 98).

In a small clinical study¹, researchers of psychosomatic medicine found that when people are experiencing emotional stress, blisters on their skin exude more fluid. A point on the skin of each subject was exposed to cantharides¹ to induce a blister from which the top layers of epidermis were removed, leaving the skin weeping freely. A spectrum of emotional states was induced¹ in each subject as the blister was blotted with filter paper for standardized units of time, and the paper was weighed before and after each blotting to measure the accumulating fluid¹. This accumulation was found to correlate with the subjects’ tearfulness, and where they suppressed an urge to cry, it was found that after a short delay the weeping function was transferred to the skin.

A small clinical study. Kepecs et al., “Relationship between Certain Emotional States and Exudation into the Skin,” and Nelson, *Seeing Through Tears*, 146.

Each subject was exposed to cantharides. Cantharides is a poisonous substance made by crushing into powder the dried bodies of *cantharis vesicatoria* beetles. When applied to the skin it causes blistering, and when ingested it irritates the urinary tract producing diuretic and aphrodisiac effects in breeding livestock.

A spectrum of emotional states was induced. To simulate crying, an actor can mine their memory for a similar kind of sadness to the kind they hope to perform (Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 163-192). Once brought to tears, it remains only to redirect and articulate this real feeling through the particulars of the script. The risk is that if you draw upon a particular memory too many times it will lose its power, and will need sharpening periodically or replacing with another.

A less costly technique is to mine your memories of crying for their physical sensations rather than their emotional force, and perform these sensations on stage instead: the raised temperature and increased respiration, the furrowed brow, the contraction of the muscles of the nose and lips, and so on. Over time and with practice, the memory of these physical sensations alone suffices to stimulate tears, with no sad thoughts at all (Lutz, *Crying*, 97-8).

Writing about nontheatrical modes of performance, Allan Kaprow suggests a taxonomy of five artistic working practices, of which the fifth is to “work in nonart modes and nonart contexts but cease to call the work art, retaining instead the private consciousness that sometimes it may be art, too” (175). He later adds: “so far, I know of no one who fits the fifth who hasn’t simply dropped out of art entirely” (Kaprow, “The Real Experiment,” 175-6).

The blunt tip of this pencil: I no longer touch it.

“Museums do more than isolate such work from life, they subtly sanctify it and thus kill it” (Meyer-Hermann, *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life*, 70).

It is hard to make sense of the fleshy bodies of visitors in museums. They are not disembodied eyes, but in the white cube of the modernist gallery it feels like they should be. “Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not—or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannequins for further study” (O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 15).

Even more uncomfortable is the fleshy body of the artist; so at home in the studio but in the gallery “an embarrassing piece of mobile furniture¹ haunting his or her own product” (O’Doherty, *Studio and Cube*, 5-6).

The body of the pencil, that odd piece of furniture,
moving about the page, haunting it, not welcome once the
drawing is complete and hardly tolerated before.

Or the I-beam cursor blinking on the screen as I
type, the stuttering repetition of a first person voice (I...
I... I...) always at the breaking edge of the text, always
just ahead of my words, hemming them so close I follow

narrowly behind—*stretta*—but it is not inspiration, or the breath of Love I follow; it is the cursor.

Cursor, cursive, recursive. (Am I heading for myself?)

“Posing in front of the lens (I mean: knowing I am posing, even fleetingly) [...] I don’t know how to work upon my skin from within” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11).

“Consciousness makes artefacts of us all” (O’Doherty, *Studio and Cube*, 5).

I remember a story about Steven Spielberg finding himself in tears at the break up of a relationship: “The human being in me was pouring the tears out. But the doggone filmmaker in me ran to the other room, grabbed my instamatic,

and took my own
 picture. I had to have that
 cry on record”
 (Zellerbach, “What Men
 say about Crying,” 37).

And the artist
 Sophie Calle,
 shocked and
 bereft at the
 sudden end of a
 relationship and
 yet—it only
 occurred to her
 months later—
 able at the peak
 of her anguish to
 photograph the
 telephone, still
 warm, that had
 brought the bad
 news.

An embarrassing piece of mobile furniture. O’Doherty could
 have written those words to describe one of the nesting bookcases
 Joe Scanlan makes, designed with a carrying strap to make them
 portable, and just as often displayed as artworks in gallery

exhibitions as in domestic spaces where they are used as furniture (Newman, “After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan’s Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing,” 207-210). They look uncomfortable wherever they go. But most of the domestic spaces inhabited by these special shelves are the homes of art collectors, which is to say they are special homes—knowing homes—where the ambiguous status of the shelves must be taken into account, and they are only being posed as ordinary furniture, as though held all the time in inverted commas.

What is it about the contents of Eva Hesse’s studio that comes to mind when I imagine Scanlan’s shelves in collectors’ homes?

It must be that Hesse’s works do the opposite of posing: that however much they are exhibited, circulated or displayed in the homes of collectors, they never really leave behind the studio or the fleshy body of the artist. The way they seem to slip between being art and being something else leaves them quite unknowable. When she describes her co-curation of a posthumous exhibition of Hesse’s work, Briony Fer reveals that not knowing was at the heart of the decisions she made: “Here, the point is that I do not know what these objects are. [...] The question is how

to attend to them in a way that is adequate to the risks they take” (*Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, 15).

One of the ways she attends to them is by giving names to certain categories of the things she found in Hesse’s studio. Of these, I am struck by name “sub-object,” which she uses to group together a class of small, apparently residual, raw or unfinished sculptural pieces she describes as “something that does not quite rise to the status of an object but remains closer to a thing. They play in between these two terms” (42).

In their play between subject and object, the risks they take bring to mind Coypel’s blind men, running “through space as if running a risk” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 5), advancing or committing themselves with no end in sight—unless the end is somehow all the way through, or is the running itself; the moving through space; the being made. “This is not necessarily about making *something* particular,” Fer explains, “but just about making some thing” (*Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, 19). “I want to take seriously the idea that you can make something with no end in sight” (16).

Then after the making, the sub-object is left over, almost despite itself, as a result of having been made. Sub-objects play somewhere between thing and object, but “they also play in the spaces between the primordial and the residual; between the coming-into-being of sculpture and what LeWitt called studio leavings; between origins and remainders” (*Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, 42).

To measure the accumulating fluid. (If one could measure the weight of breath drawn in against the weight of breath drawn out, would they balance one another out? Was Love’s inspiration perfected in the form of poetry, with nothing left unexpressed?)

2.3

The image of myopic movement and touch that had already formed in my mind persists so strongly that these new resemblances are drawn towards it, and shape it into an image stronger still: that of a curious globular form that expresses in physical terms the impalpable qualities being described, and the way these qualities interact.

But the first thing is how much wetness there is. The fluid presents itself as another articulation of the longing or loss that was here before, and it articulates this weight of feeling as a quantity in need of its opposite measure. It is a diluvian kind of wetness: the kind that floods things in a promise to drain them away, dissolve them or cancel them out, thus balancing an imbalance and bringing a remainder down to zero. This promise is not yet kept, and perhaps it will not be: perhaps it will digress or turn away and become something else in due course; because whatever else the fluid might be, it is mutable, flowing, to do with the waviness or wobbling of meaning.

And the exquisite closeness of sightless touch: it has a globular quality now. Its cautious movement through the dark is slowed by another kind of movement that tends towards both stillness and constant agitation: the fluttering palpitation of the globular surface, which is fluid, but fluid contained. The containment is as important as the fluid itself, or even more so. It is a containment brought about by a pull from inside or underneath: an inward pull that tries to make the whole as compact as it can be, resulting in a tension so finely balanced that the threat of rupture is always close, because it might be spilled or overflowed, or perhaps pierced by whatever is outside.

For whatever is outside this fluid globule, it is not nothing. It is receptive in some way, or expectant. As movement gropes forward half-blind, it is no longer pressing into the unknown; it is being received (closely, narrowly) into something, and this changes it.

The image in my mind is compacting and becoming more defined, but still details remain left over, most of all these:

recursivity, and following the cursor instead of inspiration;

the pose;

the uncomfortable body of the artist in the gallery.

I cannot yet use these fragments up.

Chapter 3: The voice recordings

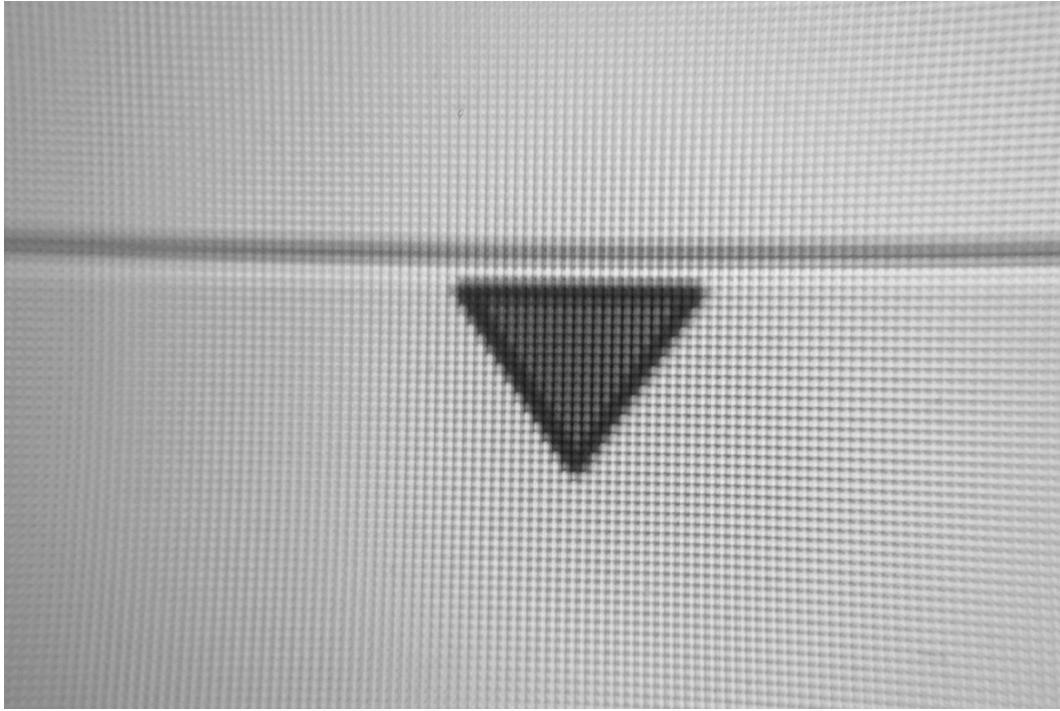


Fig 4. Photograph of my computer screen, showing the play head moving along the line of audio.

3.1

Saved on my hard drive is a folder containing a few dozen audio files. They are all voice recordings I made near the harbour in Bristol a couple of years ago, when I was trying to make videos of drawings in a temporary studio there. I made the first recording on my walk home after an unproductive day. For some reason I had spent a lot of time looking at a spool of wire, and thinking something about the end of the wire being all the way through it and not just at the end; this thought had thrown me from my work and I could not understand why. Perhaps if I talked it through step by step, I thought, I could describe the whole problem of the wire from beginning to end and it would start to make sense. I believe the decision to record my speech was taken quite lightly: that really I just wanted to talk to myself out loud, but with so many people around I felt self-conscious and held my phone to my ear as if in conversation—and with my phone to my ear I thought I might as well press record.

Because the files are saved in a single list I can click on the first one and listen to them all play through in order without my intervention: about four hours of speech, including a few longer recordings I had made in daylight, at my desk as I drew. As soon as each new file begins it is obvious which was recorded in the studio and which outside. It isn't so much the higher ambient volume of the outdoor recordings that sets them apart as the texture of the speech. The speaker's breath (listening back, she is no longer really me) is certainly heavier in these recordings, because she is walking quickly and usually carrying a bag or two, but this doesn't account for the impression of clipped urgency: of being anxious or preoccupied with something more immediately pressing than what she is saying.

Something tugs at her. There are no pauses for reflection where one might expect them. The speech runs on in syncopated jabs, staccato like treading water, as though she must

keep talking or she will go under. She speaks as though her mouth is just above the surface of the water, head tipped back, eyes wide and unseeing.

Now and again the edge of some thought seems to approach, as though creeping towards her along the dark surface of the imaginary water. Without hesitation she grips on and pulls herself up as if onto a life raft. Then, if the thought turns out to be good and robust it carries her easily for some pleasurable moments, taking one turn then another and another: speech becomes thoughtful, graceful, rhythmical and composed, like rowing—until suddenly there is nothing but voice again, treading water, preoccupied with the matter of staying afloat. These brief successes are rare: more often the rafts turn out to be thin as tissue, and get wetted and stuck together almost as soon as she touches them, and dissolve. They must have seemed substantial enough on the approach—enough to bring her to embark upon some darkly complex undertaking of thought—but listening back I can make no sense of what she was saying. “The air is ... all an ear,” she says, and makes some work of sliding between the words “aural” and “aerial” several times by lightening and darkening their vowel sounds until they sound the same. Then “I am a mouth, I am a mouth, I am a mouth,” she mouths in an exploratory way, tongue shaping the sounds slowly and thoughtfully, pausing often as if to taste them. They are spoken as though the mouth and the mind are full with them, the pauses rich and moist: something is being made here, some new discovery—but then she falters and the thing disintegrates, and only the words are left, repeated a few more times without feeling. The words sound ridiculous in my ear. Nothing supports them. The pauses that must have been so thick at the time are silent now, and empty, and I cannot make sense of the thought. It occurs to me these recordings were small acts of boldness, launching herself onto surfaces of thought just barely strong enough to perceive and pushing forward all the same—but in the end little but the launching shows.

These recordings are hard to listen to. Very often I find myself distracted and thinking about something else. There are so many little gaps and openings in the speech and so little to keep my mind from drifting through them and away. By contrast the recordings made at the desk are easy. It is a relief when they come up in the playlist. Some are a good half-hour long, accompanying the whole of a drawing from beginning to end. I describe what I'm doing and reflect on things that occur to me, but much of this time is spent in silence, and there is an easiness to the silence: paced, gentle, reflective. The room was painted white and lit with even sunlight through a single opaque window that cut a square into the ceiling. For a long time I thought the white opacity was just the sky, and that every day had been overcast and bright, until a seagull landed on the glass and was invisible but for a patter of sharp little grey marks stalking across, before it vanished again into the open sky calling for the sea. The voice in these recordings is still distracted, still pulling away from the recording somehow, but it tugs brightly towards the studio and the drawing on the table top, and not towards the dark. When I speak, each word is just where it is. When words trail off there is the sound of the pencil scribbling. You can hear the airy space of the room. We are on firm ground, supported by the activity of drawing and putting no weight on the words, which just come and go. Sometimes in the middle of the silence a description comes, clean and matter of fact: "I've just got to line up the mirror." Later, with a scribbling sound: "I am putting in the hair." In the readings made outside in the dark, meanwhile, there is no such description. The voices of the people passing by, the hum of the night boats passing, distant traffic sounds: all these go by without any remark. The only circumstantial details that make it into words are that it was dark as I spoke, and I was walking.

In fact most of what the voice in the dark described was the sensation of walking in the dark, and thinking into the dark as she spoke, and wondering what kind of surface it was that received her words: what kind of aural tissue enveloped her as she spoke, and how it

was different from the surface of the paper that accepted her marks when she drew, or collected her words when she wrote. The listener loomed large in her imagination. This seems quite misplaced now that I am the listener, and find the recordings almost completely inaccessible. As I play the list I am aware to the point of distraction that the struggling speaker might slip underwater at any moment. I watch the play head edge along the line of audio and find I am listening out for only one thing, a yes or a no: will she stay afloat this time, all the way along the line to the end of the track? Or will she falter too long and go under? In the end, for all her fascination with the listener, the only thing that could hear her is now gone: the thick dark air, her own mind, all around her. Listening, I cannot understand how it was to speak. The two perspectives are irreconcilable.

*

But I can remember that when I was walking along in the dark and speaking I was not moving along a line like a play head towards the inevitable stop. I was not struggling to stay afloat or gasping for air. The whole thing is upside-down. I didn't need air and I didn't want it. It would wake me. Walking along the harbourside speaking into the dark I was deep underwater, and my struggle was to stay down, rather than rise to the surface as the body naturally would.

