



# *Vibrant Matter*



words heard and gathered, like hints:

on fragments of memory making history  
on magical realism within industrial ruins  
on paintings leaking and growing and glowing  
on horizon lines and cut shapes  
on desires towards the earth and care  
on a sense of dripping and feeling crap  
on excess and power and conflict too  
on hooks, ropes and safety pins  
on architectural bodies  
on surrealist anatomies and transportable landscapes  
on dysfunctional bodies  
on narratives of failure  
on economy in every sense of the word  
on skills that have been lost or left behind  
on what you leave and what you take  
on movements of translation and connection  
on gestures of repetition and combination  
on bonding and vulnerability  
on decay and shadows and uncertainty  
on duty  
off pressure





On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove  
 one dense mat of oak pollen  
 one unblemished dead rat  
 one white plastic bottle cap  
 one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmed back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.*

I was struck by what Stephen Jay Gould called the "excruciating complexity and intractability" of nonhuman bodies,<sup>12</sup> but, in being struck, I

realized that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive "intractability" but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects. When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they were all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. In my encounter with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane, I glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects.<sup>13</sup> I achieved, for a moment, what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, "to be surprised by what we see."<sup>14</sup>

This window onto an eccentric out-side was made possible by the fortuity of that particular assemblage, but also by a certain anticipatory readiness on my in-side, by a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power. For I came on the glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick with Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to practice "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen"; with Spinoza's claim that all things are "animate, albeit in different degrees"; and with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had disclosed for me "an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends, . . . to the whole sensible world" and which had shown me how "our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."<sup>15</sup>



THE FOOL .



Man's is an abnormal and "therefore precarious" situation. The future is dark. "Through knowledge and genius, man has succeeded in drawing on the energy in the nucleus of the fundamental particles that contain nature's fundamental reserves: and it is not improbable that a chain reaction, imperfectly controlled or carelessly provoked, may liberate an excessive quantity of that energy and annihilate all matter. The intersecting paths of Chance and Necessity have presided over man's prodigious destiny; but they also suggest that the miracle might happen in reverse, and return life to the impassive and immortal inertia from which a lucky statistical chance once plucked it." Caillois's devotion and emotion seem to recoil from a humanity conceived of as more precarious than ever, and from an animal and vegetable kingdom whose destruction we are hastening; he seeks a substance more lasting, an object more pure. And he finds it in the race of stones: "the dim mirror of obsidian," vitrified thousands of centuries ago at temperatures no longer known; the diamond, which while still buried in the earth already carries within it all the potentialities of its future fires; the evanescence of mercury; crystal, giving lessons to man in advance by admitting impurities which endanger its transparency and balance—splinters of iron, tufts of chlorite, threads of rutile—yet, in spite of all these, pursuing its limpid growth, with prisms which, as Caillois brilliantly reminds us, are like souls in casting no shadows. Not only did the amazing variety of form found in stones persuade Caillois that human invention is only a development of the data inherent in things, but also in minerals through aesthetics, he found history. Those fusions, pressures, ruptures, imprints of matter on matter have left traces inside and out which sometimes almost exactly resemble writing and which actually do transcribe events from millions of years ago. "There are impossible scribblings in nature, written neither by men nor by devils," and seeming to foreshadow the insatiable human passion for meaning and recording. "Already present in the archives of geology, available for operations then inconceivable, was the model of what would later be an alphabet." Although, as Caillois knew better than anyone, this unconscious alphabet is immeasurably far away from the lines of letters we produce by a turn of the wrist, itself the slave of muscles, tendons, and neurons, yet the authorless inscriptions may be regarded as a first draft of a chronicle of stones.

Stones, like us, stand at the intersection of countless lines crossing one another and receding to infinity; at the center of a field of forces too unpredictable to be measured; and we awkwardly call the result chance, hazard, or fate.



