





What Comes Through?

Kathleen Stewart

These images make a still life of the clothed body. A body part touches a membrane, blooms into specificity, erupts into light and texture. The part held back shrinks, is gray, lurks in the background, a shy or menacing shadow of its full self. A cheekbone comes through fully freckled. The hands, caught in precise detail, are in the process of buttoning or unbuttoning a lab coat. They look older, as if the hands and the freckled cheek had led different lives within the one body. Surprised, we look again. An eye pressed into a literal eye contact leaves its mark on the membrane while the rest of the body becomes the withered limb of an awkward afterthought. A woman with a black-and-white scarf brings part of a forearm into vivid contact with the skin threshold, but her legs, left behind, now seem too far back on her torso, a little off angle, too small to do their own work. What comes through is an opening onto contact, slippage, surprise: a wondering.

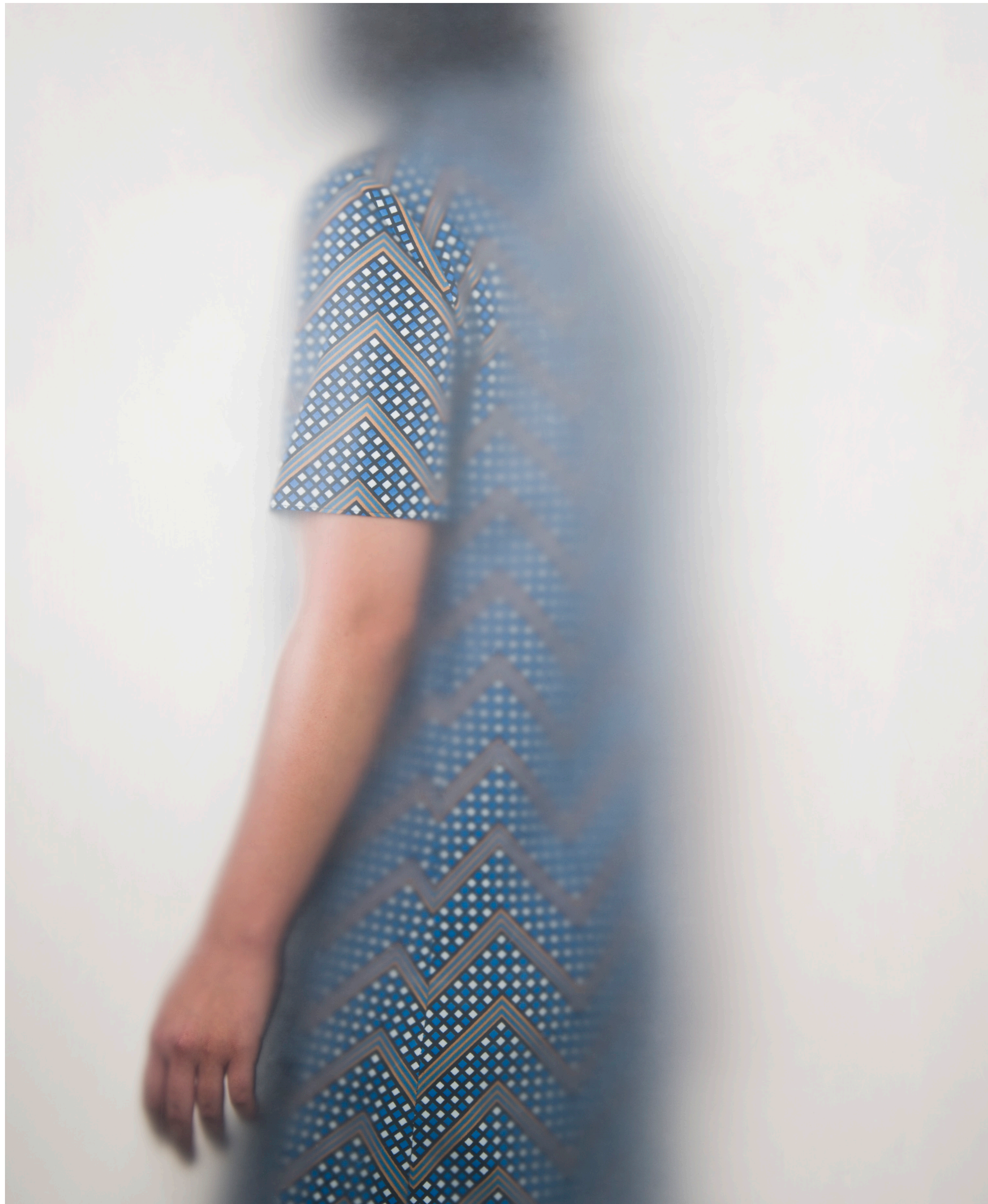
People lean in and then away. One physicality thrusts forward into focus; out of scale, another physicality waits in an amorphous atmosphere. A man looks up, his neck held rigid, his head extended a little off center. He looks down (the neck still rigid, the head again angled). His eyes are huge, beautiful, the shoulders and arms strong, but his legs wither. In other images, a head looks too big, a face looks like a paper doll cutout, or a gigantic hand looks disembodied. As in a primitivist painting, the composition builds on one object, then another, each one discrete and bounded. What comes through is a fabulous woodenly dream of life captured in an instant. The body becomes a scene of elements in proximity like the painting of a village in the snow with a barn and skaters on a pond, and trucks loaded with logs and running dogs and ducks and winter clothes. *This* body is a rough-cut collection of things out of scale with each other, each in the middle of something and in their own different states of composition and decomposition. But there is still a body in the midst of something undeniable. What comes through is a puzzle for the jumping eye, a wondering machine for the mind figuring out what to make of things in the encounter with an image.

What comes through is the clarity of a body that has things to say. Body parts perform themselves as things already fully textured and sentient, loaded with significance but cut free of the heavy hand of explanation, the dead ground of knowing something because you've seen it before. What comes through is the fingertips of a hand framed by beautiful black nail polish. Other fingertips hold a little bouquet of white flowers and green leaves. The colors and the tendrils are supernaturally crisp against a background like dense fog, and deep back in the fog we see the blur of a back turned. What comes through is a gift of specificity, powerful and weighted with precision. What's in a fingertip, a flower, a freckle? Hair cascades down a woman's back, every strand present—thick and straight, or white and curled, pulled back tight or entangled. The simple happiness of a mother swaying with a baby swells out of the ordinary. What comes through is contact.

What comes through is already formed and moving on its own but it's not alone. Body parts are wrapped, entangled, adorned, veiled, accompanied by companions, and resonant with other possible presences and absences. The hands carry a harmonica, a rag doll, the flowers; they wear nails, a ring, a tattoo. Wrists are covered in bracelets, or, unadorned, show the tender subtlety of a vein under the skin, a delicate bone protruding just slightly. Necks and shoulders are wrapped in necklaces, dog tags, scarves, and shawls. There is a blood pressure cuff, an eye patch, keys worn around the neck on a cord, a hospital wristband, the frill on the front of a blouse, a sharp pink tie setting off a dark suit and white, white shirt. The slowness of attention these photos perform is a pause that's poised between the way looking extends into touching and feeling and a speculative wondering about what might be going on in an ordinary situation made a little stranger by a membrane of skin and captured by a camera. What comes through is the way a sensory touch meets a fabrication. The world becomes a series of ordinary encounters in which hands hesitate, and drop back, or venture out like emissaries to a threshold.

What comes through is the possibilities lodged in a stranger intimacy. A public of eyes and hands attunes itself to instants of touch and trouble. In a contact zone of first encounters, touch is a reason for surprise, pleasure, and concern. Its ephemerality is frightening, or sad, but also comforting. Here there is just the reaching out to touch a membrane that separates and connects. Or not. Reactions ring out like the chorus of a song. Here we are. This is it. And it's here that the hands always seem to look a little worn, the eyes a little wide, the soft-focus background sharpening the impact of the finger poking or brushing the shoulder that leans in. What comes through is the human ordinary caught in a single frame of sidling up to what unfolds. A body part pulled into focus is cut out but not alone. An army of companion species comes along: the bracelets, the tattooed arm, the dimple, the colors and the textures of skin and cloth, personality fragments in a smile, a raised eyebrow, a turned elbow. This is it, now, and with it a backlog of pasts and the suggestion of a future. ■

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Exposures

Kris Paulsen

Photography is “writing with light,” but it depends just as much on the dark. The analog film camera, regardless of size, has always been a *camera obscura*—a dim room—into which breaks a tiny point of light, letting in a brief glimpse of the outside world. No one can see what goes on in there. It hides away a thin sliver of the present and quickly turns it into the past. It takes something visible and makes it invisible, at least for a time. To see it again, to let it out, one must enter yet another dark room. In a bath, a shallow birthing pool, a photographer gently coaxes it back into visibility.

And what is there, staring up from the waters? A frozen muscular twitch. One hundredth, one thousandth of a second. All the expressions that are so fleeting one cannot perceive them, at least not with the eyes alone. The camera observes everything: all the movements and moments and everything in-between. What do Eadweard Muybridge’s and Étienne-Jules Marey’s late nineteenth-century chronographs show? Not the smooth travel of a body in motion, but that every action of agility and grace is composed of countless awkward incidents in which one appears to be stumbling, falling, or impossibly hovering above the ground. They knew about the dark. They matched their little *camera obscuras* with hollow dusky caves, long expanses of dark paint, and inky velvet light traps so that they could pick out the bright bits of body in contrast. There the body’s movements could be measured and calculated, subject to standardization and control. They contrived the deepest depths to make their flat images and to turn unfurling life into discrete information.

Soon after Marey and Muybridge had mastered photographing and studying the outsides of subjects’ bodies, Wilhelm Röntgen began looking straight through them. Röntgen’s Radiograms saw past flesh and tissue, revealing bones and their breaks, and bits of foreign matter lodged inside. X-rays, the beams of light that made these images possible, were invisible to the human eye. Hence, they were named “X”: the unknown object or quantity. It was on photosensitive surfaces that they first made their presence known. How could photographic papers or plates, wrapped in opaque black paper, stored in pitch-dark rooms become speckled with flecks of light? How could there be light in the dark? The accidentally exposed photographic plates allowed the hidden to be seen. The scientists could trace backwards the unobserved path of these imperceptible rays to the rock minerals that were secretly glowing. And so, the patient did not merely undress in front of the doctor but became transparent, doubly exposed on paper and in the world, seen inside and out. The invisible, unknown thing made what was once hidden and fundamentally unknowable into a picture.