This is what it was like to speak. It would always begin out in the open, somewhere bright and familiar, with a description of something observed or handled or read over the course of the day, but which seemed to conceal somewhere along its surface a region of unsafe ground: something nagging, some obscure significance I could not grasp. The spool of wire, for instance. It was simple enough to describe, but as I embarked upon the description I knew there would be difficulty soon enough: that soon I would have to

describe something I could not describe, and by forcing a description I hoped I might begin to understand the thing, or at least understand why it nagged me as it did. So I would move rapidly towards this unsafe ground, hurrying my words as if taking a run up, then taking a leap—and usually the leap would fail and I would land back on familiar ground again. When this happened, sometimes my speech would trail off and I would stop recording; sometimes I would repeat the last words again and again in case they took flight after all (“I am a mouth, I am a mouth...”); sometimes I would continue to speak in hope of finding another place to leap from later on. Sometimes it just happened: and I was underwater, lungs full and staring at the near edge of a dark shape before the shock of success would startle me to the surface again and I was back where I began, only with the dark inflection of a thought receding from me and no longer anywhere to be found.

When the leap was most successful it was not a leap at all but a gradual exertion of even pressure over the surface of the thought. If I spoke very carefully and simply to describe in detail, say, the problem of the spool of wire, it was possible almost to trick myself into going under. The rhythm of steady, regular speech, once well-established on firm ground, could take me down with it into the depths, far enough that I could be some way under before realizing I was describing something I could only see as far as my words were showing it to me. Then it was not a leap but an imperceptible slip through the surface into the thick of the water, and as long as I managed to trick myself nothing was changed, I could breathe the water like air. With the steady regular pace of speech I could press on into the unknown, surveying the surface of the spool of wire, or whatever it happened to be, as though a diver’s light were poised at the tip of my words, illuminating a little glow just ahead of me in the dark. To know more of the thing I was describing I had to describe it more, the glow probing forward and the darkness closing behind me as I moved, unable as I was to keep in mind any more than the last few seconds of speech—just as much as I could hear ringing in my ears. This failure of memory came to shape the way I spoke as I

walked along the harbour in the dark. Every detail of thought needed attending to at the very moment it was first encountered or it would drop out of sight (out of sound?) and could not be retrieved. Where an idea split and multiplied only one strand at a time could be pursued. Very quickly the others drifted out of reach, and the one I had chosen became the only one there was. Sometimes I tried to follow multiple strands at once, crawling along in a series of branching advances and retreats and tending to everything that occurred to me on the way, but multiplied together they became a cacophony, not only to listen to but, I remember, to try to speak.

I needed to proceed in a particular way, not oriented from the perspective of an idea being pursued, but neither altogether disoriented. The single point within which I spoke became my orientation, the glowing beacon from which I navigated—though I could never navigate *from* it because it would come with me, or I would come with it. This far underwater, oriented only to myself, I did not know whether I was describing, inventing or making things up. I allowed myself all kinds of liberties of form and idea, as though it were a virtuoso performance by someone not entirely myself. These poetic contortions, which must be the nonsense I was to hear as a listener, seemed to be what was needed to press onward through the dark when there was so little form to find; form that would only come forth if coaxed by a certain inflection of vowel sound or arc of the mind, the lifting and placing of a certain geometry. In any case, whatever translucent frills of thought these delicate manoeuvres might have brushed against at the time, they were not robust enough to reach the surface intact, or make it out into the empty air.

*

It occurs to me now that while this underwater speaking was going on I must have noticed, really, that I was no longer out in the open somewhere bright and familiar. I must have been aware that the pressure on my words had changed. If part of me was not entirely myself as I performed these poetic contortions in the blissful trust of sleep, so to speak, another part of me must have been wakeful enough to watch the performance and know not to come too close. I wonder whether trying to support this conceit exerted a pressure greater than that of the darkness pushing against the little miner's light as I spoke, and greater even than the struggle to stay down underwater instead of coming up for air. I must have been working hard to not notice I was underwater—to know and to not know at the same time—and perhaps it is the effort of this doubling, more than anything else, that sounds like struggling when I listen back.

3.2

A man begins to speak¹ without knowing what he is going to say. There is a dark inkling¹ of thought in his mind but no glimmer of its resolution, and only by pressing on through the dark, lighting a path with words¹, might he reach it. Beginning to speak with conviction is enough to embolden his mind and oblige it to find an end to the beginning he has set in motion¹. Until it reaches some end he extends his pathway on and on, pacing out his speech with slowly pronounced conjunctions, reflective parentheses, the drawn-out vowel sounds of thinking. His words are received into the warm silence of the drawing room: a pliant surface to press into and which presses pleasingly in return with the soft resistance of a passive listener. His sister sits behind him at her work¹. Not knowing his subject, with her mind on other things, her presence makes the silence just thick enough to push against. Should she gesture or suggest with an intake of breath a wish to interrupt her brother, he meets her increased resistance with a greater exertion of thought: a correspondence.

A man begins to speak. Heinrich von Kleist.

A dark inkling. “Some obscure preconception, distantly connected in some way with whatever I am looking for” (Kleist, “On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts During Speech,” 42).

Lighting a path with words. “As if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had grown right next to the nail, a single eye,” “a miner’s lamp” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 3).

“Imagine the negative of a poem on a page, white script on black. You’re blundering through arctic night with your little lantern^l swinging”
(Maxwell, *On Poetry*, 21-2).

Little lantern. Inkling. Sapling. A little spatter, not even quite a blot, that sort of resembles an arborescent growth on the page.

Find an end to the beginning he has set in motion. “This kind of speech is nothing less than articulated thought. The chains of ideas and of their designations proceed together at the same speed, and the mental documents for the one and for the other agree. Then speech is not an impediment, a sort of brake on the wheel of intellect, but like a second wheel running parallel with it on the same axle” (Kleist, “On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts During Speech,” 44).

Surely not as neat as parallel.

Kleist is arguing that “at the moment when he opened his mouth, many a great orator did not know what he was going to say,” and that “the conviction that the necessary wealth of ideas would be provided by the circumstances and by the resulting excitement of his mind, made him bold enough to pick the opening words at random” (“On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts During Speech,” 43).

But by his own account, when Kleist begins to speak without knowing what he is going to say, his opening words are not random at all. Instead, they describe something he knows, however obscurely, to be “distantly connected in some way” to what he is trying to say. He is

hoping to get to something that in some way is already there; though in what way, and where, he does not know. How different are his opening words from the glue and sand André Masson would drip and scatter at random onto the surface of his paper before starting to draw, with the firm intention of deferring the moment of conscious choice for as long as possible, so that when he began to draw it would bring out an image composed more by chance than rational decision. Kleist chooses his words rationally, not at random. His words are tools “for the fabrication of [his] idea in the workshop of *reason*” (42, emphasis mine).

All the same, his opening words are put to peculiar use. They seem to be more material than semantic: grainy in texture, as if to grit a surface to gain traction. They are used with the firm intention of engaging a listener whose attention will excite and embolden his mind and oblige him to continue. They are used to hold that attention over time: he would “interpose inarticulate sounds, draw out the connecting words [...] and employ other tricks which will prolong [his] speech” until his idea is formed (Kleist, “On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts During Speech,” 42).

I wonder how such granular speech would have sounded.

And whether it mattered to Kleist what his
listener heard while his speech went on.

His sister sits behind him at her work. What kind of surface is this sister?

There is something repulsive about the thought of an ear used to receive speech rather than properly to hear it. Like a mouth with no tongue—

“It was no comfort that his mutilation was secret, closed behind his lips [...]. Indeed, it was the very secretness of his loss that made me shrink from him. I could not speak, while he was about, without being aware how lively were the movements of the tongue in my own mouth. I saw pictures in my mind of pincers gripping his tongue and a knife slicing into it, as must have happened, and I shuddered” (Coetzee, *Foe*, 24).

The full, fleshy cave of the mouth.

Pressed loosely and sensitively, could the tongue fill the cavity of the ear, and lie flat the way the stub of an oyster lies on its shell?

Then: the taste of the ear and the sound of the tongue, answering one another.

Italo Calvino described an imaginary city that has earth instead of air. “The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative, over the roofs of the houses hang layers of rocky terrain like

skies with clouds. We do not know if the inhabitants can move about the city¹, widening the worm tunnels and the crevices where roots twist: the dampness destroys people's bodies and they have scant strength; everyone is better off remaining still, prone; anyway, it is dark. From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, 'It's down below there,' and we can only believe them. The place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam" (*Invisible Cities*, 114).

If the inhabitants can move about the city. Moving around the city is unthinkable, and so must be speaking, I imagine. If you opened your mouth the cavity would be met with clay¹ that filled it, causing the involuntary closure of the larynx¹ and restricting the movement of your tongue, which would limit the vowel sounds you could make. All your consonants would need broaching around the hardening wad of clay, and so the soft velar folds at the very top of your throat would need to do most of the work, giving your words a dark, glottal timbre.

The cavity is met with clay. In the schema of *The Invisible Cities* the city of Argia is associated with the dead. But its inhabitants, though packed prone into the earth underground, are not dead.

Then there are the dead who speak with mouths full of excrement, in the eighteenth canto of hell, the *Malebolge*, speaking shit in death as they did in life. Dante calls these sinners *lusinghe*, flatterers. "Ordure was an image of foul or deceitful speech (as the word 'crap' is used in English) and he has chosen this worst possible degradation to express his scorn" (Reynolds, *Dante: the Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*, 163).

Cacophony comes from the Greek *kakos* meaning *bad* or *evil*, and *phone* meaning *sound*. From *kakos* derives the proto-Indo-European root *kakka-* meaning *to defecate*, and thought to be “imitative of glottal closure during defecation” (Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European*, 37).

“The adjective ‘cathartic’ meant powerfully laxative” (Lutz, *Crying*, 73).

“The Real only appears in *jouissance*, leftover bits of enjoyment that remain at the edges of the body in what Freud calls the ‘erotogenic’ zones: the mouth, the anus and the sexual organs. Lacan adds to these a language that emerges from the lips and a vision from the eye, all that emerges at the edges of the body, from the structure of the rim” (Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 32).

And then these leftover bits are
often received, and then kept.
The lachrymal phial, the voice
recorder on my phone, the sheet

of paper against which the pencil
wipes the edges of its tip.

I think of the slab of
white marble from which
Bernini “released” his
sculpture of Saint Teresa
in Ecstasy (Nobus, “The
Sculptural Iconography
of Feminine Jouissance,”
22).

“The wonderful
head [...] is bent back on
the neck as if from the
painful thrust of a
dagger. The eyes are half
closed under leaden,
fallen lids and rolled
back almost completely
so that the iris is only
visible as a faint shadow
on the upper edge of the
white of the orb. [...]
The nostrils seem to
quiver, the mouth is
convulsively opened, not
in a scream, but barely a

deep moan. The lids, the
nostrils, and the mouth
are deeply undercut to
create an effect of long
shadows” (Weibel, “The
Representation of
Ecstasy,” 84, describing
Bernini’s *Saint Teresa*).

Every splinter of
marble plucked
and teased away
as her form was
released. What
an encounter: the
hammer and pick
and rasp meeting
for the first time
the quivering
nostril, the
barely moaning
mouth.

The involuntary closure of the larynx. Drowning begins when water enters the larynx and the vocal cords constrict, preventing fluid from entering the lungs and restricting the intake of breath completely. Just

before asphyxiation the larynx is forced back open in an involuntary attempt to get oxygen at any cost, and the lungs fill with water.

The eardrum is translucent, pearly white and almost egg-shaped; its surface softly curved. Pressing visibly against the membrane from inside, like a jointed arm stretching in a womb, is the handle of the malleus, the first of three chained bones that occupy the middle ear. When sound is received into the drum and presses against these bones, their movement enlarges the movement of the sound and sets in motion a spiral shell of fluid and with it a population of microscopically fine hairs that rhythmically tap the auditory nerve¹.

That rhythmically tap the auditory nerve. Earlier, I wrote “I imagine tapping a gate as you might tap a tree: drilling a hole into the surface until the sap begins to bead and drip, and then inserting a spile to direct the fluid down the line. Or tapping the skull to alleviate pressure, or tapping a line to listen in. He taps the gate, extracts from it his route and takes it home” (this document, 38-9).

Hearing is all touch.

Modelling wax is very pliant, its surface puckering to receive its marks like many little mouths¹. Press it with a scalpel or a fingernail and there is almost no resistance at all¹. If the figure being shaped is small, it can be held in the hand and gradually turned while it is worked upon, but care must be taken not to dull or softly fold any peaks of detail already tooled into the surface or the work will need repeating¹. Because the wax is so soft the rough shape of a figure is often carved out first in stiff clay and then cast in wax when nearly complete, so the fine details can be added. When a figure is carved in wax from the

very beginning, the softness of the material determines the shape from deep inside, as though it were surface all the way through¹. Figures carved in this way cannot support protrusions extending too far from the central form as they tend to sag or collapse unless supported by armatures, and generally these cannot be extracted later on¹.

Like many little mouths. A century ago you could set a machine to etch your voice with a stylus into wax. The sound could only be replayed a dozen times before the same stylus began to smooth it away.

There is almost no resistance at all. Scrape across its surface and translucent ribbons curl away, and these can be melted together to reuse later on.

The work will need repeating. This can go on and on around the figure until you are working on it from all over at once.

“A book [...] is written from all over at once [...]. A book is just about round. But since to appear it must adjust itself into a rectangular parallelepiped, at a certain moment you cut the sphere, you flatten it, you square it up. You give the planet the form of a tomb. The book has only to await resurrection” (Cixous, “Writing Blind,” 120).

When the book is round (without protrusions extending too far from its central form?) it has something to do with life. When it has something to do with death it is squared up.

As though it were surface all the way through. If the wax becomes very soft in the warmth of the hands, the finished figure can bear the impression of every incision or fingerprint made along the way (giving the surface a pock-marked and irregular appearance, I want to say).

There is so much roundness in all this, so many globular forms.

“I don’t know how to work on my skin from within” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11).

There is something peculiar about being the face inside a life cast while the alginate is pasted on, warms, stiffens and gets tight. Drinking straws protrude from your nostrils, life-saving and ridiculous. You are worked upon by people who know, but try not to worry you, that others have asphyxiated this way. You sit like a candle in the middle of the action, blunt and mute, expressionless, announcing the surface of your expression only to the surface of gel, which repeats it to you.

Under the eyelids and between the lips tiny air bubbles form in the alginate as it sets. Later on when the mold is cast in plaster, the bubble cavities form globular blebs beading the orifices here and there. These can be removed with a fine rasp or sharpened dental probe.

A curette is a narrow spatula-like medical instrument designed to scrape or scoop away soft tissue, in particular for draining and excising chalazion blebs from the eyelid.

I think of the “nauseating business” of the marrow scoop you use to gut a trout on the bankside, so you can identify what it last ate, and choose the fly for your next cast accordingly (McCully, *Fly-Fishing*, 19, citing Skues, *The Way of a Trout with the Fly*).

Cast: cast a line, cast a spell, cast light, cast a character, cast a broken limb, cast away, cast a glance, cast a mould, cast a die, forecast, cast about for what to do, cast a vote, a plaster cast, a worm cast. And then, to cast is to spread out in search of a scent, to twist fabric or warp it, to miscarry, to steer a ship as the anchor is weighed; the remains of animals or insects regurgitated by a bird.

These cannot be extracted later on. When the figure is completed, it is normal to make a final cast of the wax in a permanent medium less sensitive to atmospheric conditions.

Water is almost eight hundred times more dense than air and contains a fraction of the oxygen. As they move through water¹ fish open their mouths and close their throats, forcing water through the gill slits either side of the jaw where capillaries thread a flow of blood against the flow of water. These streams of fluid run parallel for some time as they travel the expansive surface area of the gills: extraordinarily compact systems of convoluted paper-thin folds, wrinkled with long finger-like protrusions that extend the surface further still¹. Out of water¹, the tissue of the gills is no longer supported¹ and the folds collapse together¹, reducing the surface area so greatly that respiration ceases¹.

As they move through water. “Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one’s line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out?” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 5).

When a thought is already there (where?) and it needs to be expressed in words, there is some kind of careful, or jerking, or torturous work to be done, and sometimes the thought is lost in the process:

“At social gatherings where minds are continually fertilized with ideas by a lively conversation, one can often see persons who as a rule are reticent, because they feel they have no command of language, suddenly

break out with a jerking movement, take hold of speech and give birth to something unintelligible. Indeed, now that they have attracted everyone's attention, they seem to intimate by their embarrassed gestures that they are no longer quite sure what it is they want to say. It is likely that these persons thought of something most striking, and thought it clearly. But the sudden change of occupation, the transition in their minds from thought to expression, soon neutralized all the excitement required for the holding fast of thought and, even more so, for its expression" (Kleist, *Gradual Construction*, 45).

The way to salvage the thought, he writes, is to make the transition to speech so smooth it is hardly felt at all, and to this end, spoken language "should be within easy reach of our minds, so that those concepts which we have thought synchronously, but cannot express synchronously, may at least succeed one another as quickly as possible" (45).

Or the whole thing can be turned upside down, and you can try to stay on the side of thought. Cixous describes "the torture of beginning to speak aloud" ("Sorties," 92). But when she writes that this torture is "experienced more as tearing away, dizzying flight and flinging oneself, diving," you can tell she also finds it a wonderful thing (92). She goes on: "There is waste in what we say. We need that waste¹" (93).

We need that waste. I think of the granular kind of speech, with its inarticulate sounds, that Kleist would produce as his thoughts gradually found expression, and

then of lines like these, written by Cixous, and imagine hers a cross-section of his; a kind of CT scan: “I am trying at this moment to capture the mysteries of passage so as to confide them to you, this is an attempt to note down what goes much faster than my consciousness and my hand. But the passage, luckily, leaves traces. One must act fast. And no time to learn” (Cixous, “Writing Blind,” 118).

Imagine, as you speak aloud, and try to gradually construct thought as you go along, and produce the kind of granular, inarticulate sounds Kleist produced to prolong your speech as you do— imagine the grain of your speech embedding itself in the surface of the air, or the surface of your sister’s ear, and accumulating there, so that when you finally arrive at whatever thought you were hoping to construct it is fixed, indistinguishable, to the near edge of this inarticulate concretion.

Earlier, I wrote “Thinking something about the end of the wire being all the way through it and not just at the end” (this document, 82).

Finger-like protrusions that extend the surface further still. These protrusions are called microvilli: microscopically slender filaments of membrane projected from the central form of a cell to greatly increase its surface area. In the gills of fish, this increased surface area exposes each cell to a great volume of water from which an abundant supply of oxygen can be absorbed into the bloodstream.

Villus is derived from the Latin *villus* which meant a *tuft of hair*, and today its anatomical definition is “A slender hair-like process or minute projection forming one of a number closely set on a surface” (*OED Online*).

I am surprised to read the word *process* being used in this way, to describe a static thing—namely an anatomical “protuberance or projection,” or a botanical outgrowth in moss. Reading the examples of usage (for instance, “The [...] naso-frontal process as the basis for the lachrymal bone”; “[The stigmas] form two protuberant, almost horn-shaped processes on each side of the mouth of the nectary,” *OED Online*), I picture the villus as a static thing, but a thing that is somehow action-like: somehow continuous or extended in the way that a processual action might be, as though the villus were just a material concretion of the process that formed it.

Which it is, I suppose—as is everything.

Imagining everything as a material concretion of the process that formed it, I think of the “*awful* lines” John Ruskin discerned in anything one might set out to draw:

“the lines in it which have had power over its past fate, and will have power over its futurity” (*The Elements of Drawing*, 121).

He gave an example: “In a tree, they show what kind of fortune it has had to endure from its childhood; how troublesome trees have come in its way, and pushed it aside, and tried to strangle or starve it; where and when kind trees have sheltered it [...]; what winds torment it most; what boughs of it behave best, and bear most fruit; and so on” (120). His advice was to seek out the awful lines of your object and “see that you seize on those, whatever else you miss,” the stylus sculpting the drawing as the elements have sculpted the tree (121).

Jean-Luc Nancy observed that the object of a drawing is sought and gradually found through the gradual formation of its image on the page. Through this process, he wrote, you arrive at an idea of the object that you had not formed and could not have formed before the drawing began (*The Pleasure in Drawing*, 10). This enquiry and gradual encounter is played out on the surface of the page, the “formative force” of each exploratory venture leaving on the page a visible record: a material concretion of the process that formed it (12).

Out of water. There are amphibious fish that can breathe both in and out of water, their gills and eyes adapted to either environment.

Is no longer supported. Earlier, I wrote “It must have been the near edge of a dream or an idea I was nourishing half-asleep but which woke me up, and once awake I could not support it” (this document, 34).

The folds collapse together. They smell and come apart in your hands. Little salty bits are left on your fingers.

Respiration ceases. The way wet hair lies flat on the scalp when it was wonderful underwater.

It is possible to desiccate the human body in the final years of life so that it does not decay after death¹. The diet is gradually restricted to the needles and bark of a pine tree, starving and dehydrating the body to remove excess fat that would otherwise provide a warm and moist environment for bacterial growth in the cadaver. Tea prepared with the toxic resin of a lacquer tree¹ supplements the diet, making the soft tissue inhospitable to insects. When it is nearly dead the body heaves itself into a confined tomb, composes itself and is closed from outside, a thin tube providing air to breathe¹ until no signs of life can be heard¹; the tube is removed and the tomb sealed¹. Being alive and being dead are so close by for long that exchanging one for the other is a very minor physiological event, not a leap at all¹.

It does not decay after death. In the Buddhist practice of *sokushinbutsu*, self-mummification, the incorruptibility of the body is understood as a sign of special grace (Jeremiah, *Living Buddhas*).

Lacquer tree. This practice is known as *mokujiki-gyô*, tree eating (Hori, “Self-Mummified Buddhas in Japan,” 223-224).

A thin tube providing air to breathe. When flowers are cut, are they from that moment dead, and just keep up the appearance of liveliness for a few days? Or is there still life in them until they dry out?

No signs of life can be heard. As the dying monk meditates in his tomb, he rings a bell occasionally.

You can sometimes hear a bell ring. “You can sometimes hear a door slam” (Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 114).

The sound it makes is not the signal but the baseline from which the signal can be sounded. The real signal is his *not* ringing the bell, which communicates to the attendants outside that he is dead (Jeremiah, *Living Buddhas*).

The tomb sealed. Three years later the tomb is opened and, like an announcement, the cadaver shows in the degree of its preservation how successful it has been.

Although *sokushinbutsu* has been practised for thousands of years we only know of a few dozen monks who have preserved their bodies with success.

Not a leap at all. Four short lines of verse describe the darkening brain of a woman preserved in a peat bog for hundreds of thousands of years. Its spawnly fermentation into something like amber in the jar of the skull is described as though the brain were dreaming: one cerebral concoction for another. The poem speaks with her voice; the woman lying in wait, undergoing her disarticulation without ever relinquishing control. She seems deeply to restrict the language of the poem, limiting its lines, extending its length down and down the page—she has all the time of the world. As my eyes skip the half-inch gap between stanzas five and six she spends millennia perfecting the resin of her mind into stone:

“my brain darkening,
a jar of spawn
fermenting underground

dreams of Baltic amber.

Bruised berries under my nails,
the vital hoard reducing
in the crock of the pelvis.”

(Seamus Heaney, “The Bog Queen.”)

The unearthing of these bog bodies is often imagined as rebirth. “For now, the peat that had grown up around him, the womb from which he was about to be reborn into the modern world, was the safest place for

him” (Skerrett, *The Body in the Bog*, 31). Heaney, for instance, imagines the Bog Queen’s hair as an umbilical cord:

“The plait of my hair
a slimy birth-cord
of bog, had been cut

and I rose from the dark”

(Seamus Heaney, “The Bog Queen.”)

Cavities unearthed in hardened deposits of volcanic ash¹ were found to contain bones, indicating that these were the hollow casts of human remains. Following this discovery, liquid plaster was poured into the openings of promising apertures in the ash wherever they were found¹, so the forms could be recovered. With a blush of chemical warmth the space once occupied by soft flesh turned hard as bone and the bones, having served their last purpose as markers of their own burial, were swallowed¹.

Hardened deposits of volcanic ash. In Herculaneum and Pompeii (Petron, “Human Corpses as Time Capsules”).

Wherever they were found. Delicately balanced exchanges took place: in the dark the milky fluid lapped at the sockets of the knees and eyes and filled the body up, sealing in the bones completely.

Were swallowed. I imagine, two centuries later, magnetic imaging revealing that some of these skeletons occupied their casts in irregular ways, their bones subtly pulled away from one another or dragged delicately down; one skeleton apparently reclining within its cast, the jointed bones relaxed into a pose not reproduced by the limbs of plaster¹. In these casts, I imagine, the plaster was too thick when it was poured in, and the delicate balance of pressures was lost¹. But far as I know, this is not true. Not one of the casts they found was irregular in this way, but I cannot help imagining the possibility. If the plaster was heavier and meatier than the frangible bones it lapped against, then as it captured their arrangement it would envelop them and pull them heavily down into a new, encumbered pose, leaving the skeletal form describing the weight of the plaster as much as the plaster described the skeletal form.

The delicate balance of pressures was lost. The expression on the face of Grauballe Man was a response to the booted foot of an onlooker pressing down against his malleable cheek when his body was first unearthed in a Danish peat bog in 1952, two and a half thousand years after his death (Sanders, *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination*, 23).

His booted face brought Heaney to imagine him “bruised like a forceps baby,” who “seems to weep the black river of himself” (Heaney, “The Grauballe Man”).

3.3

The finely balanced meniscus that was shaping the globular form is more robust than a meniscus now. More solid. Its fragile quality, and its fluttering balance of equal forces, have been supplemented by a thicker, more muscular pressure, but this heavy pressure is heavily weighed against by its opposite: the resistance of whatever yielding solid it pushes against. I don't know what I'm describing. But I can only describe this.

As it moves forward it is no longer pressing into the unknown, it is being received into some substance that presses against the movement in return, the way clay is received into velar folds, or the soft of the tongue into the cavity of the ear, or facial expression into alginate gel. And as this movement proceeds there seems to be no actual space for movement whatsoever; rather the simultaneous filling and yielding of one substance against another, so that any form created in positive creates its negative too. As a result there is no change of weight or volume in the matter involved, just the internal play of soft peripheries, and the leftover bits of enjoyment at their edges, left over in excess of the movement proper.

But there is another kind of membrane here too: one that is generally flat rather than generally spherical, and that wants to be so thin it is barely a membrane at all. I am thinking of the membrane between sleeping and being awake, living and being dead, between dream and amber: there is a sense in which the transition from one state to the other is only successful when it is barely felt at all.

Again there are leftovers which, try as I might, I still cannot use up:

the weeping of female saints;

rhetoric, oratory, speaking shit;

my impression that the end is not just at the end but all the way through (an impression bound up with some wish, repeatedly mentioned, to make a lateral incision through the sound of speech).

Chapter 4: The bed sheet

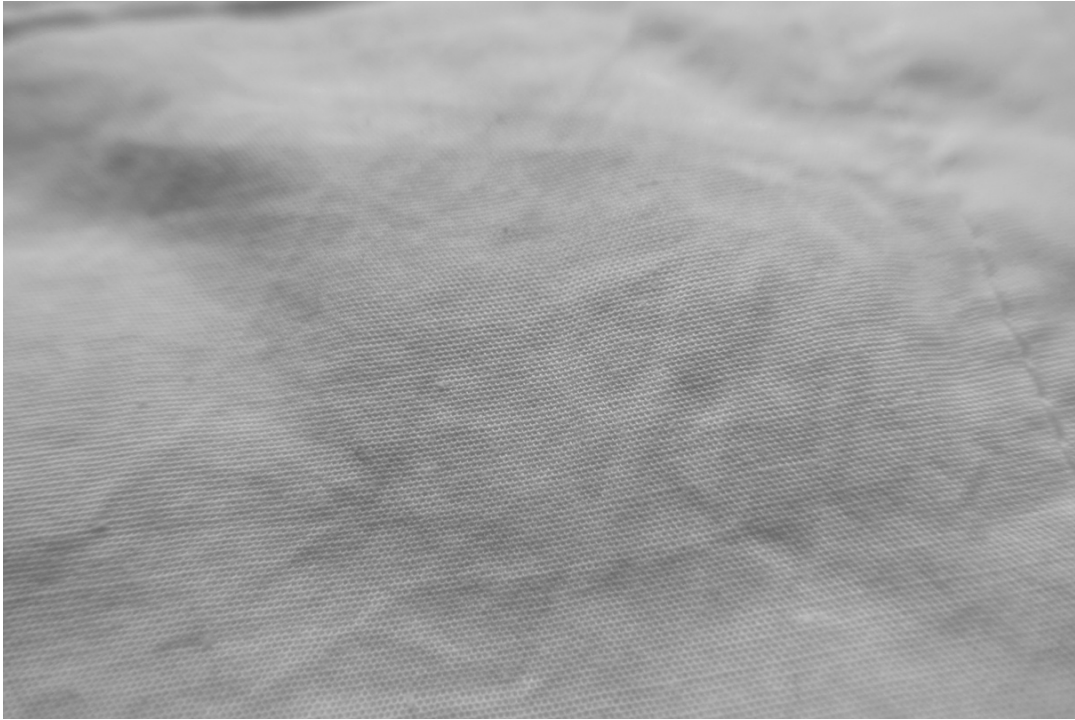


Fig 5. The bed sheet once marked with a biro line.

4.1

Folded up on my desk is a bed sheet I've kept out of circulation for the last nine years or so, ever since I drew a line on it in biro and then washed the line off.

The last time we used the sheet it happened that I couldn't sleep, and I sat up in bed with a notebook on my lap and a biro in my hand, trying to write a few paragraphs about the way our bedroom looked at that time, and the way my husband was sleeping beside me. I remember I worked hard on these paragraphs. There must have been something important and especially worth capturing about the scene, though I no longer remember what it was. The longer I spent on these paragraphs, the further away the writing crept from whatever I had hoped to describe. They never digressed from their subject exactly, but the subject gradually sharpened as I wrote, until it had become another version of itself. It was as though the scene around me was rising up into a kind of pose, and the writing was rising up to support the pose, so that between them a new object was being created and captured in a single move. It was only very subtly different from what was there before, as though the light were shifted, or the scale of the room, or my scale within it were slightly altered, but the subtlety of the change was the worst part of it. It meant that the description stayed very close to my impression of the room, and could change it without my really noticing.

At a certain point this preoccupation found a home in the body of the notebook on my lap. As my eyes flicked from the room to the handwriting it became difficult to appreciate whether the book was part of the scene being described or part of the description, and because it was poised between the two it seemed to me to be the centre of the problem. It rested so easily on the bed clothes, on my lap, in the darkening room; made of the same

stuff and lying in the same light as everything I wanted to describe, and it made me wish I could just use all this stuff, somehow, to describe itself. Compared to the book, the words I was writing were so distinct from what lay around them. I looked at the book, and the shape of the shadow cast on the page by my hand and the biro that paused, tip still pressed against the page halfway through a vowel, and they fell together with the book: neither quite described nor description. And then just for a moment the words came too, or at least the shapes of them, and briefly I was able to not read them but just see them, and for a moment there was nothing in the room but things (then was I also a thing?) before the word shapes became words again, and I could read them, and something was lost.

Then quite suddenly and without much thought, I pulled the line of the vowel out of the word it was forming and down, down to the foot of the page where the nib of the biro pressed a notch into the edge of the paper, and then pressed a little blue gully all the way down the side of the book to the black of the inside cover, and then down onto the bed sheet below, and I steered the line all the way across the bed onto the skin of my husband's jaw and to the parted opening of his lips.

As I drew it, I remember the line seemed exceptionally continuous, as though it were a thread unspooling from the nib of the pen, and that if I were to lift the nib from the surface even once, even slightly, the thread would be broken and the effort lost. This preference for continuity had the curious effect of producing a discontinuous line, interrupted by many little gaps along its length. Sometimes, for instance, the movement of the nib would push the slack of the sheet into a little wave, which it would chase and finally break across, briefly flattening the wave into a sharp crease pinned down and then released as the nib slipped down off the crest and away, leaving an abrupt gap marked by an oily fleck where the extra pressure and the rush of the pen had pulled excess ink from the barrel. Or where the fabric of the sheet fell into loose folds of its own, and the nib would begin to

climb the rise of such a fold but with nothing to support it underneath, so the surface offered almost no resistance from the pen: not enough to turn the ball of the nib and roll out ink, but enough to drag from the nib some residue that lay there, leaving a length of line barely visible. These gaps I would only really notice the following morning, when I examined the sheet before I put it in the washing machine.

What gave the line this threadlike, spooling quality I did not know, but it had begun in the tactful movement of the pen away from the half-written word it left behind, as it descended the tail of the last vowel and plunged down, committed, into the empty space of the page. I knew there was something at risk in this movement: that I needed to play the line very carefully or it would fail to take. I remember it helped that my husband was sleeping to the right of me and not to the left, because it allowed the line to continue the general course of the paragraph it had been following, proceeding left to right and gradually down the page as writing does. The rightward course of the line helped, in my imagination at least, to defer indefinitely the moment at which the words gave way to the line, allowing the line to reach his mouth without ever quite ceasing to be writing, and there I lifted the nib from his lips and the work was done.

It was only as I lifted the pen away from the surface of his skin that I felt the release of a subtle restriction I had not noticed until it was gone: a restriction of movement that had accompanied the drawing of the line from beginning to end. It was as though the line itself were pinning in place my notebook, my limbs, the bedding, and everything else in the room, so that nothing should move as long as the line was being drawn. The pen only released its hold when I lifted the nib from his lips, and then I easily closed the book and put it away, stretched across to turn off the light and slid down under the covers to sleep, satisfied that my line had captured him more keenly than any words I could have written.

Once the sheet was in the washing the following morning, I opened my computer and wrote a page of notes detailing what had happened. It was a spontaneous account, written swiftly and without much reflection, but the last sentence has always puzzled me. It reads “One day he will die, but I have kept in my book a line that touched him.” I am not surprised to find myself reading the biro line as a kind of amulet against the loss death will bring. What surprises me is how easily I could have written that the line that touched him was kept in my book. I know the beginning part of the line is kept in the book. But surely most of it was on the bed sheet, and on his skin, washed away in the morning. And even before he woke the line began to separate into its member parts, as soon as the pen released them from its hold. The line that touched him was only briefly intact, for the duration of the drawing and no longer, and so the line that touched him is not really *kept*, surely. What am I to make of this? Can I take seriously a statement written so spontaneously? Can I take it all the more seriously because it was spontaneous? I must have meant something by it.

4.2

Butades, a potter's daughter of ancient Greece, captured the likeness of the shepherd she loved by tracing his shadow onto the wall (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXXV, 151-3). To make her tracing she had to turn away from him¹, and he from her¹.

She had to turn away from him. Reading Butades' story as the mythical origin of drawing, Derrida observes: "it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing" (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 49). She is shadow writing, he says (51). She "writes, and thus already loves in nostalgia. Detached from the present of perception, fallen from the thing itself—which is thus divided—a shadow is a simultaneous memory, and Butades' stick is a staff of the blind" (51).

"More abiding than Orpheus," Derrida points out (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 49).

Orpheus could not resist turning to glimpse Eurydice, committing her to the depths of the underworld forever, and committing himself to never bringing her back into the light. Blanchot measures Orpheus' loss. He fails to bring her into the light, but at the brink of this failure is his reward: the brief, unique glimpse of Eurydice as she exists in the dark, ungraspable and unfamiliar: "in her nocturnal darkness, her body closed, her face sealed, [...] the

fullness of her death living in her” (Blanchot, “The Gaze of Orpheus,” 100).

It strikes me that Orpheus only succeeded in glimpsing the unglimpsable because he had become, in some way, unglimpsable himself. The beauty of his song was so unworldly it persuaded Hades he was unworldly too, and he was accepted into the passages of the underworld. Of course, really Orpheus was alive, fleshy, familiar, nothing like the shades gliding underground, and it was with these living eyes he cast Eurydice a glance.

Earlier, I wrote “Cast: cast a line, cast a spell, cast light, cast a character, cast a broken limb, cast away, cast a glance, cast a mould, cast a die, forecast, cast about for what to do, cast a vote, a plaster cast, a worm cast” (this document, 100).

And he from her. Perhaps they began to depart from one another even before Butades began to draw: as soon as she thought of drawing him, or thought of missing him, already loving in nostalgia.

In dry-fly¹ fishing the artificial fly attracts the fish more by its movement than its plumage¹.

With practised movements of the arm, wrist and fingertips¹ the experienced angler can create on the surface of the water an imitation of life¹ compelling enough to deceive the predator¹ lying beneath. The deception is most effective when the fly imitates the diet of the fish being

courted¹, according to season, time of day and position in the water. Should the fish make an offer on the fly, the angler continues the performance for a few beats, allowing the fish to take the bait some way into its body¹ before it realizes the trick too late and the hook is driven home¹ in a single decisive tug. Once the fish is firmly hooked there is another kind of driving home, which anglers call the play¹, by which the fish is kept in the water as it grows exhausted trying to extract itself from the line. You tire it out¹, gradually making it yours¹, until it no longer belongs to the water¹ but to you¹.

Dry-fly. Wet-fly fishing is another matter: “dry-fly fishing is beautiful, productive, and deeply satisfying, but it is child’s play compared with the subtle and deadly craft of fishing the sunk fly effectively. [...] Put another way, the dry-fly man will catch fish when they are obviously feeding (on floating flies). The expert wet-fly man will take fish (if there are any at all takable) when they are *not obviously* feeding on anything at all” (Wiggin, *Fly Fishing*, 55).

Plumage. It is not uncommon to use quills to make artificial flies. “Being light and hollow, quill floats well; wound in neat, touching turns up the hook shank, quill also gives a good effect of the segmentations of a natural insect’s body” (McCully, *Fly-Fishing*, 174).

When quills are used in calligraphy, the plumage is trimmed and stripped away and the shaft is clipped so it balances well in the hand.

From a single feather I suppose you could make a pen and a handful of flies.

With practised movements of the arm, wrist and fingertips the experienced calligrapher can create on the surface of the page an imitation of life compelling enough to capture the predator lying beneath—no, not quite. But I imagine the calligrapher doing the same work as the fly fisher. The line is cast onto the surface of the page, and as it moves something is drawn out from the depths—but what depths?

There is the depth of the stream into which Thought lets down its line (see Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 5). The depth of the unconscious, of the night-sea journey (see Barth, "Night-Sea Journey," 4). The depth of the flood that plunged all of creation into a total sea (see Blanchot, "The Gaze of Orpheus," 42). The depth of the empty page, before the first pencil mark is placed like a fish into a tank (see Berger, *Berger on Drawing*, 5).

What kind of calligraphy would wet fly fishing be? The line passing through the surface and moving in the water in three dimensions, sometimes brushing a flank or a fin—

"An immense profusion of sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses, little larval actions that no inner language can convey, that jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness" (Nathalie Sarraute describes "what is hidden beneath the interior monologue." Sarraute, "Conversation and Sub-conversation," 91.)

Meniscus midge larvae spend their lives at the very surface of the water, feeding within a rich film of organic material that collects from below the surface and above. The meniscus presents a nearly impenetrable barrier to the larvae when they develop into nymphs, then pupae, and seek to take flight. Streamlined and active, the pupae lurch towards the film at speed in an attempt to penetrate it, and they can be killed in the process.

An imitation of life. Once the line is landed in the water: “Follow it round reluctantly with the rod tip. Don’t lead it, or you will momentarily ease the tension of the current and lose touch with your flies. [...] Never forget that they are supposed to simulate tiny fish, struggling in the current” (Wiggin, *Fly Fishing*, 71).

“You are trying to convince a fish that here at the end of your line is a tiny, succulent morsel of fish-life—*in trouble*. A bit of a slip of a fry, struggling to maintain itself against the current. Easy meat, in fact, for a predator” (63).

I wish the fly could leave a trace of its movement on the surface of the water as it moved, and afterwards I could look at it. Not the ripples and concentric rings it naturally leaves in its wake, but the line of its movement, as though it were a stylus and the water were paper. What lively scribbles they would be. I try to imagine the line but the water moves too much. It is impossible to conjure in my mind the topology of such a line as the water’s surface bounces and dips and ushers the fly

downstream even as my wrist raises and lowers the rod to animate it against the current.

I remember the way Nicolette Gray describes calligraphic lettering. “The results are the most elaborate drawn letters known, superb creations, great swirling lines moving out of some dark centre in a cloud of gossamer curls; they are like some whirlpool, or a Leonardo drawing of water” (Gray, *Lettering as Drawing: The Moving Line*, 61). She offers as an example C. F. Brechtel’s letter V (*Appendix 4*).

I don’t see the fluidity Gray describes. The composition of the letter is amply balanced, the hand is so certain and sure, the thickest lines must have been outlined first then filled in with ink. The lines might be drawings of flourishes, but they are not the flourishes themselves. Did Brechtel know exactly how his letter V would look when he began to cast his line onto the page? If so, his was not really a line cast, but a line laid out.

I would like to see his preparatory sketches.

Then again, I would like to watch an angler practise casting repeatedly onto a scrap of paper laid on the grass, learning

not to startle a catch. I have read that you can do this.

“It is purely and simply a matter of practice. You won’t be able to do it without a lot of practice. Put a saucer on the lawn and cast at it—or, I should say, *over* it—for hours on end” (Wiggin, *Fly Fishing*, 96-7).

It was a saucer after all,
not a scrap of paper.

The predator. Calling the fish the predator is an uncomfortable reversal; so is giving life to the fly to take the life of the fish.

“No, I’m not the one, though I thought I was, who watches me sleeping: rather, I am the one who sleeps while the one who wants to deprave me watches” (Kafka, “The Burrow,” 171).

The fly imitates the diet of the fish being courted. To identify the fish’s diet you can gut it on the bank as soon as it is caught and killed, and examine the contents of its stomach. The least digested of the food, which is that most recently eaten, is the food you imitate.

Autopsy, from the Ancient Greek *autopsiā*: seeing with one's own eyes.

Imagine *Tender Buttons*, the book of unfamiliar descriptions by Gertrude Stein, is really an array of autopsies. "ROASTBEEF. Lovely snipe and tender turn, excellent vapour and slender butter, all the splinter and the trunk, all the poisonous darkning drunk, all the joy in weak success, all the joyful tenderness, all the section and the tea, all the stouter symmetry" (Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 32-2).

Imagine those lines are the stomach contents of roast beef as Gertrude Stein examined them. Or imagine that, having turned out the contents of the stomach and studied them, these lines were the play of a fly she constructed especially, to lure and capture and gut the meat again and again.

Earlier, I wrote "It was a saucer after all, not a scrap of paper" (this document, 124).

Imagine that whenever you write, the movement of your pen is the movement of the fly, trying to coax up onto the surface of the page a thing you know so intimately the contents of its stomach are still wet on your fingers.

Take the bait some way into its body. The fish is persuaded to swallow the fly because it seems to be something of its own world: alive, soft, fleshy, familiar.

When it accepts into its body a real morsel of living food nothing much happens: flesh digests flesh and absorbs it into itself, their substances coming together in a kind of caress, even if it is partly fatal. (Levinas: the caress does not know what it seeks.) The artificial fly promises such a caress, but the hook it conceals never takes its eye off the fish, and it waits until it is swallowed before its glare pierces the soft palette of the mouth.

Hook, line and sinker.

The hook is driven home, home usually being the soft palette of the fish's mouth or, if the fly is already swallowed, the lining of the stomach.

The play. "This steering involves not only sensitivity but also a kind of strong tact in knowing when to give line and when to redeem it" and "the combined certainty and delicacy of correspondence between wrist and eye" (McCully, *Fly-Fishing*, 164; Skues, *The Way of a Trout*, 192).

I think of the way Emma Cocker describes the movement of her pencil when she draws in a restless way. A kind of tact comes into it. She says she steers the pencil like a helmsman steers a vessel, reorienting herself moment by moment against a page that becomes "contingent, shifting or unpredictable" as the drawing moves on (Cocker, "The Restless Line, Drawing," xvii).

Imagine the currents agitating the surface of the water in unpredictable ways. To keep the ship steady every agitation needs, at that very moment, its opposite measure from the helmsman.

I suppose if the helmsman were quick and powerful enough, as quick and as powerful as the sea, then her measures would match the agitation of the waves exactly and the boat would stay precisely still, not moving or rocking at all. A dot.

Then again if the helmsman did absolutely nothing the ship would move in precise synchrony with the waves; each sail, all the weight of the mast, every splinter of decking, the mass of every living thing on board contributing their proper dynamic force to the ship's most natural conclusion on the sea bed.

“Being rocked and annihilated by the current” (Borges, “Funes the Memorius,” 104).

You tire it out. When a fish is all played out its movements will slow and it will turn onto its flank to float at the surface of the water, alive but almost tamed into

the condition of a lifeless thing. In this state it is easy to net the fish or even collect it in the hand, bringing it from the water onto the bank with little resistance.

Gradually making it yours. “The cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out?” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 5.)

I think of Orpheus, cautious, walking back towards the light, listening for the footsteps behind him: and he can hear nothing.

Until it no longer belongs to the water. At the end is the death of the fish. The death of the fish, then, is the price we pay for the catch. I remember Peter Schwenger wrote: “The death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word” (Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” 100).

Anglers often carry a weighted baton for cleanly killing the fish on the bankside as soon as it is caught (the baton is called a *priest*, for administering last rites). But inserting a long spike through the eyeball and into the hindbrain causes a swifter death. Because the fish suffers more briefly its muscles endure less thrashing, and this reduces the flow of sour lactic acid through the body, improving the taste of the meat (Angus et al., “Improving the Quality of Farmed Salmon by Ike Jime Harvesting”).

When does flesh become meat?

A flowering stem does not die the moment it is cut, although the cut is swiftly sealed to prevent the ingress of bacteria. This inhibits transpiration, the process by which menisci in the plant's cell walls regulate the pull of water from the soil or water vapour from the air. The cutting dies when its reserves of mineral nutrients from the soil are so depleted that transpiration slows and stops.

At the end is the death of the thing. When a thing is given a name it is changed, brought out into the open, and is no longer what it was in the dark. It becomes an object: the object of the subject that named it. But when the thing is named it is not altogether lost, because our knowledge of it is always shadowed by "something more, namely, that there is an unknowable otherness to the thing" (Schwenger, "Words and the Murder of the Thing," 101).

Lurking in the dark is an "ineluctable presence—the thingness of the thing—that we can never grasp" and "of this we must think in exactly the measure that we are unable to think it" (102, 101).

What glutinous contortions, I wonder, must be made by the ineluctable thing that lurks underwater as its flank is brushed by the line, and the line coaxes it into the inkling of an idea that might conglomerate there? And what contortions could you possibly make with your line, your words, your cautious wrist, to haul it to the surface intact?

“Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked [...]. But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind—put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas” (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 5-6).

When she puts the thought back into her mind, is it really the same thought, or is it changed?

Even if the hook is clipped free or curved back through the hole it made, the hole is still there. If the fish is released it swims away punctured, with a little hole, a *punctum*, pierced into its flesh, which will seal into a little scarred nib of meat denser and tougher than before. It becomes a fish that has been played, that has laid on its flank exhausted at the surface of the water, tamed towards death, brought up into the light and measured for length and weight.

Once caught and returned to the river a wild trout “is no longer wild” (Leventon, “Editorial,” 2).

Neb. “The extreme forward part of the fish’s mouth (the ‘nose’) from OE *nebb*, cf. e.g. the *nib* of a pen. In angling

literature, the surface of, for example, a placidly-flowing chalk stream is often broken by ‘the large neb of a rising trout’” (McCully, *Fly-Fishing*, 138).

But to you. Perhaps Woolf’s young writer dipped her head into the water; perhaps she could breathe underwater, so that when she laid out her thought on the metaphorical grass, then the grass—and everything else—was submerged as well. In this way perhaps she could have put the thought back into her mind unchanged. But how long, and how well, can one stay underwater¹?

Stay underwater. “They do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, they eat, rest, digest, leap about again” (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 60).

“To a fish, the act of *rising* to a fly is something like a dive would be to us: quite a business, extracting energy and involving a brief contact with a deadly element in which it could not survive” (Wiggin, *Fly Fishing*, 56).

Imagine there are no words underwater, and words are the air that kills the thing. Imagine thoughts, like things undiscovered and undisturbed deep in an ancient peat bog, which maintain some kind of compositional integrity, chemical or biological, as long as they are undisturbed. Then brightly from above a boot stamps the

hilt of a spade, cuts through a darkened skull, bends the bones and breaks the hair and lets oxygen in.

You can kill a thing by giving it a name. Then what you have named is no longer what it was in the dark; it becomes an object in relation to you: the subject with your piercing eyes.