## ENTER LIFE: THE OTHER WRITING

Life appears: a complex dampness, destined to an intricate future and charged with secret virtues, capable of challenge and creation. A kind of precarious slime, of surface mildew, in which a ferment is already working. A turbulent, spasmodic sap, a pre-sage and expectation of a new way of being, breaking with mineral perpetuity and boldly exchanging it for

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and insect, a blurred gelatin which can only quiver until there awakens in it a wish for a definite form and an individual function. Soon after comes the first domestication of minerals, the few ounces of limestone or silica needed by an undecided and threatened substance in order to build itself protection or support: on the outside, shells and carapaces, and on the inside, vertebrae that are immediately articulated, adapted, and finished down to the last detail. The minerals have changed their employ, been drawn from their torpor, been adapted to and secreted by life, and so afflicted with the curse of growth—only for a brief spell, it is true. The unstable gift of sentence is always moving from place to place. An obstinate alchemy, making use of immutable models, untiringly prepares for an ever-new flesh another refuge or support. Every abandoned shelter, every porous structure combines to form, through the centuries and the centuries of centuries, a slow rain of sterile seeds. They settle down, one stratum upon another, into a mud composed almost entirely of themselves, a mud that hardens and becomes stone again. They are restored to the immutability they once renounced. Now, even though their shape may still occasionally be recognized in the cement where they are embedded, that shape is no more than a cipher, a sign denoting the transient passage of a species.

Unceasingly the microscopic roses of diatoms, the minute lattices of radiolaria, the ringed cups of corals

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"Enter life," belemnites (112 × 190 mm)



the doubtful privilege of being able to tremble, decay, and multiply.

Obscure distillations generate juices, salivas, yeasts. Like mists or dews, brief yet patient jellies come forth momentarily and with difficulty from a substance lately imperturbable: they are evanescent pharmacies, doomed victims of the elements, about to melt or dry up, leaving behind only a savor or a stain.

It is the birth of all flesh irrigated by a liquid, like the white salve that swells the mistletoe berry; like the semisolid in the chrysalis, halfway between larva

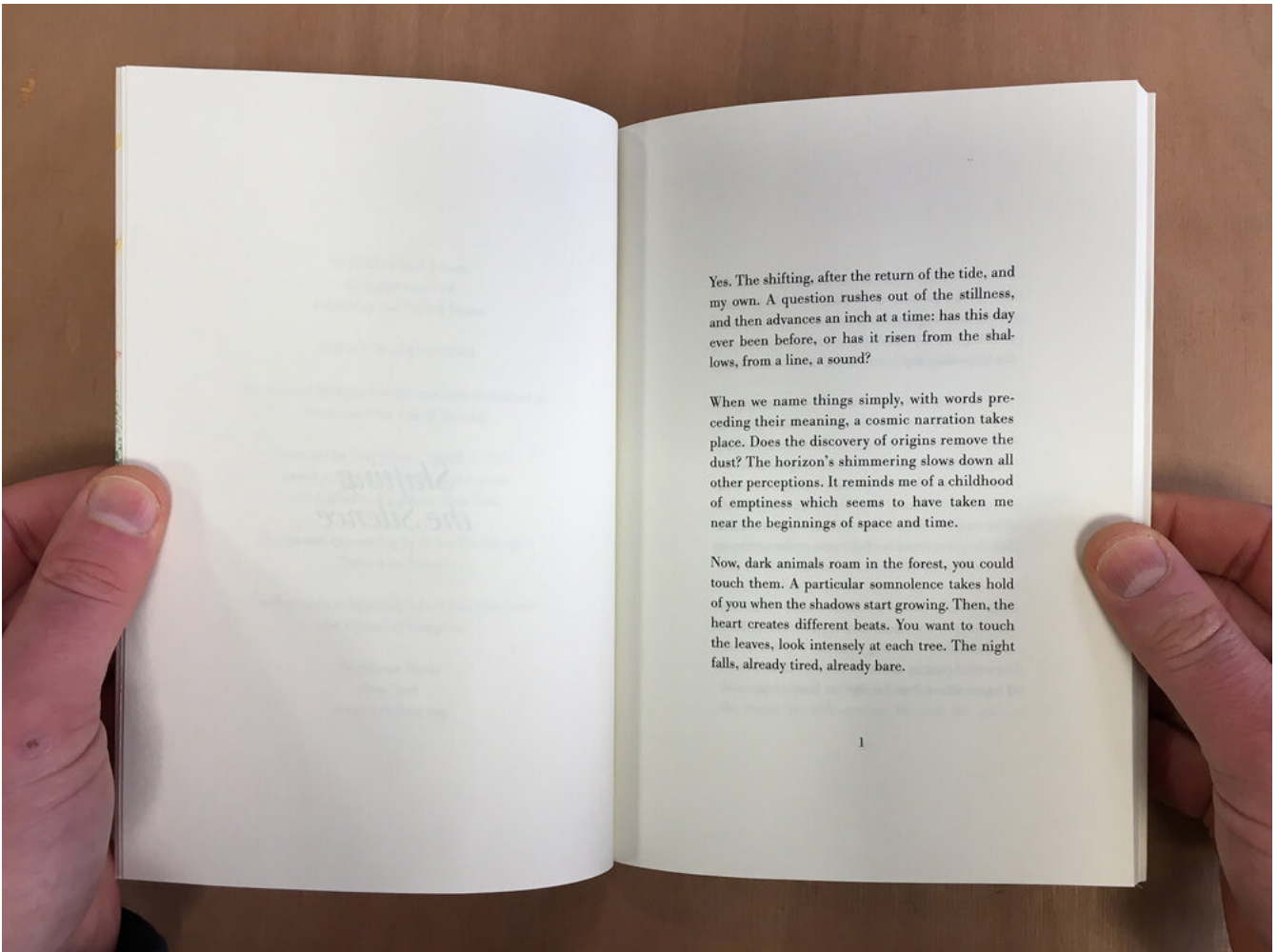
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like tiny bony disks with countless thin spikes resembling circles of converging swords, the parallel channels of palms, the stars of sea urchins—all sow seeds in the depths of the rock: the seeds of symbols for a heraldry before the age of blazons.