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The digital camera is not a dark room but a black box. Between input and output there is only mystery and magic. It gathers data from the world and delivers it bit by bit to the screen. When being photographed, there is the temptation to look right away, to get caught in a loop of capture and peeking. Move from one side of the lens to the other to check. Make sure everyone (especially oneself) looks their best. Delete the ugly, awkward images. Keep only those that seem perfect. Take it again. Discard all of those mysterious moments that used to emerge in the bath as a surprise. Resist what photographers used to see—the unwieldy and unobservable in-betweens. Delete or adjust until flawless. Repeat.

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There was a time when photographs took time. It was before Muybridge and Marey, before sharp lenses, sensitive films, and quick shutters. It was before we could see in instants. The first permanent photograph, Nicéphore Niépce’s *A View from a Window at La Graz* (1826–27), took more than eight hours to expose. The simple window scene does not show the building as much as the slow crawl of shadows across the tiled rooftops. Here, the photograph appears not as light writing an image, but as the record of a leisurely rotation of the earth on its axis. It is not an instant, but one third of the day.

So many things escaped the camera’s gaze: clouds and shadows, which were constantly changing; animals and children, which could not be compelled into stillness. Photography was a medium better suited for landscape and architecture—unmovable things. Louis Daguerre’s 1938 image of Boulevard du Temple shows an abandoned Paris: no carriages on the street, no pedestrians or passersby, no birds, no weather. Only the buildings, trees, and pavement could sync themselves to the slow capture of photography. Just two figures—blurry, armless forms—inhabit the scene: a shoeshine and his customer, who, by chance, stayed in the same place for the many minutes the shutter was open.

As equipment improved, time contracted. By the mid-nineteenth century, only twenty or so seconds were necessary to make an image. With discipline, and stabilizing apparatuses like arm rests and head braces, people could slow their bodies down to conform to the pace of the photograph. They had to choose to be seen. They had to sit still and grow into the image. The instant had yet to be invented. There was little “smiling for the camera”: it was too hard to hold, and photographs were rare, expensive, and serious things. During an entire lifetime, one might only sit for the photographer a single time. The image did not preserve a split-second, but a broad idea of a person and her enduring physical presence.

With the instant, everything changes.

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Instead of sitters growing into the photograph, it is taken of them. Marey’s camera was fashioned like a gun so he could point and rapidly shoot his subject. There is a violence in the language of photography when it becomes an instant action: a “snap shot,” as the hunters say. And now, our images are continually taken and captured, uploaded and databased, indexed and cross-referenced. We are at every moment made into information. Images come constantly and instantly, slicing fractions of time we can’t feel or perceive.

There is a singular horror of being in front of the modern camera, analog or digital. As before the doctor, one is subject to inspection, yes, but also to permanence and exacting data. The fleeting moment endures; it won’t pass away. It is impossible to live in instants or isolated moments. One can’t see or feel that way. Existence is continuum. In anticipation of capture, reconfigure the face into a mask, the body into a statue. Freeze before being frozen. Be surprised at the uncanny strangeness of the result: “Is that how I really look?” No, you are an always-moving blur, we just can’t see it any more. Through analogy, we have come to imagine the eye as the camera and vision as a photograph. They are not.

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Can we get back to the blur? Can one yield to vision and capture without being seen? Without becoming information? Can one be exposed without exposure? Can one remain hidden in a culture of continual recording?

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A child hides behind a curtain and claims invisibility. Shape, mass, form: she is still there but yet she is hidden. It is a barrier that withholds information while still conceding presence. It establishes the conditions for exchange. It can open, part, or close. This membrane is a bulwark: a fortification and site of negotiation from the other side of the lens. It allows one to become visible or to remain anonymous. It pictures presence and resists information. Here one can give but is never taken. Here one is knowable but never known.

The camera, like the curtain, is a threshold, and a threshold is a strange thing: neither inside nor outside. In its very construction, it creates the opposites that it holds apart. The camera separates the present from the past, the given from the taken, the exposed from the hidden, the moving from the still, the light from the dark. ■

Nicéphore Niépce’s *A View from a Window at La Graz* is now in the collection of the Henry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin and is reproduced on the center’s south atrium window.

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Five Variations on the Opposite of Any Handprint

Natalie Shapero

I

The opposite of any handprint is the feeling of being touched. There is said to be an old trick with phone books, apocryphal favorite of pulp detectives: let the book drop from a good distance, and it will fall open to a frequently creased page—the page that lists the name and number of a person often searched for, often called. The phone book bears the imprint of that seeking, enshrines the drift of the finger down the page. The phone book “holds the place,” as we put it—it has its own capacity to lift, to carry, to touch.

Touch, in public instances of greeting and farewell, is often cited as a means of joining together or parting as equals. Modes of meeting or parting that do not involve touch, such as the curtsy or bow or the brief tipping of one’s hat, often connote mutual respect and honor; at the same time, they may be associated with differences in status and power. The citizen stands and removes his hat when the leader enters the room. The subject takes a knee before the king. But in the embrace or the clasping of hands, there is no ordained order. Instead, a coming together—the forging of a new form.

Franz Kafka, in an exchange with a young friend: *The road from appearance to reality is often very hard and long, and many people make only very poor travelers. We must forgive them when they stagger against us as if against a brick wall.*

W. S. Merwin: *By the tree touching the tree I hear the tree / I walk with the tree / we talk without anything.*

II

The opposite of any handprint is any negative handprint. Somewhere between the amoeba and the astronaut was the iteration of human who pressed her palm against a limestone formation and spit. Put-put. Prehistoric mark-makers chewed ochre and charcoal, mixed pigments with water in their mouths, then sprayed the new dye across and around the backs of their hands. When they lifted their hands from the walls of the caves, the dye formed a stencil around where their hands had been, preserving the shapes on the stone, in the colors of the stone. Put-put. Michel Lorblanchet: *Human breath, the most profound expression of a human being, literally breathes life onto a cave wall.* Historians in the intervening centuries have noted that negative handprints are most likely to occur in caves at strange acoustic junctures, where a drop in the ceiling or a sudden opening-up causes the human footfall to echo or truncate in an unusual way. From *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art*, offering the idea of sound to accompany a photograph: *The sound of the soft repetitive spitting resembles the “put-put” noise of a motorboat far out at sea.*

The conventional terms for the architectural features of a fingerprint: arches, loops, and whorls. The word “whorl” may also be used to denote the pulley of a spindle or the spiral of a shell, the wheel from which emerges the silken body. It derives from “whirl,” the action of circumvolution. The language of the pitching, heaving sea. The language of the interior rush and pulsing of the body. Thoreau, from *Walden: Many an irksome noise, go a long way off, is heard as music...* The record spins on the turntable, making of itself a whorl. On the A side, classical music, intended to be played during pregnancy, to herald the outside world to come. And on the B side, to be played to the infant after she is born, the sound of a heart as heard from the inside of the body. So that the child, amid so much utter newness, might have something to recognize. A single sound, on loop. Its wavelengths cutting the air in whorls and arches.

III

The opposite of any handprint is a particular person’s handprint. In 1935, Virginia Woolf sat in Aldous Huxley’s home while a palm reader analyzed her hand. From the reader’s report, excerpted in Abbie Garrington’s *Haptic Modernism: Virginia Woolf’s rectangular palm is divided into two by the Head-line which runs right across the hand and ends in a fork. It is the Head-line of a philosopher. It is not influenced by any other part of the palm, but, self-contained, it forms a barrier between the sensitive and imaginative worlds.*

...I do not dare to make any final statement as to whether this division leads to a separation between outward impressions and the experiences of the imagination or whether it acts as a power of resistance refining and subtilising outward and inner perceptions... The most striking peculiarity of this hand is the shape and position of the fingers, which are straight, pointed and introverted.

Prior to the advent of widespread writing, documents of importance were often signed by thumbprint. The press of the skin to the paper was the person, was the promise. Our bodies and our identities travel in tandem; the touch of one to fabric or paper may leave the imprint of both. Even that which has no form may have its own kind of touch. Ernest Hemingway, on wartime: *I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body, like how you’d pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner.*

In medicine, guidelines as to best practices often emerge from the lessons of history. To take in what has happened. To prevent what has happened from happening again. Teaching a student about the transmission of infection from one body to another, the instructor asks the student to press one unwashed hand onto the agar plate and lift it up again, then wait. Days pass. What appears is tiny marks on the surface of the agar, formed into the silhouette of a hand.

IV

The opposite of any handprint is the absence of any handprint. *Leave no trace*, demands the trail, the shore, the sea. *By the tree touching the tree I hear the tree / I walk with the tree / we talk without anything.*

In the theater, waiting for those who have yet to arrive, noting their absence, the stage manager finds the language of embrace: *Hold the house.*

In historical research, the question of how many individual people must have been involved in a given movement, or represented in a given moment, in order for it to be considered a thing of significance. Nine women in a convict labor camp in rural Louisiana or seven children in an orphanage in New York, the subjects of study. Each individual experience counts. Each individual experience is enough. Morgan Parker: *The body is a person. / The body is a person. / The body is a person / The body is a person...*