You can imagine *Tender Buttons* in another way, as an attempt to give names to things themselves, and not the objects they become by being named. An exercise in overcoming death, or otherwise diving into it, submerged and never surfacing for air. Then we, the readers, are the ones who have to hold our breath and dive under with the effort it takes the fish to rise. Far from opening the stomach to capture the thing, fingers wet and oily with death, you can imagine Stein underwater, her words fleshy and darting in the dark, now and again brushing against the flank or crinkling fin of some unseen companion, and trying to put off forever the moment of coming up for breath, the moment her caress rises into bright light and language again. You

can read in her words the attempt not just
to hide the hook and eye the words
conceal but, as much as possible, dissolve
them altogether, so that when her
artificial fly persuades the fish that it too
is flesh and life, it is almost true.

But finally, it is not true. “I made
innumerable efforts to make
words write without sense and
found it impossible” (Stein, “A
Transatlantic Interview,” 18).
There must be many fatalities in
Tender Buttons, many little
puncta, where the words scratch
and pierce the thing.

On a page of *Tristram Shandy* a fictional¹ Corporal waves his stick in a flourishing gesture of freedom and spontaneity¹ (Sterne, 743, *Appendix 5*). The gesture itself is not quite free nor exactly spontaneous; it is an expression of these qualities, exerted upon the air to complete a spoken utterance about how freely a man can live outside the confinement of marriage.

Fictional. Ingold’s description of the line indulges the fiction of the novel, imagining Corporal Trim’s gesture really to have preceded that of the author who simply copies it: “Like any other gesture, the Corporal’s flourish embodies a certain duration. The line to which it gives rise is, therefore, intrinsically dynamic

and temporal. When, pen in hand, Sterne recreated the flourish on the page, his gesture left an enduring trace that we can still read” (Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, 72).

But Trim’s flourish is not like any other gesture. It is imaginary, and at some point in the process of its being imagined it is drawn over with the near-identical gesture of the one who imagined it. I wonder which is more real, the imaginary line of the flourish or the visible one on the page. I wonder which came first: whether there really was an image of the Corporal’s gesture in Sterne’s mind first of all, which he faithfully transcribed onto the page; and if so, whether it was an image of the line he was to draw, or an image of the movement he was to make. When he saw the line on the page, was it new to him? Otherwise, perhaps the author slipped through the surface of the fiction for a moment, so to speak, and embody his character, and the pen embody his stick. He might have propped his manuscript upright on an easel, adjusted his grip on the pen, readied himself, and then struck: a performance.

In any case, once the line was on the page: then, afterwards, that was how the Corporal had moved his stick.

But which way around are we to imagine it? Are we to imagine Trim standing on our side of the paper, facing away from us towards the page; or facing towards us, in which case he is behind the page, or within it, so that the page contains him?

Imagine, as Corporal Trim approached Mrs Wadman’s house where he was to wave his stick in the air, that the ground had marked the tip of the stick with earth or soot, so it would draw if scraped across a sympathetic surface.

Imagine, suddenly, such a surface being pushed into position as the stick begins to wave in the air: a giant sheet of sturdy paper, taller than a man, perhaps yellowed and lightly crisping like the pages of my copy of *Tristram Shandy*. Perhaps we can imagine the paper being held by uncle Toby, say, whom Trim is talking to. A slapstick performance. He would need to hold the paper more-or-less vertically to capture the sooty residue of the gesture—but Trim must have waved his stick through three dimensions, not two, so he would need to follow the tip of the stick as it pushed into the paper and pulled away, heaving the page forward or caving it in to stay in contact throughout. There would need to be rehearsal, coordination, a kind of tact, reflexes the speed of light to make it work.

And even if it worked, and uncle Toby backed away from the stick when the gesture was done, and held the sheet up taut so we could see the line they had drawn between them—even then, the record would be inaccurate because the hills and troughs they had pushed and pulled into the sheet would be flattened, and the line on the page would fail to account for their variation.

Freedom and spontaneity. You can contrast the freedom and spontaneity of Trim's gesture with "the immobilization of the stick" in marriage, and take with a pinch of salt the Corporal's equation of freedom with celibacy. (J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative Middles," 172.)

Surely the line it issues is progeny.

A single spermatozoon journeys through the warm salt water of a night sea¹ (John Barth, “Night-Sea Journey”). As he swims and swims,¹ he begins to realize that of their millions, he might be the only one of his kind still left. He relates with dread his growing belief that the ancient story of a fellow swimmer might be true after all: that the line of his journey answers the siren call¹ of a distant shore¹ that represents his certain death—or worse than death, his immortality¹, and that he is nothing but a singular moving point in a line of transmission¹, and the reluctant tale-bearer of a generation.

Reading through *The Pleasure in Drawing* chapter by chapter, I have an inkling that the sperm in Barth’s story is like the line issuing from the pencil. Or better, it is like the dot of graphite the pencil deposits on the page, and its night-sea journey is the line the dot becomes as the pencil moves to find the drawing’s form. Nancy writes: “to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or to let it seek and find itself)—a form to come that should or that can come through drawing” (10).

If the point—the deposit of graphite—is given up in the creation of the graphite line on the page of a drawing, on the pages of “Night-Sea Journey” the point—which is the swimming sperm—refuses to give itself up in the creation of its line. This refusal is partly a function of the first-person voice of the story, which holds the reader in time with the speaker throughout, but above all it is because the speaker demands it. Given a voice, the point proclaims “Hate love!”. Hate the call of the siren that compels him to swim, and in swimming give himself up to the line and lineage he continues, and hates to continue, by swimming it (Barth, “Night-Sea Journey, 12).

I want to listen to him. I want to stop the story short, cut into it, bisect it so that instead of swimming along and speaking as he goes, the

sperm is suddenly facing me, head on, a tiny dot from this perspective, and I would say *now speak!* And I think there would be nothing he could say. He is nothing but the story of his transmission; stop him moving and he is nothing.

“They were just about to reply to me. Why do you disturb them?” cries the preacher, settled among the cows and startled by the arrival of Zarathustra. But the cows will never reply to him; if they could he would not care to hear what they said. “For there is one thing we should learn from them: rumination” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 280).

Ruminate, murmur, grazing as they pass you by. What they cannot bear (the preacher and, differently, the sperm) is the prospect of ruminating forever, without coming up for air, never being able to write it up, pin it down, fish it out.

“There is nothing one can fish up in a spoon; nothing one can call an event. Yet it is alive too and deep, this stream” (Woolf, *The Waves*, 38).

When Peter Schwenger cites this remark, spoken by Bernard in *The Waves*, it is to help him describe “the obligatos that accompany our consciousness” (Schwenger, *At the Borders of Sleep*, 33). He borrows this use of the term from contemporary music where, most of

all in jazz, it describes a wandering “ad-lib improvisation around the main theme”: while following the main storyline of a text, a reader “will freely embroider that line with associations that are nothing if not ad-lib,” even if most of these associations are discarded as soon as they turn out not to contribute to the interpretation of the text (30).

But if this richness of association is kept for a little while, it can also contribute to the pleasure of the text—the “drifting” Barthes experiences “whenever [he does] not respect the whole” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 18, cited in *At the Borders of Sleep*, 31). Schwenger goes on: “even what is rejected—which is most of it—is a part of us, a part that has briefly been called out of oblivion and into ... obscurity. Obscurely we sense our own riches, moving beneath the surface of words, of recognized meanings” (32, ellipsis original).

Bernard, who can fish up nothing in a spoon, “is a failed writer because he is so immersed in this stream, so aware of it, that he cannot really believe in stories, with their claims to ‘event’ and meaningful structure” (Schwenger, *At the Borders of Sleep*, 34).

There is so much water in this, and so many fish.

A couple of pages earlier
 Schwenger had written: “as
 consciousness makes meaning—
 including the meaning of a text—
 it casts an extraordinarily wide
 net. What wonder, then, if it
 brings up not only the Meaning
 of the White Whale but also an
 innumerable host of small fry,
 flickering and brightly
 coloured?” (*At the Borders of
 Sleep*, 29).

“Let the most absent-
 minded of men be
 plunged in his deepest
 reveries—stand that man
 on his legs, set his feet a-
 going, and he will
 infallibly lead you to
 water, if water there be
 in all that region”
 (Melville, *Moby Dick*, 2).

The warm salt water of a night sea. Jonah was, briefly, the stomach contents of
 the whale.

When Jung writes about the night sea journey, he means a withdrawal from the outside world and a complete immersion in the unconscious, where you can learn to grasp “the inner meaning which has been till then hidden within the very texture of the concrete¹ happening” (Harding, *Woman’s Mysteries*, 151).

Concrete. “My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too [...]. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be, tries to become senseless. Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the train of the ink, the book” (Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” 46).

The paper on which one writes, the bed sheet, the lip.

If a word could be very similar to a thing, then it
might be less fatal to the thing it tried to describe.
It might kill it more slowly.

Or more swiftly, so its meat stays unsoured.

Swims and swims. I always thought the line on the bed sheet was a kind of concrete ball, unspooled.

The classical form of the night-sea journey depends upon your return: you leave behind you something defeated and then, heroically, you emerge into the light.

I imagine Gertrude Stein, a hero on a night-sea journey to the belly of the roast beef, only she doesn't want rescuing, she wants to stay there, she wants to be the stomach contents, and what she has to do is find a way to get us down there too. Sometimes I wonder why she wants us there.

Siren was the other name for that amphibious fish, that had lungs as well as gills.

Was Stein her own siren?

“And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 885).

His journey answers the siren call. The sperm describes “what seems to be a kind of vasty presence, song, or summons from the near upstream” (Barth, “Night-Sea Journey,” 10). Later he feels the tide turning, “like a flood of joy” that bears him onward and upward: “This new emotion is Her doing; the desire that possesses me is Her bewitchment. Lucidity passes from me; in a moment I'll cry ‘Love!’ bury myself in Her side, and be ‘transfigured’” (12). Sure enough: “I am all love.

‘Come!’ She whispers, and I have no will” (12). The piece ends with the line: “Love! Love! Love!” (13).

He implores his future progeny to stop their ears to Her song, like Ulysses his men. But he does not stop his own, not because he shares Ulysses’ curiosity (or whatever it is), not because he has no men to help him, nor a mast for them to chain him to (though this is true I suppose) but because it is too late, and he is too frail, and almost tamed, by the time he knows he is succumbing. (In any case, how could he stop his ears; do sperm have ears; when does the extension of an analogy become ridiculous?)

A distant shore. Then, to extend the analogy, is the Shore the page? Is the Shore the eventual drawing that calls the act of drawing to its completion? “‘That a form comes’ is drawing’s formula”—“‘Come!’ She whispers, and I have no will” (Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, 3; Barth, “Night-Sea Journey,” 12).

Worse than death, his immortality. I imagine the page liquid, or glutinous like the membrane of the ovarian wall, calling into its surface the completeness of the drawing (simultaneously its end, mid-point and beginning) and denying the point any voice that is not the voice of the line it becomes.

In the middle of the night I had a thought and recorded onto my phone: “If the page is so siren-like, calling the points to their death, well couldn’t the drawing stay in the pencil somehow, so it stays always moving always in progress always alive, rather than ever finding itself ending up on the page?”

Earlier, I wrote “Indeed, I have wondered whether this little graphite landscape is itself the drawing after all” (this document, 43).

Transmission. The line goes all the way through. John Berger draws his father on his deathbed: “I was making a record and his face was already only a record of his life. Each drawing then was nothing but the site of a departure” (Berger, *Berger on Drawing*, 68).

Tale-bearer of a generation. Reaching the end of *The Pleasure in Drawing* I find Jean-Luc Nancy also associated the line of the pencil and the journey of the sperm, first comparing the drawn line to an arrow fired from a bow, then comparing the discharging of the bow’s tension to the release of sexual tension (98). Released like an arrow from a bow, the drawn line “does not go toward any target; it only releases itself and its trajectory,” having “the specific quality of *what goes straight to the target without there being a target*” (99, emphasis original). Unlike design, he writes, drawing “leaves intention or aim in order to enter into the tension of the gesture alone and its abandon, its way of running a risk” (99).

Was Nancy remembering the blind men who “must *advance*, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 5)?

I imagine just the stomach contents of a target fish without the fish around it: a spooling bundle ambling through the water and the artificial fly darting and fluttering above.

Stem-cell researchers Gerald and Heide Schatten noted the “surprisingly spirited” behaviour of the egg (their article is entitled “The Energetic Egg: In its Rendezvous with the Sperm, the Egg is Surprisingly Spirited”). They observed that as a single sperm makes its way through the surface, it is “interrupted by the sudden and swift migration of the egg nucleus, which rushes toward the sperm with a velocity triple that of the movement of chromosomes during cell division, crossing the entire egg in about a minute” (32).

“The Energetic Egg” is thirty-five years old and must be out of date. But now I have an image of the fibre of the page as a tactile skin that senses the head of the pencil’s approach and accepts the mark or seals itself against it. Some inner nucleus of the page, the germ of the drawing, heaves up and rushes towards the mark. Drawing proceeds like the dance of these two points, each drawing upon the surface of the other: an amorous exchange between the pencil and the skin of the page that bristles in a manner that is almost feline, the way a cat presses the arch of its back

against your hand to redouble your caress as you
stroke it.

4.3

The membrane that is very thin and generally flat, like the line between sleep and wakefulness, or between water and breathable air: I can see very clearly that it not only separates two mutually inhospitable environments (what can breathe in water cannot breathe in air) but is inhospitable itself, and perhaps even carries, on its surface like flotsam, whatever is asphyxiated there.

And what is asphyxiated there? I want to say it is the globular point, turned on its side. Seen from this angle the point appears to have a kind of tail. From here, neither its palpitating meniscus nor the muscular pressure at its periphery are the globule's most obvious features. What is most obvious now is the continuousness of its movement, or rather, the fact that the point is a moment along a line, and it is in being a moment along a line that the point meets its death—

No: I'm wrong. (I'm deceived, I want to say.) It is not the globular point that's asphyxiated. In being a moment along a line the point is doing something, but not dying. The opposite. In its sightlessness, in its softness, in the yielding and filling caress of pressure it exerts against pressure, there is a sharpness concealed. There is a glint in its eye, or a hook, hidden away in the globular softness. Whatever is asphyxiated at that inhospitable surface, it is the point-turned-line that lures it there. And this is the deception: it lures it there by being so similar to the thing itself—so fleshy and alive—that it seems familiar enough to be swallowed and taken in, barely felt at all, and only then is the hook revealed that kills it.

From here, the most prominent quality of the globular point is the hook it conceals, and everything else about it just contributes to its efficacy as a lure. Perhaps the flat membrane and its inhospitable surface are so prominent now because they describe the transformative effect of the hook: what is captured is changed, brought into the light, given a name, asphyxiated. And if this transformative effect accompanies the point wherever it moves, then perhaps the two membranes are really one and the same, which is to say: perhaps the flat membrane is another of the many forces that press against the surface of the globule always, and contribute to the roundness of its form.

Earlier, I wrote whatever is outside this globule, it is not nothing. It is receptive in some way, or expectant. I had come to understand this receptivity in terms of the soft resistance of tongue against ear, and later of velar folds against clay or skin against alginate gel. But perhaps it is also the resistance of the thing it tries to capture. Perhaps the very surface of the globule is the membrane between two mutually inhospitable environments: an inhospitable surface, that carries like flotsam whatever is asphyxiated there.

This image is very much more defined now, almost impenetrably so, but there are still remainders that do not seem to contribute:

love;

progeny;

*the leftover line that fails to account for the lost hills and troughs of the flattened page;
staying exactly still and ending up, most naturally, on the sea bed*

Chapter 5: The row of ink blots

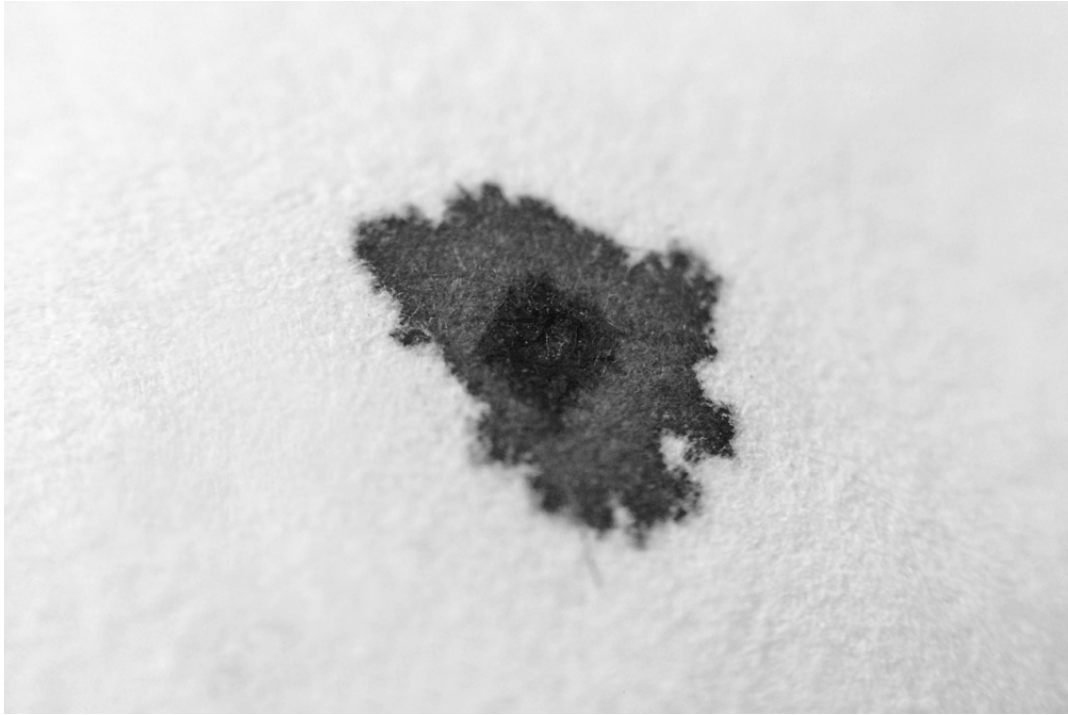


Fig 6. One of the blots of ink.

5.1

To my right is a stack of papers, and among them a folded A4 sheet half-filled with handwritten paragraphs. The paragraphs try to recount a story I had heard about a poet racing home to capture a poem as it barrelled towards her over the hills. It had almost flown past her by the time she got home and she had to catch it by the tail, she said, and drag it back. But my drafts were poorly written, much of the writing is crossed out, and I would have thrown them away long ago were it not for the blots of ink—five of them—spaced unevenly along the foot of the page.

Each blot resembles the map of a tiny landmass, rendered at a scale too small to show the mountains and lowlands and dried waterways that make them up. Each little continent has a patch of dark blue more or less at its centre, then grows paler and tinged with turquoise grey until the very edges, which are feathered with the same dark blue again. Two of the dark centres are imprinted with the split hull of the nib I held in place as I watched it very slowly issue ink. I don't remember why I began to hold the nib against the page, and why five times, but I remember watching the ink bloom from the nib for many minutes, until it hurt my eyes to look so close.

I was watching the page draw the ink from the nib. As the ink crept outwards, little feathering irregularities revealed in the fibre of the paper a complex of thread-fine tunnels, open planes and minuscule underground caves hitherto concealed by the even white of the page, and only disclosed as they filled with vivid blue. This close up the paper was not smooth at all, but pockmarked and creased as if its geography had been formed and eroded over time, and were still in formation now. The little tide of blue extended its reach so

slowly its movement would have been imperceptible without these irregularities, which appeared one by one like landmarks and one by one were lost to the growing expanse of ink. Sometimes the tide stood still for seconds on end, as though there were a blockage in the pen, and then on the page the banks of a river would burst or feather into a new estuary, or a plane would flood, and ink would flow from the pen again. As soon as a new feature was revealed by the blue, the blue would creep forward and cover it, until it was hidden again by the general sea. Time seemed to pass at a geological pace, as though it too were magnified and subtly stretching. Before my eyes mountains rose up and were levelled as the ground rose around them, lakes filled and then flooded, successive landscapes covered over by wash after wash of blue. A tide was coming in that would never go out again, each jewel-like landscape lost as soon as it was found.

Watching the ink, I began to notice that I was trying to commit these successive landscapes to memory. I was trying to watch the developing landscape in the knowledge of what had preceded it: a jutting edge here was once the furthest reach of a tributary; a feathering outcrop here had once sprung from a tunnel under the surface; the drying island before me was always also a growing expanse of sea. As it grew, so did the pressure it exerted on my memory. My eyes were already straining to see the detail and now my memory was straining to keep it all in.

Pen in hand, my impulse was to note down everything I saw, to record what seemed to me specimens of exquisitely fine geological history. But if I lifted the pen the history would stop. Plumbed into the centre of its little continent the pen seemed massive in my hand, like the axis of the earth turned real, piercing the floor of the ocean and towering up, up, out of scale into space. If I lifted the nib from the page it would cast the world spinning into oblivion, stop the tides, pour away the ocean, put out the stars—ending or setting in time an entire epoch—and so I kept the pen in place and tried to do the writing in my head

instead, taking everything in with an outwards attitude, seeking verbal expression adequate to every visual impression, and saving them up until I could get them out onto the page.

As more and more ink flowed onto the page there was more and more to remember, more language to seek and then more language to remember, until the anxiety that I might forget began to distract me from the work altogether, and pulling the plug on the world began to seem a price worth paying. The pen, which had now been still for some minutes, had begun to feel excessively still in my hand—twitchingly so—as though its stillness were now distinctly resisting the movements handwriting would make. It began to seem ridiculous, pressing against the page the very thing that could put a stop to it all and write it out—and here I pulled up the nib.

It was a relief.

And then immediately, a very slight sensation of falling or being about to fall: the impression that there was nothing substantial beneath me, and I had to be very quick or there would be nothing there at all. Hastily I put down some words: just the first available and most urgent in my mind. *Thread*, I wrote, and then *vocab of water | island, fray/feather/frost | f | rope pulling/dredging up or sent down from barrel? | direction of flow | how wet*. These gave me something to rest on, and then slower phrases could come, the ones already formed or partly formed in my mind: *The ink blooms from the nib like frost, so slowly it is almost still but moves | The tide extends so slowly its movement is almost imperceptible | To begin with there was nothing, for some long seconds, then the first tiny thread of blue pricked the page and began to fray*.

I would have liked to arrange the account in chronological order, describing first of all the white of the page, then how the nib was put down and the ink started to run, and finally

ending with the total sea, but too much would have been lost had I tried to compose the words as they came out. Speed was the most important thing. So instead, if the account was composed at all, it was composed by the relative urgency of each scrap of writing in my head, and there seemed to be no reason to it. At any moment several fragments presented themselves in my mind, and those most pressing tended to make it onto the page first: those I was about to forget, those that were faint and already far away, and those that were very close, at the very front of my mind, and needed writing out to open the way for the others behind. For the most part I had time to form full sentences, either because they came out of my mind fully formed, or because nothing interrupted me on the way. Some bits needed careful composition to get the point across; at other times a word or phrase or the mention of an image was enough. Quite often in the middle of writing down one thing I realized there was something else that could not wait, so there accumulated halfway down the page a list of words to incorporate later on: *hull* | *the outcrops* | *the word crystalline* | *stay precisely still* | *perimeter* | *sprouted as if it had leapt*, the writing creeping down and around these little outcrops as it went on, adding to the incoherence of the passage should anyone read it. I planned to write it all out neatly afterwards but in the end I never did. It was written to be written, after all, really not to be read.

As I wrote, I realized to my surprise that I was imagining the ink not coming out of the pen as much as coming *back out* of it. At this point I had the clear impression that in the minutes it had spent blotting the page the pen was not the axis of a little world after all but a kind of syringe, slowly extracting the blot from the paper, and once it was extracted I had lifted the needle—slowly and tactfully so as not to let a single drop fall—and was now steering the fluid it had collected back out onto the page in writing. It was a curiously inverted image, and factually all wrong, but it was very clear in my mind. The blot had become a little reservoir of ink in the barrel of the pen, no longer feathery and dry but mobile and thick and wet, collecting in the circular crevices of the vial, fixing dark

bubbles to the inside surface and painting over them with faint streams of colour as I turned it in my hands. This ink I needed to steer back out onto the page, as though the task of each word, one by one, were to isolate a singular fraction of ink and convey it back to the page in the description of the fraction of dried-up blot it had once been, so that one by one every bit of ink was delivered onto the page and every bit of the blot described. It seemed to me, as I was writing, that if I could get all the ink back out of the pen then the blot would be exactly used up in its description, and thus cancelled out, with no remainder. There was something deeply satisfying about this prospect: of having nothing at all left over when it was all done.

I did not like to remind myself that really, all the ink was flowing outwards from pen to paper, and none was going back in. The blot was one thing, and the writing was another. However meticulous the writing, however carefully I tried to use up every feathering detail, every sense, every nuance, the description did not cancel out its object and bring their number down to zero. Of course not. It added to it, making two things where I wanted to have made none, or rather, to have cancelled out one with the other.

5.2

The extent of an inkblot is limited by the competition of two forces¹. The first is the upward pull of the meniscus¹ formed at the surface of the ink inside the narrow cartridge, which inhibits the flow of ink from the pen until the nib touches the porous surface of the page. At the point of contact, this upward pull is met by the downward pull of microscopically fine capillaries in the fibre of the paper. These capillaries imbibe a volume of ink from the cartridge as an equal volume of air is drawn into the cartridge¹ through a finely calibrated let¹ in the feed of the nib, and the blot begins to form. The second force, against which the pull inside the cartridge competes, is the surface pressure at the outer rim of the blot. As the blot grows so its surface pressure depletes¹, until it is weaker than the upward pull inside the pen which succeeds in stemming the flow¹. The extent of the blot is the natural expression of the forces that formed it¹.

The competition of two forces. A study of the hydrodynamic interaction between pen, ink and paper examines the “quasi-two-dimensional hydrodynamic problem of capillary-induced spreading,” and finds that the emission of a blot is “limited by the competition of the capillary suction pressure inside the tube and the Laplace pressure¹ at the outer rim of the blot” (Kim et al., “Hydrodynamics of Writing with Ink,” 3).

I am at the very edge of understanding this article. When there is something I understand, I underline it to pin it down in my mind.

Earlier, I wrote “The skin of the pencil lead fluctuates in my mind, or flutters, or palpitates between concave and convex—

Palpitate, papillon, pupa, pupate. Pupae rising to the water’s surface to spew wings and take flight” (this document, 52).

I imagine miniature pupae rising to the surface of the inkblot and getting their sticky wings all caught up in the competition of two forces.

Laplace pressure is the difference in pressure between the air outside a droplet of liquid and the liquid inside. The smaller the surface area of the droplet, the greater the Laplace pressure (de Gennes et al., *Capillary and Wetting Phenomena*, 8).

The upward pull of the meniscus. The inner surface of the cartridge is hydrophilic, which means it pulls the water molecules in the ink towards it, creating a concave meniscus at the surface of the ink. Because the cartridge is fairly narrow, the weight of the ink is fairly low, so the upward pull at the edges of the ink’s surface is sufficient to hold the ink up inside in the cartridge, inhibiting its flow from the nib.

I think of the I-beam cursor blinking on the screen as I type. Earlier, I wrote “it is not inspiration, or the breath of Love I follow; it is the cursor” (this document, 74).

An equal volume of air is drawn into the cartridge. Ink can only leave the cartridge when an equal volume of air can enter to take its place. The feed of the pen—the slitted unit beneath the nib—is pierced with an air inlet: a vertical canal narrow enough to be sealed with a meniscus of ink provided the internal pressure remains steady. When the nib moves to a dry bit of paper and ink is drawn out of the pen, the vacuum inside the cartridge increases enough to force a momentary rupture in the meniscus sealing the inlet, and a gasp of air is let in. This balances the pressure again and the meniscus is resealed until more ink is drawn from the pen. When writing is continuous, these gasps are taken repeatedly, and because the inlet is so fine they do not interrupt the smooth flow of ink from the nib.

Or: it is not the cursor I follow; it is the gasp of air let in.

Cursor, cursive, recursive.

I imagine the pen to be somehow circular, writing its own tail,
like a serpent that eats the tail of itself, or the Grauballe Man who
“seems to weep the black river of himself” (Heaney, “The
Grauballe Man”).

A finely calibrated let. The air inlet—a tiny hole hidden at the back of the nib that makes writing possible.

The blind spot—the *punctum caecum*—a tiny hole hidden at the back of the eye that makes vision possible.

You could say the eye has two blind spots, one the expression of the other. The first is a hole in the lining of the eye where the optic nerve passes through the retina, and this causes the second, which is a hole in the field of vision.

What about the blind spot in understanding—the “moment of non-knowledge” I came across when I was reading about the eye and the rim? (Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 30).

I am inclined to try to describe the blind spot in understanding as a hole in the lining of the I, which sets me apart from Rilke’s animals who see (with wholly open eyes) the Open. Then (to extend the analogy) what, in the lining of the I, is the optic nerve? Perhaps “nothing but a bridge that in trying to connect two entities that were never really separated ends up working as a hindrance to their communion” (Pineiro Machado, “Nothingness and the Work of Art,” 256).

Really, when he wrote this Pineiro Machado was describing language, not the optic nerve. He was writing about the disciplines of aesthetics and metaphysics, and arguing that like language, they will always fail in their attempts to close the gap between self and world—between I and the Open—because they set out from the premise that self

and world are separate and, he writes, “once philosophical enquiry starts from a separation it can hardly move back to a unity” (259).

Bataille tries to explore what he calls a blind spot in understanding in a passage of *Inner Experience* (110). The way he goes about it is to dwell upon the feeling of trying and failing to describe—and also trying and failing just to understand—certain moments of ecstasy. Of one such experience, the best he can do is describe suddenly becoming a broken and lightning-struck tree (but voluptuously, milkily, sinfully, violently so); and then becoming (or possessing) a somber, raging, tender sky; and then, exhausted, streaming into something he would later (though not at the time of the experience) imagine and describe as a flame (126-7). “But I say ‘flame’ only by comparison,” he writes, and goes on to describe the sensation of his upper body all but disappearing: it “was an inflamed gushing forth, *overpowering*, even free of its own convulsion” (127, emphasis original).

I have seen a flame like this before.

“Lo maggior corno della fiamma antica
cominciò a crollarsi mormorando
pur come quella cui vento affatica;
indi la cima qua e là menando,
come fosse la lingua che parlasse
gittò voce di fuori”

(The greater horn of the ancient flame began to toss and murmur just as if it were beaten by the wind, then, waving the point to and fro as if it were the tongue that spoke, it flung forth a voice. Dante, Inferno XXVI, 85-89, translation John D. Sinclair.)

This is the soul of Ulysses about to speak, detained in Hell inside a flame that celebrates and punishes the exceptional eloquence of a man who persuaded his companions to their deaths with his speech.

Ulysses can speak from within (or sort of *with*) his flame, which is imagined throughout as a kind of tongue; Bataille cannot speak from within his, nor with it. Quite the opposite: his concern is the flame's irreducibility to language and the way these ecstatic experiences reject discourse altogether (*Inner Experience*, 114). When he tries to write about the flame the following day—and comes up with this: “It is not aware of itself, it is absorbed in its own unknown; in this unknown, it loses itself, annihilates itself”—the writing disappoints him because it was “exact but hampered by exactitude” (127-8).

I think of the description I tried to write in bed, and the way the writing seemed to sharpen its object into a subtly altered, subtly posing version

of itself, and I knew that whatever I had wanted to capture would not be captured this way.

Bataille goes on: “And if now, the tale finished, I come back to myself, I feel sad as happens when, burning, we discover in ourselves that which is not yet consumed and will not be able to be consumed, not being commensurate to the fire” (128).

As the blot grows so its surface pressure depletes, because the smaller the surface area of the droplet, the greater the Laplace pressure.

The second force, against which the pull inside the cartridge competes, is the surface pressure at the outer rim of the blot. As the blot grows so its surface pressure depletes, until it is weaker than the upward pull inside the pen which succeeds in stemming the flow. I want this to be the second of two forces that compete to limit the blot—it is so neat—but it isn’t after all. I have misunderstood the article. This is how inkblots are limited on smooth surfaces, not on paper.

I go back and read it again.

On rough surfaces like paper it isn’t the neat balancing of capillary pressures that limits the extent of the blot, but something

messier and less appealing, about the build-up of a remainder:

“On real paper, the blot spreading is eventually limited by both contact line pinning at surface heterogeneities and evaporation” (Kim et al., “Hydrodynamics of Writing with Ink,” 2).