Meanwhile the tree of life goes on putting out branches. A multitude of new inscriptions is added to the writing in stones. Images of fishes swim among dendrites of manganese as though among clumps of moss. A sea lily sways on its stem in the heart of a piece of slate. A phantom shrimp can no longer feel the air with its broken antennae. The scrolls and laces of ferns are imprinted in coal. Ammonites of all sizes, from a lentil to a millwheel, flaunt their cosmic spirals everywhere. A fossil trunk, turned jasper and opal like a frozen fire, clothes itself in scarlet, purple, and violet. Dinosaurs' bones change their petit-point tapestries into ivory, gleaming pink or blue like sugared almonds.

Every space is filled, every interstice occupied. Even metal has insinuated itself into the cells and channels from which life has long since disappeared. Compact and insensible matter has replaced the other kind in its last refuge, taking over its exact shapes, running in its finest channels, so that the first image is set down forever in the great album of the ages. The writer has disappeared, but each flourish—evidence of a different miracle—remains, an immortal signature.

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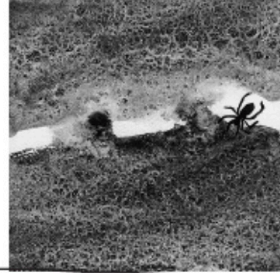
Yes. The shifting, after the return of the tide, and my own. A question rushes out of the stillness, and then advances an inch at a time: has this day ever been before, or has it risen from the shallows, from a line, a sound?

When we name things simply, with words preceding their meaning, a cosmic narration takes place. Does the discovery of origins remove the dust? The horizon's shimmering slows down all other perceptions. It reminds me of a childhood of emptiness which seems to have taken me near the beginnings of space and time.