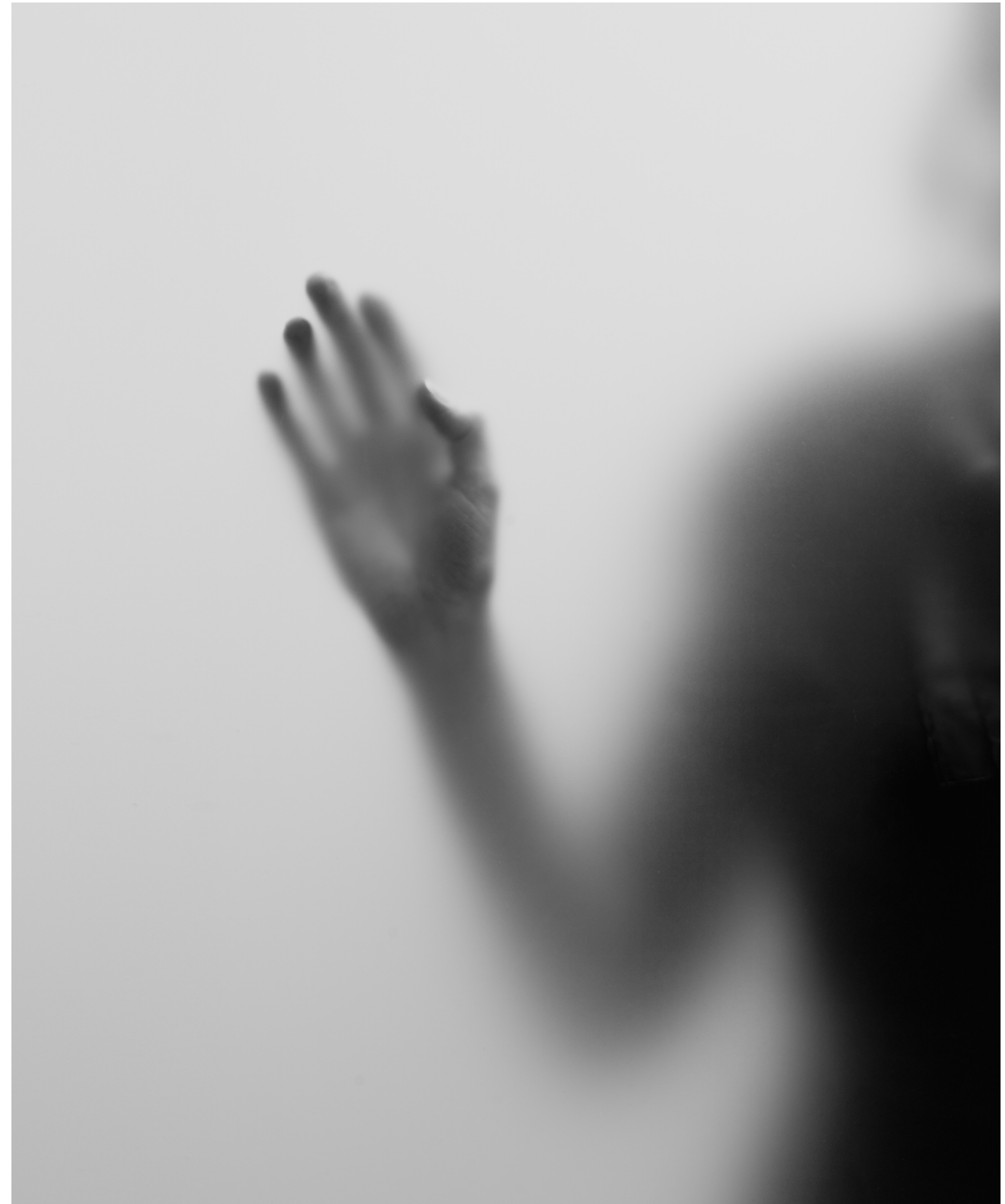
In Concord, Massachusetts, down the road from Walden Pond, sits an old cemetery. The headstones sometimes fully omit the names of the deceased, in favor of foregrounding their relationships to one another: mother, father, daughter, son. Not their names, but the ways in which they held one another against the roiling world.

V

The proximity to a garden or forest or field, the knowledge that the living and striving structures of nature are near—this alone may have restorative effects. The term for this phenomenon is *thereness*. Thoreau: *We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled: like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies.* Next to nature, too, is the whorl of made things that move as if self-directed: pendulum, water wall, centrifuge, gauge, all arrayed in the lower level of the science museum. Upstairs, in the glassed-domed butterfly garden, monarchs and skippers and swallowtails alight on slivers of melon and green hemispheres of cut grapes. Just before the exit door stands a full-length mirror, accompanied by a sign requesting that visitors check to ensure they have no butterflies on their bodies when they leave. The intense intimacy of this experience: prolonged looking in mirrors is an activity generally reserved for private spaces—morning ablutions, dressing rooms, the tiny and fleeting solitude of the compact. But here strangers stand with each other, exposed, under the glass that is under the glassy sky, to keep the small flecked bodies in their sanctuary.

In the city, certain sidewalks play host to blocks of text that are only visible in rainfall. Poetry has been painted onto city blocks using a special sort of spray paint that shrugs off the rain as the rest of the sidewalk around it runs dark with water. The term for this collection of texts is the “concrete library.” The words form and dissolve beneath the feet of passersby, reach up to them as they huddle into slickers or umbrellas or stacks of newsprint raised over their heads. In block after block, the human touch. The opposite of any handprint is the hand. ■

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Patience

Matthew Goulish

A botanist could better explain the heliotrope: its inflorescence, the stalk of clustered blue and purple flowers, its physiology, and the manner and method of its daily turning to follow the sun across the sky in a sympathetic arc. A linguist could trace the name to Greek’s helios (sun) and trepein (to turn), and to its cousin the Middle English turnsole. Any gardener will have discovered early enough the relations of light and shadow, of facing and facing away, in every plant’s life. Regarding likeness, a historian of philosophy would consult the later Greek dialectics of love: each planted terrestrial entity corresponding to its celestial deity, guided by an angel back to the source, in prayer as return.

The Prayer of the Heliotrope by Proclus the Neoplatonist states it this way: “Each thing prays according to the rank it occupies in nature, and sings the praise of the leader of the divine series to which it belongs, a spiritual or rational or physical or sensuous praise; for the heliotrope moves to the extent that it is free to move, and in its rotation, if we could hear the sound of the air buffeted by its movement, we should be aware that it is a hymn to its king, such as it is within the power of the plant to sing.”

Precisely three-quarters into the twentieth century, the young man at the center of this narrative found himself at dawn lying helpless and weak in the Flint, Michigan, hospital where, fifteen years earlier, he had been born. Maybe this episode gave him the appetite for endless striving toward scholarship, always out of reach, patchwork thinking gathered from trespass into expert terrain. All things proceed out of phase, except in those moments of rare alignment.

Twenty years later his niece will be born, and his brother will celebrate by planting oak and spruce seedlings around the perimeter and corners of his property. With a gardener’s sentiment the proud father will imagine his daughter and his trees growing in parallel, she learning from walking among them each year. He will realize his miscalculation when she leaves for college, and he stands alone in the not yet tall trees of his not yet forest grove. That lesson on no second chances lies in the future on the hospital morning, when the younger brother received a sudden span of empty time and ruminated on the unlikelihood of his survival, of his finding himself again in this particular hospital, in this particular city. The family had fled Flint’s impending decline at the first opportunity. How did it happen that he returned there in this desolate condition?

A chemist could explain carbon monoxide’s threat. In a week’s time, once school had resumed after the epic ice storm, and all, including him, safely returned to class, his chemistry teacher would in fact see a teachable moment in his near-death experience and take the opportunity to diagram the procedures on the blackboard. A carbon atom bonded to a single oxygen atom (carbon monoxide) will pull a second oxygen atom from wherever it can in order to stabilize into carbon dioxide. Inhale carbon monoxide, and those molecules drain oxygen from your bloodstream. The process deprives oxygen from your brain, making you confused, disoriented, and craving sleep, as well as from your other internal organs, which will make you weak and nauseous. Each carbon dioxide exhalation brings death incrementally closer.

Warming temperatures melted ice and basements flooded. His father had borrowed a generator and left it running downstairs overnight to pump out the water. Its exhaust fumes filled the living room above, where they all slept around the fireplace, he and his brother on mattresses on the floor, trying to keep warm because downed power lines blacked out the electricity for the week. In the night the dog, a savior, whined a loud sickening moan never heard before. The engineer father realized his nearly fatal error as he struggled to rise from the fold-out sofa bed. After some yelling and stumbling around the room, knocking into furniture and wrestling with the usually simple task of opening a door, the family had found themselves outside kneeling in the snow gasping. The breathing did not get easier. The distraught parents piled themselves, two sons, and the dog into the car and somehow the father managed the thirty-five-minute

drive to the mother’s house “up in Flint,” which still had electricity. The young man had remained doubled over through this journey. Once at grandmother’s house they all managed to try to sleep, but soon his mother woke to the sound of her own traumatized cry, and the young man began vomiting. They all went to the hospital where a doctor determined the young man had breathed in more of the noxious gas than the other family members. Who knows why? They would keep him through the night, which by now had nearly given way to morning. He began receiving oxygen, and his parents felt comfortable leaving him there for a few hours while they all went back to grandmother’s house to try again to get some sleep.

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The light increasing—the sun must be rising. It reveals the window as frosted over. Wood muntined, with four small panes, it resembles a house window more than a hospital window. What is it doing in this hall where he lies on a stretcher outside the full-to-capacity ward? He thinks this unfolding in time of the window growing lighter is beautiful, is beauty itself. Yet no one notices. Who can afford the patience? The doctors circulate on appointed rounds, stopping only for the sick and wounded. Is attention to something like this window the work of artists? He does not know the answer to that yet, but he thinks that only artists and sick people stop, out of inclination or necessity, to study beauty that takes so long. The hospital staff has materialized this moment for him, all its factors of time, place, and breath. Maybe keeping him alive was their responsibility, and now that he has received that dispensation, his responsibility in turn is to notice the window. To any passerby it would be too ordinary to attract attention, but to anyone lying below it for this hour, the beauty reveals itself in its own time. He breathes cool air into his nostrils through the moist tube clipped to his septum. He feels the leaden weight in his abdomen diffuse microscopically with each breath, and he connects that diminishing discomfort with the clear blue oxygen. Or is that his imagination at work? Is there a connection to be made between the way his breathing causes a shift in his organs and his sense of the window’s brightening as beautiful? No, the window is not beautiful only because he did not die last night. The window would appear beautiful to anyone, of that he is convinced. He can also, with a slight head turn, see a clock on the wall. He has watched the minute hand sweep from 7:15 around to 7:45. He knows that he will sleep soon, but first he can roughly triangulate the date from that combined information of clock and window and sunrise, or could anyway, if he did not know it already as the morning of March 6, 1975, in the hospital where, fifteen years ago, he was born, and where he is born again now, if being born means waking after not succumbing in sleep to death. Calming down he thinks he will remember this, and he will. In forty years he will recall this moment, and distinguish as Proclus did, between two kinds of souls in each entity; one inseparable from the body, that dwells in it and dies with it, the other independent of the body and free to fly from it. He might think then that the sympathetic light from the humble, out-of-place window did the work of reweaving his two souls, calling one back and reviving the other, restoring a braid of vapor. But all of that is in the future, and now he remembers that he noticed the window when they first parked him against this wall. It was darker than the wall around it then, and he did not attend to it until the glow began to rise in its bottom left corner. It’s not true, what people say, that beauty steals away, runs quickly and we chase after it. We are the quick ones. Beauty, a constant, waits. Some will risk slowing down to apprehend it in its pace, to breathe and from a body not saturated with words, in a whispering world, recognize it like a beacon rarely received. In this hall, as nurse and doctor pass by on quiet feet, he inclines his mind toward the window grown luminous, just before daylight overtakes it completely, and that seamless inclination belongs to him alone. ■

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“Touching” the Viewer

Brian Rotman

Each photographic image shows the body of an individual: the person is recognizable but more or less indistinct, the body blurred except for some aspect or part of it that stands out, emerging from the out-of-focus background as if delicately highlighted. This emergence out of the blur suggests an action by the individual, a movement of the part of their body in question towards us, a gesture that attracts or solicits our attention.

Gesture/Speech

Gesture is considered by many to be an inferior mode of human interaction, a crude medium of communication, a mode of sense-making made obsolescent by spoken language. Unlike speech, gesture doesn’t describe things, deliver information, argue, or make assertions. And unlike words, gestures do not aggregate; they don’t combine into phrases and larger units of meaning. Gestures are movements that *perform* their meaning: they present rather than represent.

The most familiar gestures are those of everyday social life, so called emblem gestures—holding up a palm, winking, giving the finger, nodding, and innumerable others; they achieve their effects by being *enacted*. As psychologist David McNeil explains “they regulate and comment on the behavior of others, reveal one’s emotional states, make promises, swear oaths...salute, command, request, reply to some challenge, insult, threaten, seek protection, express contempt or fear.”¹ Such gestures are speech at a distance, speech-acts transposed into acts-of-the-body; they function in place or in silent avoidance of or in opposition to speech.

Emblems, then, operate outside and independently of speech. By contrast there are two types of gesture deeply connected to speech: gesticulation, which operates parallel to speech, and tone, gestures of the voice that occur inside speech.

Gesticulation names the idiosyncratic, barely noticed and apparently meaningless movements—facial and head gestures but mainly those of hands and arms—we make in the process of narrative speech. Movements, McNeil observes, that are neither arbitrary nor meaningless. On the contrary they are part of the act of constructing meaning itself, adding a “material carrier” that helps bring meaning into existence. A verbally expressed thought comes into being as the result of a dialectic, a back and forth action between the word—linear, segmental, analytic—and the imagistic, holistic, and synthetic action of gesture.² Neither domain is primary. Such gestures are produced simultaneously, in parallel with speech; they are the silent embodied version of spoken meaning.

Tone of voice or prosody comprises the gestures of the vocal apparatus, a constituent part of the sonic substance of spoken language, integral to it, operating within the production and delivery of speech rather than parallel to it. Tone—speech’s cadence, volume, rise and fall of pitch, its musicality, its varied intensity, its movements of acceleration, hesitation, and interruption, its flow, its pauses, elisions, emphasis and silences, and so on—is crucial to the experience of our speaking lives; without these vocal gestures speech would be anonymous and affectless, pure logos without pathos, and song would be impossible. As emblems are speech-at-a-distance, so tone, the affective core and presence of the body in speech, is touch-at-a-distance.

Unmediated Presence

The camera is focused precisely on a screen, a semi-opaque membrane behind which a person is standing. The resulting photograph shows the person’s body as blurred and slightly hazy in the background, against which the part of the body touching the screen confronts us in sharp focus. The membrane itself is not visible in the image; we see only its effects: its physical resistance enabling the individual’s touch and a certain hazing of the visual field.

The parts of the body the images draw attention to vary. Some suggest an activity related to the practice of care-giving such as a hand offering support, fingertips taking a pulse, and so on. Others range more widely: a woman’s hair hangs in lush detail in front of us; a solitary eye actively stares from a man’s face out into the viewer’s world; a young woman’s cheek presses forward; the patch of skin on a patient’s back not covered by a hospital gown catches our attention; a man’s hands clasped defensively at his waist assert themselves. By appearing in sharp focus, extracting themselves from the intangible blur of the surrounding body, like figures appearing abruptly before us out of the mist, these selected parts have a quality of close, unmediated physical presence. The power of the images, what is intriguing and provocative about them, lies in the particular affect of this presence. It’s as if each individual is allowing a part of her or himself to enter the viewer’s world. As if in some extraordinary way we are the receivers of perhaps the most profound human experience: that of being *touched*.

Touch

Touch is a—one could say the—primary medium of our affective relations to each other and ourselves. In everyday speech we mobilize the sense of touch to create metaphors for physical and psychic distance, for the desired presence or unreachable absence of the other. We say: “The elite are untouchable.” “He kept touching himself.” “She was in touch with her feelings.” “He belonged to an untouchable caste.” “Touch me not!” “They kept in touch by Skype.” “Touch me *there*.” “I’m touched by your gift of flowers.” “He’s completely lost touch.” “His death touched nobody.” “Politicians won’t touch the topic.” “The game was always touch and go.” “She’s a bit touched.” “We managed to touch bases.” And then there are the many metaphors of touch involved when we talk of “handling situations,” “fingering a victim,” enjoying a “stroke of luck,” suffering “a blow to one’s pride,” and so on.

Other senses besides touch—taste, smell, hearing, seeing—provide metaphors for mental states. We talk of behavior as “unpalatable” and memories as “bittersweet,” we detect “the smell of corruption,” are “deaf to the truth,” and “stare at the future.” Hamlet’s dead father appears in his “mind’s eye,” we can be “blinded by love,” we talk of “transparent lies,” and so on. But “touch,” Aristotle insists, “is the most acute of man’s senses.”³ And touch is certainly more concrete, “pressing” and somehow more ancient and than our other senses. Touch seems so natural a way to describe our psychic being that (at least in English) we name our inner states, as well as the entire dynamic of our affective lives, “feeling.” Likewise “tact” names a certain behavior, a way of “handling” others, and “contact” describes any non-apartness of things and people. Touch is a powerful means of inducing deep kinds of human affection and pleasure, of inculcating or confirming psychic states outside of language, a fact evident from the multiple uses religions make of repeated touch in their rituals and taboos. Entering a place of worship, Catholics genuflect and affirmatively touch themselves making the pattern of a cross on their bodies; Muslims faithfully touch their foreheads to the ground in obeisance when praying to Allah; Jewish males are forbidden to touch a menstruating woman, and in some sects are not allowed to touch any woman but their wives. Eastern orthodox Christians reverently worship holy icons by touching their lips to them. And so on.

Unlike our other senses—one can watch unseen, hear and not be heard, eat without being eaten, and so on—touching is a two-sided affair. It has an internal intimacy: one cannot touch without being touched by what one is touching. In touching, the self is simultaneously a subject and object, active/passive, giver and receiver. Touch is a primeval sense possessed by animate life. For humans, being touched and touching things and people can be the ultimate source of excitement or intimacy, of care and nearness, of reassurance, affirmation, and feeling secure. In particular, the skin, the organ of touch and the physical boundary of the self, can reflexively fold back: one can touch oneself (though not always mimicking being touched: we can stroke and scratch ourselves but not, for example, tickle ourselves). Self-touch puts the embodied psyche in relation to itself, allowing touch’s affordances to become the means of affecting

ourselves. Touching oneself, then, can offer a reassuring affirmation, a gestural confirmation of one’s physical being, one’s presence in the world. Transposed into speech, the self-touching gesture becomes the uttering of “I”: the act of self-enunciation establishing one’s presence in language. Ontologically, touch is the always-reverted-to sense of what cannot be doubted about the material self and the so-called outside world, the “touchstone” of what our embodied selves are obliged to accept as *real*. (One thinks of Samuel Johnson famously rebutting philosophical idealism by kicking a stone to demonstrate its indubitable reality.) Being “out of touch with reality” is a defining symptom of insanity.

Photographic Capture

The principle underlying the photographic images is an imposed discontinuity of vision created by a close focusing of the lens on the membrane. The effect is an internal break within the visual scene, a bifurcated image divided between the sharp clarity of the part touching the screen and the hazed blur of the body physically contiguous with it. “Photography,” Susan Sontag observes, “is intimately connected with discontinuous ways of seeing—the whole by means of the part (an arresting detail, a striking way of cropping).”⁴ These photographs are no exception to the observation. On the contrary, they add their own discontinuous way of seeing to Sontag’s list. In addition, the part in question (a cheek, clasped hands, a patch of skin, etc.) becomes something more significant, more consequential than an arresting detail in a photograph: it is the key to the affect the entire image is designed to elicit. It points to a gesture that is evoked—one might say captured—in the image, as if the individual concerned has separated a part of his or her body from the rest and brought it nearer to us, as if it has been extended into the space of the viewer. We cannot of course see the movement, only infer it as having occurred. The photograph, being a still image, can do no more than register this emergence out of the blurred depth as an instantaneous jump into the foreground. More accurately, the photograph registers the gesture’s terminus, the place at which the gesture is arrested by the membrane to become a touch.

Gesture’s Capability

Gesture permeates human culture where despite—or because of—its primitiveness it plays a significant role in the arts, everyday life, religion, and as the source of abstract thought. It reigns supreme when communication and meaning is direct and presentational, when sense is made through visual icons and indexical movement and not through the symbolic, re-presentations of spoken and written mediation.

Thus repeated gestures underpin ritual experiences, collective ceremonies, enunciations, and oaths of allegiance, not least the numerous practices of the body prescribed for their adherents by secular and religious institutions. Performance arts such as dance, music, song, and theater deploy gesture—choreographed compositions of visual, kinetic, and sonic gestures—as their essential semiotic vehicle. Or their principal vehicle: Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty eschews text and demands that “gesture...instead of serving as a decoration, an accompaniment of thought, instead causes its movement.”⁵ For Gilles Deleuze the cinema, though manifestly a visual medium, is before all else a “cinema of bodies,” an art form within which what he calls the “movement-image,” an entity perceived corporeally, precisely as a gesture, is the irreducible element of filmic thought.⁶ Artifacts—tools, clothes, food, buildings—as soon as they exceed the purely instrumental, cannot but express ideas, display attitudes, make gestures in relation to their users and inhabitants. “Architecture,” for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein insisted, “is a gesture, [it] expresses a thought, it makes one want to respond with a gesture.”⁷ For mathematician Gilles Chatelet gestures, which arise from “disciplined distributions of mobility,” operate inside the mathematical universe at the embodied origin of its ideas; they give rise to diagrams, gestures “frozen in midflight,” to become the source of the rumination behind mathematical thought.⁸ It is impossible, Giorgio Agamben observes, to express in sentences what is means “to be in language,” one can only gesture to the silence the question demands. Gesture always indicates something “to endure” and leads to the formation of an ethos.⁹

Entering the Image

To touch is to be touched. The images deny this duality. They show no object of touch but only that which touches: the individual in the image can only be seen to enact half the dyad. The other half is absent. The person is seen performing the gesture of touch in empty space without being touched. This is a picture of an incomplete, truncated contact, an unreal possibility. Visually impossible it prompts more than a purely visual response. The photographic image asks us to actively engage with it, to respond in some way to the gesture located within it. The demand to actively respond to a visual scene is not unnatural: our mirror neurons encourage us to perform or imagine performing gestures that we observe. Here the situation is more complex than an imitative mirroring. We are asked not merely to reproduce the gesture we imagine has taken place but construct it by supplying its missing portion. As if we're called upon to fill the absence in the image, to occupy the place of the invisible membrane, to complete the dyad and, by becoming the thing that is touched, experience a virtual touch. Additionally we might identify with the generic subject of the photographs, with the individual who touches from the other side of the screen. The effect of entering the image in this way would be one of self-care in which we “touch” ourselves.

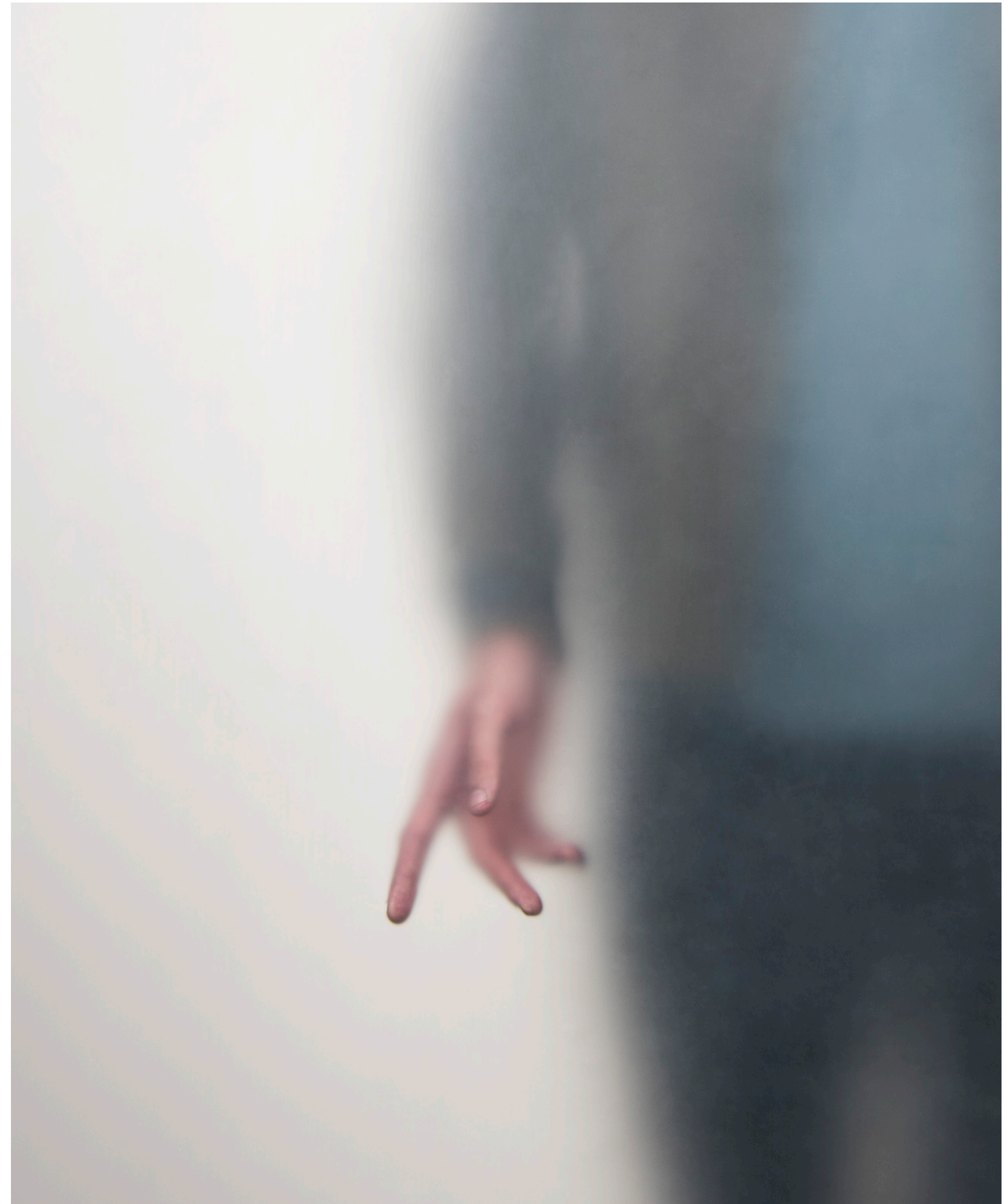
This demand made by the images is neither overstated nor obvious and easily missed; the part that touches the membrane can appear to us as no more than a highlighted patch of the photograph, a purely visual sensation devoid of anything tactile or haptic. And when the patch is correctly recognized, reacting to the image's offer of a virtual touch is necessarily a brief, fugitive experience, a barely if at all consciously registered response. Seen en masse the differences between the individuals and their varied proffered parts become less important than what they share. The repeated images merge the individuals into a generic subject, a collective persona performing a touch. As a result, the project becomes imbued with an ambience, a general (collective, institutional) experience of touch, projecting what a human touch might mean, the affordances that before all else it promises: the offer of care, trust, affection, security.

The theme of things merging, coming together, nullifying apartness, of which touch is the supreme example, is present in the oddly impacted title of the project, the non-word *ONE EVERYONE*. The title abolishes the space between the words “One” and “Everyone,” typographically uniting the single individual with the collective universal. In this it re-enacts in words the overcoming of separation the images offer the viewer: the sensation of being in touch, of being able to “touch” and be “touched” by all the many individuals portrayed. ■

Notes

1. David McNeill, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 64.
2. David McNeill, *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, book alpha.
4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 169–70.
5. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 39.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), 42e, 22.
8. Gilles Chatelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 10.
9. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59–60.

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Meg Shevenock

Navigations

How someone holds the elevator for another in the hospital is different from how someone holds the elevator for another almost anywhere else. It means so much. And a person who has just received clearance about her loved one's heart has to contain her rapture, if not her weeping, inside her, when descending floors, after days indoors, lit by television's apathetic blue.

Each gown has a Hawaiian long board print. You are equally clad: hardly, confined by strings. Your roommate is 96, "almost 97!" In halted English, he tells the doctor, "I make my arms into a helicopter," and demonstrates how he will continue his life like this. Toward evening, he carries his own diaper to the shared bathroom. Catching your eye, he laughs, freeing you from the mortal embarrassments of your bodies.

To be the only soul in the corridor when traversing the eerie, underground pathway to the cafeteria, past doorways labeled "Hazard," to purchase the kinds of foods he will eat. The cashier, touching your palm lightly with the coins, calls you "dear." "Here you go, dear." At her gentleness, you all but collapse.

The Body in Parts

So often we experience the body in parts, the body in phases. For instance, check where it touches windowpane: the nerves rise along the surface. In moments of terror, we are unable to feel the body at all, formless, pointless, it lays in shadow, unable to speak.

Remember sitting, touching knees with a friend in the unmown grass in summer, a radio in the basement drifted Stevie Nicks euphorically losing it, and the sense that all, in its messy way, would be well—

A brilliant child describes her memory of being born: a shadow, a specter of lights, and a pressure, like a never-ending swallow in reverse. Then the sudden nothingness around her body. Where closeness was, was air, a sense of *this is it*. It was a beginning. Her heart remembered that.

The heart is our first organ, thus the heart has the longest dream and the longest memory. While its rapidly evolving cluster of cells may be in close competition with development of the brain, try to imagine the heart on its own for a while, dreaming.

Please

The word *trauma* feels like what it is, though *trauma* is defined per person, the most personal. To say the word is to retreat into our own. The *tr-* is heavy and the tongue tries to lift it toward the light, but very often, halfway through the word, we're overtaken by the urge to lie down and go to sleep. How to explain jerking awake at merely the wind? There's a point in feeling beyond which every alphabet tangles, every center recedes.

In the ER, a patient's voice grows familiar in the long afternoon. The voice could be bodiless, almost, except each time the curtain opens a pair of feet are revealed, sore and mangled, flesh not even visible beneath layers of dirt. The patient doesn't remember why he fell, doesn't care, doesn't want to be here. He fights the doctor but sometimes adds an "I'm sorry" or "please." As in, "Please don't stitch my head up." Why won't someone bathe his feet, cover them in cotton socks? "Something to eat!" he shouts, "Nurse! Something to eat!" The entire ward prickles at the intensity of a *something* so specific compared to his age, race, history, unknown. Where did the man go after his head was stitched? How he exited the hospital is suddenly so important. Alone, on foot, in the rain? Searching, not crying out, for food?

At home, we collapse on couches under familiar blankets. Our partners, mothers, children bring us tea. Our animals lie warmly breathing across our knees. Physically, we are fine, only we can't stop weeping. Maybe all trauma resides in the ultimate, *fear of having a body*. That we come from humans, as animals, as algae, as underwater breathing, brings peace.

The Present is Full of Thirst

When he was weak, she smoothed the sheet across his chest. She asked for a bigger cup, because she too, was thirsty. "Because life is short and you too are thirsty."¹ The nurse brought them a kind of geometric pitcher, *not intended for this*, and two straws. She put one straw to her lips, held the other to his, and said, "We are on a date now, *drink*." In a different year, your mother held you to the metal lip of the fountain, your knees banging the long, awkward box of it, your back to her front, your head at her heart, shadowily ricocheting in the folds between. You pushed your mouth toward the simplest thing, now, at a button, the cold stream.

To remember all our vulnerability when a stranger uses her arm to keep the heavy, metallic doors from closing in your face. Later, to do the same for another, panicked at first—to exert considerable force, like pushing back a boulder—before it gives.



Emblems

When she's wheeled away for testing, you follow the hurricane's spiral across a landscape, the whirling tip shepherding forth the energy of unpredictable molecules. You know the landedness of your body in the leather recliner is all but an illusion, that a map itself can say nothing about where we are. Somewhere beyond the curtain the mountains are present, and beyond the mountains the ocean, and above the ocean the conditions for destruction, or silence.

As if by magic, the single slice of wheat bread in cellophane transforms itself into the condition of waiting.

Little Bones

When it began to rain, you helped your sister pull the freshly-cut pine branches over your bodies. Even then you had the sense, if not the language, to know that this was one manner of coffin, or hideout, say, in earlier times, or desperate conditions. You loved a situation both desperate and old-fashioned, so you convinced yourselves not to answer your mother when, from the distant back door, she called. The rain grew louder on the branches; your jackets stuck to your skin. You breathed damply the cut pine and heavy resin of your fortress, your mother growing frantic by the minute. You could hardly hear your name, paralyzed by all you could see of the sky, sliced into interstices and offered to your eyes. Paralyzed by the pressure of your sister's shoulder to yours, warm and certain but also, how now like a couple of little bones, tumbled together in the earth.

Thirty years later, you rarely embrace, but you can feel her shoulder still.

Witness

In Chantal Akerman's short film about a lazy woman, the woman is not so much lazy, as wanting to feel like what she does matters. Her life matters. For a solid minute we watch her pour vitamins into a glass, her hands above a still of crumpled papers, stubbed-out cigarettes and a half-eaten watermelon, the *this and that* that comprise a life. We watch her drink the vitamins in a portrait we would normally never see, the microcosmic events sustaining, here, the life of an artist, who, without her art, may or may not take the vitamins, may or may not feel like any of it matters. Once or twice, she looks at us. And in reporting, "I'll take some vitamins, then I'll clear the table,"² we are asked to acknowledge these acts, this life, the minutiae that, unrecorded, can mean only something to herself, a fact, on difficult days, that can prove not enough. So it is, by our witness, we may release the young woman for a moment from her loneliness, however far we are into the future, however far she's gone inside the past.

Against all odds, try to penetrate his dream: *In a hundred years, when neither of us is living, find me.*

Resilience

The street so early is quiet, nearly empty. In the relative emptiness, a small bird flies in a frantic loop around the mirror of a parked car, diving repeatedly into the glass until, stunned, feathers askew, it alights on the mirror for a moment before beginning the process again. It seems at first as though the bird is ill, but drawing closer, it's clear, this process of trying to love another, by flying again and again into oneself.

"How we live: I look into my face in the square glass."³ Only after you can see your own face, can we see you, too.

Animal Life

Certain afternoons, trying to say how you feel—it's too much. To escape the heaviness you sit with your dog in the sun. You lean into one another, attentive to the yard's flowering trees. She's more attentive, as evinced by her ears' constant twitch. Animal to animal, your loneliness dissolves, as you let the heat seep into your hair, your throats, your backs and wrists and skin. In the hospital, we long for our dogs. We want them wildly jumping on the bed, rolling across our chests, claiming us.

Pencils dented by the teeth of children, rugged beneath our fingertips when, gripping the wood we write, *I am, we, tired yes, love, I forgot, I have forgotten, our time to, maybe.* For, on some level, to be claimed is to be. My very *fear of having a body* is too big for my own body most of the time. I need to learn to live along, if not inside, it.

Concerning the Miraculous

To find not one, not two, but three lone marbles, in three different forests over a span of years. The recurring disbelief, retrieving the half-buried forms and wiping away earth. Orange, lavender, rose, shines. By the third encounter, alone among the silence of trees, it seems a message quivers for deciphering. To pocket the question. To later, tell it to another, the vibrancy continuing.

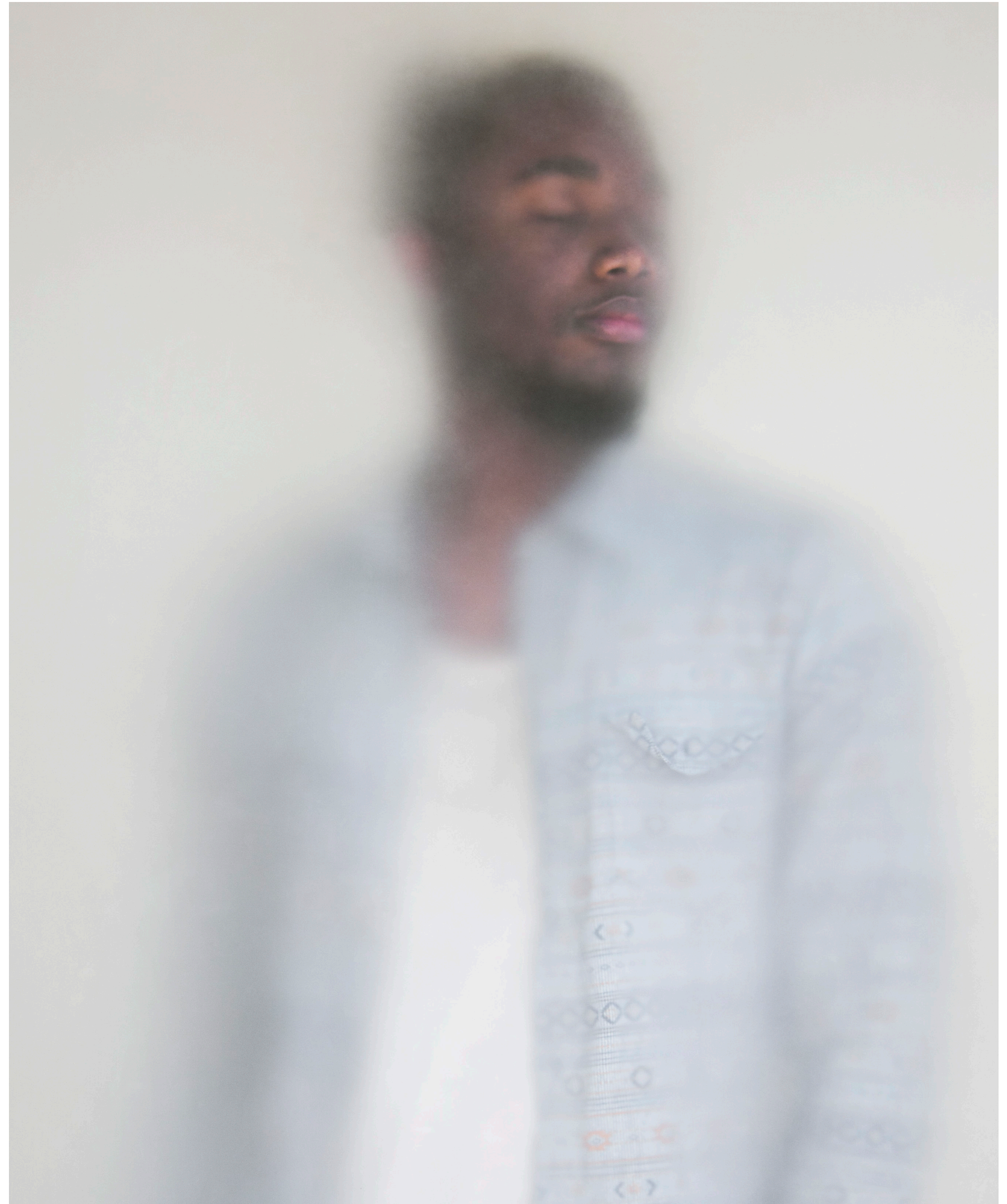
Some sleepless nights, what else can you do but line up the proverbial marbles like letters toward speech, say, "this means this," fiercely, toward meaning?

This means this, and hope someone is listening. ■

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich, "Dedications," *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988–1991* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).
2. Chantal Akerman, *Portrait d'Une Pareseuse* (Portrait of a Lazy Woman)/Sloth (1986).
3. Muriel Rukeyser, "Breaking Open," *Breaking Open* (New York: Random House, 1973).

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Hope can be the knowledge that we don't have the memory and that reality doesn't necessarily match our plans...—Rebecca Solnit

Sutures

Laurel Braitman

I believe in anatomy, that the things we learn in school about the human body are generally true, at least for the most part. But I took the fact that I had internal organs on faith until I had an ultrasound a few months before my thirty-fifth birthday and saw my ovaries. The physician assistant running the cool jelly covered wand over my abdomen was looking for anything out of place and showed me the eggs. I'd been terrified of cancer. But here were eggs. It was shocking somehow even though I know we all have them. Meaning women. Female elephants or frogs. Inside or outside, organized in clumps that can haunt us. Then she told me I had a well-formed uterus. She said it like a compliment, but I had no idea what to say in return. It felt like it does when someone compliments my dog. "What a handsome guy," they say at the park, "What a tail." I say "Thank you" because "I know," feels rude. But "thank you" doesn't feel like the right thing either. I didn't make the dog. I didn't even choose him because he was cute. I chose him because of the way he leaned into the chain link fence of his cage at the shelter and I wanted someone to lean into me like that.

I've never seen it but I'm 99% sure I have a heart. The other 1% hopes that my circulatory system is powered by chipmunks running on tiny treadmills or that I'm really a robot like Vicky on *Small Wonder*—with real-girl hair and the ability to wear dresses and keep her feelings from unhinging her. I tried being Vicky, my kind of Vicky, for years. Till recently. But it doesn't work. My heart kept getting in the way, the literal muscle of it unfathomable. It shouldn't be that way. I've known what the heart muscle looked like ever since I was old enough to climb stairs by myself, up to the loft where my heart surgeon father kept his books from medical school and later, a model of the heart that had sat on the dark wooden desk in his office till he was forced to retire, at fifty-two years old, because it was too painful to stand without crutches long enough to do surgeries. I don't know for sure, but I think he used the model to explain to patients—after they'd gotten dressed again—what their surgeries were going to be like. "First we...then we... Like this," motioning from across his desk, walking them patiently through the flow and back eddies of the body, the places blood pooled where it shouldn't. I thought about the water pump at the farm where we lived—the hours he'd spend lying on his side in the dirt, trying to fix the pump that pushed water through the big plastic hoses to the small plastic drippers to every single tree. The clogs in the line he'd fix with surgical tools he brought back from the hospital. I thought too about how he liked to read rivers before sending us down in the driftboat with thick aluminum sides. The one he'd bought so we'd be fine when we hit the rocks, spinning in eddies, till he wedged us out again.

On my last trip to my parents' place, I kidnapped the heart model and brought it back to Richmond to put on my own desk, the one that my brother built for me using our dad's tools. I picked them both up at the same time. The desk and the heart, its wood and plastic molding painted in red and blue. Each part labeled with a number and a word in fine black script. As a kid I'd run my fingers over the aorta, the vena cava, the four chambers with doors that swing open on tiny bronze hinges. A strange toy house, a beating thing fixed, a model for something I didn't understand yet. The heart—object and metaphor. Movement and memory of things that hadn't happened, wouldn't happen, for quite a long time. The steady drumbeat of advancing loss. The hopeful relentlessness of the muscle electric.

§

Every other Wednesday night for the last year, I've hung out with a group of grieving children in San Francisco. It's called Josie's Place, and we meet in a church basement with stained brown carpet and a heater we can't turn on because it makes the room smell like an electrical fire. The groups are made up of five-to-fourteen-year-olds who've all had someone close to them die, usually a mom or dad, in car accidents, or suicides, but mostly of cancer or heart disease. Their parents were young—in their twenties, thirties, or forties. As group facilitators we avoid saying things to the kids

like your mom “is in a peaceful place now,” or euphemisms like “passed away” instead of “die.” The founder, a wild-haired academic administrator in her fifties named Pat Murphy, told us that our job is to be empathetic witnesses to the kids’ grief, confusion, or joy, to play with them, and show them it’s safe to express themselves if they want to. Our job is not to tell them it’s all going to be okay, thank God. Because it’s not.

What has happened to these kids is sad and unfair and it always will be. Whoever wrote the dumb saying “Everything will be okay in the end. If it’s not okay it’s not the end.” on everything from dish towels to shitty tattoos, should be tried for treason of the human experience. It’s just not true. Some things are not okay and then they stay that way.

Hanging out with these kids isn’t sad though. It’s the opposite. It’s fun. I’m learning important lessons from them. Lessons I hope might help us all.

The knowledge that you can lose anyone you love at any moment, for no reason at all, is nearly unbearable. The kids at Josie’s Place learned this earlier than a lot of adults I know. They’re like little wizards who’ve seen behind the curtain of mortality. And yet, and still, so many of them run flat out at recess or pretend to be Elsa from Frozen singing till their voices are ragged. They throw a stuffed panda named Chubby at each other hard enough to leave bruises. Many of them are joyful. And that joy sits right along a big yowling sadness. These kids are resilient, but not in a vacuum. No one is.

§

Many Christians in medieval Europe believed that inside every one of us was a book. They called it the book of the heart and thought it contained the joys and betrayals, the sadnesses and exhilarations of their lives. Individuals could be judged by their hearts after death. Hearts were organs and texts. Written literally and metaphorically into them were the scars of deeds, good and bad, loves, losses, grace.

Sometimes my dad took parts of hearts home even though he wasn’t supposed to. Once I found a frozen aorta in our freezer next to a Ziploc bag of blueberries. Another time, while rifling for colored pens in his top desk drawer, I found a dried up heart valve next to a half smoked cigar. The valve was about the size of a quarter, white and stringy and looked a little like shark jaws without the teeth. I loved this medical flotsam and jetsam. I cut my Barbies’ hair with trauma shears and played doctor/patient with a basket of Ace bandages and shiny butterfly clips. To impress friends, I’d sneak upstairs to his cache of medical books and pull out the bright orange one on skin disorders. It had a special section on gangrene with full color photos. There was an entire page just of infected testicles. Elephantine black masses swollen to the size of grapefruits. We’d stare till we couldn’t stomach it anymore and then shove the book back onto the shelf and pull out my dad’s navy blue stethoscope, taking turns listening to the steady, watery beats of each other’s hearts.

It was only recently I found out that a heartbeat isn’t actually one thing. When people say beat, what they really mean is one contraction and one expansion in the space of about a second. The thu-whump you hear in the stethoscope, or when you lay your ear on someone’s chest, is a two-part thing. Every day this happens around 100,000 times, pumping roughly 2,000 gallons of blood through your lungs, out to the rest of your body, and then back again. A closed, circular river inside every one of us with its main arteries and tributaries—including all the small vessels that, if you laid them end to end, would reach about 60,000 miles. More than twenty times longer than the Amazon. Your giant watershed of one, powered by a single muscle the size of your fist.

§

Last month I visited the mothership for grief counseling for children in the United States—it’s in a beautiful craftsman style building in Southeast Portland called the Dougy Center. It was founded in 1982, on the belief that while therapy can be very helpful, most children reeling with loss could also use a place to be with other kids going through the same thing and that creative play and empathetic witnessing by adults is healing.

Inside, there’s a room where kids wearing smocks can hurl paint at wall-sized canvases like little Jackson Pollocks and another room the staff calls the “volcano” room where the kids can rage around—working out their anger on piles of brightly colored pillows, padded walls, and punching bags. A giant, bright volcano is stitched in red, orange, yellow, and brown vinyl onto the wall. Around the corner and halfway down the circular hallway, there is another room. It’s called the hospital suite. Inside there’s a real children’s hospital bed, tiny sets of scrubs, and white doctors’ coats for the kids to wear. There is even a light up X-ray table and X-rays of hearts and turtles. There are childsize stethoscopes and plenty of Band-Aids.

Joan Schweizer Hoff has worked at the Dougy Center for twenty-eight years. Since it was founded. She told me that the hospital room is one of the most popular rooms at the center. She’s proud of the hospital curtain mounted to the ceiling. “It was important that we had that sound in here,” she said, “the sound of the curtain being pulled back on the track.” It helps make it real.

“The kids come into this room to save the people they couldn’t in real life,” she said. They come in here to heal the people that no one could heal. And it works.

§

It’s not anything I’d recommend but you can learn a lot from growing up with terminal illness in the house—yours or someone else’s. Not that it saved me from messing up. It didn’t. But it did save me from certain hazards, even while it flung me right in the path of others.

Six months after my dad died, I graduated from high school—all frizzy haired and anxious about being good enough. I was just like the Max Fischer character in the movie *Rushmore* except fatter and into painting watercolor sunsets—such a good girl my friends called me Moral Laurel. After I walked off the stage, clutching my rolled up diploma, my mom gave me a small wrapped box. Inside was a note from my dad—and below that, a pen.

“Use this to sign your first book someday,” the note said.

It took me fourteen years but I did use that pen to sign my first book. And I’m going to use it to sign my second—the one you’re reading a bit from now.

A few years ago, my younger brother Jake met the new heart surgeon in our hometown, Dr. Dominic Tedesco. He said that patients my dad operated on thirty, even forty-five, years ago were coming back in to have their bypasses and other procedures redone. It happened often enough that he could tell without looking at their charts if they’d been our dad’s patients. Every time Dr. Tedesco opened up their chests, he’d see a neat scarred line where the stitches closed up the thoracic cavity. “It’s how he opened and closed,” he told Jake, “it was unmistakably your dad.” I love thinking about those men and women, all of them still walking around with my dad’s signatures on their hearts, the marks that allowed each of them to live so much longer than he did.



§

When I was eleven I had a succession of hamsters. La Fe was the first, a fluffy round snowflake with tiny pink toes who liked to eat peanuts in the shell. When she died, three weeks after coming home from the pet store, it hit me hard. I gave her a sky burial in the top of an avocado tree in our back yard—sliding her tiny body into an empty shoebox and climbing up to where the tree branches forked and I could stuff the box into a spot that no one would see. Then I wrote a poem. Bad poetry is how I've always grieved. Sometimes I write the poem before the dying is even happening. I imagine how it will be when they're gone. Sometimes I can't see the page, or the screen, through the messy carwash of tears. Anticipating.

Birth
Life
Love
Death
Peanuts

It sounds like a circus-man's memoir. But it's what I wrote. About La Fe but also, of course, not about her at all. An eleven-year-old's take on the world. A map of my raging heart.

This is what I know now: When we grieve we don't just grieve one loss, we grieve every loss we've ever had. And not just the death losses. But the broken relationships, the betrayals, the people we loved who wouldn't or couldn't love us back, the ones who don't want to talk to us anymore, or we can't even stand to run into, the cats who left for days at a time and then just stopped coming home at all, the parents who didn't see our hurting, or the ones who saw it too clearly, the people we hoped to be but aren't. Birth life love death peanuts.

§

Many of the kids I've met over the last year or two use the permeable border between what they believe is real and what they don't to their advantage. They choose to use the power of their imaginations to rewrite their scripts. The narratives that terrify us the most, the ones we can barely stand to touch: that we failed the person we loved, that we could have saved them if only we'd done X or Y or told them how much we cared. These are the stories to be rewritten. And if you're eight and you still believe in the tooth fairy, you can also convince yourself that it's possible to tell people who've died that you still love them and they'll know. You can talk to them in your dreams. Or invite them in for tea with your imaginary friends. Or call them up from the fake phone in your fort and ask for their advice about how to deal with the parent that's left behind, or just how to possibly endure the missing-of-them.

Living with uncertainty. Is awful. But it's all we have. We can spend our time in this waiting room of a lifetime fearfully looking at the clock or we can throw stuffed pandas at each other or paint at the wall. Saving teddy bears is a way of saving ourselves. Playing when you are aware of death is an act of bravery. It's not denial. It's the opposite. Playing is an act of resistance.

As one young girl who comes to Josie's Place said to her mom, "We can all be happy sad here."

We don't have to choose. We can't. Thu-whump. ■

Laurel Braitman, Writer-in-Residence at the Stanford University School of Medicine, is a bestselling author (*Animal Madness*) whose next book is about family, medicine, and mortality.



Ann Hamilton: ONEEVERYONE

Nancy Princenthal

“Let’s be in touch,” we say casually, although to be truly in touch is rare, a prized and intimate experience that cross-wires several systems of perception, emotion, and understanding. These are connections that Ann Hamilton has long explored with great depth and delicacy. In *ONEEVERYONE*, a series of photo-portraits commissioned by Landmarks for the Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin, she illuminates the particular links between touch and vision, contact and caring. Positioning subjects behind a material called Duraflex®, which has been aptly described as looking something like a frosted shower curtain and feeling a little like skin, Hamilton has photographed more than 500 people. Among the material’s properties is that whatever touches the surface from behind is seen, from the front, in sharp focus, while everything else becomes progressively soft; in photographic terms, it creates a very shallow depth of field. To viewers of the resulting portraits, the plastic screen becomes the image surface, a translation that binds visual and tactile perception.

Touch has been key to Hamilton’s work from the outset. Among her earliest works was *suitably positioned* (1984) a man’s business suit covered in toothpicks, which makes its wearer a human porcupine, and provokes in viewers a distinctly heightened experience of tactile sensitivity. By the end of the 1980s Hamilton had begun to produce the complex, site-related installations that have consumed the majority of her efforts since. For *privation and excesses* (1989), at Capp Street Project, San Francisco, she had thousands of pennies laid into a field of honey on the gallery’s floor; a woman wringing her hands in a honey-filled felt hat sat at the rear, and behind her, three sheep grazed in a pen: the full-body experience for viewers included activation of the sense of smell. At the Dia Center for the Arts in New York City, *tropos* (1993–94) included a floor carpeted with horsehair. In *myein*, conceived for the United States Pavilion in the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), bright red powder drifted over walls marked with Braille; visitors were invited to write with their fingers in the pigment that fell to the floor.

More than once, Hamilton has combined the tactile and the photographic: In *abc-video* (1994–99), we see a carefully inscribed alphabet slowly erased and then, it seems, rewritten by an inky fingertip. Developed in connection with *myein, reflection* (1999–2000) is a series of photographs shot in the reflection made by multiple layers of slightly wavy glass, producing images of a figure that appears to be underwater—a precedent for *ONEEVERYONE*’s blur. Also creating soft-edged images was the small camera Hamilton placed inside her mouth for *face to face* (2001), which made the artist into a kind of pinhole apparatus—opening her lips exposed the film—and transposed her (silenced) mouth into a speaking eye.

The Duraflex® sheet behind which subjects stood during photo-shoots for *ONEEVERYONE* prevented them from seeing the camera, and although they heard Hamilton’s voice directing them, they felt themselves to be in a private space. The process creates “a quality of interiority,” the artist said in a public conversation with UT Austin’s Jack Risley, a valuable condition at a moment when, she continued, “the notion of private images and private space is changing.” As Hamilton told me, trust—with respect to the camera, and the artist—was another big issue in the process of creating these images. As it happens, trust is also essential to a relationship the subjects shared: all are members of the extended medical community in Austin, whether as care providers, administrators, or patients. Photo-shoots were open to all and held at community health clinics, a student union, university campuses, a children’s hos-

pital, a retirement community, and elsewhere. “Touch and human recognition is the core of medicine,” Hamilton commented to Risley; to me, she noted a similarity between the way the subjects address themselves to her camera and the way patients are seen by a doctor. In both cases, she said, “You offer yourself up.”

Typically for Hamilton’s work, *ONEEVERYONE* is a project with several components. Primary is an image library containing more than 20,000 photographs of roughly 530 people. Installed at the Medical Center are a few dozen that have been printed on enameled porcelain panels, which are lustrous (they are finished with a thin layer of glass) and softly white—like trays for medical instruments, as Hamilton points out. Whether at slightly over life-size or somewhat smaller, the subjects are dignified, even grand, but also muffled—quieted—by the process, which prohibits the preening display so common in the age of social media. And the emphasis on touch is extended by the photographs’ frequent focus on hands at the expense of faces. When the subjects make manual gestures, as they often do, they consolidate the connection between touching and seeing. We see a man cradling a baby; a cross-generation handshake; a flutter of fingers. Choices of physical self-presentation—clothing, ornaments—further acquire, in some portraits, an emblematic force, forming additional accents, as in spoken language, of color, texture, and form.

In addition to these porcelain panels, a generous selection of images appears in a wordless book. Published in a run of 10,000 copies and distributed freely on campus, its 900 pages make it thick like the kind of old-fashioned telephone directory it resembles. The thin, pliable, off-white paper of this publication evokes, as does Duraflex®, the tenderness of skin, and further modulates the color and resolution of the photographs. And it binds them into the kind of physical index of connectedness—a phonebook—that has been abandoned in the digital age. An additional component of *ONEEVERYONE* is this free newspaper in which a selection of the photographs appear alongside contributions by scientists and philosophers, poets and essayists. These essays are also available on the project’s website—a final and crucial component—along with at least one image of each participant, which may be downloaded for free.

These several image vehicles all place the subjects securely in the present, while framing them in several kinds of history. The blur that envelops *ONEEVERYONE*’s subjects can be associated with a period, in the late nineteenth century, when the still-novel medium of photography was believed, by a surprising number (and range) of people, to be capable of capturing departed spirits; not coincidentally, it was a time when various spiritualists also promised such capture. Historian Tom Gunning writes, “Not only did the darkness needed to protect the sensitized photographic plate from exposure serve as an analogy for the darkness in which mediums held their séances, but photographs could also provide evidence of the existence of spirit beings.” Impinging on the film or the plate’s emulsion, the dead made manifest their otherwise invisible presence. In the present, when more and more of our time is spent staring at images on screens, Gunning continues, “The difference between our daily existence and that of phantoms becomes attenuated.”¹ That is to say, we have become the ghosts once thought to be exposed in darkroom-born images; touch, in both cases, is the interface. Related, too, is the healing offered by Franz Anton Mesmer, an eighteenth-century Viennese doctor who, Mark Alice Durant writes, “theorized that magnetism flowed through the universe via the fluidium.”

Mesmer believed that a diaphanous medium joined all bodies “in the universal waltz of influence,” which a skilled practitioner—a mesmerist—could channel for medical benefit.²

Hamilton, an avid reader, brought my attention to the writing of cultural theorist and mathematician Brian Rotman (also a contributor to this newspaper), who argues in *Becoming Beside Ourselves* that both mind and God are ghost effects of the alphabet—immaterial entities brought forth by writing’s capacity to sustain identity over time and space in the absence of the speaker’s body. “Writing, by rescuing speech from oblivion,” Rotman says, “allows utterance to live beyond itself.” But Rotman believes that alphabetic writing is giving way to gestural languages caught in real time by digital technology, which is driven by a dispersed community of meaning. The digitally-enabled “I” is “immersive and gesturo-haptic,” Rotman writes, and “increasingly defined by the networks threading through it.”³ Philosopher Vilem Flusser, too, felt that language born of breath and inscribed in printed words was becoming obsolete. While “the alphabet permits us to stabilize and discipline a transcendence of images that has been won, with effort, through speech,” Flusser wrote, “thinking is not a continuous, discursive process.” Instead, we think in images, which are fluid, and our brains more resemble networked databases than inscribable clay tablets. Writing, Flusser predicted in 1987, is nearing an end.⁴

Hamilton, too is interested in the fact that we “live in a world of touch-less images” where, paradoxically, pictures can be brought to life and manipulated by a finger placed on a computer screen—“That space of no space,” she calls it. Digital screens (and photographs of all kinds) have played an important role in her work. But she does not altogether share Flusser’s, or Rotman’s, rather drastic vision of a post-bibliophilic future. Just as constant as touch in her work has been the presence of books and other forms of printed matter, which is also central to *ONEEVERYONE*. Several times, books have entered her work as objects to be altered, as with tiny stones replacing typographic marks, or lines of text being slowly, systematically burnt with a stylus. In her conversation with Jack Risley, Hamilton said, “The book is a beautiful democratic object. It’s portable, it has a rhythm, it’s in your hand. When you fall into a book you’re falling into another world that extends like a landscape even if it’s not literally one. That close at hand and far away, which is how I would characterize reading, is carried always in a book.”

The democracy of art is perhaps Hamilton’s central principle, and is clearly reflected in *ONEEVERYONE*’s remarkable openness—its enormous range of participants; the free distribution of its newspaper, and of its book, which Hamilton hopes will “circulate throughout the community, hand to hand”; the public availability of its website. An internationally celebrated artist, honored with a MacArthur fellowship in 1993 and the National Medal of the Arts in 2015 (among many other awards), and with installations at major museums and public spaces around the world, she has had a wary relationship with the art market. Her choice of living and working in Columbus, Ohio, where she grew up—she was born in Lima, Ohio, in 1956—reflects a wariness of art’s commercial capitals. Engaging with local communities is a through-line in her installations, which bring together people from disparate disciplines as contributors, fabricators, performers, participants, and viewers; many of these terms become fluid in her work. Among the several installations to have involved expanses of billowing and swirling fabric (Hamilton’s BFA, from the University of Kansas at Lawrence, in

1979, was in textile design; she also received an MFA in sculpture from Yale, in 1985) are two that required the audience to help set the cloth in motion. By pumping swings suspended from the vaulting ceiling of the great drill hall in New York’s Park Avenue Armory (*the event of a thread*, 2012–13), audience members caused a giant curtain to move up and down; by pulling on ropes, viewers at an open-air pier in Philadelphia set in motion enormous swirling skirts, which were also animated by wind, and even by the movement of passersby (*habitus*, 2016).

Woven fabric is a social metaphor as well as a physical material in Hamilton’s installations. The stuff of shelter and privacy, communion and solitude, it also evokes an interweaving of knowledge and skills. Though not a traditional textile, Duraflex® is a protective material; produced by Bayer MaterialScience, it came to Hamilton’s attention as the result of a project undertaken for an exhibition called *Factory Direct*, at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, that wove together artists and local industry. That collaborative effort is deepened by *ONEEVERYONE*’s commitment to the extended community of the Dell Medical Center. Along with the writing of Rotman, Hamilton drew me to John Berger’s book-length essay, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*, which considers with great sympathy the relationships forged between a particularly thoughtful, generous physician in rural England and his patients. A highly developed sense of touch, and an equal ability to see his patients clearly, as whole beings rather than aggregated physical parts—while at the same time understanding them to be inextricably connected to their town and its culture—was central to his quietly heroic practice. Hamilton’s *ONEEVERYONE* represents a similar devotion. ■

Notes

1. Tom Gunning, “Ghosts, Photography, and the Modern Body,” in *The Disembodied Spirit* (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003), 10, 18.
2. Mark Alice Durant, “Adrift in the Fluidium,” in *Blur of the Otherworldly: Contemporary Art, Technology, and the Paranormal* (Baltimore: UMBC Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture, 2006), 67.
3. Brian Rotman, *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 122, 8.
4. Vilem Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 31, 144.

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Nancy Princenthal has written on numerous contemporary artists in books— including the 2016 PEN America award-winning *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*—and such journals as *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Parkett*, the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Times*. She is based in Brooklyn.

Project Credits

ONEEVERYONE, a public art project by Ann Hamilton, is commissioned by Landmarks for the Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin. Discover hundreds of downloadable images and other aspects of the project at www.hamilton-landmarks.org.

LANDMARKS is the public art program of The University of Texas at Austin. It presents forty works of art throughout the main campus that are free to the public and viewed by thousands of people every day. To learn more about Ann Hamilton and other Landmarks projects, visit www.landmarks.utexas.edu.

Dell Medical School is the first medical school in nearly 50 years to be built from the ground up at a top-tier research university. The school was created in unprecedented partnership with the local community and is on a mission to revolutionize how people get and stay healthy. Learn more at www.dellmedschool.utexas.edu.

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