Contact line pinning usually describes the way the outer edge of a drop of fluid is pinned in place when it lands, all at once, on a surface that is rough or heterogeneous (Deegan et al., “Capillary Flow as the Cause of Ring Stains from Dried Liquid Drops,” 829). But it occurs in the gradual formation of ink blots too, as the periphery of the blot evaporates and becomes pinned because it is dry, and any ink that continues to flow from the nib moves radially outwards towards this limit (829). It is this interaction of contact line pinning and evaporation that accounts for the ring stains you see left over when an expanse of fluid has dried, provided the fluid is a solution, because it is the build-up of dispersed particles in the solution that form the stain (757).

Imagine the sticky-winged pupae rising to the surface of the inkblot, and each one moving radially outwards towards its periphery, and when the blot dries they are all to be found there, pinned down and stuck around its edge.

This is visible in my five blots, which are all darker at the very edge. The build-up of a remainder.

I think of the gradual formation of the ink blot and the gradual formation of thought in speech, and try to imagine the outer edge of a blot of thought getting pinned in place at the furthest extent of its reach, and all the particles being drawn towards the edge leaving a ring stain when the thought is dried.

When is a thought dried?

I drop a little black tea onto china, watch it find its shape, wait for it to dry.

The extent of the blot is the natural expression of the forces that formed it. This is a point so self-evident it need hardly be made.

This is a blot so self-evident it need hardly be made. It is the natural expression of its own formation—a material concretion of the process that formed it.

Catharsis is often imagined¹ in terms of a hydraulic system¹. Emotions left unconsummated¹ build up pressure¹ in a reservoir that eventually overflows, and the excess spills out as tears¹. Where the hydraulic model has influenced clinical practice¹ patients are encouraged to weep with the aim of restoring physiological equilibrium, although the therapeutic process is also found to induce new crying¹.

Catharsis is often imagined. Individuals often report feeling better after crying (Nelson, *Seeing Through Tears*, 7-8; Lutz, *Crying*, 131), and in many forms of cathartic therapy crying is believed to bring relief in and of itself (Nelson, 8). In Tom Lutz's view catharsis "has been the single most persistent idea in this century's long march of new therapies" (119), but there is also persistent scepticism of the positive effects crying is supposed to bring. One study, for instance, found no correlation between the reported benefits of crying and objective assessments of the life quality of those reporting, and moreover found crying to be associated with poorer health and higher levels of stress (Davis, "Crying It Out"). Perhaps more research is needed (Trimble, *Why Humans like to Cry*, 32). Perhaps, following Lutz, "[j]ust as we no longer consider bleeding with leeches to be a reasonable remedy, it is time to rethink the cathartic nature of tears as well" (120).

We no longer consider trepanation to be a reasonable remedy either—drilling a hole in the skull to relieve pressure said to build up in the brain, leaving you in a state of continued gentle ecstasy. Perhaps trepanation, like catharsis and bleeding with leeches, must be understood formally above all, not medically. To borrow a phrase from Barthes when he appraises Bataille's chains of erotic metaphor in *Story of the Eye*, perhaps only formal criticism can accompany them:

"It is a case of signification without a thing signified (or in which everything is signified)" and because of this—because it is a matter of form above all, rather than a matter of content—the work is "a kind of open literature out of the reach of all interpretation, one that only formal criticism can—at a great distance—accompany" (Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," 123).

As trepanation is no longer accepted by medical councils you have to carry out the procedure yourself, using whatever equipment you have to hand.

An artist called Amanda Feilding did this in 1970. One evening she used a foot pedal to operate a hand-held electrical drill and bored a hole into the bone of her forehead. In an interview she explained that she decided to film the procedure:

Feilding: “I thought I’d make a film about it, being an artist. It was useful making the film, because it felt like I was separating myself from the situation and taking a step away.”

Cox: “So you’ve got the physical anaesthetic, then the mental ‘anaesthetic’ of treating it as a piece of artwork.”

Feilding: “Yeah, it was effective. After I’d performed the procedure, I wrapped up my head with a scarf, had a steak to replace iron from the lost blood and went to a party” (Cox, “An Interview”).

I think of her “dab[bing] the blood off her face while she stared wide-eyed into a mirror with an eerie, beautiful smile” (Colton, “You Need It Like ... a Hole in the Head?”) and ingesting from the steak an equal quantity of blood.

(But I want to know: was the pull perfectly reciprocal? If one could measure the weight of breath drawn in against the weight of breath drawn out, would they balance?)

Earlier, I wrote “When does flesh become meat?”
(this document, 128).

When does life become art?

I imagine that by filming her trepanation she is playing it, tactfully, almost taming it into the condition of a lifeless thing, almost ready to eat.

Feilding: “How did you feel after the procedure?”

Cox: “I described it at the time as feeling like the tide was coming in: there was a feeling of rising, slowly and gently, to levels that felt good, very subtle”
(Cox, *An Interview*).

To the leftover bits of enjoyment that emerge from the structure of the rim and remain at its edges
(Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 32),

Feilding adds the blood from the
borehole in her head.

Earlier, I wrote “And
then, these leftover bits
are often received, and
then kept. The lachrymal
phial, the voice recorder
on my phone, the sheet
of paper against which
the pencil wipes the
edges of its tip” (this
document, 94-5). Also
the film Feilding made,
which keeps the blood on
tape?

I imagine the
phial, the
recorder, the
paper and the
film are where
the careful
playing and
tactful taming of
the leftovers
takes place:

where they are
tamed into the
condition of a
lifeless thing and
brought onto the
shore with little
resistance.

A hydraulic system. At my desk this afternoon I looked through a book I had to hand, thinking I might copy referencing style (Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*). The bookmark was at Chapter 19, and reading back a couple of pages I find Abraham Lincoln's young son has just died. Lincoln's reaction is expressed through the words of several contemporary accounts, of which the last describes him thus: "The sight of him shocked me. His hair was wild, his face pale, with signs of recent tears plainly evident. I marveled at his agitated manner and wondered what might be the outcome if he did not find some relief. I had recently been to visit an iron-works in the state of Pennsylvania, where a steam-release valve had been demonstrated to me; the President's state put me in mind of the necessity of such an apparatus" (56).

I marvelled at this, I really did. Just now I had been writing about releasing an accumulating pressure on the mind, and here it was in somebody's book.

And then, a few pages on: "The tide runs out but never runs in" (Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 81).

(These hunches manifest themselves in your body without you knowing, and they are shown to you in the movement of the rod. Held thus, the meaning of a fragment wobbles in the light, and in it, you see yourself looking.)

I am dowsing, I thought. I am sweeping for mines.

The lead of a pencil is called the *Mine* in German. In German as in English the word also denotes a military mine, the concealed device that explodes on contact, but the German word is unconnected to the industrial process of extracting minerals from the ground.

This kind of lead is not lead at all but graphite, which is mined from the ground. Once an underground seam of graphite is detected, machines follow it laboriously through the rock to extract it, leaving in its place a tunnel supported by pillars of mineral remainders that are destroyed when mining is complete and the tunnel finally undergoes a controlled collapse.

The extracted material is crushed into particles and floated in a chemical solution to recover the graphite from its ore in microscopically fine flakes, but the flotation process is inefficient. It needs to be repeated many times because the flakes tend to coat every particle of ore they touch; these particles become indistinguishable from the flakes of graphite and are

floated off with them, contaminating the yield
(Wakamatsu et al., “Flotation of Graphite”).

Even in the mine it draws.

“The mouths of drowning people are not
above the surface for long enough to
exhale, inhale, and call out for help” (US
Coast Guard Office of Search and
Rescue, *On Scene*, 14).

Most of the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* are ghosts: deceased but convinced they are only unwell, convalescing half-underground in “sick boxes” and narrow stone homes until they can take up their old lives again. Each of them lingers on earth because of something left undone in life: some regret or unfulfilled desire so heavy not even death can subtract it from the balance. These burdens weigh upon the souls of the dead until some change of heart lightens the load and tips the balance back.

The talk of the tide running out but never in again is an expression of this unfinished business, and it recurs in the speech of angels (or disguised tormentors) who process into the graveyard now and again to persuade the ghosts they have finished their lives and have left nothing undone after all, or nothing of consequence at least. “You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore,” they often say (93, 96, 100), and I imagine the disintegrated wet and foam of a wave dispersed on rough sand and rocks, irrevocably fragmented and starting to dry into crystalline salt.

The ghosts try very hard not to be persuaded, but one or two succumb. In an explosion of blinding light (they call it a “matterlightblooming phenomenon”) these few individuals vanish from the face of the earth and their garments flutter down from the sky in shreds. One of these individuals, Mrs. Abigail Blass, succumbs when she is shown a glorious vision: “Where they wanted to take me, the tide would run in, and never out” (95).

But surely the resolution of a wave crashed against the shore is just for the tide to ebb and flow in the normal way, not to run in and never out, which surely would be as hard to bear as a tide that runs out and never in. The tide always going in, always filling up, there being more and more and more with no release—this cannot be a heavenly thing.

I think of the mind of poor Funes, overly replete. Its tide never, ever goes out.

It sounds like a trap to me. Mrs. Abigail Blass is presented as a simple woman, who might have been tricked by angels who are tormentors after all. I think it is a Hell they are taking her to; one perfectly suited to her own dark preoccupation with never having enough and always wanting more:

“You never in your life was given enough, said
Miranda Debb.

My eyes teared up.

That is so true, I said” (Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 96).

Yes, and in *this* way is balance restored. Like the *contrappassi* of Dante’s Hell that perfectly matched punishment to crime, the form of one answering the form of the other exactly, restoring balance where there was none.

Emotions left unconsummated. This is how Arthur Koestler describes the cathartic shedding of tears, as he develops an account of what he calls the logic of the moist eye (*The Act of Creation*, 271-284). He writes that moments of rapture, when “the ‘I’ seems no longer to exist, to dissolve in the experience like a grain of salt in water,” may cause “a welling-up of emotions, a moistening or overflowing of the eyes, while the body is becalmed and drained of its tensions” (273). He goes on to explain that such “surplus of emotion cannot be worked off in action” (274), and offers as an example: “You cannot take the mountain panorama home with you; the surest method to break the charm is clicking your camera” (273). Instead, the surplus “can be consummated only in *internal*, visceral and glandular, processes,” such as weeping (274, emphasis original).

The death of the mountain panorama, then, is the price we pay for the photograph.

“The death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word”
(Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” 100).

Feilding filmed her own trepanation to break the charm intentionally. It had too much charm, so to speak. (So much charm my head went light when I watched just a clip of the film.)

What Bataille found incommensurate to the tongues of flames—to language—might be consumed, or rather consummated, by weeping instead. Not used up, not cancelled out, but completed, or somehow perfected.

Build up pressure. The little drop of black tea has dried. The shellac outline I expected is here. It is exquisite to look at, so dark and fine; so certain and concise in its irregularity.

And the excess spills out as tears. But only the excess: just enough to restore the body to homeostasis. There is always a little left over.

Apparently the word *catharsis* “drops out of the *Poetics* because the word wonder, *to rhaumaston*, replaces it” (Sachs, *Aristotle: Poetics*, unpaginated).

Earlier, I wrote “Ruminate, murmur, grazing as they pass you by. What they cannot bear (the preacher and, differently, the sperm) is the prospect of ruminating forever, without coming up for air, never being able to write it up, pin it down, fish it out), cry it out” (this document, 137).

The tide coming in and going out, just in the normal way.

Where the hydraulic model has influenced clinical practice. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer interpreted hysteria as the result of past psychological trauma, the memory of which needed to be worked out of the system through cathartic purgation.

I think of Breuer's patient known as Anna O. who coined the term "talking cure" to describe what she and Breuer did. Under hypnosis she recalled and seemed to re-experience something she had once seen, which had repulsed her at the time but not since come to mind: a dog lapping water from a woman's glass. With this articulation—or rather, Breuer would emphasize, with this re-experiencing—she was cured of an unexplained aversion to water (Gay, *Freud: A Life for our Time*, 66).

She had to feel again how she had first felt to see—what? The tongue of the dog wrapping its width inversely around the inside of the vessel, assuming its curve, the back of the tongue displayed to her against the glass, the lapping, the saliva^l?

Was the wet of the dog's mouth too similar to the wet of the water, I wonder, and the contamination of one with the other^l too much to bear?

Saliva. Saliva, salivate, sliver, silva.

And these are inhaled in turn.

You can imagine the weight of personal experience as a kind of private silva: raw fragments of memory you can collect to construct new texts, clasping the branches lightly in either hand, supported in a state of disequilibrium so they wobble in the light, and in them, you see yourself looking.

The contamination of one with the other. But memories must be the most wobbling of branches to collect. Much more so than the textual fragments King Alfred imagined gathering as staves and posts and tie-beams from the forest floor.

Perhaps, instead, the weight of personal experience leaves its scent pooled and lingering in some mossy recess of the mind, waiting there for you to sniff it out, track its path and correct for its displacement over time, as the sniffer dog's handler corrects for humidity, rain and airflow when interpreting a path of scent, trying to cancel their effects to zero. Is this how memories are collected to construct new texts?

Apparently not. The moment of recollection is not really a kind of collection at all, according to psychologists Michael Ross and Roger Buehler, who describe it as a creative and constructive moment "in that people's current beliefs, knowledge, and perspectives can influence which episodes they retrieve from memory and how they interpret that information [...]. People's present

beliefs can also direct their guesses about the past; individuals may fill in gaps in their memories using their beliefs as guides” (“Creative Remembering,” 207). In their view you cannot collect raw fragments of memory at all (206-7).

It is not that memories are too difficult to trace and find and gather up, but that the forest floor itself is indistinct from the memories we find there. The forest floor is perhaps not a place we can visit after all, but a coat we move around in always, or a skin, littered with detritus renewed with our every move.

I think of Kafka’s forest-dwelling animal, and it occurs to me he does not live inside his burrow as much as inside his coat of fur.

In my mind fur and moss are temporarily exchanged. Briefly I imagine the forest floor carpeted in unkempt fur, and the pelt of the animal is briefly moss.

Memory “only exists as retroactively posited from a position” within the present, I could write, partly borrowing a phrase from Natalie Loveless (“Reading with Knots,” 30).

Loveless is not writing about memory but about Lacan’s conception of the Real which, she writes, “only exists as

retroactively posited from a position within ‘reality’—the remembered dream, the experienced symptom, the play of signification that suddenly emerges as uncanny” (30). She writes that even though the Real “can be said to name the play of the unconscious,” it is graspable only through its effects, and in this way it seems to pull in two contradictory directions: towards the irreducibly unknowable and towards the known, familiar narrative through which we can grasp it. The point Loveless wants to make, in agreement with Gallop whose words she quotes, is that this “may be a tension intrinsic to the anecdote” too, which likewise pulls towards its irreducible origin while finding meaning in its retelling as part of a meaningful discourse (30, citing Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 85).

But I was drawn to Loveless’ account by her remark that when you read an anecdote you read not for the known but for the unknown (“Reading with Knots,” 35). She elaborates: “That said, it is not just any kind of unknown that is privileged here, but the unknown by which we are *compelled*” (35, emphasis original). When you read an anecdote you ask: “To what are we inescapably, repetitively drawn?” (35).

I imagine particles of solute inescapably, repetitively drawn towards the ring deposit at the outer limit of their drying drop: “the resulting outward flow can carry virtually all the dispersed

material to the edge” (Deegan et al., “Capillary Flow as the Cause of Ring Stains from Dried Liquid Drops,” 827).

Ink, inkling, the unknown by which we
are compelled.

The therapeutic process can also induce new crying. “And new crying can happen in analysis, too, a newly induced mourning for an object of desire that is ‘lost’ in the process of analysis” (Lutz, *Crying*, 125).

Earlier, I wrote “The description did not cancel out its object and bring their number down to zero. Of course not. It added to it, making two things where I wanted to have made none, or rather, to have cancelled out one with the other” (this document, 153).

Between tides there is a natural period of stillness¹ known as slack water, when tidal pressures¹ are relaxed. During periods of slack that follow a low tide, underwater visibility is much reduced because the particles drawn out by the ebb are not dispersed by tidal movement¹. But swimming is less effortful¹ in slack water, and the likelihood of drifting away from a vessel or from the shore is reduced for an hour or more¹. For this reason it is normal to arrange diving expeditions¹ while the water is expected to be slack, and for vessels to navigate channels that are narrow or unfamiliar during this time, before tidal movement resumes.

There is a natural period of stillness. For six frames the blacks of my son's eyes are round and still as they take me in.

Earlier, I wrote "the inspired air pools for a while in the convoluted folds of bone" (this document, 53).

He is smiling and singing a song I cannot hear, going slowly round and round a carousel. I have watched this video often, frame by frame (*Appendix 6*).
Something about it disturbs me.

Earlier, I wrote "I want to listen to him. I want to stop the story short, cut into it, bisect it so that instead of swimming along and speaking as he goes, [he] is suddenly facing me, head on, a tiny dot from this perspective, and I would say *now speak!*" (this document, 136-7).

Tidal pressures. Because all the world's oceans are connected, they are affected by gravity as though they were a single globular body of water. The tidal bulge aligned with the lunar orbit is caused not only by the moon-bound pull of lunar gravity, but by its earth-bound pull near the earth's poles, at the points furthest from the lunar orbit line. This pattern of water pressure squeezes the globule near the earth's poles and, like a blister of fluid when compressed, pushes the mass of fluid outwards towards the equator.

I think of the cantharide blisters of fluid with their layers of skin removed, weeping freely in correlation with the suppression of tears, and blotted

with filter paper for measurement. The globular ocean body is so complete and self-contained in comparison. Like a serpent that feeds its body to itself, flesh becoming meat becoming flesh.

The particles drawn out by the ebb are not dispersed by tidal movement. I

imagine the particles of solute flowing radially outwards towards the edge of an ink blot and building up there, slack for a moment, visibility poor, and then tidal movement resumes and the particles all disperse. The waves sound in miniature, crashing on the shore of an inkblot tide, rhythmically tapping the auditory nerve.

Swimming is less effortful. “Whereupon, marvellous to tell, in an instant the sea grew still! Then warmly, gently, the great tide turned, began to bear me, as it does now, onward and upward will-I nill-I, like a flood of joy—” (Barth, “Night-Sea Journey,” 12).

At the turning of the tide the swimming sperm is briefly bewitched by the Shore that calls him to her: “‘Come!’, She whispers, and I have no will” (12). For him, reluctantly succumbing to the will of the Shore (I want to say: to the matterlightblooming phenomenon), the tide will never go out again. He is drawn to his conclusion, and gives himself up in the creation of his line.

Before tidal movement resumes. It is the seventh frame of the video that disturbs me, and those that follow. Very smoothly, he begins to look away from me. The rounds of his eyes grow black tails in the shadows of his eyelids until they are two black commas turned about onto their flanks. The smoothness of the movement, and the way his smile remains unchanged as he looks away and then glides around the carousel: these are the crux of the disturbance. Because they reveal in the

manner of his looking away that he was never really looking at me in the first place, and neither exactly looking past me, but that his glance was just passing through, his eyes never really still at all, just brushing the surface of their field of vision. What had seemed to me a moment of stillness was really just a caress; a kind of near miss.

Inverted commas, I think.

Diving expeditions. Although watching the video again, perhaps there is something else. It's true that his smile does not change and nor does the hold of his eye. But at the very moment his eyes begin to turn, in that same seventh frame, he begins to extend the pointing finger of his hand. I had never noticed this until now, so fixed I was upon his eyes.

Watching the two movements together it is clear they are part of a single gesture: a single swooping forth of eyes and fingertip to indicate—what? The direction of his travel. It is a peculiar gesture, because he need only point ahead with his finger, and look ahead, and the circular motion of the carousel does the rest, causing his body to describe the path it takes just by taking it. It is a point so self-evident it needn't be made, I want to say. As soon as I have noticed the movement of his finger the whole of his form changes in nature. His eyes are not looking away at all, they are pointing. And all of his body has become an arrow, describing the curve of its orbit until it glides out of view again and around.

5.3

The inhospitable surface of the globule has the quality of something dried now. Not simply dry but dried: the quality of something that was once wet and is no longer so. This dryness begins to present itself as the resolution of being wet, or as the cancelling out of wetness and its bringing down to zero. After all, this is the main preoccupation expressed here, and repeatedly so: the prospect, or even the hope, of one thing being cancelled out exactly by another; each the other's perfect opposite or its natural resolution, with the result that nothing at all is left behind.

But if this dryness presents itself as the resolution of being wet, its resolution turns out to be far from zero. The quality of something dried is not, in the end, associated with a perfect cancelling out to nothing but with an alternative that is less satisfactory: the messiness of a remainder, which has become associated with the image of a ring stain. An outer limit to which all the particles of a solution flow, like flotsam pinned to the surface, as the wetness evaporates away.

And here, although there are still things left over—

the depletion of pressure as surface area grows;

the recovery of graphite;

the making of art as a kind of anaesthetic

—I am inclined to think, at last, that I can identify the object of my description.

Conclusion

I am inclined, after all, and as I had first expected, to identify as my object the nature of the point of contact between pencil and page, and in particular those aspects of its nature that arrested me in the five drawings that lie on my desk alongside my writing. And it is because this inclination has become quite strong that I must be cautious here, and must try to add nothing more to the images of membrane and flotsam and the globular form in my mind, because now, what I think I know about their object will too likely shape them further, and might falsely confirm my inclination. I have reached the point of crisis a drawing meets near its completion, when you look at your drawing and realize it has demands of its own, which might correspond with the demands of your object and equally might not. And rather than beginning to draw according to the demands of the drawing I must resist them, stop drawing here, and instead begin to describe the drawing I have made.

If it is indeed a description of the point of contact between pencil and page, then how is it described? It is described as a movement provoked by the desire to draw something up—specifically to draw up and indeed use up some experience hitherto unconsummated and therefore excessive—in the laying down of a line. This reciprocal flow (of drawing up by laying down) is at the heart of this point of contact, as is the tension between the wish that drawing would succeed (by drawing its object up, thus cancelling it out to zero) and the reality that it cannot succeed (the thing remains uncapturable; the drawing draws a line down, ending up not with zero but with two: more excess than before). An expression of this reciprocal flow is the nature of the drawing's movement towards the thing it seeks to capture. It proceeds softly, like a kind of caress that presses into the yielding unknown of

the uncapturable thing, seeking to assume the qualities of the thing itself, foremost among which is its uncapturable nature.

The movement of the point of contact, then, is towards the uncapturable. By this I mean that it tries to approach what it cannot capture, but also that it tries to become uncapturable itself, so that, like an artificial fly deceiving its catch, its flesh can press into the flesh of the thing it seeks, seeming so similar. To move towards the unknown it must become somewhat unknowing and unknown itself—somewhat in the dark, or underwater, or asleep, but knowingly so—and here another tension lies. Movement of this nature must proceed by proximal contact, paying myopic, touching attention to whatever subtle impressions present themselves at the very time and place they are encountered. And these impressions must be taken seriously, each one, because they are all that is encountered of the unknown thing. It is these effects of the unknown thing that are traced and followed, and these that are laid down in the line of the drawing's movement. The appeal of the caress—of caressing the flank of the thing but leaving the thing uncaught—is an expression of the appeal of rumination and the mute openness it implies, but this appeal is tempered powerfully by its opposite: the accumulating pressure of the experience of rumination itself, which presents an unconsummated excess of its own. It is in an attempt to release this growing pressure that the line is laid down: an attempt to capture and tame and give a name to such experience, so balancing away its excess. The point's tendency towards the unknown conceals its opposite tendency towards the known.

Then the line is laid down by means of a hook, concealed. As it moves into the unknown, and approaches the thing it cannot capture, the action of the moving point is to reveal from within the softness of its caress a glinting hook concealed inside. Then, like some flash of life lured to the surface of the water the uncapturable thing is unfailingly lost or killed as it is brought to light.

Here, it would be easy enough to imagine the hook as the tip of the pencil, and the surface upon which it lays its mimetic caress the surface of the inhospitable page, collecting on its surface as flotsam the remains of things asphyxiated when they are drawn there, as if drawn to the shore of the night-sea journey by a siren call that denies the moving point any voice that is not the voice of the line it becomes. But my description, I am convinced, is formal above all, and describes not the material elements of the point of contact and the drawing act—not the pencil and the page, nor the biro and the sheet, nor any of these particular things—but the operation of the point of contact.

The inhospitable surface and the luring hook have come into appearance in my description as two parts of a story (the third part being the poor fish). But understood formally, they describe two aspects of a single operation: the simultaneous drawing in and drawing out of the point of contact as it embraces and extinguishes in a single continuous movement the thing it would capture. The point of contact, when it really takes (for it does not always take, and drawing with a point that does not take is speaking shit), is preoccupied completely with this pursuit; even absorbed and almost asleep in it. And although its pursuit *can* be seen in the line it wipes onto the page, such a line is drawn to be drawn, really not to be seen. It is there, but does not show itself to be there.

Afterword

I remember all the leftovers I have been collecting in lists at the close of each chapter, expecting them to be brought into my description at some point. But now they present themselves in a different way. Understood formally, they have served their purpose already, as grit to help gain traction into a thought otherwise unthinkable: each one an impression that must be taken seriously, because they are all that is encountered of the unknown thing. And now that the thought is being thought, all the grit left over forms a residue at its edges happening to show, by accident of being left there, the pinned edge of the thought it helped create.

A subtle turn is happening.

If the thought was indeed created *by* its description, then this much is true not just of those grains I have called leftovers, but of every grain of the description. And this makes sense of a concern that has been growing in my mind. On my desk now I have six things not five: the roll of drawings, the blunt pencil, the computer with the digital folder of voice recordings, the bed sheet once marked with the biro line, the row of inkblots on the folded page, and this writing, printed and squared up. My growing concern is that finally, the writing is not a description of the point of contact in drawing after all, even if it describes it very closely. It is not a description of an aspect of drawing; it is that an aspect of drawing is a description of something else: some further thing that remains altogether unknown and hitherto uncapturable. And what is more, as I write this, I am no longer sure that the unknown thing being described is a thing after all. Apart from the metaphors, there seem to be no nouns. All the description provides are properties, actions, tendencies and

desires, the details of which have taken shape through analogy to drawing and all the little images that make it up, but exactly what the detail describes resists being pinned down at all. Instead, it is the analogy to drawing that has been pinned down: the description, and not the thing it describes.

Understood in this way—formally above all, as grit to help a thought gain traction—this writing conceals a hook of its own, and moves, almost blind and almost asleep, sensitive to every impression, brushing against the unknown flank of this unknown thing; a thing so similar in form to my description that I imagine this very writing to be the food I would find least digested in its stomach if it could be caught and opened up, if I could ever bring it up alive. I had expected that the end of this writing would correspond with a conclusion to the question that began it: what is it about the point of contact in these five drawings that so arrests me? By now, any such conclusion has been so closely described in these pages that it cannot be far from the surface—but I cannot stop short its movement, make it face me head on, and say to it *now speak!*.

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Appendices

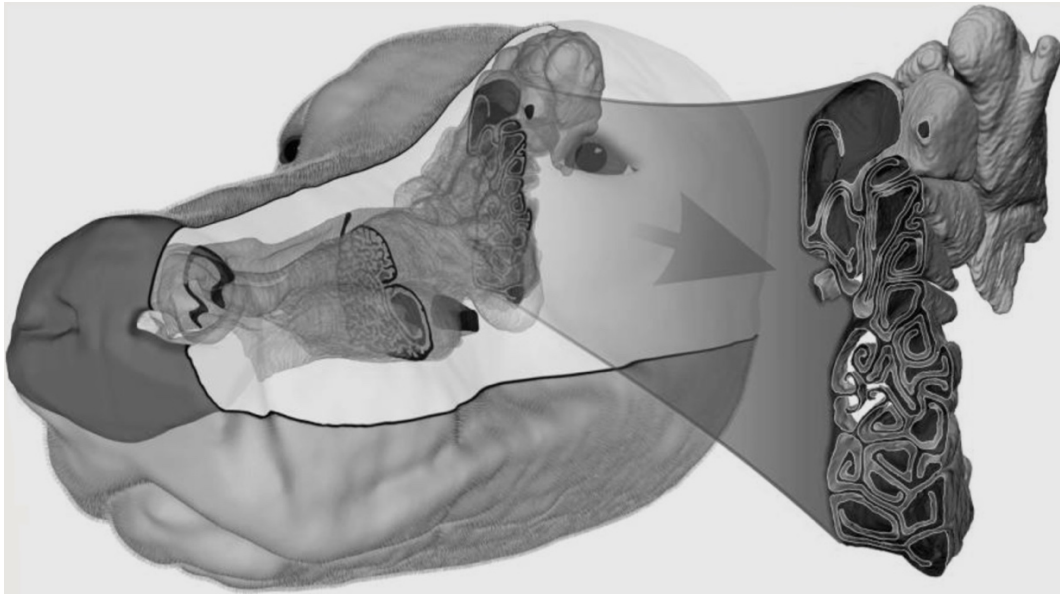
Appendix 1. The half-blind drawing that troubles me.



Appendix 2. Study of the Blind by Antoine Coypel, Louvre Museum.



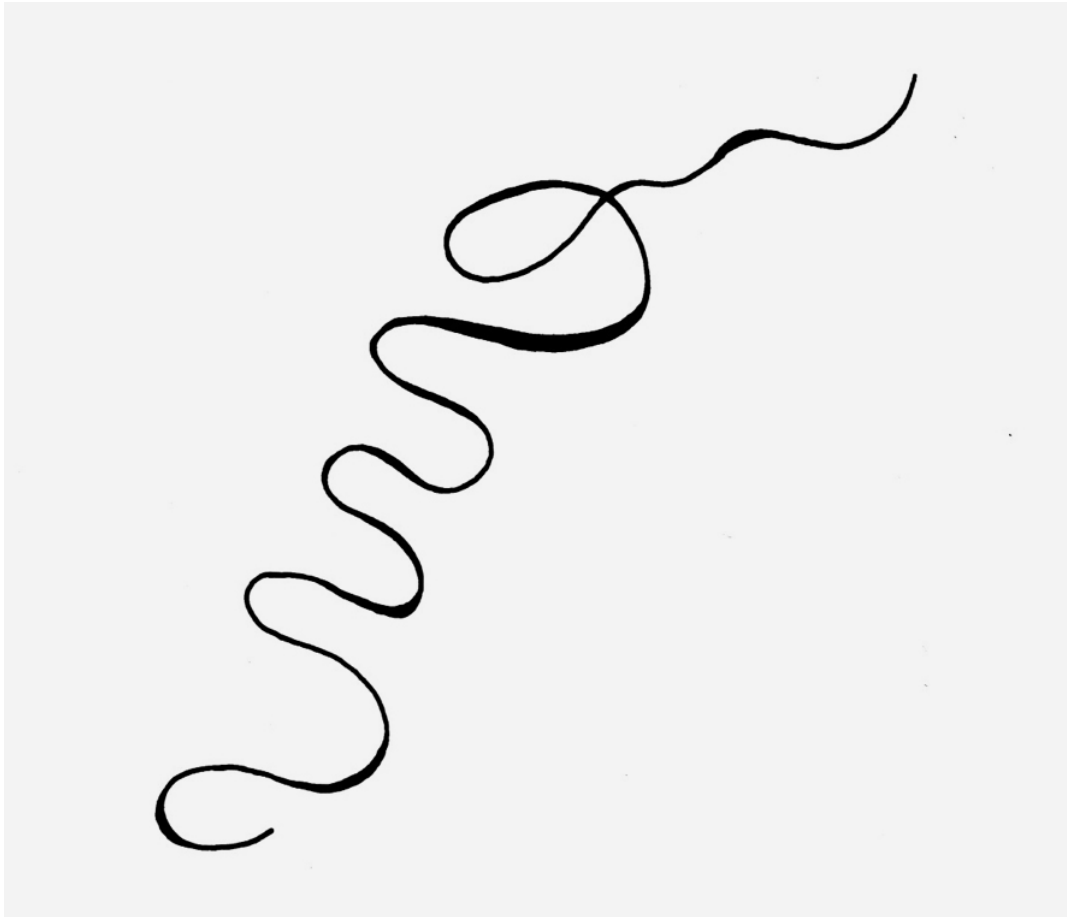
Appendix 3. The canine nasal airway, highlighting the olfactory recess (Craven et al., “The Fluid Dynamics of Canine Olfaction,” 934).



Appendix 4. The letter V from *Kurze und getreue Unterweisung* by C. F. Brechtel (Gray, *Lettering as Drawing*, 67).



Appendix 5. The line traced in the air by Corporal Trim's stick (Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, 743).



Appendix 6. Detail of a frame from the video of my son on the carousel.