Now, dark animals roam in the forest, you could touch them. A particular somnolence takes hold of you when the shadows start growing. Then, the heart creates different beats. You want to touch the leaves, look intensely at each tree. The night falls, already tired, already bare.



favor of crows



autumn scenes

first frost  
moths flutter at the windows  
billets-doux

cedar cones  
tumble over the river stones  
wash ashore

autumn wind  
garage doors open and close  
wings of a moth

overnight snow  
brightens the summer paths  
courts the crows

november moon  
creeps over the bare boughs  
lightens the leaves

cold mist  
glistens on the dark shoreline  
river ghosts

cold morning  
sluggish horseflies on the fence  
catch the sun

robins migrate  
marigolds wither with grace  
crows stay

cold night  
ghosts of summer in the trees  
trace of leaves

*The space of our lives is neither continuous, nor infinite, nor homogeneous or isotropic. But do we know exactly where it breaks off, where it curves, where it disconnects and comes together? We confusedly experience cracks, gaps and points of friction, sometimes vaguely aware that something is stuck, that it breaks loose or collides. Though we seldom seek to learn more about it and more often than not, wander from one spot to another, from one space to another, without measuring, without taking into account or considering the course of space. The issue is not to invent space and certainly not to re-invent it (too many well-intentioned individuals are already there to reflect upon our environment...), the problem is rather to question space, or more exactly, to read space; for what we call everydayness is not the obvious, but opacity: a kind of blindness, or deafness, a sort of anesthesia.*

*From these elementary findings the book develops, the diary of a user of space.*

Georges Perec, "Prière d'insérer", *Espèces d'espaces*  
*Species of Spaces*, 1974.





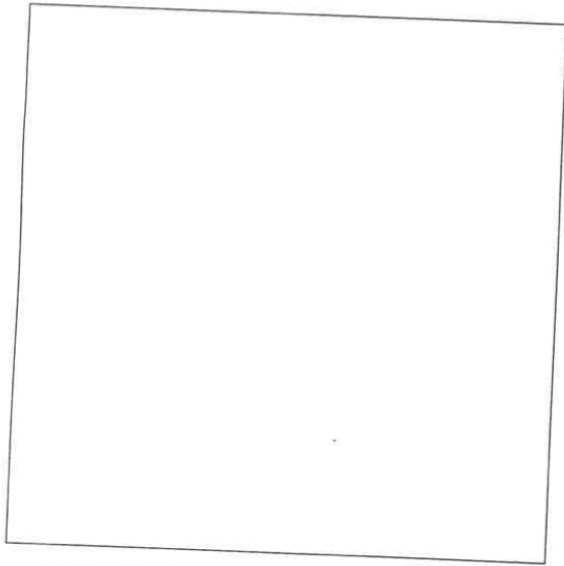


Figure 1: Map of the Ocean  
(taken from Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*)

SPACE  
OPEN SPACE  
ENCLOSED SPACE  
OUTER SPACE  
SPACE SUIT  
SPACE AGE  
LIVING SPACE  
PROJECTIVE SPACE  
SPACE CAPSULE  
LACK OF SPACE  
SPACE BAND  
SPACE HEATER  
DEEP SPACE  
SPACE ODYSSEY  
SPACE SALESMAN  
EUCLIDEAN SPACE  
SPACE CADET  
SPACE STATION  
BLANK SPACE  
SPACE OUT  
PARKING SPACE  
SPACE INVADERS  
SPACE WALK  
SPACE TIME CONTINUUM  
SPACE BAR  
LOST IN SPACE  
STARING INTO SPACE  
WATCH THIS SPACE  
SPACE CURVE  
SPACE LATTICE  
SPACE OPERA  
CATCHER SPACE  
SPACE SICKNESS  
BUNCHER SPACE  
THREE-DIMENSIONAL SPACE  
HAIR SPACE  
SPACE RACE  
NULL SPACE



**'Vibrant Matter' exhibition at Pada Studios**  
with works by Andrea V Wright, Elise Carlton, Erika Trotzig, Joe Horner, Lauren Pirie, Linn  
Henrichson, Na Liu, Poppy Whatmore, Serra Behar, Sophie Mackfall.  
Words gathered by Manon Klein  
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 Excerpt from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*

 THE FOOL - Tarot card

 Excerpt from Marguerite Yourcenar's introduction to Roger Caillois's *The Writing of Stones*

 Excerpt from Roger Caillois's *The Writing of Stones*

 Excerpt from Etel Adnan's *Shifting the Silence*

 Excerpts from Gerald Vizenor's *Favor of Crows: New and Collected Haiku*

 Excerpts from Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces*