



mattie-martha sempert

sweet spots

writing the connective
tissue of relation

SWEET SPOTS

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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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First published in 2021 by 3Ecologies Books/Immediations,
an imprint of punctum books.
<https://punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-010-1 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-011-8 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0340.1.00

LCCN: 2021948743

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent WJ. van Gerven Oei

Cover image: The Sun. Courtesy of NASA/SDO/AIA/LMSAL

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Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.

– William James, *A World of Pure Experience*

Golfing and the Sweetest Sweet Spot

My dad had high hopes for me to become a professional golfer. In my early teens, I could out-drive his golfing buddies, who would gape at my easy swing and hand-eye-body precision. This would pump up my father's determination to groom my natural ability. He entered me in summer tournaments throughout the Pacific Northwest. But I lacked the cutthroat drive necessary to win sudden-death playoffs. What I enjoyed was nailing the sweet spot of the golf ball: the clean crack that sent the ball soaring high and long, and carried with it the effortless feeling that the ball and I were inseparable.

The technical term for "sweet spot," according to the science of physics, is "the center of percussion." However, the impact point that feels best is usually the node of the fundamental vibration mode, not the center of percussion.¹

That is, the sweetest sweet spot is in the vibration, just off center.

1 Rod Cross, "Center of Percussion of Hand-Held Implements," *American Journal of Physics* 72, no. 5 (2004): 622–30.

Early on in acupuncture school – the late 1980s in Boston – one of my teachers paused during his lecture and made an offhand comment. Looking back, it was a timely comment that seeded a radical shift in the way that I perceive the world, and how I orient to experience.

He said, as a casual aside: “You know, acupuncture is all about the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously*.” He then relocated his place in his lecture notes, and turned to the blackboard.

As I rushed to scribble down the pithy sentence, the ontological ground beneath me began to quake: to think like an acupuncturist means I need to learn to place myself within the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously*. As I began to digest the sentence, and consider the complexity of its implication, I got my first semiconscious glimpse of pluralism. A major trajectory shift was in motion. I could never fully return to the comfortable habits of binary thinking: this or that. From now on, I realized, I’ll attempt to make pluralism my ontological operative and try to place it at the nexus of my everyday experience. To do so, I’ll need to learn how to keep one perceptual foot grounded in the plurals, in the multiplicity of the fluxes. And somehow learn to move, with puny acupuncture needles, this elusive stuff called *qi* – considered to be both energy *and* matter at once – which travels amidst the multiplicities.

In that pivotal moment, the teacher’s comment spoke to a long-standing intuition: that it is impossible to step into the same place in a river twice. Change is constant. Nothing is certain, and there are certainly no Experts, except maybe the body in its immediate experience. The comment also supported my ongoing sense of the human body as unfathomably complex: all the thousands of systems, trillions of cells, busy going about their businesses, whether we know it or not. And this intuition extends to the infinitude of ineffable activities – mostly non-

conscious – that are within the affective field of bodying experience.

So began my mission to disrupt and trouble binaries. Undermine “experts” obsessed with the dichotomy of true or false. With it comes the ongoing practice of resisting the exclusivity of reductive thinking; its tendency to cut off everything in the dynamic field of relation. Dizzying in its demands, the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously* became my new orientation.

Essaying Bodies, Bodying Essays: A Manifesto, of Sorts

Essaying bodies, bodying essays.
Oriented to the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously*.
And carried by more-than forces of lyric.

This book's text-body stretches before me on the Last Supper-length wooden kitchen table. A splay of paper – a scatter of cut bits amongst neat piles of intact sheets – that hold possibilities as print agitates the pages: a Deleuzian undulating plateau of topographical and syntactical multiplicities.

As I pace back and forth along the table – my near six-foot frame hunched, alert, as it does before prone fleshy bodies – the agential forces are restless, eager to interact with my capacity to make cuts and distinctions, to imagine, and attempt to choreograph concepts. My listening finger – and probing eye – thinks with the cacophony of text spread out before me.

Agential elements mingle, rub shoulders, dance an imbricating dance, generating patterns that overlap and jiggle in co-composition. No one element takes center stage. As I am an *incidence of writing*, and written language is nothing without forces to interact with, no one of us

takes center stage. Figures of speech take turns adding their flare for words and phrases. Lyric hangs in the air and hovers on the edges as a potential, eager to sway the beat with its more-than tones and textures.

We are in the process of hyphenating, of making something, together. Our *poiēsis*, our method of making, is done in dynamic relationship, as we attune to the plurals – the *onewhichincludesthemany* – in our midst. We orient to Whitehead’s notion of body as an *activity within* our bodies.¹

Irreducible, always in process.

Always relational.

Languaging is sticky as it moves.

The *essai* – considering its longevity, flexibility and open-mindedness – lends the growing body its bones. The support and protection it needs to grow into whatever shape and form it immanently comes to be.

A plethora of literary devices, alive and ubiquitous, are eager to be taken up and put to work. Each has an innate drive to express. And, like contiguous gooey connective tissue in the human body, each is a material force that is always responding to the movement of language within the growing elastic flesh of text.

The essaying body before me and my bodying thoughts – all of us with infinite possibilities – recall Spinoza’s dictum: we know not what our bodies can do.² The body and

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Aims of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1929), 165.

2 The negative “know” at the front of Spinoza’s pithy sentence pushes it to the background, allowing “do” to come forward and do its bodying work: “For no one has yet come to know the structure of the Body so accurately that he could explain all its functions – not to mention that many things are observed in the lower Animals that far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the Body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature,

its bodying capacities are indeterminate. The only thing certain about immanent process is that something will happen.

Language bends to sustain relationships.

These agential literary forces work together in close proximity as many enter in one coming together. Their functional contributions to the bodying essays, and book – as it comes to be – are plentiful:

White space is respiration, billowing between clumps of paragraphs, sentences. Space to pause, consider. Breathe.

Juxtaposition and *oxymoron* generate tension and pressure within the text's vessels. Twist, jerk, and puzzle: stimuli necessary for the essay to elicit a reaction or respond. As a response to the stimulus – like a needle's tweak – the fascia lining the muscular walls of the text lay down fresh fibers. It flexes. The text needs tension and pressure to be able to stretch, grow, and essay forward.

Rich *imagery* is non-retinal sight. Images that provide not only contours and depth of perception, but also a focus: patterns and shapes for the mind's eye to home in on.

Metaphor, one of the many figural potentials of language, metabolizes. As unlikely word pairs smack against each other, energy is released. Fresh meaning is made. While metaphor metabolizes, *metonymy* digests. More fresh meaning is taken up and absorbed.

can do many things which its Mind wonders at." Baruch Spinoza, "Third Part of the Ethics: On the Origin and Nature of the Affects," in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 495.

Synecdoche – metonymy’s kissing cousin – adds a colloquial chunk as the whole processes the chunk. Such as, *the essay has good bones*. As a synecdoche, bones are only part of the whole but stand in to represent the whole.

Simile adds conjunctions into the pulpy word-chyme: *like* or *as* act as a buffer between oddly matched things, such as, *the essay’s guts are like a barrel writhing with irritable sardines*. Unlike simile’s tendency to add more as a point of comparison, metaphor makes singular declarations, such as *the essay has guts*. Either way, the comparisons generate enzymes that break down difference and release a burst of energy: the sentence moves.

Hyperbole emits loud gaseous noises. The paragraph moves.

Perhaps all the figures of speech metabolize and digest together?

Of course they do.

The collective imagery is rich with nutrients, essential for a growing body.

It absorbs.

Perspective is proprioception, how the text’s body orients to the world. No conscious effort is needed. An imagined world or an idea moves as it is guided by the text’s point of view. Vertigo is sometimes deliberately induced. Such as a disorienting sudden swoon. Or a moment of nauseating dread.

Rhythm paces the essay’s pulse: it speeds up when tension builds, and slows to a gentle cadence when the tension recedes.

Syntax and *grammar* are the essay’s hormones and directly influence the text’s mood and excitability. Unique to

each essay body, glandular secretions have a distinct odor and, hopefully, a strong allure.

Periodic *puns* provide intermittent complexity, little challenges for the nervous system: a sudden contraction (mini-confusion) followed by a release (relief in the form of a laugh, groan) when the joke lands. A pun's twist – like oxymoron and juxtaposition – lays down fresh synapses. The relief-release of the pun's effect – a jerk, a twist – derails the cow-ruts of expectation, and lays down fresh neurons.

Puns exfoliate, lubricate, extricate. But never placate.

Alliterations are the essay's lymphatic tissue: they smooth out turbulent flow and aid secretions within the tissue's microscopic perfusion. Passageways are maintained as the alliterating interstitial fluid flows freely. Waste is excreted.

Onomatopoeia – the word-sounds of the text-body – vibrate with a combination of resonant and dissonant tones. Maybe a hum, or a high-pitched wail. As sound vibrations, the words are what the words do.

Close by, *assonance* clusters soft sounds around, affecting the text's tone. And mood.

And, of course, *hyphens* are busy connective tissuing language. Their active presence allows for the possibility of new word concepts to evolve, and become a part of the essay's emerging genetic makeup. Other between-ing agents, such as *em dashes* and *en dashes*, are also active in their middling zones. These connective tissuing elements aerate, lubricate, and hydrate the language-tissue.

Again, the body responds. And moves.

Importantly, there is no fragmentation: the *interstitium*³ (or the *organwithanamebutnoform*⁴) or middling space propels the essaying body forward, making all of the bits contiguous. As each feels the force of form, in-forming, it is folded in. If not needed – or if a bit does not feel the force of form – it shrivels and dies off. Or is deliberately cut away.

It is the *organwithanamebutnoform* that is only observable as an activity as it generates movement between

- 3 Residing within tissue matrices, the *interstitium* comprises layers of fluid-filled compartments and are strung together in a web of collagen, and coated by a flexible protein called elastin. Contemporary researchers claim that the interstitium went unnoticed (although they knew something has always been there carrying about twenty percent of the body's fluids) mostly because of the way tissue has been studied: dehydrated, stained with a dye, and then compressed between glass slides. That is, they studied dead tissue. A new sort of sophisticated microscope has made the study of live tissue possible, and hence, the "discovery." To learn more about the interstitium, go to <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/meet-your-interstitium-a-newfound-organ/>
- 4 Several thousand years ago the ancient Chinese identified "an organ with a name but with no form or shape," calling it the *san jiao*, or the Triple Burner. The *san jiao* resides within the body's middle to perform its function of regulating the body's water passages (or, put more imagistically, maintaining its "ditches" by relaxing sphincters and pores, reducing tense muscles around transport tubes, and freeing up space around joints). If the body's internal ditches are left unattended, the middling spaces could shrivel and dry up, become fungus-infested smelly swamps, clog with waste and debris, or turn into some other ailing state of dysregulation. It is the regulated, smooth movement through the *san jiao* – the dynamic gooey matrix – that allows a body to maintain its hydration, fluidity, and transportation medium for the relay of crucial messages throughout the whole body. The *san jiao*, (a.k.a. the contemporaneously named interstitium) is the associated milieu: regulating the dynamic movement of connective forces and flows as a body grows, changes, and comes to be. For more on the Triple Burner, see Wu Jing-Nuan, trans., *Ling Shu, or Spiritual Pivot* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 19–26.

organ-structures. Its effects within the dimension of the betweening zone are to soothe, open, free, and quicken.⁵

It is poised in the active zone of betweening, amidst ambiguity. Amidst the not-quite-yet of creativity's potential.

> > >

Forces and intensities propel the essay forward as all of the bits gather to become more-than the sum of its parts. Lyric, in its ineffable style, makes sure of this. Unseen, lyric permeates with its lyre, its hidden music, and is carried by forces and qualities that are freed from the ego-bound slavery of the subjective "I."

As the *whole body thinks*.

- 5 In Wu Jing-Nuan's introduction to his translation of *Ling Shu* (a.k.a. the "canon of acupuncture," since it is the first literature on this medical practice that was originally compiled from twelve scrolls between 480 to 222 BCE), he makes an important point that many of the ancient Chinese ideograms convey dynamic and relational *motion* (over static enclosed structures), such as the dynamism of the Dao and *yin* and *yang*. "In present day terms," he says, "I see the process as being akin to the wave continuum in a theoretical view of reality which has both particle-structural and wave-dynamic forms simultaneously." Jing-Nuan, *Ling Shu*, xv.

Essaying forward, the body of language moves united, as *one, which includes the many*. As the *multiplicity of phenomena occur simultaneously*. Plurals and duals move together, amicably carrying their differences, within the text's *milieu*: both its middle and its surroundings, as one.

As I make cuts and fresh twirls, the body before me responds, inching closer to whatever it *comes to be*.

We pause and allow the changes within its tissues to settle. We listen for sweet spots, those coalescing places that are just slightly off-center. Like the Barthesian *punctums*,⁶ or the Duchampian *infra-thin*⁷ moments that carry more-than qualities. The body responds: more white space is needed to breathe. Bits are highlighted then vaporized with the delete button. My pencil slashes sections. The body stirs, stretches into the freed space.

It is the *scattered condition of the personal plural – of the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one* – that is at the nexus of our always changing affective body, not me.

That is, an essaying body is a condition of *wonder*.

6 "The *punctum* of a photograph is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 27.

7 Marcel Duchamp's concept of the *infra-thin* is necessarily impossible to define, and he can only give examples of it as lived experiences. Such as:

- the warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is *infra-thin*
- the swirl of cigar smoke is *infra-thin*
- just touching: while trying to place one plane surface precisely on another plane or surface you pass through some *infra-thin* moments. In Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics and Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), xxvi.

Giving my hunched body a rest from its prolonged focus, I sit. Stretch my arms up. Yawn. Look out the window and notice the wind buffet the trees. I enjoy the long view outside and a break from the immersive demands of all the nonhuman agents clamoring for attention. Their insistent need to *make*.

Within seconds, I sense the paper on the far-right corner of the table squirm. From where I'm sitting, I can see that a paragraph is cramped and demands more space. Most likely a knotted passage that can't move with its neighboring sentences. It wants to fit in and move with the rest of the text. Several other elements jut up their hands, eager to be useful.

Many enter in one coming together.

I stand up, pick up a sharp pencil, and go to it.

Until around the 1990s, connective tissue and fascia had been considered inert, mere glue that holds things together. It was the stuff to be scraped away in anatomy class to better view the structures underneath. But recent research in biomedicine has rediscovered connective tissues as dynamic and alive.⁸

Imagine if all bones, organs, muscles, and blood vessels are removed: what would be left is an enormous drooping bag of connective tissues that retains the shape of the whole, quivering body.

As I learned to fish for *qi* with an acupuncture needle – attuned to the ever-changing field of relation – several pragmatic questions hovered (and continue to hover) in the background:

How is it possible for duals and plurals to coexist, simultaneously?
 How to keep a foot planted in the plurals while making cuts, making distinctions?
 Is it a matter of continually orienting to the moving middle?

8 The inaugural International Fascia Research Congress (FRC), hosted by Harvard in 2007, gave rise to the Fascia Research Society, now considered to be “connective tissue” for the emerging field of Fascia Studies. In 2015, the FRC stretched its human-centered matrix to include veterinary aspects to fascia studies.

How then, to needle – and write – into a moving middle?

Hyphen.

Late Latin for the Greek *huphen* (“together”)

hupo (“under”) + *hen* (“one”)

Hyphens – that little bit of form placed between words – *move* word-bodies. They aid acceleration, movement. The way an acupuncture needle potentiates as its tip twists⁹ microscopic fibroblasts, hyphens *perform* a connective tissueing of language: as a betweening agent, hyphens respond, allowing for an emergent, indeterminate becoming of language as it continues to move.

- 9 As the needle’s tip pierces the skin it enters the *cou li*, or lining (or, in Western anatomy, the space analogous to the superficial layer of fascia). It is by way of the *cou li* – a vast, interconnected meshwork made up of intricate layers of linings that extend, contiguously, deep to the internal organs’ *cou li* – that the effects of a needle’s *twist-zing!* are conducted from the outside to the inside. For evidence on an acupuncture needle’s signaling effects along connective tissue planes, see Helene Langevin et al., “Subcutaneous Tissue Fibroblast Cytoskeletal Remodeling Induced by Acupuncture: Evidence for a Mechanotransduction-Based Mechanism,” *Journal of Cellular Physiology* 207 (2006): 767–74.

“For me,” says Erin Manning, “the more-than-human is a way of making operative ways of thinking the nonhuman without excising the force of human complicity from these worldings.”¹⁰ Whereas, “When I speak of the more-than human,” excising the second hyphen, “I am focusing on the realm of the human, emphasizing that the category of the human is always modulated and affected by the more-than.”¹¹

Contained in such hyphenating play are subtle but profound conceptual tilts in perspective. With the more-than-human, the human subject is hyphenated in and dissolves into relational complicity. Fully hyphenated, the category of the human swims in the worlding soup with the forces and flows of the more-than. Whereas, de-hyphenated, the human loses its mooring from the more-than. With the anchor removed, the focus turns on the human (and all-too-human subjectivity) for whom the more-than is a problem to be thought.

Hyphen: *Under One*.

The linguistic roots of hyphen are tangled, under one. To sever a hyphen from its roots would kill it. Out of relationship, a hyphen would be nothing.

When developing her concepts, Manning considers carefully – and strategically – where to place a hyphen, and where to leave it. So, when a hyphen is omitted from its usual place – such as the more-than – I take it as a clue to be alert for what might be concealed within the concept Manning is exploring. As in the title (*Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*) of her philosophic inquiry into

10 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 233.

11 *Ibid.*, 234.

Simondon's concept of individuation – that is, individuals, whether subject or objects, “come to be”¹² – conspicuously omits the hyphen.

As the tissue bathed by the interstitium comes to be, it is considered pre-lymphatic, that is, not-quite-yet lymph. Fluids slosh and move through the structure's lacy lattice-work. As collagen bundles sway, elastin gives, prompting pre-lymph to leave limbo and become lymph.

With such finely crafted critical distinctions and hyphenating care, Manning moves the concept away from the human towards the affective power of impersonal, inanimate forces. From this perspective, the human is no longer sidelined or pinned in a binary – in a self–other relationship – but is *amidst* the multitude of forces the more-than moves through.

What Manning proposes is that a “vitality affect”¹³ is at the center of experience, not us. She is alerting us to

12 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), x.

13 “Vitality affect” is a concept first developed by psychiatrist Daniel Stern as he closely observed the subtle changes that took place during the interplay between infants and their mothers. Stern's particular blend of “vitality” with “affect” refers to a specific dimension of experience: the progressively persistent interplay between a feeling process is inseparable from the activity within which the feeling arises. He noted that the body's *movement* leads the way as the experience – the vitality affect – is entrained as a pattern in the infant's body-brain. Kinetic terms such as “surging, exploding, fleeting, fading away, effortful, accelerating, decelerating, bursting” convey the dynamic and interactive nature of vitality affect. Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 68. Another way of putting it could be that vitality affects are the more-than qualities that are carried within their verb-*ing* intensities.

attune to the more-than qualities that many things can have.

Vibrations come through my attuned affective body and out my fingertips: twist the needle or twist words for the desired effect. Alliterations, rhythms, activities that I can see, feel, smell, as I attune to the reverb of nonhuman sounds.

Hyphens are just one useful tool among dozens – hundreds – within a writer's reach. Needles and moxa are amongst an acupuncturist's many tools they can use to *move qi*. Nails and hammers are a roofer's. A moving body is a dancer's tool.

And a concept is a tool a philosopher can use to develop – and move – their thoughts.

The hyphen smears the division between self and others. In its inclusive operative, the hyphen generates what Alfred North Whitehead describes as “the vague sense of many, which are one; and of one, which includes the many.”¹⁴ Even if I'm not aware of it, everything is always humming, united, as one, which includes the many. My thinking seeks to include as much of the many – which are one – rather than exclude the many and just single out one.

Again, I ask: is it possible to think in duals and plurals, simultaneously?

14 Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 110.

A needle is tapped into a spot on the top of your head and gently twirled. The twirl elicits a vaguely pleasant sensation: a feeling of warm caramel spreads across your scalp and all the way down to your toes, melting tension along the way. Breathing slows, goes deeper. Stubborn muscular knots begin to unfurl.

The needle's twirl calls out, and the

one which includethemanyincludestheone

responds.

All in the duration of the twirls' ebbing tide.

A Case Study: The Hot Pink Scar

As she rattles off wedding plans, my hand explores the dent on the inside of her lower leg, just below her left calf. She does Irish dancing so her calf muscles are particularly meaty. Around the dent's edges I locate a few possible spots that I can use to find my way in. I can fit three knuckles into the hollow space. The scar, though well older than a decade, still has a surprised look about it. Flushed with iridescent pinks and purples like the inside of an abalone shell, the middle of the scar retains the shock of the wounding moment. Of disbelief.

Motorbike accident? She told me on the first visit but I forget and don't bother checking my notes. Anaesthetized with ouzo as she crashed into a tree, I think. Happened in Cyprus; that I do remember. Or maybe it was Sicily.

At the other end of the table she's preoccupied with everything that needs to be done in the next few weeks. She's oblivious to my prodding fingers. I'm careful to stay along the scar's bank and not go directly into the old wound. But the most important aim of the treatment isn't working on the scar. It's just a local means of generating flow upstream to her abdomen, in her core, where the deeper wounding lies. Restoring circulation around the scar is sort of like removing a logjam.

"I've picked out the dress. It's a hot pink! Very 70s."

I can imagine it: her trailing train of flamboyant pink, defiant.

“Where are you having it again?” I ask, and sneak in a needle without her noticing.

“On the beach. At Eggs and Bacon Bay, down past Cygnet. You know, last time you said you’d been there.”

Cygnet, Cyprus, Sicily.

“Yes, of course. Magical spot.” As I head back to the cart for more needles, I circle above her and tweak the one on top of her head, sending her down into parasympathetic bliss. She goes silent. I return to her leg and quietly open up a couple of spots around the old scar.

I explored the area around her upcoming wedding site a few months before she first arrived for treatment. She came to me on the recommendation of her psychologist. After the third visit, she reported nightmares related to sexual abuse from her girlhood. The excitement and stress of her upcoming marriage seem to be flushing out submerged symptoms that have been hidden deep inside. I let her know that the part of her brain – the amygdala, whose sole job it is to keep her alive – doesn’t know the difference between “good” and “bad” stress. Every intense stimulus is a potential threat. But if a threat does result in significant wounding, flares and rockets will often be sent off into the sleeper’s night sky to signal the need for attention. Acupuncture is one way a message is returned, delivered at the level of a bat’s sonar frequency: we hear you; help is on the way.

Eggs and Bacon Bay is about an hour’s drive south of Hobart. The cove is sheltered from the wild weather that is delivered in great gusts by the Roaring Forties.¹ Heading

1 Tasmania dangles exposed to the fierce force of the westerly winds that rip around the southern hemisphere in latitudes between 40 and 50 degrees. Ten degrees south of the Roaring Forties are even

further south from the bay is Cockle Creek, the last tiny hamlet before heading to the southern-most tip of Tasmania. There is no other body of land until Antarctica is reached a few thousand miles away.

I made the two-hour walk out to the point from Cockle Creek. I was told by a local that surfers make the trek out to the frigid waves that are birthed off the continental shelf, forests of bull kelp pushing the waves up, helped along by the Roaring Forties. Through the soggy heathland along the two-planked boardwalk, sure enough, the only person I passed along the way – racing against the clock as it was getting dark soon – was a wild-eyed surfer, barefoot, surfboard perched on one bare shoulder, boots slung across the other. This was the middle of winter. His mossy green eyes radiant with an ecstasy of which most people can only dream. I asked him how far I was from the bluff. Another 10 minutes, he beamed. I said thanks and he strode off down the planks, leaving residue of a vitality that made my heart want to burst.

Very gently, I wake up a slumbering trauma that had lodged itself in her leg, her own mind having to split away from the offending area. The tissue on the edges dense, close to losing life at the surface. But the still pink center has just enough blood flow to move the lymph, just enough vascular pressure to keep the tissue viable. Just enough.

With a few more gentle tweaks I move the flow, quietly, back up to her lower abdomen. Stagnation on the banks of an old leg wound give way to the power of fresh flow as it swirls around locally, then courses upstream towards the vital, intimate spaces of her belly.

A fresh flow can help her consume space, inhabit her body, wear her hot pink dress with a flare that comes up

stronger gale force winds called the Furious Fifties. And another ten degrees further south are the Screaming Sixties.

off the depths of the shelf, washing onto the shores of her wedding site.

> > >

A hyphen is a fine detail that can be hidden amongst the camouflaged text. When noticed – *Look! A hyphen!* – it can alter the way we think about the field's ecology, the text's milieu. Like Barthes' notion of a *punctum* that has the effect of piercing the viewer of a photograph. A little off-center detail that was incidentally captured by the photographer comes as a little sharp shock that takes place outside of language. Much like how an acupuncture needle generates a zing: a sudden felt aberrance, an agitation, an affective twirl that escapes language.

A virtual needle coming out of my fingertips. A mapped acupuncture point on its own is static, inert. A live spot on the skin needs to be activated, brought to life. It needs to be met. Informed touch warms up the spot and locates the gate precisely (*Yes! That's it!*). A gentle tweak opens the gate, granting flow entry.

After giving the needle a gentle twirl, a microscopic fascial footprint is left behind.

Hyphen-ing, as an activity, is sticky.

Through the process of stickiness, it gathers.

When making a lyric essay, my mind meanders, makes wild associations and attempts to spin pure sensibility through words. When I twirl a needle, the narrative can take an arbitrary, unexpected turn and wander in a completely different direction.

Without a post (such as, posthuman, postCartesian, postliterate), the more-than is generous, free to herald an opening.

Rather than drag with it an ending, telling us what *isn't*, the more-than suggests what *is*.

The more-than affirms. It does not declare, but allows.

Butcher Ding

Over the three years at acupuncture school, several Taoist parables snaked their way along our classroom tables as Chinese whispers, punctuating the tedium of our intensive study. I recall their arrival as a welcomed relief – and relevant distraction – to my unsuspecting ears. Parables used to convey the pluralistic philosophies of East Asia – usually through a sage’s super powers – through the lure of storytelling. Their cryptic messages pierced the monotony of rote memorization: of the actions and effects of hundreds of acupuncture points, their location on the body, and the theory – both ancient and modern – behind their modulation in practice. Parables that entailed Taoist principles, such as how to find the path of *Wu Wei*, or, The Middle Way.

One parable I still keep close. I’ll pull it out when I want to coax other minds away from binary thinking and towards the plurals. The parable mystically intimates what is behind the apparent magic of the ancient needling arts.

It involves a butcher named Ding, who, even after butchering thousands of oxen – slicing with ease through tens of thousands of joints – still has a razor-sharp blade on his knife. It never gets dull. This is possible, says Ding, because he has learned to find *the space in between*. That is,

he learned how to connect with the gap, that empty space that resides between the joints.

In deference to Ding's masterful ability to work with the yielding middle, our class, upon graduation, called ourselves "The Twenty-seven Dull Needles."

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The hyphen is the gap, the place where something exceeds the sum of its parts. The gap carries the ineffable quiver of more-than qualities.

Such as a *diastema*, or tooth-gap. A diastema is caused by an imbalance between the size of the teeth and the jaw. Or it can work the other way: a mismatch between teeth size and the jaw can result in crowded teeth. Either way, something in the relationship is askew, and the askewment creates – for many – a lopsided aesthetic.

Perhaps this dental analogy needs a bridge to close the gap.

Ha! Puns! Often mal-aligned with eight-year-old boy humor, puns can also carry more-than forces in their word-playing effects. Puns exfoliate tension through humor. Such as the physical relief when the micro-confusion – the unexpected twist of meanings – lands a snort. A laugh. Or a guffaw that exceeds the sum of the lopsided pun's parts.

In a lyric essay, no single narrative carries the movement forward. Rather, the movements between many mini

(un)narratives generate a waft much like how the twirl of a needle can cause sudden shifts and scatter the movement onto new trajectories.

William Strunk and E.B. White, in their enduring *The Elements of Style*, share an amusing anecdote about how the hyphen “can play tricks on the unwary, as it did in Chattanooga, when two newspapers merged – the *News* and the *Free Press*. Someone introduced a hyphen into the merger, and the paper became the *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, which sounds as though the paper was news-free, or devoid of news.”¹

Or perhaps, from another perspective, the hyphen conceals the power to create fresh meaning. That is, how it is capable of generating a semiotic twist, as does oxymoron, when two disparate meanings combine. But Strunk and White do not see the hyphen’s hidden potential in the Chattanooga instance. “Obviously,” they conclude, “we ask too much of a hyphen when we ask it to cast a spell over words it does not adjoin.”²

However, they do consider the long view: “The steady evolution of language seems to favor union: two words eventually become one, usually after a period of hyphenation,”³ a view that could be considered to be in sync with the force of more-than.

Perhaps the hyphen, in its capacity to absorb two previously odd-fitting words, is up for the task of casting wonder?

Even a scant few and well-placed hyphens can make possible the proliferation of more-than qualities across

1 William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Longman, 2000), 35.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

thousands of word-bodies. This is a feat not unlike how Jesus fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes. And even the fragments – gathered after the mass feeding – were able to keep on feeding more.

Fishy tall-tales? Messianic magic? Wonder casting?

Or possible proof of the powerful lure of the “one and the many” – of Whitehead’s “event” – proliferating.

As the force of creativity cleaves the way forward into infinity.

Learning to Move Qi

*So, matter resolves itself into numberless vibrations,
all linked together in uninterrupted continuity,
all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction,
like shivers.*

– Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*

Acupuncture is, very simply, all about moving *qi*.

Zheng qi: healthy atmosphere (or tendency); upright, vital energy.

In Chinese etymology, one of the original meanings for *qi* (pronounced “chee”) was the mist that rises and forms the clouds. Having its roots in ethereal concepts gave rise to its changing forms and extended meanings over time. The Chinese have at least 164 meanings for the word *qi*, similar to how Inuit people have generated many words for the different types of snow and snow-ness, that is, the effects of snow.

The many usages – words and phrases – are animated by the concept of *qi*.¹

Xiao qi: laughing gas; nitrous oxide.

I wonder: as the Arctic snow melts, will the Inuit's snow-words also shrink?

Nuan qi: central heating.

In Chinese medicine, *qi* is the force that connects the entire organism of the human body. It circulates – along with blood and fluids – through the system of channels and pathways known as the *jing luo*. Put another way, the *qi* – and its intimate relationship with blood and fluids – is the medium for the exchange of information between any one part or function of the body and all others. Say, for example, inside a capillary bed, or in a nostril's flare.

Tian qi: weather.

1 Huan Zhang Yu, *A Brief History of Qi* (Brookline: Paradigm Publications, 2001). All of the assorted translations for *qi* included in this little essay are found in Huan's book.

How is it possible to move something you can't touch?
How can you pin down the unpindownable?

Shen qi: expression, air, manner; spirited, vigorous; putting on airs, cocky.

But since I'm not Chinese, I didn't grow up with the concept of *qi* embedded in me. I needed to learn to feel *qi*.

Early in my acupuncture schooling – nearly all the students in our class were of Western heritage – in order to begin to comprehend *qi*, we were shown a Chinese character that was derived from a steaming bowl of rice. Our teacher – a Greek–American – emphasized the relationship between the steam and the rice, a symbol for health and nourishment in China. “This is *qi*,” he said. “It is the animating force in nature.”

Yang qi: foreign flavor; Western style; outlandish ways.

Soon after seeing the pictograph of steam arising from a bowl of rice began the arduous bodily task of comprehending *qi*.

Yong qi: courage, nerve.

With an ongoing lesson of humility.

Ao qi: air of arrogance, haughtiness.

Growing up, I learned to be invisible and to tune into the imperceptible. To try to sniff like a dog. Sing like a whale. Tune into a bat's frequency. Have the sensitivity of a spider's legs.

Huan qi: get some breathing room; have a respite, take a breather.

In learning to forage for comprehension in this foreign land of *qi*, it was necessary to accept that something had been activated. That a motivating force was behind the action.

That I needed to cultivate my own *qi*.

Song qi: relax one's efforts.

I practice by attuning to barometric pressure drops and by leaning into up-draughts of air. I learn that our global atmosphere is always seeking equilibrium, but will never actually get there. I gradually realize that there is no place or state at which to arrive.

As I begin to bodily grow into the concept of *qi*, I extend this insight to the workings of the human body: that it is a biological drive for our bodies to seek homeostasis of dynamic equilibrium. That is, to stay alive. Even at rest.

There is no such thing as absolute balance.

Only a quivering flux.

Qi qia: balloon (literally “*qi* ball”).

We learned that *qi* can become disordered in the body and manifest as physical signs and symptoms: fever, chills, spontaneous sweating, dizziness, tinnitus, fainting, cough, palpitations, belching, hiccups, vomiting, diarrhea, numbness, pain, and frequent sighing.

Qi fen: atmosphere.

I wonder: Do clouds have bodies?

Qi jiu: sparkling wine.

Or *qi* can be vacuous, such as in someone with a poor memory, urinary incontinence, or a low sex drive.

Sang qi: feel disheartened, lose heart; become crestfallen.

We were taught that when needling, it is essential to get *de qi*, which means “obtaining *qi*” or the “arrival of *qi*.” When a needle is inserted and gently twirled, there are techniques to summon the arrival of *qi*, such as pecking maneuvers, or rapid tiny thrusts, or sneaky sudden lifts to tease the *qi* closer to the needle’s tip.

When the grasp occurs, we were told, it can feel like when a fish, deep down in the water, bites the hook-needle. That there’s a barely perceptible, tiny tug under the skin.

Qi xi: breath; flavor, smell.

We were taught that *qi* is information.

He qi: to engage in sexual intercourse (literally, “unite the *qi*”).

Most importantly, obtaining *qi* has a double aim: its arrival is to be felt simultaneously by me, the needler, and the person I am needling.

Sheng qi: to get angry (literally, “to make *qi*”); vitality, life.

My mother came from a line of water dowsers who were effective at finding veins of fresh water hidden deep underground. She is a voracious reader and bird watcher, but has never dowsed for water.

Sheng qi: information; voice, tone.

Where to start to look, search out spots to needle? How do I know where to go?

Chu qi kou: gas outlet, air vent.

Perhaps I'm lured by lethargy, or called to agitate a stagnant pool of blood.

Qi se: complexion, color (of the face).

Or drawn to a grimace, one of pain's magnets.

Shan qi: hernia, rupture.

What have I learned to feel-sense when I'm locating a spot to needle?

Tong qi: ventilate; aerate; be in touch, keep each other informed.

A potential.

What do I feel when I get de-*qi*?

In a whisper-blink, our co-joined jellyfish-body gives a barely perceptible shiver.

Qi lang: blast (of an explosion).

With the tiny tug under the skin, *qi* moves.

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As I puncture the body, lyrics are made.

I practice lyric-ing the body with punctures.

A hyphen includes. And makes possibilities bigger.

Dashes are used to separate groups of words, unlike hyphens, which are used to separate parts of words. Strunk & White's instructions are to "Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption."² A dash dashes – light skips – darts – across a sentence. The trace of a water skipper as it walks across water.

A hyphen separates by generating a sucking action between words. For a dash, there is nothing but surface tension between the dash-water skipper's legs and the paper-water.

As a dash sets off, quick in its movement, a hyphen embeds, and stays in intimate proximity.

Consider this: Our nocturnal dreams have no beginning or end. They always take place in the ever-moving middle. In this way, dreams could be considered a mode of thinking that begins with process. Lured towards the ever-moving middle.

Hyphens, in their doing, break up compound words. They aerate word-soil to allow for fresh meaning-growth to take place.

Hyphens – in their process of hyphening – also *make* compound words. They graft words together, generating the possibility of new meaning.

2 William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Longman, 2000), 9.

Again, staying true to its Greek origin, *huphen*, a hyphen's presence tethers two (or more) words together. As offspring of hyphenation, the words are no longer separate, but now move together, "under," "one."

Without a self, or a subjective "I" to orient to, who or what leads the way into the anterior now? Hyphens are handy, but how can the more-than gain purchase in language without a subject to gain traction, to push off against?

How can knowledge be made if the more-than is ineffable?

The White Coat

I arrive at New York City's Penn Station the evening of the day Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. Besides plans to catch up with friends and do New Yorky things, my four-day immersion coincides with two noteworthy happenings: the women's protest march, and a grand rounds seminar with my most influential acupuncture teacher. I haven't studied with Kiiko since my apprenticeship – as her *moxa girl* – in her Boston clinic more than twenty-five years ago. And I haven't returned to New York for about the same amount of time.

As I step off the train from Montréal into Penn Station's low, rumbling belly, a waft of diesel fumes mixes with stale piss – and other familiar yet ineffable scents. Ineffable and familiar as, say, a mouthful of blueberries: impossible to describe without the *experience* of tasting blueberries. In that first nostril flare, the long gap since my last visit vanishes. This instant olfactory recognition is followed by a wave of awe for this wildly restrained city.

Yes, *that's* the smell of New York.

Once above ground, as I wait for my Uber ride, I notice the street sweat from invisible asphalt pores. Even from several blocks up, the glare from Times Square makes its presence felt.

The term “grand rounds” conjures an image of a clump of white-coated, naïve medical students who are led in and out of hospital rooms by an attending senior physician. The main job of the chief white coat is to hone and sharpen the knowledge and clinical skills of the green practitioners.

They hover at the end of a populated bed, the thin curtain pulled around behind them. The patient is usually silent and wide-eyed as the clump discusses the pertinent clinical details – the data – of the case before them.

Rarely does anyone in the attending group actually touch the person in the bed.

A diagnosis is deduced from details gleaned from various clinical tests that have already been performed. The interpretations of the test results are discussed, and a treatment plan is devised based on an accurate diagnosis. The chief white coat ensures accuracy. All the different particulars combine into a whole diagnosis. This is considered a rational approach to making knowledge, when there is a distinct separation between the Knower and what is Known. In the rational approach, Knowledge becomes fixed because it is deduced from what is already Known, from the past. This can be considered dead knowledge.

Meanwhile, since the tests, blood flow has long since moved on, very much alive.

In this rational approach to knowledge, the parts and systems of the body are separated and don't touch each other. This separation is necessary. The gap created by the separation is ignored, and considered irrelevant.

As the group discusses the recorded information and the time arrives for decisive clinical action, answers from the group emerge. The senior physician mocks one student; another is lauded. Knowledge has been bestowed, and it is time to move on to the next case.

In the sudden leaving, the privacy curtain is scraped open by the senior physician.

The person in the hospital bed is often left feeling like a lump of raw meat.

Early the next afternoon, my friend and I step into the protest march on Fifth Avenue, not far from Rockefeller Center. It is already well underway. The march began at a spot close to the United Nations building on the East River and is supposed to finish at the Trump Towers on Fifth Avenue, a few blocks short of Central Park.

The march has grown into a slowly moving snake of people a few kilometers long, everyone pinned in solidarity as one gigantic, barely moving body. Impatient with the snake's slow pace, we pull out of the crowd to find out why the body isn't moving any faster. The reason: the freshly sworn-in President's New York residence has been barricaded and made impenetrable with cement pilings and SWAT teams. There is little room for the snaking body to stretch out and disperse at the end of the march. As we walk through the vacant side streets, we notice empty buses that police have placed at awkward angles to block the possibility of rogue elements from ploughing into the soft, fleshy flank of the resistance.

As we once again merge with the snake, I'm puzzled by a low hum in the distance. A helicopter hovers above but this sound is coming from the ground. Downstream, a distant sound-shape is rising from the throngs of thousands. The hum gradually grows in intensity, quickly arrives to our position in the snake, and passes through as my neighbors raise their voices and let out a banshee scream. As local breaths run out, the singular scream ripples on as those further up the snake join into the flowing voice. Every ten minutes or so the hum returns in the distance, then wells up and crashes through as a united scream.

The immanently choreographed sound-pulsations add an affective vitality to our shuffle of shock and disbelief. The more-than-human rhythmic pulse also carries the

deep hum of defiance, as the United States – the country of my birth – unravels.

In the later part of the 1800s, William James left New York to teach and write at Harvard. In the early 20th century, around when James was writing a collection of essays on his philosophy, New York's "Tenderloin" – slick with corruption and crime and home to the city's red-light district – was snuffed out and razed to make way for Penn Station.

For James, "Philosophy has always turned on grammatical particles. With, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my – these words designate types of conjunctive relation arranged in a roughly ascending order of intimacy and inclusiveness."¹

My friend and I decide to peel away from the still pulsing defiant body, and make our way down the Lower East Side. To our left, I feel Queens and Brooklyn press in across their watery cushion of the East River. Behind us, I'm also aware of Harlem leaning into Manhattan across 125th Street, and the Bronx leaning across the Harlem River. And I sense New Jersey – way over on the other side of the Hudson – feeling excluded from all the edgy fanfare. And I imagine Long Island's smug and uppity indifference stretch all the way out to Fire Island at its fingertip.

At the heart of James's philosophy of "radical empiricism" is his notion of *pure experience*. Pure experience must be directly felt. For James, experience includes both the particulars and the *relations between* the particulars. In a way, James's philosophy takes place in the gap that is ignored – and dismissed – by rationalists, which "empha-

1 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912; Mineola: Dover, 2003), 24.

sizes universals and makes wholes prior to parts in the order of logic.”² James’s postulate – posed around the same time that Penn Station opened as well as when Einstein’s theory of relativity was bending scientific understanding of the physical universe – accentuates the relational, whereas “transcendental idealism is inclining to let the world wag incomprehensibly, in spite of its Absolute Subject and his unity of purpose.”³

Ordinary empiricism has a tendency to “do away with the connections of things, and to insist most on the disjunctions.” James takes another swipe at general empiricism and its “general pulverization of all Experience,” instead favoring radical empiricism, as it “*does full justice to conjunctive relations*,”⁴ he stresses.

Direct lived experience, and all that comes with it, is all that matters for James. Nothing is left out, as parts – not the whole – continue to lead the way forward, indeterminately.

As in the fleshy body, nerves and blood vessels, muscles, bones, lymph and gooey connective tissue, and all the organs are in a conjunctive relationship: it’s all in there together.

The live body makes its way forward, indeterminately.

Manhattan stretches a length of around twenty kilometers, and its girth is a lean four kilometers. Its surface is pocked with subway portals, their discrete openings marked by different colored dots; one color is assigned to a line of tubular vessels moving underneath. Movement pours in and out of cracks. Taxi drivers squeeze into opportunistic gaps and are jerked forward by the pulsing congestion. Sudden up draughts swirl with the movement across the surfaces. Spindly-legged water towers on

2 Ibid., 22.

3 Ibid., 21.

4 Ibid., 23.

rooftops – continually sucking water up into their wooden bellies – aren't just clichéd props for the cityscape, but are useful, and give up their water when needed by the scurrying humans below.

On my first day as Kiiko's moxa girl – in July 1991 after I graduated from The New England School of Acupuncture in Boston – she immediately had me perform a clinical technique called *tonetsukyu*, translated from Japanese as “penetrating” moxibustion. It was done on the first patient of the day, a woman recovering from a stroke. The technique is fiddly and requires lots of practice. Tiny bits of pure moxa wool are rolled between the thumb and index finger into a thread sized shape, and placed – precariously – on the bottom inside corner of the skin next to the patient's great toenail. The top of the thread is lit by an incense stick and snubbed out just before it burns down to the skin. The patient should feel a tiny prick of heat. This is done in succession about ten times on the same spot. Kiiko told our class how she would practice repeatedly as she rode on the Tokyo subway until she was able to roll the moxa into perfect forms.

This style of moxibustion directs the heat into the body. In the 1920s, to demonstrate its penetrating effects, a group of Japanese researchers performed the technique on a watermelon. After burning bits of moxa numerous times on the same spot on the watermelon's skin, they cut open the melon. Inside, a brown sliver ran all the way through the watermelon's flesh.

With sweaty palms and Kiiko hovering over me, I performed the task. When I finished, she grunted and walked away. She kept me for the next six months as her apprentice moxa girl.

New York's different voices press into the throbbing sensorium. The tetchy honks of the taxi drivers jam with the long, irritated honks of impatient commuters. Emer-

gency vehicles have their range of voices: an ambulance's cough and insistent throttle; a fire truck's undulating tenor mixes with a police vehicle's staccato and sneaky rasp. Beats, sounds, rhythms combine into an incessant background din. There's a high-pitched quality in the silences between. Even when the city tries to sleep, an echoing ring lingers. New York is a city with tinnitus. Then another colicky wail that rouses it up from the brink of sleep.

Overall, the undulating rattles soothe.

James elaborates on the problem of knowledge-making, singling out the importance of *felt* transitions.

So the notion of a knowledge still *in transitu* and on its way joins hands here with that notion of a "pure experience" [...] The instant field of the present is always experience in its "pure" state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into a thing and a thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as some one's opinion about fact.⁵

That *instant field of the present* that often arrives as a sudden, unexpected surprise. Over and over, it is experienced as a simple *that*.

Walking around the city's lower end, I catch glimpses of one of my favorite buildings, the Jenga Building. It got its name from the children's game, where structures are made with small rectangular wooden blocks, balanced precariously as it grows. I'd play Jenga with my nephews when they were little, who would squeal with delight the moment the structure teetered and came down with a crash. From several perspectives – the Bowery, Chinatown, not far from Ground Zero – as I round a corner,

5 Ibid., 39.

there it is: a skyscraper precariously standing upright. With each singular sighting, and every surprised corner-turn, I squeal with delight.

In Japan, the practitioner learns *Kampo* or “traditional” medicine through direct experience. Students commit hundreds of hours, observing thousands of treatments in their teachers’ clinics.

One of Kiiko Matsumoto’s most influential teachers was Kiyoshi Nagano, a blind acupuncturist.

Not far from New York’s acupuncture school in Chelsea – the venue for the grand rounds session – is the High Line. It is an elevated greenway, about two and a half kilometers long, and acts to aerate the street level congestion below. When James was young, this area along the Hudson shuttled meat carcasses, fresh produce, and the rag trade onto the street-level trains. Due to many accidental deaths at the rail crossings, the area was dubbed “Death Avenue.” The West Side Cowboys arrived to ride horses and wave flags at the trains in an effort to bring safety to the bloody chaos. Their brave intentions did little to curb the accidents, so an elevated line was built. It was designed to go through the center of buildings – and connect directly with warehouses and factories – and allow trains to load and unload their cargo inside the buildings without disturbing traffic below. As interstate trucking grew in the 1950s, rail traffic waned. The High Line was abandoned and soon became ripe pickings for developers. A grassroots organization was able to snatch it from developers and repurpose it into an urban linear park.

Walking south along the promenade, picking up my pace to get to the grand rounds on time, I glimpse the distinct but faint outline of the Statue of Liberty. It hovers over the water, like a mirage.

I'm able to score a front-row seat, positioned between two students, both elbow-deep in notes and reference books. The room – on the building's thirteenth floor – is packed with fifty or so buzzy acupuncturists with varying degrees of experience, who are anticipating Kiiko's entrance. The treatment table is placed in the center of the long rectangular room. The atmospheric surroundings are a mix between a live cooking demonstration and a magician's clinical sideshow. Instead of a mirror over the treatment table, a digital camera will home in on the master's maneuvers, and project the live image onto a large screen positioned for both sides of the room to see.

The grand rounds at New York's acupuncture school is a chance for students to bring in their recalcitrant cases and observe Kiiko-sensei at work, unwinding stubborn pain out of stuck bodies.

The first client is waiting, supine, on the treatment table, eager for relief.

Kiiko enters. Her greying jet-black hair is carelessly camouflaged with brunette dye.

She must be at least seventy now.

Thick socks push into purple shower shoes.

She's still as unadorned as I remember her.

Although sighted, Kiiko has the singular focus of an unsighted person. As she begins to ask the woman on the table questions, her probing hands listen for answers, as though reading Braille.

Just as single-minded as all those years ago. A comet. Someone in class then called her a comet.

She wears a puffy grey sweater under an oversized white lab coat.

The room hushes as she gets to work.

“The first great pitfall from which such a radical standing by experience will save us,” says James, “is an artificial conception of the relations between knower and known.”⁶

Kiiko’s treatment style – which she first learned through Master Nagano, who was considered by most of his contemporaries to be a renegade – is performed through direct palpation, and through the conduit of relationality. With acutely tuned hands, the patient is directly palpated to determine what is going on and what to do about it. Treatment possibilities are tested, immediately, and the body answers, immediately. Either the palpated reflexes – the spots of pressure-pain on the body – get better, or not. A needle is inserted into the effective releasing spot. A bit of time passes. The needle is tweaked. The painful reflex spot is checked again. No more pain. The needle is removed. The spot is re-palpated. The pain moves, deliberately blind to the durational rhythms and forces that capture the needle.

Using Kiiko–Nagano’s techniques, the *treatment* – the event – performs the diagnosis. A priori, all is just an assumption. Theoretical guesswork is minimized. There is no need to wait and wonder if the treatment is making itself felt in practice. The body gives a direct response, now, in the experience.

“In this continuing and corroborating, taken in no transcendental sense, but denoting definitely felt transitions, *lies all that the knowing of a percept by an idea can possibly contain or signify*,” James emphasizes. From a Jamesian philosophic perspective, the acupuncture treatment is very much alive, as knowledge is made in its felt transitions. James continues: “Wherever such transitions are felt, the first experience *knows* the last.”⁸ The effect of the

6 Ibid., 23.

7 Ibid., 30.

8 Ibid.

needles twirled is an aggregate of knowledge, layered in its felt transitions.

There is no gap between the treatment and the diagnosis. Nor is there an Outside Knower bestowing what is known. “Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.”⁹

The needle’s tweak inside the tissue of experience makes knowledge in the tweaking instant.

From my front-row seat, what appears to be a sleight-of-hand performance – or a séance on the Ouija body-board – in reality is Kiiko’s attention that stays in the Jamesian *instant field of the present*. “Even so my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another,”¹⁰ says James. No magical thinking is involved, only the rigor of attending to transitions – as pure experience – and staying at the point of emergent knowledge.

A treatment must be lived. Experienced directly.

Acupuncture does its work on the dimension of the ineffables: between thresholds, in the transitions, as the body levitates, reorients. A treatment is co-composed in the field of possibilities, in the conjunctive relations.

Where knowledge is made on the spot.

For years Kiiko would return every summer to study with Nagano in Tokyo until his death. Each immersive period of study with her master thickened the layer of the treatment strategies, growing denser with possibilities. As with the living tissue of experience, “The universe continually grows in quantity by new experiences that graft themselves upon the older mass; but these very new

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 25.

experiences often help the mass to a more consolidated form.”¹¹ Kiiiko develops ideas that have been layered over, and collaged into, Nagano’s ideas. Ideas that spread out like bamboo shoots as treatment possibilities to be put to use directly as living treatment options.

James’s philosophical orientation is based on “My description of things [that start] with the parts and [make] of the whole a being of the second order. It is essentially a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts.”¹²

Like James’s “mosaic philosophy,” Kiiiko spreads a living mosaic of treatment possibilities. Her hand is suffused in a body, amidst the layers of possibilities to test out: as a practitioner amidst change rather than on the Knowing Outside. Contiguous bodies are within their tissue conjunctive relations, as the more-than tendencies – felt in the transitions – relay the pulse of things, in the instant.

Kiiiko Matsumoto *thinks* with her fingers, and uses touch as a rudder to steer her thoughts. Concepts are circulated through a body, and are echoed back by the body: does *this* spot do its work? If the body says no, she moves onto another potential strategy. Layers of treatment possibilities are put to the test, immediately. A theory is immediately tested, and the body judges the usefulness of the theory. Informed touch is the rudder that steers ideas into willing flesh.

Movements of thoughts – directly testing ideas, possibilities – cleave a way forward, leaving ripples of felt transitions in their wake.

Knowledge-in-the-making, on the fly, by the seat of a needler’s pants.

The practice of acupuncture as an operational philosophy: a needle is nothing without a body. Contiguous bodies: as the therapist thinks forward amid the grain of

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Ibid., 22.

things, they test the usefulness of their ideas. The acupuncturist is among the forces at work and play, not on the Knowing Outside.

The body wears the white coat of pure experience.

Back on the ground after the grand rounds, and just as I turn a corner making my way to the subway, there it is again. The Jenga Building. Teetering. Just.

I feel another squeal as fresh as the first.

I have no idea what New York's body is going to do next.

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Hyphens are one of language's materials – a kind of glue – placed between two surfaces so that the one and the many can move, together. Particularly in response to chaotic conditions, as “chaotic self-ordering depends,” says Massumi, on a “sensitivity to initial conditions no matter how far the system has drifted from its original terminus.”¹³

He goes on to ask: “Is not this enduring ‘sensitivity’ the connecting thread of affect meandering impersonally through the world?” He fields his own question with a succinct answer, tucked in with hyphens:

“World-affect: life-glue of matter.”¹⁴

Extending Massumi's logic, I ask: aren't hyphens one of affect's materials? A chaotic self-ordering of bringing together the one and the many into selfless self-order?

13 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 227.

14 Ibid.

Subject. From *sub* (“under,” “below”)
+ *jacere* (“to throw”)

Literally, to throw under.

“I think it’s just psychological,” you say. This is a common refrain I hear from supine subjects on the treatment table. A reflexive throwaway line that tends to dismiss the soma over the psyche, and suggests that acupuncture cannot penetrate the amorphous mind. The psyche – the psychological subject – is thrown under the soma.

The act of splitting the mind from the body is a culturally petulant habit. A kneejerk condition sanctioned by the benign laziness of Cartesian thinking.

By protocols and moldy models.

By the circumscribed search for a single causative factor.

By methods that have overstayed their tenure.

By a lack of considered, reflective thinking. And lack of imagination.

By an aversion to ambiguity and an intolerance of mess. That compulsion to resolve difference. That pesky “or” that greases binary thinking and keeps the object/body in opposition to the subject/mind.

And, mostly, by the static, mechanistic model of the human body, where everything is reduced into separate parts. The act of reducing extinguishes more-than potentials.

And with the rusty model comes non-conscious expectations, as though my job is to peer in under the hood, check the spark plugs and fluid levels, kick the tires, and occasionally do some panel beating.

The culturally implicit expectation is for me to *fix* things. Nothing is added or taken away with my puny needles – just *moved* – through carefully placed and gently executed twirls within the always-changing flow of flesh and fluids.

All the meetings and occurrences that take place within the register of the more-than:

As the whole body thinks.

As a way to practice process-oriented thinking, Manning steps – without flinching – into contradiction, into paradox where there is no “subject.” To do so, like Whitehead, she sidesteps the bifurcation¹⁵ and difference perceived as an exclusionary wedge that splits this from that. Instead, because process has no beginning or end, she is always thinking amidst the inclusive middle, that is, the differential.

15 Whitehead explains: “The reason why the bifurcation of nature is always creeping back into scientific philosophy is the extreme difficulty of exhibiting the perceived redness and warmth of the fire in one system of relations with the agitated molecules of carbon and oxygen, with the radiant energy from them, and with the various functionings of the material body. Unless we produce the all-embracing relations, we are faced with a bifurcated nature; namely, warmth and redness on one side, and molecules, electrons and ether on the other side.” Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 32.

A hyphen twists a word-pair into the middle. Far from passive, the nonhuman hyphen takes on agency as a relational activity. And like gooey connective tissue in the body,¹⁶ a hyphen is discrete yet very much active.

Due to their middling presence, both forms respond to movement in their relational twists and articulations.

There is no longer an inside relative to an outside, no subject in relation to other, just vast surfaces relating to other surfaces as they glide, undulate, twist; all unified, especially when chaotic. With a more-than force – a vitality affect – always at the center of the movement, accessible to all, not just finely attuned otherworldly shamans and seers.

Like the way Butcher Ding instructs through his actions: practice by attuning to the space between and the middle way will yield to the knife-needle-word's blade.

When I needle, my subjective "I" slips away. I am merely a fleshy quiver in the treatment room, listening with my hands, attuning to the vibrations within your fleshy quivers. As the needle grasps fine microscopic connective tissue, we twist into the differential.

When I write, my fingertips think as they attempt to capture and convey the vibrations – often felt as unex-

16 Resembling the consistency of egg whites, all the different connective tissues in the body are coated with a gooey "ground substance" that provides the slippery, conductive medium for change to take place. Messages are relayed (*twist-zing!*) across contiguous liquefied sheets containing homogenous cells that initially scatter, then gather to flock into coherent excitations: like the flash of fireflies, or chirping crickets, or the synchronized beat of the heart's pacemaker cells.

pected wafts of turbulence – arising within my internal milieu, as an activity arising from my instance of writing.

Thoughts twist into the differential. Many cuts and distinctions are made.

As my whole body thinks.

“Where does your body want attention, *now*?” is my usual counter-refrain. My question flings you into your body as it presents its [Whiteheadian] functionings for your experience. Into that quivering space where wonder remains, always present to the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

Too often my question is met with a bewildering search of the ceiling. As though experiencing has levitated up into that back corner. As eyes search for an answer, the fleshy curious organ housed between ears gets busy scanning memories for an insult or injury to report as a cause. Seeking out that belligerent single causative factor. Maybe it was that bad night’s sleep. Or last night’s bad curry. Or that fight you had with your neighbor. Or the worry about the ambiguous results from that blood test. Or, a popular reason: too much time spent on an electronic device staring at a flat screen. Usually done sitting.

But more often than not, the causes are multiple, landing as the varying manyness of all that comes as one. The multiplicity of phenomena that occur simultaneously.

Process-oriented philosophy reorients the swivel to a processual twist within. Process takes place within movement's differential: within thoughts; within vessels; within the forces always at work and play (stillness and emptiness are produced by the interplay of forces!); and within the differential of the swiveling between. Whitehead's reality is located within a swivel: "we are an activity within the world, and the world is within us."¹⁷

My refrain to myself, as a way to etch it within the space between, into my own experiencing: Yes, we are in the world, and the world is within us.

I turn the refrain into a practice that folds the outside into the inside and the inside into the outside, like a Möbius strip. I repeat it over and over as a mantra that propels me forward into my own becoming: I am always in the world, and the world is always within me.

I stifle a frustrated urge to bark at you: "But your whole body thinks! You are an activity within your body!"

Instead, as a response to your efforts to respond to my question, my fingers get busy and listen to the spaces within that call out from under your skin. To meet the call, I respond with a needle's precise and pointy touch, and give it a twirl. A series of soft zings spread across your goeey horizon. Across the fluidy undulating plateau of a multitude of surfaces.

Almost instantly, your eyes glaze over as you drop: into parasympathetic bliss where the more-than activities of the one and the many take place within. Drop into White-

17 Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 227.

head's *event*, or William James's *pure experience*, no longer as white-coated abstractions, but as live, felt experience.

Into and within the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

Let's meet in the middle, orient to within the hyphenating space where our experiences co-mingle, entwine within the forces of the ever-present anterior-now.

By thinking within the undulating and formless logic of process-oriented philosophy, the epistemological Houdini escapes the subject-object binary straightjacket and vaporizes into the incalculable constant of swirling activities and forces.

The subject – what is thrown under – arises, renewed, not as a noun, but as a verb: as a more-than activity – a doing – to be explored and discovered, in direct experience.

Gui Yu Qu's Answer

Gui Yu Qu said, "The five elemental phases and the six atmospheric influences have a definite pattern and rhythm. This knowledge is very profound. If one grasps it, one can know the changes that will transpire in the natural world. One who masters this science can enjoy eternal health, one who neglects to learn this will suffer danger, injury and even death by having violated the natural rhythms and patterns of the universe. Please learn, understand, and apply this knowledge carefully."

Huang Di said, "In order to understand this deeply, one must know its origin and consequences. Then one will know the near and the far. In this fashion, the understanding and application of the five elemental phases and the six atmospheric influences will enable one to achieve clarity. Is it possible for you to summarize this in a simple form so that we can more easily understand and recall it?"

Gui Yu Qu answered, "You ask very meaningful questions. The wisdom will become apparent to you very quickly. It is like hitting a drum and hearing the sound; it is like the echo that results from speaking. It is that transparent; it is that simple."

Huang Di replied, “This is illuminating. You have communicated in a specific manner. I will carve it on a jade tablet and preserve it in the *Golden Chamber*, and I will call it ‘Discussion on the Cosmos.’”¹

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“From chaos, Milieus and Rhythms are born. This is the concern of very ancient cosmogonies.”²

- 1 Maoshing Ni, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine: A New Translation of the Neijing Suwen with Commentary* (Boston: Shambala, 1995), 240.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313.

Pulses

...the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions.

–Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹

On the side of my left index finger, over the first knucklecrease, there's a small vein. It's located up from the tiny shard of graphite that broke off when Jim Spagle accidentally jammed his pencil into my palm. Our desks were next to each other in second grade. The carbon is lodged deep under the skin, and it's there for good. Like a fossil.

I've developed a habit – a sort of behavioral tic like hair twirling – that I do, usually when I'm avoiding attempts to concentrate: with moderate pressure using the base of my thumb, I glide over the little vein, watch it disappear, then just as suddenly, it refills with blood. Over and over, I play with the vein with mild amazement. How I can dam up the flow then release it, as a way into my body and its persistent ways. It's a window into my body's real-time activities, a glimpse of what is held inside and

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313.

the ongoing pressure to sustain movement. I'm reminded of a sea lion that glides towards the thick window of the aquarium tank then makes a sudden U-turn. The blood moving through that small surface vein looks at me then darts down deep to join up with bigger veins on its trip back to my heart for more oxygen.

I've also discovered that in the same spot – with light pressure – I can sometimes feel a pulse.

“Every milieu is vibratory,” say Deleuze and Guattari, which suggest that a milieu is a “direction in motion” that forms a “block of space-time constituted by the periodic repetition of the component.”²

“My blood pressure is up. The anesthetist isn't happy about that.”

My fingers, placed lightly on her wrists, listen to the pulse underneath.

“Surgery's at the end of month. Be good to finally get the thing out.”

Her question hovers over my head, but my focus remains on her pulse. Is it choppy? Or maybe knotted?

“Do you think we can bring my BP down?”

Blood pressure. The pressure of blood's push against the walls. Arteries and veins are the vessels that hold blood as their ducts and valves work to help propel blood along their slick, muscled walls. The tremendous push from the heart's left ventricle begins the circuitous trip. The first big push thrusts oxygenated blood up and out through the thumb-size aorta that makes a hairpin turn down, pushing blood into bifurcating byways and tributaries. Pressure ensures fresh blood saturates flesh, perfuses organs, and gets deep down into bone. Capillary beds are the minuscule sites for gaseous exchanges, trading oxy-

2 Ibid.

gen for waste products, and a venous system trudges it back to the heart and lungs for more fresh oxygen.

Every second or so there's another thump-push-squirt from the heart's chamber as blood is propelled through the aorta. Over and over and over the repeated splash, like waves wearing down rocks as blood is pushed through the body.

The metronomic beat quickens with fever, sex, and a fright; or slows with cold, relaxation, or when in deep undisturbed sleep. Veins labor against gravity, pushing – with dogged effort – the blood back towards the heart and lungs. Gravity often wins when valves give up, collapsing under time and pressure: varicose veins pop out. But even as walls thin and erode, the heart insists: "Get up! Keep moving. Life must go on!" Until the aorta, the great garden-hose vessel gets so worn down and stiff from all the incessant forceful splashes that it gives way to a rupture. Or a collective organ mutiny: the kidneys' filter gives up and toxins seep out; or the brain, so over-taxed and exhausted, also gives up. Enough.

But until then, the pulses keep time.

"Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition,"³ they say.

I press into her wrists. Closer to the bone.

"They said it's the size of a cantaloupe. With legs coming off of it!"

The pulse disappears. Hollow? Hidden?

"Like an octopus," she adds.

Even in the low light, her face looks pale. Lack-luster. Lacking luster. Lacking blood, that, if plentiful, creates sheen, a lusty hue to her skin. The presence of the uterine fibroid is causing her menstrual flow to flood, draining her iron stores. Iron in blood carries oxygen, lending lus-

3 Ibid.

ter. Most likely her lips are a shade of purple–cyan under the thick smear of bright-red lipstick.

“Creepy, isn’t it?”

It’s an odd fact: in traditional Chinese medicine, the uterus, along with the brain and the gall bladder, are considered “curious” organs.

Like playing a double bass, my fingertips jam with the percussive pulse coming from under her wrist. I press and release with my fingertips, moving from spot to spot. Underneath, the pulse responds, playing a duet with my moving fingers. Forming a line with my fingertips, I break from the duet and press them down in unison. And hold. I imagine the octopus–fibroid hiding under a rocky ledge. Listening from the surface, I can feel the vibrations on the sea floor. I track the movements of the fibroid-octopus. Above, the waves break, making the water choppy. Yes, choppy! For a moment, the octopus comes out of hiding but with a wild swirl of current, darts back under the ledge.

No, *hidden*. The wind above the water must be gusty.
Is there such a thing as a gusty pulse?

“...but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction,”⁴ they add for clarity.

Wind, in traditional Chinese medicine, is considered a pernicious influence that can wreak all sorts of havoc. Someone who suddenly faints or suffers paralysis for no apparent reason is “struck by wind.” Or a gust of wind can be considered “evil wind.” Not that the wind itself intends evil, but is, instead, some unknown entity that is *carried* by the wind.

4 Ibid.

In the form of a lively list, cultural theorist and blogger Andrew Murphie lobs an incisive beat between the intervals of the Deleuzoguattarian sonorous and fluctuant concept of The Refrain: “In the ocean, for example, the energy of the sun, the forces of current, the nature of water, osmotic membranes, schools of fish, sand and geological formations, etc., all different milieu – as ‘directions in motion’ overlapping and intersecting.” The multiplicities of milieus and rhythms swirl and vibrate in the relational soup, and are “the basic elements from which refrains assemble.”⁵

Years of circulating Chinese medical theory, planted in my explicit memory as knowledge over three decades ago, perfuses my thinking. As it does, my imploring fingers respond to the vibration coming from the surface of her wrists, which are draped across her distended abdomen. In traditional Chinese medicine, pulse-taking is often the first diagnostic port of call before deciding on which points to needle. Points are selected from a diagnosis partly informed by what the pulses are indicating. In the practice of traditional Chinese medicine, theory leads the way.

“And I’m not sleeping,” she adds. “My mind keeps waking me up. Over and over, I can’t quiet it down. Around three a.m., every night.”

Her comment pulls me up from the watery, sensuous depths under my fingers back to heady theory: Three a.m. is Liver hour on the circadian clock. The Liver circulates the blood. Not enough blood to hold down the *qi*. So not enough *qi* to anchor down the *yang*, which floats up in the middle of the night and *Boing!* Wide awake. Noise fills her

5 Andrew Murphie, “Milieu, Rhythm, Refrain, Territory,” *Adventures in Jutland*, September 8, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200530023611/http://www.andrewmurphie.org/blog/?p=426>.

head, Heart-blood too weak to fend off the ruminating Spleen. Liver clamors for attention, and succeeds.

The dynamics – the inter-relationships amongst her viscera’s milieu – are out of sync and stuck in a chaotic rhythm. The heart’s milieu – its “direction in motion,” for example – can occasionally throw ectopic or stray beats that are out of sync and might *feel* chaotic. They are usually clinically benign, harmless, but can be unsettling.

Milieus and rhythms – refrains of windy gusts and intonations – are making her life miserable, and sending her to the operating theater.

“Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another.”⁶

When learning how to interpret the pulse – again, one of several diagnostic tools in traditional Chinese medicine – different qualities are discerned as fingers are trained to listen to the flow within a person’s body. It is a fundamental skill in becoming an acupuncturist, particularly if practicing traditional methods. The daunting task requires memorizing, and integrating through touch, all of the twenty-six or so different pulse categories with their clinical indications. To be an accomplished practitioner of this ancient traditional approach, an acupuncturist must master all of the pulse categories. Each reflects the qualitative state of the substances (*qi*, blood, and fluids) that are circulating through the body at that moment in time. Like snapshots of the state of flow in the body, taken with knowledgeable and discerning fingertips.

For example, a *floating* pulse – felt on the surface with only light touch – indicates a superficial pathogen, such as wind and cold that has snuck in and hasn’t (yet) penetrated deeper into the body. Whereas a *sinking* quality

6 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 313.

– a pulse that can be felt only by pressing hard – usually indicates that the illness is located deep in the interior of the body. When the pulse is sinking, commonly referred to as a *deep* pulse, the body is attempting to deal with a serious problem threatening the viscera. Other qualities – such as *soggy* (feeling like a thread floating on water) or *slippery* (like feeling pearls in a basin or beads on a plate) or *hollow* (like pressing into a scallion stalk) or *wiry* (like fingers on guitar strings) are among the categories to be memorized and used to form a diagnosis.

A *choppy* pulse, which comes and goes choppily in jerks, like a knife scraping bamboo, can indicate sluggish blood circulation. Slow moving blood can stagnate, get stuck. A choppy pulse is considered more severe than a knotted pulse. Both indicate degrees of blood stagnation.

Whether knotted or choppy, hidden or hollow, this woman's blood – from a traditional perspective – is weak and stuck. With a gigantic fibroid obstructing the flow.

“Why can't I sleep?”

“Because your Chinese Spleen can't keep your Chinese Heart quiet at night,” I shoot back a chunk of theory as an answer, released from the archives of rote memorization.

She takes in my obscure answer. Ruminates.

“Oh,” she says, in a tone that matches the hollow pulse quality.

More bits of theory float up and circulate in the foreground of my thinking, but I shoo them away and return to my listening fingers. I practice a type of mongrel medicine that prioritizes pragmatics – led by informed touch – over theory. Go straight to the body, to its unfathomable complexity and continuous state of change, for direct feedback. The sense-perceived field – in the present moment, for the body never stands still – is more important than imposing theoretical chunks of knowledge.

My listening fingers are receiving a quick sense of the atmospheric conditions inside this woman's body. Palpable, vibratory clues to the current state of the living thing's internal environment: the hum and cadence of relational complexes; forces at play within atmospheric milieus and directions of motion. Which way the wind is blowing. Low-pressure troughs brewing. Shifting jet streams.

Just as I'm about to leave her wrists, another chunk, tucked deep in my dusty archives of Chinese pulse theory, emerges. I recall that a hollow pulse can also feel like touching the surface of a drum, which can not only indicate blood loss, but can also occur with hypertension.

Or was it a hidden pulse? Pain can hide the pulse. Pain drives the pulse into hiding. But she's not in any pain right now. The image of the octopus hiding under a rocky ledge sweeps across my vision. The explicit hollow pulse-chunk recedes back into the theoretical archive.

She persists: "So, do you think you can lower my blood pressure?"

Feeling confident that I've captured the general atmosphere of her body from her pulses, I leave her wrists and the submarine forest of subtle differences – Choppy? Knotted? Hollow? Hidden? – all wide open to interpretation, and go to her abdomen.

To her *hara*. Her *dantian*. Her Sea of Qi. Her body's ocean floor.

To where my hands listen to the lay of the liquid land – to what is immediately *felt* – and not cave in to the tendency to privilege theory over the pragmatism of direct experience.

I've learned to trust my fingers' implicit knowing as they meet the meeting ground: her body.

"Drying up, death, intrusion have rhythm. It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregu-

lar meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march.”⁷

Moving away from pulse poetics, I head towards the crass inelegance of messy, lived experience: to the stuck spot in her soft belly. Straight to the landscape to find a way in to stir the atmosphere with a few carefully placed needles. Used for several thousand years, acupuncture needles are simple intercessing tools – or tweakers of motion – capable of nudging her blood pressure down by twirling the milieus’ collective direction of motion. And smooth the choppy flow. And coax her Spleen, Liver, and Heart back to more amicable relating for better circulation, and a more peaceful sleep.

“I believe so,” I finally offer back, not quite convincingly.

My left hand investigates the lower left side of her abdomen; the surface of her body’s seabed. It’s the area, according to a style of Japanese hara diagnosis, where blood tends to pool and stagnate. Using light pressure with my left middle fingertip, I can feel the top of the fibroid.

I press around the edge of the huge but fairly harmless mass lodged in the muscle tissue of her uterus. There is a sliver of space, a way in.

With my right hand, I reach down to a spot on the top of her left ankle, and press in. It’s a spot, downstream, that is directly related to stuck blood. Related to the area in her abdomen where the cantaloupe–octopus–fibroid lives.

“Is this tender?” Again, I press into the spot.

“A bit.” She winces with the imposed finger pressure.

After holding the spot for several seconds, I recheck the space by the fibroid, pressing in once more. The sliver widens.

7 Ibid.

“The milieus are open to chaos that threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion. Rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between – between two milieus, rhythm–chaos or the chaosmos.”⁸

Swiftly, I tap in a few needles: one into the reactive ankle-spot, two into points on her lower leg, one into the top of her head, and one into the opening space that hugs the side of her octopus–fibroid. Gently twirling each needle, I feel for the trace of a tug, the miniscule sign that the message has been delivered: contact.

Immediately, she drops into parasympathetic bliss.

With the moxa lit, I hold the smoldering pole over the needle that is perched over her fibroid. She’s resting, silenced, with her eyes closed. I soon notice a pink hue fill her cheeks. Curious, I place my fingertips on her wrists. I don’t have to think because the sensation is clear and unmistakable: her pulse is smooth and even.

Calm, open seas.

“Yes. Your blood’s pressure is relieved,” I quietly tell her.

For *now*.

8 Ibid.

With the deceptive ease of common sense, Whitehead states, simply, "I am experiencing and my body is mine."⁹ Whitehead is his experience in its doing, and "the world for me is nothing else than how the functionings of my body present it for my experience."¹⁰ To think with Whitehead is to recover a common sense that has been lost in the recesses of the binary wedged between mind and body, between reason and intuition.

Of course, we are experiencing and our bodies are ours. This makes good sense. But the habitual tug of the binaries – of splits and bifurcations – is a stubborn and chronic one. The mutual exclusivity of this *or* that kind of thinking.

How to make a practice of thinking along and amidst the undulating plateaus of plurals? Within the *ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one*?

How to experience our body's activities as they fluctuate under our noses?

That is, how to experience our bodies as forces and flows amidst our sense perceptions?

How to simultaneously feel and think, touch and calculate, tease and soothe?

Perhaps borrow from the practice of improvisation, its generative and inclusive response, always the "Yes, *and...*" that cleaves into the anterior now.

Always affirmative, abundant.

And practice sitting in the discomfort of excess.

Resist the speed of scissors.

9 Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 138.

10 *Ibid.*, 163.

Linger in a vibrating dissonance, such as the percussive sweet spot that is slightly off-center.

And make a practice of thinking into the elastic ease of mutual *inclusivity*,¹¹ of allowing this *and* that to overlap, to co-join. Such a thinking practice requires lingering in, what Massumi describes as “a changing field of reciprocally presupposing differencings, complexly imbricated with one another all along the line.”¹² To invite difference invites mess that pools, playfully (hopefully), in paradox.

As you sink deeper into the treatment table, calm arises. Within the still space you recall how your specialist “pointed the genetic bone” at you; how they made a speculation laced with the voice of authority that sets in motion a torrent of fear and anxiety. How, since you carry the marker for the breast cancer gene, there is a strong statistical possibility that you will develop the disease. That, bluntly, in their medical opinion, you should get a “prophylactic mastectomy.”

Word-forms careless in their distinction and harmful in their effect. Words delivered – sealed tight in scientific *conjecture* – without acknowledging the ambiguity that lurks within their statistical edges. Words that slam shut possibilities. And have the capacity to terrorize.

I seethe: How do they *know*?

11 In his long essay, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, Brian Massumi thinks about how, with the animal, “the arena of combat and that of play enter into a zone of indiscernibility, without their differences being erased.” Too long restricted by the logic of mutual exclusivity, the human animal is often agitated by such paradox. Massumi reassures us that “humans may also practice effective paradox, when they abandon themselves to play. In play, the human enters a zone of indiscernibility.” Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 6, 8.

12 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

It's no wonder you arrived scattered into a million pieces. That's not psychological: that's your body – your Whiteheadian experiencing – freaking out.

Hyphens become a centrifugal force that keep the co-joined word-body intact and prevent it from spraying into smithereens.

As you recall out loud the doctor's words the anxiety surges again, vibrating in its affective dissonance. I twirl a needle in response: the tip tissue-ing as its self-less deed chases out the nocebo's – the placebo's evil twin – bone-pointing effects. The needle's counter-effect reassures you: it is not happening, now. And there is a good chance that it will never happen.

We know not what our bodies will do.

You relax. Gravity pulls you down into another infra-thin layer. The dissonance recedes.

Anxiety dissipates and with it the harmful residue of the pointed bone. A calm widens, seeps into the corners of the room. A resonant hum settles in.

When I twirl a needle, the force of the twirl mixes movement, bringing the forces to impinge upon flesh. On their own, needles are meaningless. They need flesh to twirl, a response to make movement.

Just as gravity – without a body to pull against, to shape – is nothing.

Perching

I've had to resist the urge to prune the straggly dead branches off the scrawny red box gum trees outside the window of my mud-brick studio. They're situated in the dry, crackly Australian bushland within cooe of Melbourne. The trees appear to be struggling, but surprise me every autumn with tender shoots that sprout the leathery, fragrant pale green leaves. Dry, pencil-thin branches reach up towards the roof where a nest is tucked inside a crack between the eaves and the top of the mud-brick wall.

Small birds, called pardalotes, a colorful yellow-throated, wren-sized songbird found only in Australia, use the branches as a perch, so that they can fan out their wings and quiver. This makes them look twice their size for a display meant to guard the nesting chamber from other pardalotes.

To snap off the dead branches might neaten up the view – and satisfy my urge to prune – but would remove perching possibilities.

"I feel like glass that's about to shatter," he says to the ceiling. The tremor in his left hand is obvious. The rest of his body is rigid, frozen like a stone statue, laid out long on the treatment table. The nuance of a quiver spreads

down to his left foot, which extends over the table. He folded his suit jacket carefully over the back of the chair.

He is not able to see the neurologist until late May, another month and a half away. A long wait, and a long time to hold the feeling of glass about to shatter. I'm hoping the treatment will at least release some of the tension. And make his clinical picture clearer. Clearer for the better.

Like glass about to shatter. My attention wanders. Yes, I feel like glass about to shatter. News from my sister this morning. Nausea sweeps up towards my throat at the thought of it.

"My uncle had it."

A tremor of terror has seeped into his voice, and yanks my attention back. The nausea recedes.

"He died within two years. He couldn't breathe in the end."

Motor neuron disease is a cruel condition that destroys the nerves that spark muscles. It is irreversible, without a cure. Life expectancy is three to five years. Feedback loops and signals from the brain to the nerves embedded in muscles stop working. Gradually – and sometimes rapidly – the ability to speak, swallow, walk, stand, gesticulate, and breathe, ceases. Part of the internal torture of motor neuron disease is that the mind – unaffected by the disease – helplessly watches as the body becomes less and less capable of responding to what were once simple, automatic cues. Brushing teeth becomes impossible. So does scratching an itch. Or saying yes.

"The tiredness could be from many different things. So can weakness. And muscle twitching. Have you been drinking enough water?"

My question ricochets off his tense body. The tremor intensifies, making the shatter seem imminent.

"Muscle spasms and twitches can simply be from a lack of hydration. And trouble swallowing could be from feeling so anxious. Let's let the treatment do its thing to

help you to relax. Lots of these symptoms can disappear," I add.

My efforts to find reassuring words smack against the glass. I'll hurry and get the needles in and let them do their reassuring work on a nonconscious level. Many of his noisy symptoms – from the multifarious systems and forces simultaneously at work – could be on a functional level and easily settled, quieted down. If the source is due to a neurological pathology, it is unlikely that a return to functional regulation will be enough to make them disappear.

"I doubt very much you have motor neuron disease," I add. Even if he does have the beginnings of it, my 'untruthy' declaration – it's only an opinion not a clinically verifiable fact – won't make any difference. For now, at least, I can use my clinical tools to soothe, calm him. Possibly slow down a progression. Even if the disease is well underway in his body, he can leave the treatment feeling better. And less like glass about to shatter.

For Virginia Woolf, there are exceptional *moments of being* that can be experienced as "sledgehammer blows." As shocks. Many big events that arrive – fierce and distinct – bringing with them "a peculiar horror and a physical collapse."¹ Moments that can leave deep cuts in memory and remain as fibrous scars or marks, or left just as a trace. These marks can act as a reference point for memory to re-trace back to a happening. Back to *cuts* in being.

But what happens when the Woolfian moments of being (or cuts in being) occur more insidiously? When there

1 As a writer, Woolf infers that she gladly absorbs such shocks, as "It is only by putting it into words that I can make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps by doing so it takes away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me." Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 72.

is no sudden sledgehammer blow – no *cut* – but the slow seep of time as it festers a sinister happening?

Chronic low-grade inflammation and adrenal exhaustion can gradually turn the body against itself and transform into an autoimmune disorder. The body sneakily – right under our noses as we sleep – turns on itself as a foreign invader. Like a snake eating its tail. Or when rogue cells decide to proliferate and cancer grows out of control.

A phone call from my sister this morning left me with the reverberations of an after-shock. The worst of the sledgehammer blow has eased, already folding into my body.

I head to the treatment cart for the needles.

“I’ll get the needles in,” I say, as my attention shifts back to him. I’m secretly grateful for the distraction, the reprieve from my own fears, if only for a moment. “And release this tension,” I add as I peel open a packet of pins.

“She couldn’t recall Multnomah Boulevard,” my sister told me early this morning over the phone, from the other side of the world. “And she got confused about the TV remote.” I took in her words, delivered in the unblinking incredulous tone of a newsreader, as I watched the pardalotes dart from the spindly dead branch into their hidden nest. In less time than it took for a pardalote to dash off the perch, the inference of those two sentences landed like a thick lead weight in my chest. The sledgehammer blow. A swarm of buzzing ambushed my head, disorienting me with the sudden realization of what this could mean: Mom could be showing signs of stepping into the black hole of dementia. A sour lump of nausea sat in my throat.

Multnomah Boulevard, located in Portland’s southwest hills, is a familiar road close to where she lives, and has lived for the past fifty or so years. Just head up Multnomah, Mom would often say when giving directions.

For her to forget Multnomah is a frightening sign. Our sharp, decisive mother – the sort of decisiveness that I wouldn't dare challenge for fear of her disapproving gaze – could be losing her sharp edge. Losing those attributes that make her who she is: inquisitive, delighting in wonder, always darting to the dictionary. To the bird book to identify an unfamiliar bird; always after precision.

Once the needles are in place, I sit to write my notes. The pane of barely breathing horizontal glass over my right shoulder, just a few feet away, still vibrates. I'll wait another few minutes. If he hasn't settled, I'll add something more.

But what kind of pardalote is nesting outside my window? She will want to know.

Would want to know. This could be a leaving.

He has no idea, but we are both caught in the dreadful grip of waiting. His wait to find out if he has a hideous neurological disease. For me, waiting to see if my mother's memory is retrievable. The possibility of her permanent leaving is no longer abstract. Instead, it is now very concrete in its nearness.

I glance towards the treatment table, but a niggle from the lingering shock pulls my attention back to thoughts about my mother. To the cascade of events that often happen with the frail elderly, initiating a landslide. That landslide is now happening to our mother. To us. Sweeping across my sister's and my emotional landscapes. Congestive heart failure and atrial fibrillation. Common and reasonable enough signs of a tired 86-year-old heart.

But vertigo is her most debilitating symptom. Since her heart episode a few months ago, she spends most of her day curled up horizontal on the couch with a book, a dog tucked behind the crook of her knees. To stand upright brings on waves of nausea as the room sways. Her chest aches from the flutter of her atrium; sometimes a frantic beating that brings on panic. There is "no clinical

reason that can be pinned down," claims her cardiologist. "It's not a plumbing problem with your heart. It's electrical. But don't worry. You're not going to die from atrial fibrillation!" says her specialist, in a dismissive tone. This careless comment intensifies Mom's vertigo, coming as a wave of anger.

He's still vibrating. I get up.

"You'll feel a zing in a moment," I tell him, and give the two needles, each placed in a spot on the top of his foot, a little tweak, eliciting a zing. The zing instantly generates a minuscule shiver down his second toe and simultaneously shivers up my hand into me as it spreads through his body.

A few seconds pass. Something shifts. I lean over the desk and make a note of the change.

Over the phone, not long after her heart episode, Mom gave me her moment-by-moment recollection of the events as they unfolded. It happened soon after she was admitted to hospital and was settling into her room across from the nurse's station. "It was so strange, like watching a dream," she told me. "At first, I saw brilliant red that then flashed to black, then brief white. I was aware of them surrounding the bed, then holding hands up high like they were about to sing in church. Then I felt a cannonball hit my chest and everything went black."

My sister, who was at her bedside when it happened, gave me her version: "Suddenly her blood pressure shot up and the monitor alarm went off and Mom barked at me to get out! I left and watched the crash-cart team storm her room. It was terrifying. I guess she was being protective and didn't want me to witness it."

And the little shock of surprise when Mom later changed details on further retellings. And another surprise when I found out much later the true – or the factual – clinical nature of the dramatic heart story.

What more immediately surprises me – in the blow’s reverberations from this morning’s news – is the joint arrival of the visceral stickiness of grief. That familiar and deeply uncomfortable feeling of a never again finality. The impending loss of my mother’s memory – and soon, the end of her life – sticks to, and pulls to the fore, another loss: that of my brother’s accidental death. My body doesn’t hesitate to remind me: the swarming ear buzz and its disorientating stupor, a parched mouth, clenched throat, the fright-driven urge to pee. Symptoms of shock. An affective tonality that seizes my body, demanding all of its attention.

Caught in grief’s timeless updraught: for my brother’s death as it is revived and viscerally swirls with my mother’s impending death – concrete, no longer abstracted – now not too far away.

My body remembers it all, now.

According to psychiatrist Daniel Stern, the present moment occurs in two ways: in the now present moment,² and in the retelling of a past present moment. “Telling is a now experience,” Stern says, “even though it refers to a present moment that occurred in the past.”³ The reliving is going on now, and “this allows the past to be constantly folded in,”⁴ he adds.

In describing the temporal architecture of a present moment, chunking is the term Stern used to describe how a moment is recalled. We tend to chunk moments together to make meaning. “In short,” says Stern, “the flow of perceptual stimulation must be chunked into meaning-

2 Stern has found that the temporal duration of a now present moment is short: around three to four seconds. Vitality affects – those kinetic, feeling-qualities – emerge as the moment unfolds. Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 41, 36.

3 *Ibid.*, 23.

4 *Ibid.*, 199.

ful units best sized to make us most adaptive, rapidly and efficiently. Chunking is the work of the present moment. It is the basic building block of psychologically meaningful subjective experiences that extend in time.⁵

Another way of grasping it – and Stern paraphrases William James to make this important point – is that the present moment can be compared to a bird's life: the constant shift between perching and flight. "The present moments are the perchings. The flights are the spaces between moments of consciousness and are part of the present moments. These 'flights' are inaccessible and ungraspable."⁶

On the meeting/perch of the present moment, where the past is present, during the perchings and between flights, implicit knowing lays down the memory. Chunking comes later.

Perhaps those white-knuckled moments – of gripping hard as the gust blows through intensely – could be perceived, and thus experienced, differently? To be seen as an opportunity to shift perception, as a way to grasp the whole experience of perching, shocks and all? Could it be experienced as exhilaration rather than as life-threatening dread?

Chunking shocks. Woolfian moments of being when the perch must be gripped, hard. From the clutching feet the moment chunks itself in the body as a cut before flying off.

Philosopher Henri Bergson – in the early 20th century, around the same time Einstein bent the understanding of physics with his theory of relativity⁷ – offers ideas on

5 Ibid., 43–44.

6 Ibid., 43.

7 Up until the 1922 public debate in Paris between Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein about the nature of time, the philosopher and his philosophy had been popular and highly revered. But, during the

time that have the capacity to radically reorient perspective. Bergson's philosophy of time twists Stern's present moments into what he calls *durations*, where "there is perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality."⁸ And it is through *intuition*, says Bergson, that duration can be apprehended, grasped whole, within a ceaseless flux or flow of time that is irreducible to measurable clock-time (which is, paradoxically, the original source of "duration"). Say, for example, through intuition the possibility of perching and flights can be experienced – apprehended – as a singular event.

Not intuition as usually understood, as a more "feminine" attribute led by gauzy apprehension and oozing feeling. Soft intuition pitched against the hard edges of reason, of rational analysis, and the valued quest for provable – that is, measurable – facts.

Time, for most, has become an obsession.

Time management.

Time out.

Time's up.

It's about time.

Time is running out.

Time to say goodbye.

Time as master to our slave.

But the tick-tock march of clock-time is aloof and indifferent to actual experience.

debate, as Bergson questioned the metaphysics of Einstein's new theory (i.e., that space and time are no longer separate), it was Einstein's verbal jab at Bergson ("The time of the philosopher does not exist!") that quickly deflated not only Bergson's long held acclaim, but Philosophy – and in general, the Humanities – as well. For more on the earth-shaking debate, see Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson and the Debate that Changed our Understanding of Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

8 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 17.

For Bergson, duration runs through everything and is the *only* time. Everything derives from duration, including clock-time. “It is not a question of getting outside of time (we are already there); on the contrary,” says Bergson, “one must get back into duration and recapture reality in the very mobility which is its essence.”⁹ In duration, while immersed and moving in process, awareness of clock-time disappears, where “novelty is constantly springing forth and evolution is creative.”¹⁰

The tyranny of quantifiable clock-time misses the beat of durational experience. To describe this unity in process – duration grasped whole – Bergson uses the example of listening to music: “When we listen to a melody we have the purest impression of succession we could possibly have and yet it is the very continuity of the melody and the impossibility of breaking it up which makes that impression on us.” To analyze the individual notes – the spatial images – leaves out the infra-conscious potentials by pulling attention out of duration and into consciousness. Instead of duration, what gets experienced becomes a cut, a space. “In space, and only in space, is there a clear-cut distinction between external parts.” Bergson goes on: “Moreover, I am aware that we normally place ourselves in spatialized time. We have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths. And yet, that is where real duration abides.”¹¹

Perched, open, ready.

Space and time are not ours to make.

Instead, crucially, *they make us*.

Grasped whole outside of clock-time as a melody. Take sugar dissolving in coffee, a sandcastle collapsing, and

9 Ibid., 30.

10 Ibid., 24.

11 Ibid., 141.

blood sloshing in capillary beds. Listen to the melody – its swaying rhythms or discordant beats – as present moment perchings. Attune to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths, far away from the redundant drone of habit and somnambulant conditioning.

Those Woolfian moments that abide the hum, deeply.

To be spatially knocked off my perch, and welcome the exuberance of disorientation? How will I find my way without space and time to orient me? Swept up into the timeless updraughts of grief, spinning round and round in its turbulent vortex? Surrender to lightning jolts, to sledgehammer blows?

Orderly coherence, even if illusory, is a way to grab control: pare back and prune off intruders. Manage. Grip the perch.

I glance over and tune in: the tremor has settled into barely a quiver. Nearly there. I get up and move towards the treatment cart for another needle.

"I'm going to add one more. On the top of your head," I say as I stand over him. His eyes have settled. Less bugged out.

Probing his head's crown, my investigating finger finds the spot: a slight depression under the taut skin of his scalp.

"Is this spot tender?" I ask.

"Yes, I think so," he answers back.

I tap in the needle. Instantly, his body melts, from his head down to his feet. He drops into parasympathetic bliss, a physiological state where time is managing him.

I'll let him perch there for another 10 minutes. That will be long enough.

The clock on the wall's tick-tocking becomes a soft rhythmic prattle in the background, barely noticeable.

William James, who became Bergson's close friend as well as a philosophical kindred spirit, reminds us that "personal histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced."¹² Similar to a bird's life, full of sudden flights, with brief perchings made in between. Rest on a perch, such as the treatment table, and allow the shock to dissipate. The treatment is a resting place that gives his body the duration to settle, taking the affective pressure out of his body-glass. And far from passive: the movements during the perching, all the thousands of physiological systems and trillions of cells, in their unfathomable complexity, settle, lean together into a calm. Back to a fluidy flux, or autonomic flexibility. Waves and particles stick and move together.

My thoughts wander further afield towards notions of reversibility. Of irreversibility. Of tipping points when matter and energy twirl together, creating both turbulent gusts and soft breezes. How a skateboarder, in continuous movement, chases the moment when gravity is suspended. Or a surfer in a wave's curl. Or the shift between anabolic and catabolic phases during metabolic activity. How those durational processes are constantly at work, right now, in my body. In his body. In our collective body-worlding.

I wonder about tipping points and the body's capacity to reverse pathologies. Of the cruel indifference of pathological tipping points once tipped, when cellular changes are beyond the grab of functional rescue. Or when energetic potentials are stronger than dark pathologies – of the shadowy cellular etchings of irreversibility – and can still arm-wrestle a win. Something that acupuncture is so good at: discretely retrieving the unfathomable multi-

12 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912; Mineola: Dover, 2003), 26.

plicities and leading the attention of the trillions of cells back towards dynamic equilibrium. Unified, the body rests in Bergsonian duration. A chilled-out simultaneity. Humming in flux.

I wonder about the forces at work and play – Genetics? Lifestyle? Environment? Poverty? Temperament? Chance? Chronic stress? Ageing – that can lure the body back towards the dark forces of pathologies. How the forces are a multiple intermingling, an unfathomably complex simultaneity of factors swirling together. But all too often we are on the hunt for a single causative factor to track down and snuff out. Fixed. Return to normal.

But there can only be a new normal. The river keeps flowing, changing. You really can't step in the same place twice.

I wonder about that tendon thickening in my left hand and if it will keep thickening and turn my hand into a claw. I wonder about the sinister dark forces, such as motor neuron disease, that twiddle their noses at efforts to retrieve physiological function. I wonder about a person leading a squeaky-clean life – years of daily yoga and meditation and fermented foods and embedded wholesome rituals with clean thoughts – who gets a sudden advanced pancreatic cancer diagnosis and is dead in six weeks.

Is there a physiological straw that breaks the camel's back?

I'm recalling how grief's tenacious force – for my brother's death – had the power to yank my mother and I out of our strained relationship. The shock blew us onto a fresh trajectory. We immediately settled into a ritual of an hour-long phone call once a week that connects us across opposite ends of the globe. At first, we stuttered in vivid images that played over and over, fixed in a loop, in the grip of shock, timeless in their durations. For the first time in a very long time we shared the ongoing, ordinary

details of our lives, and soon dropped into the rhythms of story-telling: attentive, gripped, listening to the melody created by the other.

I stand, place my fingers on his wrists, press in, and listen. All pulse positions are even, a reflection of calm. Of autonomic flexibility. Oscillating flux. Durational hum.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“Good,” he responds without hesitation.

There is a wiry quality to his pulse that bounces back at unpredictable spots against my fingertips.

“I’ve just been thinking how stressful things have been this year. Constant meetings. I had to lay off a bunch of people. Not much time to get to the gym,” he tells me.

I let go of his wrists and lean against the edge of the desk.

“I never underestimate the effects of chronic stress,” I say back. “Like the frog in hot water. Do you know the parable about the frog in hot water?”

“A frog?”

“Yes. If you put a frog in hot water, it registers the danger and jumps out. It’s too hot and its reflexes work. But if you put a frog in water that’s room temperature and slowly turn up the heat, it can’t tell the difference and boils to death.”

“Stress is insidious,” I add. Like starfish legs that are dissolving due to ocean acidification, I think to myself. Like the one I saw not long ago washed up on the beach. Its five legs reduced to little nubs. Likely another climate change casualty.

“We think we are adjusting,” I go on, “but are actually slowly boiling in stress and inflammation. Physiologically our body does have limits. But we keep pushing past them.”

He looks away.

“We get in the habit of ignoring our body’s signals. And don’t listen,” I press on.

“Makes sense,” he says to the ceiling.

We have the ability to make the past present, Bergson says, because we are a “qualitative multiplicity.” Like the affective smear of sticky grief in all its tonal differences, “each permeating the other and organizing themselves like notes of a tune.”¹³ It is also the *knowledge* of duration that Bergson calls intuition.

That is: intuition is the *perception* and the *vision* of duration, in the knowing.

Looping, repeated. The duration of time generating its own pulse from fresh tellings, new details. Several weeks after her heart event, my mother settled into a retelling of the defibrillation sequences – the major electrical zap with paddles regularly done on TV shows – over the phone: “I think my eyes were open. There was a red flash then white then it all went black. I’m pretty sure I was on the floor. They were standing over me holding hands like they were playing a game. Then I felt mule’s hoof kick me in the middle of my back. I heard someone say ‘200 joules.’ That’s a lot of power!”

Perhaps dementia is a form of falling off a perch, into no-time. A neurodiverse state of no form, out of space. Or perhaps a means of succumbing to disorientation.

Deleuze revived Bergson’s philosophy in the 1980s and folded Bergson’s thinking into his own concepts. Deleuze layers time as though nestled, like gyrating babushka dolls:

It is not time that is interior to us, or at least it is not specifically interior to us; it is we who are interior to

13 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Frank L. Pogson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1910), 105.

time, and for this reason time always separates us from what determines us by affecting it. Interiority constantly hollows us out, splits us in two, doubles us, even though our unity subsists. But because time has no end, this doubling never reaches its limit: time is constituted by a vertigo or oscillation, just as unlimited space is constituted by a sliding or floating.¹⁴

Could Mom's vertigo be a sign of a discordant melody? Scattering her memory, like a centrifuge, but keeping her whole, unified? Thoughts generating little vortices that hollow out her qualitative multiplicities?

Allied to Bergson, Deleuze's vertiginous time requires "the discord of all the faculties" – such as "the terrible struggle between imagination and reason, but also between understanding and inner sense" – leading to the "emancipation of dissonance, the discordant discord." With faculties (inner sense, outer sense, understanding, reason) askew, there becomes an accordance for "a new music as discord, and as discord and accord, the source of time."¹⁵ A new music constituted from vertigo within the uninterrupted hum: that is, in duration, the real source of time.

Perhaps, with her ageing faculties adrift, my mother is learning to lean into the paradox and allow time to manage her. Become the uninterrupted hum, interior to time, constituted from vertigo.

Here rests an irony of vertigo as a stabilizer: from the relative stasis of being to the woozy wilds of becoming. What if I opened up Woolf's moments of being into moments of becoming, always incomplete and indeterminate, yet

14 Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31.

15 *Ibid.*, 35.

continuously growing? Or durations of becoming, always multiple yet unified? As a potential, not yet happened, but always on the cusp of almost-happening. Of memory as becoming, its multiplicities always intermingling, never solidified, fixed.

Knowledge of duration intuited, on the fly, off the perch. Out of space.

My mother's heart defibrillation also knocked loose snippets of memories, told and retold, alighting on the phone's airways. Such as her love of reading as a young girl and the time she took over the abandoned old Ford, a Model T, behind the barn. How she somehow lured inside the old car her dog Dotty, cat Nicky (named so because it got the end of its tail nicked by the hay thrasher), and goat Ginger. How she would read to her captive audience. Or when, after the Great Depression forced them from the farm in Oregon to Los Angeles, she would roller skate around the MGM studio lot, round and round its high green fence.

Or the moment my brother, as a toddler, came crashing to his knees when he discovered his new red tricycle under the Christmas tree. With each retelling he crashes to his knees, in an infinitesimal instant. A looped image, told over and over. The crash. The un-wordable delight.

I wonder: during the tellings and retellings, does my mother's vertigo vanish?

I remove the needles. The tremor has disappeared. For now.

He slides off the table, slips into his shoes, and swings on his jacket.

"Take care of your frogs!" I blurt as he heads out the door.

To perch in durations is to allow time to manage me as I yield to the suction of story. Joy and wonder seep through as I relive the details with each of her retellings, intermingling with my own imaginings: the slow rake

of metal as she closes the car door. The goat's alien iris-eye as it sits awkwardly on its haunches, chewing. The smell of hot summer and hay. I can hear her skates push-scrape-clank-whiz past the fence, and feel her eight-year-old curiosity yearn to see what is happening on the other side of the monumental green fence where Hollywood was being made. I feel the ache surrounding my mother's unfathomable pain from losing my brother.

Fact or fiction? Does it really matter?

Yes, for an accurate Western medical diagnosis, it does. Diastolic heart failure. Motor neuron disease. As the components that occur in clock-time and are measured, calculated, and analyzed according to the rules of an accepted diagnostic method. But the truthiness of actual time rests outside of clock-time, experienced as timeless durations and apprehended as intuition.

"The lifespan of a fact is shrinking,"¹⁶ claims John D'Agata. David Shields appropriates D'Agata's words to flag an artistic movement that is taking form, where there is "a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure of the blur of the real."¹⁷

A passage from Pam Houston leans towards D'Agata's shrinking fact and Shields's blur of the real:

When was it decided (when again, and by whom) that we were all supposed to choose between fiction and nonfiction, what was not taken into account was that for some of us truth can never be an absolute, that there can at best, be only less true and more true and sometimes those two collapse inside each other like

16 John D'Agata and David Weiss, eds., "We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay" [special issue], *Seneca Review* (Geneva: Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 2014), 7.

17 David Shield, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 5.

a Turducken. Given the failure of memory. Given the failure of language to mean. Given metaphor. Given metonymy. Given the ever-shifting junction of code and context. Given the twenty-five people who saw the same car accident. Given our denial. Given our longings.¹⁸

Houston, D'Agata, and Shields share an allegiance and think-with each other: the lure of the blur of the real shrinks the less true and the more true as the fact's lifespan collapses. Mash, smear, blend. Experienced as the real duration of timeless memory: the cannonball, a mule's hoof, atrial flutter, a toddler's crash all collapse into each other. As gestures and intervals that are plump with potential becomings.

As our bodies continue to accumulate happenings, how we tell those happenings is up to us. Truthiness is in the telling, and the teller is free to use a different set of details each time, in whatever way necessary to best capture a whole experience – in an affective tone – with each retelling.

Story-telling is like a game of tag: now you're it, so you go and take my truthiness and imagine and spin your own. Carry the tone and the tune, but make it your own. That river keeps flowing. Moments irreversible but timeless in their tellings when the current of the past runs through them. A truthiness that in-forms language on the think-move-making. The mash of memory, and the making of the past as indistinguishable from the present.

Knowledge-making on the fly.

Linger in the sugar-dissolving moment, or slosh in a capillary bed.

18 Pam Houston, "Prologue: Corn Maze," in *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Non-fiction*, ed. Jill Lyn Talbot (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), xiv.

SWEET SPOTS

Or linger in the melody,
swaying,

whole.

In the renewed calm, you talk about your sister's early death due to breast cancer. As you do, I watch the swirl of moxa smoke and think of Duchamp's moving swirl of cigar smoke as infra-thin. Perhaps some of moxa's therapeutic effects are found in the infra-thin: how it soothes as it permeates the edges of epigenetic possibilities. You might carry the gene, but we still do not know what a body can do. Junk genes – the indeterminate form that makes up most of our genetic material – are as vast as uncharted galaxies. We – those of us desiring evidence-based scientific proof – do not yet know what junk genes are capable of.

Can the death of *subjectus* – of authority – in critical thinking, also seep into the static reductionistic model that has dominated our conception of the body?

Can we loosen the grip on fear, and ambiguity? How to venture into our anterior beyond without dragging dozens of suitcases full of fixed beliefs?

Can we negotiate this: at least try and give up the bag containing the Body/Mind split and see what happens?

The more-than forces cannot perform if wedged between binaries. There is no room for the more-than to move. No play or give. A shift in perspective needs to take place to liberate the more-than forces. When perceived as moving within the affective body's assemblage of forces – thought *and* feeling, reason *and* intuition, flesh *and* virtual – the more-than generates a generous indeterminate futurity: everything is in mutual inclusion, and moves to-

gether, unified. The “ghost in the machine”¹⁹ is no longer needed. With the ghost gone, what lingers are the more-than traces of the sum of its parts.

19 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1949). I wonder if Ryle’s effort to challenge Cartesian thinking backfired? To put a ghost (Mind) in a machine (Body) keeps the split alive by fuelling a reductive and mechanistic view of the body.

Subjectus. Latin for *one under authority*.

Death of the subjectus.

(Into the fray).

An Important Note on Ethics (and Fabulation)

"It is by the middle that things push."

– Gilles Deleuze.¹

As a practicing acupuncturist, I am privy to intimate spaces: spaces in bodies and the stories that emerge from the safe confines of the treatment room. Even after three decades of practice, I continue to marvel at the way gently twirled acupuncture needles do their quiet work. And how the heat from smoldering moxa seeps into pain, leaving its lingering scent as the pain becomes a trace of itself. I marvel at the moment when the soft chatter of our voices in the treatment room starts to hum with the vibrating needles: how spoken words and objects and our bodies coalesce, *in situ*. These ineffable spaces and micro-movements (composed of gazillions of thresholds, transitions, qualities, and intensities) create a desire to explore language as a way to re-think, and re-present, notions of body.

1 Gilles Deleuze, *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantine V. Boundas (Columbia University Press, 1993), 208.

Meanwhile, clinical and professional boundaries need to be water-tight. Trust in a therapeutic relationship is paramount. What happens in the treatment room stays in the treatment room, which is where the “factual” stories remain permanently sealed.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality – and to be able to think and write, ethically fret-free – all “clients” and their narratives are imagined. They are fabricated. I make things up. Any perceived likeness to any of the clients in the clinic scenarios contained within many of these essays is purely coincidental, and so imagined by the reader.

The ineffables are free to roam across the page. The text-word-bodyings give them a voice.

As such, *more-than human agency* is authoring this book. The boundless qualities and textures that quiver within the text’s interstices are its driving agent.

It is the middle zone that twitches with eagerness and holds the potential to push the written words into their lines of flight, into their becomings.

In ancient China, at public hangings, families would rush to the dirt below the dangling feet of their freshly hanged relative and scoop up the dirt. It was believed that at the moment of death the dense *hun* – which most closely resembles the soul in Western culture and resides in the liver while living – drops to the ground. At the same time the *po* – akin to spirit and residing in the lighter and more ethereal lung tissue – ascends towards the heavens. The collected ancestral *hun* was then mixed into the soil of the family's garden plot, where the ginseng roots twist it into their cellulose fibers.

The more-than qualities of the dead relative's *hun* live on as the ginseng is steeped into longevity tea.

"The writer can only imitate a gesture," says Barthes in his essay, "Death of the Author," "that is always anterior, never original."² Barthes insists that an author – the subject doing the writing – does not exist prior to or outside of language, that is, it is *the writing* that is anterior to the author. The identifiable body of the author is only along for the ride.

For Barthes, there is no subject to throw under, nor is there an authority to do the throwing (although, the irony of Barthes's own death – he succumbed to injuries after he was struck by a laundry van – does not go unnoticed as a subject). Instead, "[The author's] only power is to mix writings [...] in such a way as never to rest on any one of them."³

This is a challenging reorientation. Without the author author-ing, how to orient to the text? With no au-

2 Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 68.

3 *Ibid.*, 146.

thor at the wheel, where will we wind up? And what will it all *mean*?

The epistemological Houdini, having escaped the binary straightjacket, materializes as a shapeless semiotic force and is present within the swirling mix of text. For Barthes, it is no longer the author with the agency. Instead, agency lies within the indeterminate movement of the mixing of text. And in the movement, new demands are made on the reader: to bring the text to life and into meaning, there must be engagement. Passivity is no longer an option.

Lyric is the more-than dark matter of literary arts: like junk genes in our genetic material, there is plenty of it, and we know it is there, but it eludes capture. Dark matter in the universe is only theoretically quantifiable. Try to find it, and it vanishes. Its presence is everywhere, despite the impossibility of its real-time measurement. Due to dark matter's pervasive presence, many cosmologists are in agreement: the old theories no longer work.

For poet-essayist Lyn Hejinian, it is necessary to enter the vast uncharted internal territory that has opened up since the death of the singular subject: "The 'personal' is already a plural condition,"⁴ Hejinian says, and goes on to try and locate the more-than condition: "Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body – in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one

4 Lyn Hejinian, "The Person and the Description," *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991): 68.

is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal.”⁵

Like Barthes, Hejinian orients to the form of language itself and to language’s pursuit of knowing a subject, not a person.

Hejinian’s description – of the impossibility of singling out the singular personal – conjures, for me, the experience of being within Whitehead’s body functionings-world: to be amidst the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

5 Ibid., 70.

Amid the unfathomable complexities,
the needle's tip makes distinct twirls
as we cleave our way into the anterior beyond.

Becoming Nar

"Can't you hear them whisper one another's touch?"

– Stefano Harney & Fred Moten¹

The narwhal is an Arctic whale with an extraordinary tooth.

In Japanese nursing homes, residents practice origami, the art of paper folding. The group is led to make one single fold at a time. Busy fingertips are like busy brains growing new neural circuits that can carve fresh paths to the big brain. Ageing brains lose density and complexity. There's less juicy goo to form fresh rivulets of neurons, tributaries that shimmer with novelty, the stuff the brain craves.

Nar is an old Norse word for corpse; the whiteness of the narwhal's body often appears in the water like a drowned sailor.

¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia/Minor Compositions, 2013), 97.

These days, it's not that uncommon for one-year-olds to learn to use an iPad before learning to walk. A plump finger smears the glassy surface to change Barbie's clothes. Tap, tap, smear, and Barbie changes from a skimpy bikini into a disco dress. No buttons and clumsy fumbling as the brain etches the buttonhole into the fingertips as a way of knowing. Yes! Success! Fingertips never to touch Barbie's absurdly pointy petite feet, plastic breast bumps, or tensile hair. Or to feel texture: soft satin, scratchy wool, hard sequins. Instead, fingers point and slide, point and slide, point and slide. The pointer finger doesn't join the thumb to pinch, pick up, grasp, and claim. Or learn to persist with the fiddly frustration of buttons, when thumbs are needed.

Gotcha.

The narwhal tusk is actually a tooth that is embedded in the jawbone. It grows out from its mouth slightly off-center, and has nothing to do with chewing.

For Deleuze, "the human subject must be conceived as a constantly changing assemblage of forces, an epiphenomenon arising from chance confluences of languages, organisms, societies, expectations, laws and so on."² Deleuze's philosophy of dynamism has the capacity to dislodge stick-in-the-mud being onto loose trajectories of becoming. Never static, motion generates a waft of forces – lines of flight – as assemblages jostle and converge, indeterminately.

2 Adrian Parr, *Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 27.

Boundaries are smeared by difference in the porous process of becoming.

Inuits living in the Canadian High Arctic report watching the nar-tooth bend a foot in any direction.

Nearly three million years ago, our ancestors came out of the trees to stand upright on the African savannah. To communicate they had to gesticulate to each other. Spoken language was invented. Frontal lobes started to grow as opposable thumbs took up their bossy position on the hand: to hold, grip, command. Thumbs and fingers do things, make things, create things.

The Inuit name for narwhal translates into “the one that points to the sky.” This describes the narwhal’s unique behavior of pointing its tooth straight up out of the water.

Massumi opens *Parables of the Virtual* with a deceptively simple consideration:

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and

sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?³

In response to his own question, Massumi explores – in exquisite detail – the virtual guts of human perception:
Of thinking as unthought.
As the force of thinking becomes unthought.
As a way to feel and move into a new politics.

What will be laid down in the pristine folds of the toddlers' growing brains? Which pathways and neural circuits will be etched in the virgin landscape of their gooey grey matter? Will it be swiping over pinching? While their index finger leads the way, is the swiveling design of the thumb joint at risk of redundancy?

The dexterous old fingers and thumbs make the final fold. Fiddly fingers work to tilt the continental drift back to memories: shoe laces, buttonholes, doll dresses, balsa airplanes. Knowing fingers can recover lost knowledge, like leaving retraceable breadcrumbs on a path back to a memory.

The shape suddenly makes sense: it's a crane!

The entire length of the narwhal's tooth is supplied with nerves and blood. Instead of a hard, protective layer of enamel covering the tooth – such as on human teeth – the surface is soft and

3 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

porous, allowing millions of tiny tubules and channels to be exposed to the elements, that is, the frigid Arctic water.

Human fingernails are considered relics of claws. As an acupuncturist, I keep my nails clipped short. My bare finger-pads are then free to press in and saunter over a body's surface to collect information without the interfering poke or jab of hard keratin.

Contemporary researchers speculate that the narwhal uses its tooth as a tool – a sense-organ – to navigate ice floes, detect salinity changes, dive into the icy pitch dark in search of food, feel for cracks and openings in the ice as they ascend to surface for air.

“Intercessors are fundamental,” says Deleuze. “Creation is all about intercessors. Without them, nothing happens.” In Deleuzian terminology, intercessors intervene in a process of formation, and “they can be people, [...] but things as well, even plants and animals. Whether they’re real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, one must form one’s intercessors.”⁴

In other words, intercessors bring out the thinking in us.

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 125.

While at acupuncture school in Boston, I was a slate and copper roofer. My German slate hammer – one end sharp like a pick and the other a narrow hammerhead – became more like a well-trained appendage than just a tool. With quick thwacks, I'd punch precise holes, leaving a concave hollow for the head of the copper nail to rest and secure the slate flush with the roof. The copper nails, two inches long with ridged bodies designed to hug the wood, felt satisfying. With more thwacks I'd sink them, pleasurably, into the fascia planks. The nails sit snug inside the beveled space, like hidden roof jewelry. The hammer's leather handle became shiny and smooth, like an old boot.

To better locate the copper nails from my pouch, I'd snip off the end of the glove's fingers. The hole invited in dirt and slate dust. My fingerprints' whorls – especially my index finger and thumb – filled with dust. The fine lines were etched deep with grey, orange, and purple.

It is also plausible that the nar-tooth detects sound vibrations, although little research has yet been done to look into this capacity.

The kind of acupuncture needles I like to use have fine copper wire twirled around the handgrip, making them feel like little sculptures. The needle's body – about the thickness of four human hairs – is made of surgical stainless steel, and the tip is sharpened to a slightly beveled, microscopic point.

The narwhal's tooth is straight on an axis, and spirals – like a candy cane – counter-clockwise. Always.

Weary from – and wary of – human consciousness, Massumi’s thinking meanders away from the human and closer to the non-human animal. As a way to rethink the nature of instinct in creativity, so long marginalized by the dominant currents of evolutionary biology, Massumi looks to the non-human animal’s ludic gesture – and creativity – as emerging from instinct: “Play instinctively belongs to the aesthetic dimension,” he says. And the human, or “the chattering animal’s” capacities for language, and the conditions of evolutionary possibility, “are set in place by play, on the continuum of instinct.”⁵

Like Deleuze’s need for an intercessor for expression, Massumi’s becoming-animal requires “finding the right artifice, and letting oneself be swept up along by the ludic gesture.” It emerges immanently, in a thought’s twist, as one swirls into another. “Following this movement, one finds oneself always already more-than-human: mutually included in the integral animal continuum as it follows its natural path in the direction of its immanent self-surpassing.”⁶

With the swipe of a thought-paw, possibilities lurk in-between the forces at work and play.

The needle’s tip, once inserted just under the skin and gently twirled, grasps fine microscopic connective tissue fibers. The twirl generates a sonic pulse, sending ripples in the interstitial fluid across the internal horizon.

5 Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 92–93.

Narwhals have displayed obvious avoidance responses fifty kilometers from icebreaking ships, indicating extreme sensitivity to disturbances. Rather than flee, the ice whale freezes, stops vocalizing, and sinks to the safety of the benthos.

As a patient sinks into parasympathetic bliss, I marvel at the paradox: how the effects of making tiny cuts, closely followed by electrical zings, soothe.

The non-conscious bare activity of acupuncture lullabies.

As a potential way to avoid the Anthropocene's looming boil, Massumi insists "there is only one way out: to quit the human arena and reclaim animal existential territory." This requires "letting oneself be swept up all the more horrifically intensely in the enthusiasm of the body of vitality affect."⁷ As an example, Massumi references Kafka's horror at becoming-cockroach as Gregor's way out in *The Metamorphosis*:

What is expressed is the vitality-affect signature, the -esqueness of its actions arcing through all its movements, the manner in which the animal continuously performs something extra to the functions of behavior [...] There is a cockroachicity of the cockroach, a mousiness of the mouse, and it is these form-of-life signature styles that get into the act of writing.⁸

7 Ibid., 56.

8 Ibid., 59.

Inuits have reported to researchers that narwhals rub teeth together in what looks like a display of pleasure, or play; or behavior not necessarily needed for survival.

As a way to get these signature-styles into the act of writing, Massumi offers a clue: “All you need to do – quoting Deleuze and Guattari – is look only at the movements.”⁹

The narwhal can dive a mile deep to feed on cod, squid, and Greenland halibut.

Try not to flinch and at the same time be affectively attuned to the wild and untameable movement of -esqueness, and allow it to seep into the act of writing. The pure expression of lived abstraction – in -esqueness – also has the capacity to seep into evolutionary possibilities because, according to Massumi, “the written act goes the furthest, most intensely.”¹⁰

Several attempts have been made to keep narwhals in captivity, but none have survived.

Massumi goes on to explain: “The style of writing composes itself around this -esqueness of the analog animal,

9 Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 206.

10 Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, 61.

taking up its species overspill into creative language.”¹¹ By stepping onto the animal continuum, and motivated by a bit of stylized imagination, “it allows the real stakes to revolve around play.”¹²

How will I become the feeling of moving-with the nar-whal?

Perhaps by feeling the signature-style of a nar’s whaling.

Or by wailing nar-ness.

My narwhal-esqueness intercessing with nails, needles, and a nar-tooth.

My nar-touch overspilling into words.

The narwhality of the narwhal, overspilling to dive deep with language.

The unknowable, elusive nar, made in its movements.

Made in its gigantic, porous feeling-tooth.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 52.

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Lyn Hejinian is amongst the revolutionary band of Language Poets that gathered in the 1970s in counter-response to the subjective excesses of the Lyric "I." Hejinian examines the liberating role form can play as an organizing principle in her essay "The Rejection of Closure." When creating form, she orients towards the "open" text – "when all the elements of the work are maximally excited."¹³ The closed text, according to Hejinian, allows for only a single interpretation. Hejinian's main concern in the essay involves the writer's subject position. She positions it anterior to the author, as "writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them."¹⁴

It is writing's form as a dynamic force that Hejinian foregrounds as its potential power: "Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics – they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion."¹⁵

Hypens carry the quiver in the materiality of language: a little mark made at the interstices that aid a poem's capacity to yearn.

13 Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 43.

14 *Ibid.*, 51.

15 *Ibid.*, 42.

For Hejinian, “the writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive [...] The open text often emphasizes or foregrounds process [...] that is, it resists reduction and commodification.”¹⁶

The hyphen provides a twist within the differential. The differential is neither here nor there. The differential, Manning impresses, is where relation resides, in the Jamesian sense, as “a making apparent of a third space opened up for experience in the making.”¹⁷ Within that third space – within the twist – resides a multitude of associated milieu, which are “active with tendencies, tunings, incipient agitations, each of which are felt before they are known.”¹⁸ In the third space, “relation folds experience into it such that what emerges is more than the sum of its parts.”¹⁹

Into the relational twist: the intensity of feeling gathers forces into a grimace, a wince, a swoon, as they twist into the middle. Direct experience in the making transmits the more-than of texture, flow, duration, and agitation: all are tendencies on the minor move.

I am writing acu-essays with lyric punctures. This makes me think of Barthes’s notion of punctum as an aberrance, an unintended shock or surprise that escapes language: “What I can name cannot really prick me. Therefore, the

16 Ibid., 43.

17 Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid., 2.

inability to name is a good sign of the disturbance of punctum."²⁰

Xu, or cleft points, are located in anatomical fissures or narrow gaps on the body's surface landscape. These interstitial points are places where stuff can accumulate and get stuck, much like a logjam in a river.

For form to provide an opening for the text, say the Language Poets, there is an "Emphasis on the materiality of the text – its actual language, syntax, use of white space, and typographical elements."²¹ More specifically, for Hejinian, one set of devices that can open a text includes: arrangement and rearrangement, repetition, and careful placement of compositional "gaps" in the text which must be filled in by the reader.²²

Once the Lyric "I" has been removed, says Hejinian – along with the other New Critical heretics – it "makes it impossible to interpret a given poem; one can only 'experience' it."²³ This perspective blends well with William James's philosophy of radical empiricism, of relational experience leading the way: "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continu-

20 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 51.

21 Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics and Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), xxviii.

22 Quoted in *ibid.*

23 Quoted in *ibid.*

ously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds. The relations, generally speaking, are as real here as the terms are."²⁴

The vague visceral twitch of an emerging thought. It starts to move.

Imagine this: sit in a capillary bed and sway, listen, watch. Sitting in a nexus–plexus: what would it feel like? Tickle? Fizz? Senses alert and washing over, tickling, fizzy noises.

That miniscule meeting place – one single cell-layer thick – between arteries and veins when tissues are suffused. During diffusion, oxygen and carbon dioxide meet in the middle, exerting equal gaseous pressure. As my fingers tap out these words into sentence-ideas, it is happening: gazillions of capillary beds make their exchanges. Under my fingertips; in my lung's tender alveoli; within my intestine's undulating folds, as *onewhichincludes themanyincludesone*.

Do words have bodies? Viscera? Vibrating guts? Peristalsis? Words need something to vibrate against to generate a resonance, or dissonance. Language, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Without a body, thoughts would have nothing in which to stand up. They'd collapse. Without edges, words would be sucked into a vacuum or a black hole to hang out with all that unfathomable dark matter.

24 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912; Mineola: Dover, 2003), 33.

When writing is oriented to Hejinian's "open" text, the text-body is "maximally excited" and quivers with possibilities. It is always in process, amidst the thresholds and intensities and flows, when "Formation is more inclusive than form-and-function," says Massumi, in his prelude to Manning's *The Minor Gesture*. "The span of a becoming is broader than a being. [...] This more-than of becoming is never lost from sight,"²⁵ he adds.

Within the becoming of form(ation), writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.

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Perhaps the newfangled, high tech microscope's²⁶ ability to peer *onto* the body's gooey middle – in vivo, alive, and quivering – opens a possibility to shift modes of thinking. That is, move away from the reductive habit and open up to a more inclusive – and affirmative – pluralistic approach and grant this thing now dubbed the *interstitium* the freedom to be what it is: a vital, vast differential space located in the middle of tissues. Lean into what the ancient Chinese recognized as an *organwithanameandnoform* or the *san jiao*: an amorphous organless organ where the

25 Quoted in Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xi.

26 That is, the relatively new technology called a "probe-based confocal laser endomicroscopy," or pCLE, which combines an endoscope with a laser and sensors that analyze fluorescent patterns and gives researchers a micro-kaleidoscopic view of living tissues.

ineffables oscillate in our midst and within our tissues, generating possibilities.

Where tides are welling within swellings.

Where dynamic fluids give way to a lunar tug.

Where the *one which includethemanywhichincludesone* circulate within cellular eddies.

All is ubiquitous – slick cellular shoulders touch, as we swim together – made possible by the presence of the *organwithanamebutnoform-intersitium*.

Can we consider the possibility of simply allowing the interstitium and the *san jiao* to play, unchaperoned, at the interstices and about the poles? Allow them to move as unsettled propositions, as a kind of knowing that comes to be?

Allow them to be both a space *and* a place: all at once.

The habit of ownership – of claiming knowledge of fixed things – is a petulant one.

Slobber

Slobber.

I say the word in my head and it echoes off internal walls.

As a single sonorous word-vibration, it needs to be said aloud.

Break the silence: sss leads the way, then my tongue pushes forward the *laa*, and the *berr* reverberates from my lips. *Slobber.*

But no slobber comes out. As a sound-word-body, slobber needs a stimulus to come to life.

Brazilian painter, sculptor, and performance artist Lygia Clark was interested in ways of showing – through direct, lived experience, or *vivencia* – how the body's insides are on the outside. She dedicated herself intensely to activating body experiments, mostly through the use of relational objects,¹ including one called *Slobber Threads* that she staged numerous times in the 1970s with her students at the Sorbonne. *Slobber Threads* continues to be re-

1 “Clark’s relational objects,” says Erin Manning, “are carriers of potential” as well as “mobilizers for a schizosoma,” a reminder “that the self is never enclosed, that it moves across tendencies it cannot hold in its-self.” Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 183.

enacted globally by artists, therapists and others keen to experience a collective singular body.

The experiment involves about ten participants, nine of whom stand together in a tight circle, facing in. In the middle, one person lies prone, sparsely clothed, on the floor. Each standing person is given a small wooden spindle of cotton thread of a different color and is instructed to hold the spindle in their mouths, close their eyes, and use their tongues to gradually unspool the thread onto the person below.

The presence of the spindle in the people's mouths, combined with the unspooling action, stimulates saliva production. The muffled "clackclack clack clack clackclack" of wooden spools against teeth can be heard as saliva-saturated tongues push out slobber-soaked threads. Layers of unfurled thread grow into a multicolored mesh of second skin on the person below. For Clark, the act of pushing the thread out of one's mouth draws attention to the permeable, sonic *feel* of bringing something from the inside to the outside. Then, according to Clark, "they begin to perceive that they are pulling their very guts out."²

Once all the thread has unspooled, the standing participants open their eyes, crouch down, and with physical effort – for the protein in saliva hardens as it dries – *tear* apart the thread-web that has covered the person on the floor.³ The prone person often reports a sense of claustrophobia that lifts as soon as the skin-mesh gets ripped apart.⁴

2 Lygia Clark, quoted in Andre Lepecki, "The Making of a Body: Lygia Clark's Anthropophagic Slobber," in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art*, eds. Cornelia H. Butler and Luis Perez-Oramas (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 295.

3 During one restaging of *Slobber Threads* (SenseLab, Montréal, 2019), one participant, while bent over and tearing away the stiff but still sticky thread-web, mentioned a putrid, wobbly smell that was released, reminiscent of encrusted breast milk.

4 Lepecki, "The Making of a Body," 296.

Slobber. The word spills over, in excess of itself.

As Lygia Clark simulates the feeling of pulling out one's guts, Whitehead steers our attention to an obvious yet neglected fact: "No one ever says, 'Here am I, and I have brought my body with me.'"⁵ So habituated are we to the Cartesian split – of the mind as separate from the body – that Whitehead's sensible, logical twist disorients us, momentarily.

Whitehead's simple statement jars us from our mind and back into bodily common sense: *Of course* I am my body.

Slobber is a word with a body.

Whitehead's common sense re-oriens body away from the all-too-familiar Cartesian fleshy thing,⁶ where the notion of body is external; a subject that is presupposed. Instead, Whitehead's relativistic view places body – the concept – as an activity, as an immanently emergent happening *within* a body. That is, Whitehead's body is not *a* body thinking but a thinking *in* the bodying, in the activities. "Our knowledge of the body," he says, "places it as a complex unity of happenings within the larger field of nature."⁷ These happenings – trillions of functionings and activities, or what Whitehead calls "actual occasions" – take place where there is "no definite boundary to determine where the body begins and external nature ends."⁸ Such as the complex unity of happenings that take place within the fluidy reverb of the slobberers' collective moving guts.

5 Alfred North Whitehead, *Aims of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 114.

6 That is, the all-too-common Judeo-Christian transcendental perspective of body.

7 Whitehead, *Aims of Education*, 161.

8 *Ibid.*

Another way to follow Whitehead's concept of body could be to say that bodying is *everywhere* present as a "society of molecules." This bodying society – always unified within the larger gyrating field of nature – "[b]elongs to the structural essence of the body that, in an indefinite number of ways, it is always losing molecules and gaining molecules."⁹ The bodying society of gutsy slobberers bring this concept to life.

Slobber is a happening, everywhere present as a vibrating, ever-changing society of molecules.

Clark and Whitehead firmly place bodying as the source of all experience: "All sense perception is merely one outcome of the dependence of our experience upon bodily functionings," says Whitehead.¹⁰ Rather than embodying process (of, say, generating slobber), the process *itself* embodies as it moves along – a concept enacted by the collective bodying experiment of pulling out guts. Whitehead's philosophy outruns the subject by placing movement – *process* – at the center of experience. Inside–outside, subject–object, mind–body binaries do not exist in Whitehead's world because, "We are in the world and the world is in us."¹¹

There is only a seamless becoming of continuity, of reality always in process. Always immanently generated; moving, changing, becoming, the past contiguous with the future-present: "There is a rhythm of process whereby creation produces natural pulsation, each pulsation forming a natural unit of historic fact."¹²

From this perspective, there will always be eternal possibilities for following the sonic fluctuations of bodying

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 159.

11 Ibid., 165.

12 Ibid., 89.

slobber. Until we die, and even then, another pulsating process takes over: decomposition.

Slobber drags the past with it as it moves on.

My brother, when he was alive, liked to use the word slobber.

As kids we would taunt our beloved dogs with food and watch the globs of slobber gather and grow in rows along their long lips.

“Look at all of Rufie’s *slobber!*” Craig would exclaim, amazed. His wonder at the dog’s capacity directly expressed: the process of salivation making visible strings of saliva. My wonder at my older brother’s wonder. Our amazement at how quickly the saliva would form. How the dog’s eyes and body would freeze, fixed in restraint, with a barely perceptible quiver of hopeful anticipation. How it seemed as though we could control the amount of saliva secreted, as if on tap.

A dog porous to the environment (potential food held by its taunters) that does its work on the dog’s bodying process. The wonder doing its work on us. Slobber as a direct expression of a dog’s desires, appetites, wants. Unlike most of us humans, who tend to keep our desires hidden by swallowing our saliva.

More amazement: gravity eventually drags the strings of saliva, the

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r

o

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l

to the floor: Our cue to toss the food.

Slobber: When I use the word, it brings my brother back to life for the duration of the word's slobbering lifespan.

Slobber is what it does.

Patti Smith, aging punk-poet, *does* slobber, a lot. She says she cannot help it and makes no effort to swallow, to suppress, to turn her saliva back inside.

Patti's waistcoat is torn, open, so her diaphragm – and her swagger across the stage – is free to release wild slobber. Strands of her grey hair are moist with spit. Her mouth, her words, her music, secrete copious amounts of slobber. Like Lygia Clark, for Patti Smith, the inside–outside is porous, indivisible. Her compositions are carried by slobber, and slobber is a conduit for expression.

Slobber sprays the audience: molecules of Patti are vaporised in the air for all to take in.

Stand close and inhale – swallow – bits of Patti.

As her whole body sings.

Slobber: feel its secretions, its viscous weight hanging on, just.

I wonder: with all of his copious conceptual secretions, perhaps Whitehead's slobber was never allowed to fully express itself? Born into Britain's Victorian era when expressions of desire – its smell and messiness – were often swallowed, suppressed, secreted away under clinched waistcoats and strict morality. Pages were kept dry, free of dribble and spit. Yet Whitehead's thinking secretes juicy propositions that place us as a happening within our bodies: *the whole body thinks*. "The body is ours, and we are an activity *within* our body."¹³

13 Ibid., 165. My emphasis.

In other words, what we are is what our bodying *does*.

So, if we consider Whitehead's proposition, that what we are is what our bodying does, what about sounds? Do sounds immanently body forth, as word-sound bodyings? Do sonorous words need a fleshy body so they can language forth? To be able to come alive, both on and off the page?

> >

Onomatopoeia is the Latinized Greek term for "word-making." That is, simply, words that sound like what they describe.

The fleshy body is a resounding chamber: words that use the air from our lungs and the position of our teeth, lips, and tongue to form audible words.

Hoick. Mucus needs the throat's surface – and a force – to push it up and out.

Words related to the voice that comes from the back of the throat:

giggle growl grunt gurgle.

Words related to the voice that comes from the lips:

murmur mumble.

Words related to gas as it is released from a stomach:

belch burp.

Or a word related to the slow movement of gas as it moves through the intestines:

borborygmus.

A word related to air that doesn't need to be pushed through the lungs and throat:

whisper.

Words related to water:

splash, spray, squirt, drizzle, drip.

Words related to soft bodies hitting the ground:

splat, splatter.

Word-sounds embody process as they language forth. Put another way, word-bodyings are immanently emergent happenings *within* sonorous activities.

Slobber: the word signifies nothing more than the sound it makes.

It is what its sound-bodying *does*.

> >

Plub is a Gaelic term used by the fishermen on the Mull of Kintyre on the southwest coast of Scotland. It is the sound a single herring-body makes when it jumps out of the water and lands, making a tiny splash:

u
l b
p

Many Scottish herring fisherman still shun high-tech devices used to locate shoals of fish. Instead, they use their bodies to *feel* herring deep in the water under their boats. To do so they use a feeling-wire. The wire – made of twine and sometimes piano wire – is dropped into the water’s depths with a weight on the descending end, and the other end held between the thumb and forefinger on deck. The vibrations through the boat’s metal hull become a part of the feeling-wire. When the person wiring “feels them thick,” they call the skipper and the crew springs into action. Practiced through generations of fishermen, the wire is still used to estimate the depth and density of a shoal of herring, and can even distinguish between the different species of fish.

Finger–thumb–wire–belly–hull–seawater–herring bodies fuse together as they attune – and *become* – the vibrations underneath.¹⁴

As their whole thinking bodies.

I wonder: since I am an activity within my body, and thoughts are also an activity, do ideas therefore have bodies? Do concepts form first as an abstract blob from which words fuse with sound to form language, in the form of a word-sound-body?

If these wonderings are met with a desiring yes! then words – that is, language that lands as written text – are a sort of more-than human material. And this material – activated by forces and flows and tendencies – is capable of generating text-flesh that grows into a thinking *in* the bodying. Text as a complex of happenings bodying forth.

14 Penny McCall Howard, “Feeling the Ground: Listening, Vibration, Sounding at Sea,” in *On Listening*, eds. Angus Carlyle and Cathy Lane (Devon: Uniform Books, 2013), 61–66.

Can writing, then, carry the affective vitality – those more-than human qualities – smeared through the sound – and feel – of words?

Words which include *that* way of inhaling – swallowing – molecules of Patti-ness in the bodying. And *that* way of taunting Rufie’s drool, and the Craig-ness that will always live as a sonorous activity in our bodying drool.

And the life of this *essai* (French for an attempt, or a test): it bodies as it aims, and bodies as it follows *that* complex of feeling in *that* particular way of wording. The structural essence of this essaying body and its indefinite ways of bodying forth: it is always losing and gaining word molecules (until the final edit).

In other words, essaying forth I am *in* wording activities.

How to practice bodying word-sounds? For Manning, it is about developing the practice of “sitting at the uneasy interstice of process and production and asking what things do when they shape each other.”¹⁵ And find ways to invent techniques: sit with a dog desiring or lean into the relational field of a collective group’s saliva-saturated spools of thread; follow slobber’s potential to refold a past-present juicy with Craig-ness. Always in the middle, in the not-quite-yet, belonging to process – and the self-enjoyment – as things shape each other.

Find ways to sit in the complex unity of happenings that are (im)mediated by relational objects, those carriers of potential. Again, as Whitehead has sensibly reminded us: there is no definite boundary to determine where the body begins and external nature ends. Such as *that* way the wire-thumb-belly-hull-herring feels them thick. The drool that drops in *that* way. A practice of following the qualities, tendencies, and intensities that are always already more-than human.

15 Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, 170.

Follow the essaying sounds become the sounds themselves reverbing with more-than qualities and tendencies.

As a thinking in the bodying, worlding words.

A society of molecules always in reverb.

My bodying is a sounding porous membrane attuned to the field, following the rhythms and forces at work and play, always in our midst.

As I sit in the uneasy practice of bodying word-sounds, I ask, over and over:

What are the word-sounds *doing* as they shape each other?

Slobber: the single sonorous word-vibration reverbs off my fingers, poised over the keyboard, ready to catch every vital, juicy drip.

Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who has been profoundly deaf since she was 12, performs barefooted so she can better hear the vibrations as they move between her body and the ground.

Thoughts move. Writing sticks thoughts to paper: words, syntax, and rhythm punctuate a flow, or not. The thrill when a thought gathers other thoughts and form vortices that potentiate a concept. As the forces gather strength within the idea's vortex, a more-than quality forms that is out of human earshot.

"The lyric essay requires an allegiance to intuition. Because we are no longer tied to a logical, linear narrative or argument, we must surrender to the writing process itself to show us the essay's intent."¹⁶

How to express the inexpressible – and the imperceptible – through language? Maybe through those sweet spots when the moment a needle's tip zings – like a lightning flash – a discharge of calcium ions bound-up in taut muscle tissue.

The zing is a thunderclap after the flash, sending ripples across the body's horizon.

16 Brenda Miller and Suzanna Paola, *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (New York: McGraw Hill 2012), 10.

Over 400 years ago, the shearing force of grief moved the essay's inventor, Michel de Montaigne, to experiment with a new way of writing. The sudden death of his friend – whose conversation he cherished – left a void he needed to fill.

An acupuncture needle would be nothing
without tissue to twirl
and a body with which to converse.

Joan Retallack, a comrade of Hejinian and other Language Poets, puts essay-ing as a risky activity with an uncertain outcome. As a poethical act, she wagers the risk as necessary, recalling Montaigne's words: "If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial."¹⁷ A spirit of playful experimentation motivates the form to forgo the air of mastery, and instead actively seek out precarity and ambivalence. Retallack, by invoking Montaigne's words, reminds us that the essay deliberately seeks out slippery contingencies without footholds for the mind to gain purchase.

Xue, an acupuncture point, literally means hole. Classically *xue* meant a cave, or was referred to as a "chamber below the earth."

The essay is awry, off balance: "Montaigne cultivates sentences that admit unsteadiness while finding a moving balance in disequilibrium. This is the way every interpermeable life system works – in dynamic, vertiginous flux – finding its patterns in contingent motion."¹⁸

17 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 611.

18 Joan Retallack, "Wager as Essay," *Chicago Review* 49, no. 1 (2003): 31–51.

I practice lyric-ing the body with punctures.
Or, in puncturing the body, lyrics are made.

Navel Gazing, or, The Immanent Twist

You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, so what is this BwO? – But you're already on it, scurrying like vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight – fight and are fought – seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹

A friend told me recently that she's kept the desiccated umbilical cords of her three children.

In a hidden shoebox? I forgot to ask.

What happened to my umbilical cord will always be a mystery. Most likely my mother bundled it into my dirty nappy. Her farm-girl pragmatism wouldn't have allowed any sentiment over our shared remnant.

However, I do know that during my birth, my mother, out of it on gas, recalled meeting St Peter at the Pearly Gates. He was very pleasant and welcoming, she said,

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 150.

when recycling the story over the years. But while she was conversing with St Pete I made my way out of her yawning vagina, which was stretched to the point of tearing. Forceps must have gripped my soft temporal bones. I can still feel a dent above my left temple.

Is that original shock, the violent separation, held – like a miasma – inside our navels?

“The becoming-body,” writes Manning, “has no fixed form. It is an exfoliating body.”² Perhaps like the suspended state of becoming-snake, when it is in-between skins. One has been sloughed off and the re-assembling of another has not yet emerged. The snake, between skins, has lost its form. The becoming-body is a virtual body. It is de-territorialized, “free of the fixed relations that contain a body all the while exposing it to new organizations.”³ Becoming-bodies are re-assembling all the time, in process and in relationship with other assemblages. Exfoliating is a doing, a “verbing,” an action. To shed the restrictive skin of a binary allows for becomings to unfold. Movement and rhythm exfoliate, says Manning. And for total exfoliation, laughter.⁴

Most people watch the ceiling as I probe their bellies. But this young woman hasn’t taken her eyes off me. A fixed, wide-eyed stare bores into the side of my face. I sense a frozen stillness as my hand rests over her taut navel. She stops breathing. The deer is hiding in a grove of trees, holding dead still until the bear lumbers past.

I glance over at her deep red stockings draped over the side of the chair, which still hold the shape of her feet. More of a venous shade of red, I decide. There’s a hint of

2 Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 124.

3 Manning, 67.

4 Manning, 21.

blue. It was only ten minutes ago that I passed her standing at the reception desk, her long red legs capped by a vinyl black mini-skirt, feet planted in ankle-high black boots with severe zippers on the side.

I remove my hand from her navel and do the rest of my information-gathering over her abdomen. Temperature. Tone. Areas of tension. Skin texture. No scars, moles, or other irregularities. Only a few scattered freckles. Her ribcage is on the narrow side, indicating a relatively weak constitution. My hand moves with a sure, swift touch, conveying confidence born from exploring hundreds of bellies over the years.

Her chief complaint is tight shoulders. Too much computer work, she tells me. But I know it comes from a deeper tension, a deeper source.

When I move my hand away from her navel, she relaxes. Move it back over, and she tenses up again. Like the tree falling in the woods, does her navel relax when no one is probing? Judging from her taut musculature, including her neck muscles stretched like guy wires to the point of snapping, I don't think so.

Her middle is clenched. Tight.

When I remove my hand, the side of my face relaxes. The deer comes out of hiding and watches the bear shrink in the distance.

She's here for her tight shoulder muscles, not her belly. I move up towards her head and press my fingers into the muscles on the top of her shoulders. Cement.

"In this Japanese style of acupuncture, we treat your whole body starting from your abdomen," I say, as I move around to the other side of the table to check the top of her other shoulder, which is also hard as cement. I press my fingers in again.

"We see a connection between your tight shoulders and the tension in your belly."

I notice a thin layer of foundation on her face, discretely blended into her neck. A tiny crater, left by an

absent nose ring, stands out. Her black eyebrows nearly meet at a crease in the middle. Long earlobes. A sign of longevity, according to the Chinese.

As her eyes follow my face, the fear-bulge appears again. My cheek tenses. I look square at her, into the stunned stare. The carefully applied make-up suddenly makes her more vulnerable to me. Removing my hand, I make sure my face and voice are soft.

“We need to free up your belly in order for your shoulders to loosen.”

She gives a little quick nod, but I don't think she has any idea what I mean.

Her body is like a gated community surrounded with razor wire and sirens. I move away to jot down my findings in her fresh case file. And consider a way in. Maybe I should take the steering wheel and drive straight for the barbed-wire barricade, head-first into her fear. Or make the white-coated decision of *The Expert* and disregard her frightened state, her naked vulnerability, however much she's tried to conceal it.

And what of informed consent? I've witnessed plenty of tears over the years, the moment of sweet relief when held-back feelings give way to a rupture. And several times the unrestrained sobs on the treatment table when a belly has unbuttoned, the clenched fist opens and blood floods back to the source. The disoriented stupor of having finally let go but not knowing how to fill all the freshly freed space. I do know this: too much energy is bound up in watching, in holding it all together, in concealment.

The clinched core. Fisted feelings. Anxiety circling a small room looking for a way out.

Without the oppositional tensions of a binary to keep it intact, when skin is neither on nor off, what can the becoming-body do? Deleuze took up Spinoza's idea of immanence: not only don't we know what a body can do; we don't know what our bodies will do from moment to moment.

Spinoza never ceases to be astonished by the body: not of having a body, but at what the body is capable of. Bodies are defined not by their genus and species, nor by their origins and functions, but by what they can do, the affects they are capable of, in passion as in action.⁵

By rebuking binaries, possibilities open up. Becomings are potentiated by the rub of difference, juxtaposition, and paradox, and aspire to ambiguity. Difference is affirmed, celebrated even. Elizabeth Grosz, a philosopher devoted to re-thinking the body, notes that:

[Deleuze and Guattari's] notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior oppositions.⁶

By taking up the challenge to contest binaries, such as the Cartesian habit of privileging the mind over the body, somato-phobia – or fear of the body – can be looked at square in the face. This could be an antidote for the centuries-old Cartesian splitting headache: to step into Deleuze and Guattari's world, comprised of thousands of wide-open undulating plateaus where the body and the mind can roam, aimless, together as one.

5 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Hammerjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 74.

6 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin), 164.

Our umbilicus. The site where the original lifeline, the chewy cord, connected to mother. The odd pucker of dense tissue left over once the shriveled lifeless cord falls off like a dead branch snaps from a tree.

Maybe the wail of a newborn baby comes out as a grieving protest to being cast off from the mothership. The shocking finality of the lifeline's snip, never to return. I recall the nightmare I had as a child after watching *2001: A Space Odyssey* – that astronaut floating, forever alone, into deep space, into infinity. The cold sweat of horror turning quickly to dread that is still not far away inside me.

Could it be that our navels hold that memory? The shock of the snip leaving the trace of our first unforgivable wounding? Could that be why so many people have an aversion to having their navels touched?

Belly button. Our belly's button. Push a button. Don't push my buttons. A button gathers and holds two surfaces together.

Deleuze took up the term "Body without Organs" (BwO) from Antonin Artaud, another Spinozist, who invented the term as a means to free himself from the disgust and hatred he held for his own body. "Man is sick because he is badly constructed [...] when you have made him a body without organs, then you have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him his true freedom."⁷ Deleuze folded Artaud's term into his philosophy, having the BwO insinuate a deeper, hidden reality. For Deleuze, the BwO embodies a virtual space outside the hard edges of well-formed wholes constructed from functioning parts. "Then," says Artaud, with the conceptual evisceration complete, "you will teach him to dance wrong side out as in the frenzy of dance halls and this wrong side

7 Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 570.

out will be his real place.”⁸ But to “dance wrong side out” isn’t enough, suggests Rosi Braidotti: “To switch to Spinoza is a switch to the radical materiality of the body: the entire body thinks. You don’t think with the mind, you think with the entire fleshed existence.” Therein lays the inescapable human rub, the same one from which Artaud sought freedom. “You cannot step outside the slab of matter that you inhabit,”⁹ adds Braidotti.

“How’s your sleep?” I ask as I move over to the treatment cart. Time to get the flow started.

“Is it going to hurt?” Her voice is pinched, small.

I head towards her feet with a packet of pins.

“Not really, they’re so fine and thin,” I say. To tell her there’s no pain isn’t the truth. Sometimes the zing can be felt as pain. I start to peel the packet open.

“It’s a shame they’re called needles because it conjures up injections.”

Anticipation thickens the air in the room.

“If it makes you feel any better, when I was little I was terrified of getting my shots. And now I’m an acupuncturist.” Most people respond with a surprised, *really?* She says nothing.

I touch her toes. Icy. I also notice her feet aren’t flopping out at a relaxed angle from her hips. Hip joints can often mirror shoulder joints. Both are holding on tight in this client. Her gluteal muscles are probably also clenched.

“I wouldn’t say it hurts, but you can feel a little tingly sensation. Acupuncture is about getting things flowing again, like flicking little switches, and....”

8 Ibid., 571.

9 Rosi Braidotti, “Borrowed Energy,” *Frieze*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy>.

“You’re not going to put one in my stomach are you?” Her voice cuts through the thickness, taking up space. The air moves. Good. She’s got spunk.

I press my warm hands into her icy arches, pulling her attention down to her feet. Better not head for the barricade, at least not today. Do I risk another rattled meltdown? And what of informed consent? Tell her: sorry, but there’s a chance you’ll have a sobbing attack if I go straight to your clenched navel. Are you up for that? Unbutton it and underneath is access to another land of possibility. The unblinking grip of your implosion habit is a familiar, steady presence. Exhausting, but familiar. Keep it all contained, quiet, camouflaged.

Anxiety circles the room faster, faster. Frantic. Got to be a way out.

Forces are always at play, even in stasis, in stillness. Masumi points it another way when he says “positionality is an emergent quality of movement. The distinction between stasis and motion that replaces the opposition between literal and figurative from this perspective is not a logical binarism. It follows the modes by which realities pass into each other. ‘Passing into’ is not a binarism. They are dynamic unities.”¹⁰ Moving forces – earthbound and material, animate and inanimate, human and inhuman – rub, crash, scrape, caress, explode and fuse as dynamic unities. The swirl of forces on and against surfaces merging into each other. The New Materialists conceptualize “traversing the fluxes”¹¹ as a strategic move away from dualisms. Grosz comments on Deleuze and Guattari’s elemental – or “molecular” in their terminology – conception of the body, which “implies a clear move toward im-

10 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

11 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds., *New Materialism: Cartographies and Interviews* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 86.

perceptibility [...] their work is like an acidic dissolution of the body, and the subject along with it.”¹² Cartesian thinking has benignly neglected matter with its preoccupation with the mind. As a relational ontology, the perspective of the New Materialists allows for the immanent enfolding of matter and meaning.¹³ This re-conception of matter tolerates, encourages even, an apparent oxymoron, such movement in stasis. The endless possibilities of becoming create a power so potent it is capable of defying the classical laws of physics. The forces created by the actions of multiplicities can yank free of binary constraints by twisting around into the middle, and pass into each other.

I gently prod a spot on the inside of her ankle, a particular spot on the body that can manifest the fear-bulge. The prolonged fixed stare.

“Is this tender?”

She goes frozen again and winces. Just the feedback I need. But I want her to acknowledge it more directly.

“Does it feel sharp when I press it? Or more like a bruise?” I press it again.

“Sharp.”

“And this spot?” I reach over and press into the same spot on her left ankle.

“Ow. That’s worse.”

Swiftly, I tap a needle into one of the ankle spots.

“There, it’s in. Did that hurt?”

Silence. The air in the room circulates again.

“Is that it?” Her tone is incredulous, on the edge of a laugh.

12 Eleanor Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 52.

13 Dolphijn and Van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 48.

“Yep, that’s it. Now, remember how I said acupuncture is like flicking little switches and getting things flowing better?”

The pinched voice reappears: “Ah, huh.”

“Just let me know when you feel a tingling sensation.” Very, oh-so very gently I give the needle a minuscule twirl, barely a whisper.

“Ew! I felt it down to my big toe. Like a tingle of electricity.”

“Yes. That’s the switch getting flicked on.”

I’ve already moved to her other foot and tap another in. I don’t bother tweaking the second spot. One zing is enough to start the shift, to initiate the drop.

I move up to the head-end of the treatment table. She’s looking at the ceiling. Trillions of cells in her body are starting to hum and head towards equilibrium, like bees reforming a swarm. The fear-bulge disappears.

“How’re you doing?”

“Good. I feel really... good,” she responds, dropping down into free flow. Dynamic homeostasis is just around the corner. She closes her eyes.

I place my hand just under her navel. She doesn’t flinch.

“Take in a big breath, and fill up my hand.”

She does, with surprising ease.

“And keep doing it several times, okay?”

Once free of the dualist structure of oppositional thinking, territorialized bodies – literal bodies, as well as social, economic, political bodies – can find ways to challenge power disequilibrium. With the binary straightjacket removed, we can find out what our becoming-bodies are capable of doing. One option is to leave the cramped interiors of psychoanalytic orthodoxy and roam on the surfaces as assemblages intermingle. No longer is there us or

ours, only the possibility of coming together, or *agencement*.¹⁴

We can contest Freud's phallogentrism. And the pinched negativity of desire understood as an insatiable lack. Desire as something missing. Instead, desire, according to Deleuze & Guattari, is defined as a "process of production without reference to any exterior agency; desire is a process of experimentation on a plane of immanence."¹⁵ Their philosophy is one of affirmation: desire is re-conceived as abundance, as excess. A plentitude. Not looking to fill a hole. "The BwO is never yours or mine. It is always a body."¹⁶ Without an external agent, the BwO refuses to be owned.

Birth is shocking, simple enough. Once outside the womb the air pressure changes, forcing the tiny heart flap to snap shut. In the time it takes for the lungs to inflate, the mysterious morphing from amphibious creature to land mammal takes place.

Cast out into a sea of blue scrubs and machines bleeping, the perilous journey outside the womb begins. The unnecessary slap on the bottom that was done in the old days. Vernix, like a thin smear of wet scrambled eggs, gets rubbed off by a scratchy towel. A needle prick to the base of a fresh heel. Add blinding lights, the cold embrace of metal, and this beginning outside the womb is enough for any creature to want to turn around and crawl back inside the mothership.

But to return inside is impossible. Docking to the breast is the next best option.

14 The French term, *agencement*, is untranslatable, says Manning, yet it "carries within itself a sense of movement and connectibility" and "of potentializing directionality." Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 123.

15 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 154.

16 *Ibid.*, 164.

Deleuze returns to the middle as a source of becoming: "It is in the middle where one finds the becoming, the movement, the velocity, the vortex. The middle is not the mean, but on the contrary, an excess. It is by the middle that things push."¹⁷ Events pass through the middle, in transit, neither here nor there. Manning and Massumi say that each center-point of movement, also known as the any-point, "twists around into the middle. In the middle, the immanent limits are in abstract superposition."¹⁸ Midway, betwixt and between. The middle holds it together, just. "Touch resets the any-point of movement,"¹⁹ they add.

"Your hand is really hot."

I snap back into the room.

"Yeah, they do warm up."

My left index finger marks a spot a couple of inches below her navel.

"How about I tap one in here?"

"Okay," she says, hardly hesitating.

Several thousand years ago, the ancient Chinese scanned the night sky for the North Pole Star, the prominent constellation used as a coordinate to chart the heavens. They considered it the fixed point around which everything orbited. As it is above, so it is below, they said, extending the celestial guidepost into the body, fixing it in the space just below the navel.

As long as we can locate our Pole Star, it doesn't matter how far we venture across the horizon. But if we lose our way, by a tangle of fear or a flare of rage, a few calm,

17 Gilles Deleuze, *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 208.

18 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 42.

19 *Ibid.*, 54.

focused belly-breaths will lead us back to the hub – our body’s night sky. Yes, there it is. Homeward bound, back to our source.

Perhaps touch, in resetting the any-point of movement, also resets potential? “Potential is abstract by nature,” Manning & Massumi continue, “in the sense of not yet being this or that, here nor there. What is abstract feeling, if not thought?” Perhaps, also, home is found “in the immanent twist.”²⁰ In one moment, one breath. One touch. Back to the source: the middle.

My left finger continues to mark the way in, easily found on the south side of the small rise in the flesh below her navel. This fleshy gateway into the Pole Star is always there, no matter if the surface terrain is a large mound or flattened surface. A pale freckle, like a faint nebula, sits next to her entrance.

Placing the metal guide tube on the spot, I give the top of the needle a quick tap. It pierces the skin, and the portal opens. The needle sinks just under the surface. A few gentle twirls send down slow ripples. I feel a tiny tug. Contact.

Returning to the desk to light the moxa, I hold the tip of the cigar-shaped stick over the candle flame waiting for the dense punk to smolder. Her breathing is slow. The flame’s wobble is mesmerizing.

My mother, while giving birth to me, either had a profound, drug-induced dissociative episode or a near-death experience. Did the experience also get embedded in me? Maybe it helps to explain my love of flying, of watching clouds, or my phobic terror of tight spaces. Does my navel hold that memory? Maybe that’s why my friend saved her babies’ shriveled cords – to secretly hold like a talisman,

20 Ibid., 41.

preserving the connection. The pain and the ecstasy, forever mummified, hidden in a shoebox.

For my becomings to become becomings, my “series of assemblages” – me, that is, in Deleuze’s terminology – is required to relate with other assemblages – human, animate or inanimate – whereby my molecules affectively morph with whatever it is I’m in the process of becoming. As I think-feel into the density of flesh, through the gooey interstitial tissue, I listen for an opening. I refuse to conclude with this or that thinking, side-stepping the binary pothole. My sense-perceptions stay focused, attuned. My listening finger is a becoming-needle. Like how a painter think-feels through color, or how a dancer think-feels through movement. My becoming-needle think-feels through flesh. I find the grain of things through the movement of feeling-forward. Stasis is a needler’s nemesis. Exfoliating on the cutting edge of a skin’s assemblage, I twirl internal whirls and alter the surface, alter the flow within. Our realities pass into each other by twisting into the middle.

Her feet are flopped out, relaxed. She sinks deeper into the table. Trillions of cells are happily humming as *yin* and *yang* do-si-do around her Pole Star.

Blowing on the cherry-red ember, I move back to the table and hold the burning stick an inch or so over her skin around where the needle is planted. She hardly stirs.

“You’ll feel some warmth below your navel,” I say. She exhales, lets out a barely audible moan. The guy wires on her neck go slack. Her head slumps slightly to the side.

As the heat is conducted down the needle, it sends her source a strong reminder: Burn bright, hold fast, keep her oriented. As the heat seeps deeper, a message orbits back to her: Here’s your energetic core, located under your umbilicus-stem, its coals smoldering, providing the light whenever you need to find your way home.

My thoughts return earthbound: Will you feel lost unclenched? Are you ready to spill from your middling in your immanent twist?

Deleuze and Guattari offer a prescription for a healthy BwO:

This is how it should be done. Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO.²¹

Hovering my open palm over her skin, I feel the warm glow coming from underneath. Enough moxa. Just a few more minutes and I'll take out the needles.

A few gurgles, a telltale sound of relaxation, come from her belly.

After placing the moxa back on the treatment cart, I sit to finish my notes.

More gurgles emerge, sounding like a long line of trapped air bubbles finally freed, rush to the surface.

"The BwO is permeated by unformed, unstable matter, by flows of all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles,"²² Deleuze and Guattari reassure us.

21 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 161.

22 *Ibid.*, 40.

The stockings sag. The foot's shape is gone.

I recall a period of time when, as a young child, I had a deep concern for the pickles that lived in a jar placed on the top shelf at the back of the refrigerator. I was convinced that without breathing holes in the lid that they would suffocate. In my world, the pickles and I were one and the same. The pickles not only embodied breathing, they also, as far as I was concerned, weren't able to breathe. The slime that grew around their bodies was proof to me that they were dying.

A friend, four and a half years old at the time, posed three questions to me in quick succession:

Do trees have muscles?

Can water swim?

Where does metal live?

Instead of trying to imagine an answer, I gently tossed back each of her carefully considered questions: Did you ask the trees? And water? Can metal tell you where it lives? How about we go out and ask them?

We went for a walk and a wonder. A wonder walk. I figured she still has direct access to the things themselves, so I tagged along to find out what each had to say.

This is a fact: the physiological properties of connective tissue – from fine microscopic strands to the thick planes of fascia – respond to movement in the body and change as a direct consequence of bodily movement. Movement changes the behavioral responses of connective tissue.

The interaction – the *movement* – between ideas lays down conceptual connective tissue and creates the capacity for the body of the lyric essay to grow, change and become. If an idea cannot stay in relationship with another idea, it shrivels, atrophies, and dies.

My thoughts dart around restlessly and become a chaotic parade of phantoms, animals, climatic conditions, abstractions, ideas, smells, pieces of furniture: all things that exist for themselves in the “mind” that is everywhere. Could it be that what I perceive is a result of the act of personifying? As my “mind” intermingles with and seeps into my milieu’s “mind”: that vast field where self-organizing things and I share a zone of experience?

Infra (“within”) hyphenated with *thin* creates infinite possibilities. We know not what a body will do.

I wonder: how do concepts behave?

What do *they* do when we’re not thinking?

Personify themselves, as themselves? Like Newton’s gravity?

Can concepts inhabit a zone of experience, free from representation?

Maybe there is a dimension out there where concepts frolic and cavort and collide, with glee.

If it is possible for concepts to personify other concepts, how about words?

How do words behave?

Words that exist, *for themselves*.

Words that are intrinsic, that push out from within.

Pushy words, sticky words, words that flock.

Words that spill over.

Soft word bodies that feel the force of thought, informing.

Alliterations stick similar-sounding soft word-bodies together.

Onomatopoeic sound-body words swish their sounds as they *do* what they *are*.

Words as *pan* (everywhere) *psychic* (intelligence): words, for themselves, that have their own kind of consciousness.

And the practice of creative writing – the craft of figuring language – personifies their bodying forth.

In my ordinary mental meanderings and free-falling daydreams – before the act and effort of turning my internal thoughts and ideas into words – all the objects in my field of physical perception are there for themselves, in that Jamesian *panpsychic* way. Like James suggests, my sensate perceptions (smell, see, hear, touch, taste, intuit) become my “psychical reality.” I am not personifying – that is, imposing my perceptions onto the nonhuman world – but, instead, all of my experience is a seamless extension of all “minds” everywhere.

Personification steers clear of identity politics. It cannot become anything other than what it is, for itself. As an *it*, it cannot be owned, claimed, staked. Or made into a representation. Or have its wings pinned down as “knowledge.” It is air and fluids and forces and wings, all at once, undifferentiated. When using the English language, personification spills out everywhere, inseparable from the words we use.

On their own, acupoints are inert. But they project a quality. To be open, and to be clinically effective, a point needs to be met, stirred. Agitated.

Personification has a persistent way of insinuating itself into thinking, and into the creation of language. With silent stealth it seeps across porous membranes into interiors about to burst with figures, expressions, and turns of phrase. Images conjure ideas – ideas conjure images. A figure of speech is so reflexive that my fingertips cannot distinguish the thought from the word-images that they tap out. And I've always had a preference for the subtext, for that interstitial-land that resides between this one and another place.

The whispers, faint traces, sudden up-draughts and hauntings.

Isn't that the place where all figurative language is birthed?

And isn't that the zone of experience where the unreachable itch to create resides?

It is the tree's muscles.

It is water swimming.

It makes a home for metal, hidden deep in the earth, below the rivers and seas.

Spinoza's Body Politic

Postulate I.¹

The human Body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite.

Deep within Gut, something is amiss.

Vagus nerve, also known as Wanderer, rushes to collect information onsite and assess the severity of the situation.

Look at me! Look at moi!

Everyone heaves an exasperated sigh. There it goes again.

Irritable Bowel.

Wanderer relays a message up Parasympathetic nerve to Brain:

Situation not urgent. It's just Irritable Bowel, again.

¹ *Postulates I–VI*, included in this essay, are from “Second Part of the Ethics: Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind.” Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 462.

Intestines continue to whine: *I can't take it anymore! I can't take the pressure!*

Stomach leans down, terse: *You think you've got problems – at least you didn't get hit with a gooey bomb last night.*

Gallbladder contracts at the memory.

At midnight! Stomach adds.

Jaw pipes in: *Yeah, well I had to chew it.*

Hang on there, Jaw. We did it together, barges in Teeth.

Tongue recalls the pleasurable yet complex swirl of chewy caramel with tiny shards of hard toffee hidden in soft mocha, and decides to stay out of it.

Yeah, I suppose you're right. After a short pause, Jaw adds, directed at Teeth: *But do you have to gnash all night? I'd like to get some rest once in a while.*

Hey don't blame us. That's coming from her Head! snaps back Teeth. Several others grumble in agreement.

Amidst all the epigastric commotion, Brain remains quiet.

From a distance, Great Toes speak up: *Hey, we'd like a rest at night too but for some weird reason she rubs us against the sheets when she sleeps. So don't forget about us down here.*

Hear, hear! chime in the other toes.

Brain is still quiet, playing possum. Many of the Individuals are getting impatient and irate. They think Brain is holding out on them, taking advantage of its lofty status and not contributing its full capacity. Someone needs to finally deal with Irritable Bowel, and the consensus is that Brain should take the initiative.

There are whispers of mutiny.

Rogue cells in Pancreas wait for their cue to start can-
cering.

Postulate II.

Some of the individuals comprising the human Body are fluid, some soft, others hard.

Heart steps in to make its presence felt by turning up the pressure. Muscles lining the major arteries flex, bulge. Blood rushes faster, squeezing through Vessels as they suddenly narrow. Pupils dilate, encouraging more light in case it's an emergency. Pores open and release a mist of sweat.

Heart pounds faster, insistent. It needs to express something, but needs Brain to at least take an interest.

For a moment, the Body is still and attentive. When the Heart pounds, tissues listen. Wanderer zips around to pass the message that constricting Vessels have turned up the heat. Strong sensations grip Intestines. Anus shirks at the relentless feeling of pressure, of having to hold it all in. It desperately wants to let loose. Heart understands, and is empathetic towards the unreasonable pressures put on both Anus and Rectum.

Brain remains silent. Uncommunicative.

Postulate III.

The individuals comprising the human Body, and consequently, the human Body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways.

Lungs billow, and try to fill their long cavity with air. Millions of Alveoli – teeny air sacs – stretch to make more space available. But Diaphragm is stubborn, and refuses to let Lungs fully lounge, lengthwise. Around back, Mid-Thoracic Vertebrae crowd together, colluding with Dia-

phragm. Facet joints on Ribs are also belligerent, refusing to give. Lungs have no choice but to concede to their uncooperative structural neighbors. They're much too delicate to sustain a struggle against the hard thuggery of bones.

Due to the cramped conditions, Bronchi let out a barely audible wheeze. Scalene muscle, deep in the Neck, strains to help Lungs with breathing.

Lungs know if they could fill their entire space on a regular, deep, rhythmic basis, Parasympathetic nerve would have a chance to soothe Irritable Bowel. Parasympathetic thrives on deep breaths. And Parasympathetic is Wanderer's fraternal twin so they share a closeness and understanding most of the other Individuals are unable to grasp.

The Wanderer picks up not only on Lung's inter-torso struggle, but its wise ways, which will invariably help The Collective,² that is, all of the Individuals. Wanderer quickly zips up through Cranial nerves to deliver its report to the hindbrain, where the Respiration Center is located. *Crowded Torso, Lungs Struggle*. The whoosh from the zip summons the attention of Neo-Cortex, the Boss Brain up front, who, unfortunately, makes light of Wanderer's report.

This is not an emergency. Just some discomfort, Boss Brain ascertains. Wanderer shrinks, returns to tending the wheeze, a sign of Lung's relational struggles.

Boss Brain – the chief decision maker – seems preoccupied and dismisses the plight of Lungs. By physiological association, Parasympathetic's needs – which are, mostly, not to be continuously oppressed by Sympathetic nerve – are also dismissed. Sympathetic's "Type A" tendencies are

2 *Postulates I–VI* are preceded by this Lemma: "[...] the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual." *Ibid.*, 462. In other words, all milieu – external and internal – are porous, as all bodies affect and are affected by other bodies, and pass into one another.

getting out of control, partly due to more frequent false alarms. But why won't Boss Brain step up and intervene? Make some decisions that will surely benefit Everyone? Parasympathetic is teamed well with Wanderer, but they aren't allowed to develop their full collaborative capacity with Lungs. Even though not deemed an emergency, only "some discomfort," Lungs' restricted motion can have profound long-term implications on Everybody. Pressure from chronic tension and inflammation – and not enough restorative sleep! – have been overshadowing the interstitial atmosphere for months. Sympathetic needs to take a chill pill, and finally live up to its name for a change. If only Boss Brain would place more value on *prevention*, and less on the drama and glory of emergencies!

Ribs and Diaphragm gloat.

Just as quickly as it started, Heart settles again.

Vessels dilate and Blood pools. Pupils relax. Pressure recedes from walls. Pores close, just as a chill tries to sneak in.

Anus is still tense. Due to its proximal proximity to Irritable Bowel, it rarely gets a respite.

I really really need you to notice me, pleads Intestine.

Stomach rolls its eyes. *There you go again! Eeyore. Ee-yore. Look at me, look at me*, says Stomach in a mocking tone to its neighbor below.

You really give me the shits. I'm so sick and tired of your belly-aching. Can't you feel Heart has something to say? Why do you always make it about YOU?

Heart pains at their bickering and aches to get a message through to them. But for the message to be effective, Brain needs to get involved. And Parasympathetic needs to be taken more seriously.

Postulate IV.

The human Body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated.

With no warning, Knees buckle. A shearing pain blasts the Body.

Ears shudder as they turn up the volume. *Something* just happened! The reverb from the sound of *something happening* skids across Interstitial Fluid and reaches the limbic center of Brain, that ancient place the human Body still carries, inherited from its reptilian ancestors. Maybe even amoebic ancestors. The place where it's *all about staying alive*.

Faster than a lightning strike, Wanderer makes a bee-line for Amygdala tucked deep inside the Hypothalamus, Brain's belly.

Incoming danger! alerts the Limbic system. *This is not a drill.*

Distress! Amygdala secretes a squirt of adrenaline – conspiring with Adrenal Glands, who sit on top of Kidneys – that instantly goes global. The emergency juice spreads through Body. Wanderer goes into overdrive, a reflex conditioned over thousands of years. With all that practice it knows what to do. In less time than it takes for Eyelids to blink, the alarming message has been delivered and all Individuals kick into action: Gut battens down the hatch and shuts down. Stomach at first churns, then goes quiet. Intestines freeze and go mute. Mouth goes dry. Heart pounds with such fury that everyone believes this is no Chicken Little moment. Muscles tense, ready for action. A generous squeeze of adrenalin goes to the

Muscles, who prepare to fight. Or take flight. Or freeze. Or, possibly, a collective faint³ could take place.

Without hesitation, all of the trillions of Cells attune to the danger. Even the multitude of microbial colonies lining Gut's walls – all of those helpful freeloaders – turn their heads, in unison.

An injury! Life-threatening noise!

Besides Adrenalin, a flood of various neurochemicals and hormones are dispatched to tend to and regulate the Body.

Among the gush are inflammatory chemicals that rush to surround the surface of the right Knee.

The composite Body holds its collective breath: waiting, waiting...

Frontal Lobe – Boss Brain's boss, it's executive center – gives the all clear.

False alarm! Not life-threatening.

Everyone heaves relief.

After a collective pause, with the help of Frontal Lobe's perceptive sorting, Ears pipe up after receiving the information necessary to assimilate the happening:

We heard a car backfiring!

Then the dog tripped her! Eyes add.

Gluteal muscles unclench. All the other muscles follow their lead and relax.

- 3 In the mammalian– and reptilian – evolutionary effort to stay safe and preferably alive, neuroscientist Stephen Porges's *polyvagal theory* directly links social behavior to physiological adaptive responses of both the central and autonomic nervous systems (such as the fight, flight, freeze, or, very rarely, the faint response). This linkage foregrounds a relational dimension and gives Wanderer an appreciative nod for tending to the social and emotional needs of the Individuals, making possible their capacity to connect and communicate. See Stephen W. Porges, *Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communications, Self-Regulation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

A throb takes over Right Knee. Fingers brush off dirt, rub the stunned spot.

Mid-back feels a gentle pressure lean on top of them. Then a caressing pat. Mid-Thoracic Vertebrae feel met, and relax. Together, they let their guard down.

Cheek feels moist pressure, then a blushing rush of heat.

Saliva pools. Pupils constrict. Piloerections are aroused.

As Mid-Thoracic Vertebrae release their grip, Diaphragm also softens and gives way for Lungs. A calm warmth spreads through *all* the connective tissues, from fine Fibroblasts to thick planes of Fascia. Parasympathetic swells with appreciation.

Interstitial atmospheric pressure recedes.

Postulate V.

When a fluid part of the human Body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the Body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against the fluid part.

With another emergency averted, the Body settles back down. The Individuals resume their duties. All is quiet, for now. Some gas is passed. The Duodenum accepts what Stomach has broken down, its Lumen secreting enzymes with ease. The metabolic wheels move, feeding energy to the Mitochondria, each Cell's powerhouse. Waste is sent downstream, and for a while the bowel graciously attends to its job. More gas is gently passed.

All is harmoniously humming on the physiological farm. Adrenals enjoy a much-deserved rest. Wanderer uses long

even strides, grateful that everyone is getting along. Diaphragm has relaxed as well, allowing Ribs their freedom to move. Pelvic floor lounges, and Bladder is void of need. Eyelids shutter Eyes. Nose relishes a break from tending to noxious smells. Lungs expand into their full length, slowly, over and over, in tempo with Heart.

Parasympathetic purrs.

But it doesn't take long until the chatter starts up again. For years now, Brain has been dismissing the sensations delivered by the Wanderer from Intestine. And Stomach has become *such* a sour puss. Their bickering has become an annoyance for the rest of the Individuals. Eyes are weary, as are their neighboring Optic Nerves, who are getting frayed, worn at the edges.

All that staring she does into that glowing screen, way into the wee hours.

Why doesn't she just get into bed and go to sleep?

We all need a good rest. Especially Parasympathetic.

And more fresh food. Green things.

Move it or lose it! It's pretty simple!

The reliable Wanderer delivers messages but is also frazzled, worn down. Everybody is feeling the strain. Bone tired. Heart doesn't feel heard. Feelings tend to get shunted to the Gut. Intestines get a lot of the blame but why don't the others share some of the responsibility? Don't blame it all on Irritable Bowel. As a member of the alimentary canal, it contributes plenty. Poor thing gets so much dumped into its delicate terrain. And all those false alarms! Perhaps the real threat *is* that Gut is not taken seriously.

Could it be that Gut senses something everyone else dismisses as unimportant, especially Brain? Perhaps Intestines are going through evolving pain. And maybe Heart's aching throbs are trying to say something as well. Seems to be more insistent lately. Heart's pressure-surges are almost daily.

Covert cells tug at the opportunity, and threaten to gather downstream in Rectum's folds, disguised as Polyps. If Brain won't listen and insist on making urgent collective behavioral changes, there could certainly be cancerous anarchy. They'll wall themselves off and set up a tumor factory with its own blood supply. Sweet gooey bombs, delivered over and over, will feed their insatiable need to grow and proliferate out of control.

Postulate VI.

The human Body can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways.

Tongue fiddles with something and Brain has a little bleep of recognition.

A poppy seed.

Thank you, Tongue.

Sure thing Brain, any time.

Once again, all is humming, peaceful. Amiable.

Out of nowhere, Clitoris stirs, chirps:

Hey, what about me?

“The intelligently formed playful imagination make it possible to experience binaries as magnetic poles that form productive limiting conditions of vast fields of cultural energy, ie., cultural playgrounds,”⁴ writes Joan Retallack.

Write in the middle, between the moving poles. Poles greased by the movement of forces and flows and tendencies, and the attractions and repulsions that are always changing, on the minor move. Vibrations are picked up. Cuts and distinctions are made along the way.

Writing in the middle allows for the binaries and the plurals – *the one, which includes the many* – to coexist, and potentially, to co-compose.

The text-web feels the forces of form, in-forming. It quivers.

The bodying essay responds to the cuts and distinctions.

The essaying body makes propositions as it moves forward.

4 Joan Retallack, “Wager as Essay,” *Chicago Review* 49, no.1 (Spring 2003): 37.

Many enter one coming together.

My body makes knowledge as I needle and write by the seat of my pants, situated in the sloshing middle. Attune to the field of potential as it in-forms: to wafts and up-draughts, and to the cushiony gentle eddies within the folds and indurations. Glide over surfaces alert to the more-than in the midst, always within the associated milieu, all within “that scintillating spectrum of ‘in-between’ that haunts all binaries.”⁵

It is not *us* who are at the center of our experience, but a “vitality affect” that is generative, in surplus.

Relational movement, always in between, is caught – surprise! – in its kinetic verb-ing: as it surges, bursts, collapses, caresses, efforts, fades.

In movement something always happens.

On the vast fields of the cultural playground, the always inclusive *and and and* orbits and dashes and wobbles on the field’s magnetic meadow located between the imagined poles of the binaries; within the sloshing, slippery middle.

5 Ibid., 37.

Investigating fingers and curiosity propels the process of making – that is, the text-body's celestial *poiēsis* – into the field of potential. Propositions are little pockets of potential sitting under the skin, within the paper, eager to be met. The essaying body is moved to speculate, and orients to potentials. A finely tuned zing calls out as nerves fire in the gazillions. Within the gooey matrix, the *onewhichincludesthemany* answers back in a flash:

Yoo hoo! Over here!

I listen for which proposition – which appetite – is moved to call out next.

Not there! Here! Quick now!

Within the emergent co-composition, the more-than hovers, lingers as a potential.

I am not an acupuncturist or a writer on the knowing outside.

Instead, I connect to the forces at work and play, always in the midst, where knowledge is made in flashes.

Needling and writing are emergent phenomena within the welling event, poised within the scintillating middle.

>

Connective tissue is the tissue of relation.

>

The Bodyguard

I once read about an experiment undertaken to show how heart cells need to join up in order to beat in unison.

The heart's pacemaker cells beat when a complex series of gates open and close in an organized way. When the beating cells don't touch each other, their beats are independent – sometimes faster, sometimes slower.

The experiment shows that after two-to-three days, the single cells form interconnected sheets of cells that start to beat in unison. Pores, called gap junctions, open between adjacent cells, making their cytoplasm – their internal cellular goo – interconnected. It is these gap junctions that ensure that the interconnected cells work as one.

Like the billions of synapses connecting nerve cells, it's the biochemical messengers that relay the information through the gap junctions.

Struck by what this experiment implied, I realized: reduced to the molecular level, pacemaker cells never actually touch each other.

Visit 1

I'm not sure if he'll fit on the treatment table. That's my first unsettling thought as he walks across the threshold,

as his shoulders nearly graze the doorjamb. I've treated plenty of muscle-bound people before – mostly hairless body builders, thighs thick as established tree trunks – and their bulging muscles seem hollow to me, without purpose.

His gaze is furtive, not quite landing on mine. Jet-black handlebar moustache. One swipe from his mammoth forearm could flatten me. Or a bear hug could pop my lung's pleural sac in a single squeeze. I'm certain his muscles have purpose and I'm curious to find it.

As I close the door behind him, a waft of spicy aftershave gets trapped in the room. His head has been freshly shaved.

Without a word, he hands me the referral letter along with my intake form, still not meeting my eyes. He sits down. The way he moves is light, measured. But I sense a heavy weight hidden somewhere. Buried, tucked away.

A quick look at the letter. Referred by a GP colleague.

[...] thank you for seeing Mr Hatsya for acupuncture treatment [...] he's 44 years old with a persistent pain under the left scapula the past few months [...]

"Dr Shepherd sent me to you. Seen physios. Chiropractor. Even had a shot. The pain still there."

I strain to hear him. His accent is soft, undulating, like bobbing in a boat.

"How long have you had the pain?"

"Long time. It's there all the time," he says, staring at his feet. Sandals, must be at least size 13. The leather like burnt sienna, the same hue as the Pilbara desert in Western Australia. All that iron ore.

"What's the pain like? Is it dull like a toothache, or sharp and stabbing like a knife?"

He shrugs.

"It's pain."

Reading down, I land on additional problems: Anxiety, depression, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, followed up by

a list of medications: antidepressant, cholesterol lowering, reflux, hypertensive, insulin.

“How long have you been on the meds?”

His eyes finally land on mine. Sadness. Deep, cavernous sadness looks back at me. Something happened. Something unbearable. He looks away again.

“A year, maybe.”

“Where’s the pain located?”

“In my back.”

“Can you point to it?”

Facing me in the chair, he motions behind his left shoulder.

Standing up, I turn my back to him, within his reach.

“Show me where on my back.”

Behind me I sense him hesitate, then he traces a circle, barely grazing my shirt, around the inside of my left shoulder blade. The back door to my heart. The back door to his heart.

I move towards the treatment cart.

“Okay, Tukru. Take off –”

“Tom.”

“Okay Tom, take your shirt off please. Let’s start off with you on your back,” I say, gesturing to the treatment table. “I need to check in with a few other things before we focus on your shoulder.”

As he hoists his shirt over his head and turns to fold it neatly over the back of the chair, I look again at the report of the CT scan. Nothing revealing other than some fatty infiltration suggested in portions of the liver. I flip back to the letter from Shepherd and notice for the first time: ...the pain occurs only when immobile.

In Chinese culture, like a lot of non-Western cultures, the mind is inseparable from the heart.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Heart stores the *shen*, loosely translated as “spirit.”

The eyes reflect the strength of a person's *shen*. If bright and clear, the *shen* is strong. If dull, it's weak, like someone struggling with depression. If nobody's home, the *shen* has been scattered.

Big shocks can scatter the *shen*.

My brother was killed in a scuba diving accident in south-east Alaska. It happened a month before September 11, 2001. He got sucked into a drainage pipe in a shallow body of water on the grounds of a hydroelectric power plant. He was given the wrong blueprints and the turbine was left on and no protective grate covered the pipe. It took five hours to get him out; he was so tightly wedged in. I got to see him in his casket before it was permanently sealed for his sea burial. My first thought when I saw him laid out in the casket, dressed in his beloved red dive suit, was he needed a haircut. A deep gash over his right eye looked like the mortician filled it with wood putty. Even though the coroner reported "death from drowning," I wanted to believe the gash was from slamming his head on the side of the pipe when he got sucked in, knocking him out. I couldn't bear, and still can't bear, the possibility that he was trapped and conscious.

His shocking death severely rattled my *shen*. Sleep became an exhausting snorkel on the surface. Letting go to drop down into deep sleep meant to risk facing the death monsters lurking underneath. No matter if it was day or night, I never got a break from the cruel truth: Craig's gone. It took years for me to face that fact.

The deep ache in my heart stayed there for a very long time. And it was worse when I was immobile. Like when I was trying to fall asleep.

Tom's *shen* is dull, like a dimmer switch is turned down as low as it can go. Or when light can't get through a blocked entry.

As I palpate his abdomen, he clasps his arms behind his head, the only way his broad girth can take up less space on the table. He winces every time I apply mild pressure on his belly. His olive-toned flesh pushes out over the top of a thick black belt, set on the last notch. Several fatty cysts, like embedded soft grapes, are scattered across his upper abdomen. My investigating fingers push against a hard spot at the base of his sternum, the reflex area for his heart, that is, his “Chinese” heart. The tissue refuses to give.

“How’s your sleep?”

He takes a moment to answer.

“Not good,” he says, coming out as a sigh.

“We’ll get to your shoulder soon. Hard to fall asleep or stay asleep? Or both?”

I press a spot in the middle of his sternum and he arches his back. It can be a reflex spot for anxiety.

“Never good sleep. Not for long time.”

Twenty minutes left for his appointment. I need to find a way in. I have him turn over.

After passing my hands over his broad back it becomes clear that I’m not going to find a way in without using some force. The silky, unblemished texture of his skin creates a mocking diversion from his musculature’s steely shield a few millimeters underneath. How am I going to get at the spot without using a chisel? He wants relief, but to chip away at the hard, protective layer risks exposing the raw source of his deep sadness. That is the core of his pain, with a musculoskeletal overlay of discomfort.

I place my palm over his left shoulder blade and, with my thumb, try to move the inside corner of the triangular shaped bone. It’s fixed and immobile, cemented in place.

As I start to prod around the lower margin, the heart reflex area on the back, I ask him to let me know when I’m on a sore spot. After I poke around for a minute or so, increasing pressure as I do, he remains motionless and

mute. Low pain threshold on the front, high threshold on the back.

I crouch down by his head. From his earlobe droops a gold earring, the size of a tiny woman's wedding band.

"Tom, I'm going to use the edge of a ceramic Chinese soup spoon to scrape your skin around your shoulder blade." I know the pain is hidden deep underneath. But the most I can do for now is draw some fresh blood flow into the area. Into the surface, at least.

"It might look like a purple bruise when I'm done but will disappear in a few days. Is that okay with you?"

I'm not convinced he understands but he gives me a nod anyway. After smearing a generous amount of liniment over his left upper back, I get to work with the spoon. The fumes from a mix of menthol, camphor, and eucalyptus oil overpower his aftershave. I blink against the sting. The friction generated by scraping the spoon's smooth beveled edge over and over on his skin draws blood into the area, stimulating a lymphatic response. It's an old folk medicine technique, a quick and efficient way to start moving stubborn stagnation.

Passing over the inner margin, the spoon bumps over a tough strand of muscle. An old micro-tear?

I lean over by the side of his head, my hands slick with liniment. The edge of a cramp sits in my right palm. I switch the spoon to my left hand.

"Can you remember any old injuries to your shoulder?"

After a considering pause, he answers. I notice he considers everything. Attentive. Precise.

"Five years ago. Boxing."

I resume scraping, my right hand grateful for the short rest.

"Oh, you're a boxer?" I say, wanting him to tell me more.

Purposeful punching. Roll with the punches. Throw in the towel.

“But that came good,” he adds. “This time it’s bad even when I go to the toilet.”

Rib, facet joint, diaphragm. Intercostal muscles. Layers there. But I’m sure my hunch will find a deep loss at the nub of the pain. Two years ago, is my guess. Hypertension doesn’t start overnight. Neither does depression nor type 2 diabetes. His whole body is in a holding pattern. There is a story trapped under the stony weight of his scapula.

A splotchy redness from the frictioning heat spreads over the area. Hints of dark purple – evidence of deep stagnation – start to pool under the red.

With a moistened hot towel, I wipe the liniment off his back.

“All done for now, Tom, you can get up,” I say as I wash my hands. “And take a look in the mirror on the back of the door. The purple marks show how stuck it is. That’s why the pain hasn’t moved.”

Tom rolls off the table and stands up. As I dry my hands, I motion to the mirror.

“Take a look.”

Craning his neck, he twists to see his back’s image in the mirror. He doesn’t say anything. Instead, he tests his shoulder by rotating it in small circles, then stands quiet, as though listening.

“Pain still there.”

“It’s in there deep. If you can come back three more times, I think we can get at it. Once a week would be best.”

I move back to the desk to scribble down notes.

After he puts his shirt back on and gathers up his wallet, cell phone and keys, he looks up.

“Okay.”

I see a feeble flicker of light. A negligible shift in the boulder.

As he leaves the room, I glance at the clock. Seven minutes over time.

Practices that focus the mind's attention on the area of the heart while mustering sincere feelings of love and appreciation lead to a more regular variation of heart rate. This is a physiological state referred to as coherence. A steady rhythmic beat reflects a coherent state of the system in charge of the heart's tempo: the autonomic or involuntary nervous system.

The moment a twirling acupuncture needle elicits a zing on the surface of the skin, in less time that it takes to blink a message has been sent from the needle site up the dorsal ganglion of the spine to the basement of the brain. The zing sneaks in below the vigilant, judging gaze of the neocortex upstairs. A cascade of physiological processes are set in motion and the body tips towards coherence, a humming restful state of equilibrium that cells in the body are tuned into seeking.

For now, sweet relief. To beat together, unified.

Visit 2

Again, the plume of aftershave lingers after I close the door behind him. Freshly shaved and showered, head shiny, handlebar moustache jet-black. So black it looks like shoe polish has been combed into it.

"Work maybe call me." He's already pulling his shirt over his head and makes for the table. "I need my phone on." He lands face down, puts his phone up next to his head. I scramble to arrange the pillow under his chest and the small rolled towel under his forehead to support his neck.

The marks on his back have nearly faded, except for a patch of greeny yellow, like the end stage of a bruise.

"How's your shoulder been?"

"Still pain." His voice is muffled by the sheet.

With light pressure I start to check in with his back. It's more springy; there's more give to his skin.

"Is the pain still constant? Has it changed at all?" I've already decided to use the blowtorch today. Need to use the penetrating effects of direct moxa to get deeper. Maybe a bit more chiseling, as well.

"Maybe a bit better. Hard to tell."

My fingers land on the cryptic spot I noticed last week. It has the dense texture of scar tissue, but it's too superficial to be the source of the petulant pain lodged under his shoulder blade. Twisting the standing lamp's neck to light up his back, I make out a faint scar, about three centimeters long. He tenses slightly.

I'm getting closer to another story, and I don't think it has to do with boxing.

"Any other injuries since the one from boxing?"

His phone lets out a rock-and-roll blast. He looks at the screen and, before the next guitar twang, answers it.

"Yes," he says. "Yes." He hangs up, and places his forehead back on the rolled towel.

"Any other injuries to this shoulder, Tom?" My hands continue to survey the lay of the land on his back. Something else has happened. The more specific the information I get, the better.

"I'm a bodyguard for a CEO. I had to restrain someone. Maybe I hurt it then."

That doesn't explain how the scar got there, but I don't push it.

I get to work, choosing about six spots around his shoulder to burn the moxa. The heat penetrates, like a laser beam, deep into his tissue. After a few minutes I sense his body giving in slightly, sinking into the table. I finish the treatment with more scraping around his shoulder blade and along his spine. Like last week, under the redness some more dark purple is pulled up from deep below. We're getting closer to the source.

As he slides off, his massive hands grip the sides of the table to keep it from toppling over with his weight. His

foot finds the floor and he moves to the chair with quick, buoyant steps, and quickly buttons up his shirt.

"Next week?" he says, heading for the door.

"Yes. Let's do two more. I think that will shift it. At least take the constant pain away."

As he turns around to close the door, he looks at me.

"See you," he says. A sliver of light is coming through the cracks between the boulders, showing the possibility of a way out.

For more than 800 years, in the middle of December, hundreds of whirling dervishes converge in Konya, in central Turkey, to recognize, celebrate even, the death anniversary of the Sufi poet Rumi. The pilgrimage takes place for a week and culminates in a massive group twirl on his death day, December 17.

My understanding is that Sufi mystics believe one must die before one can live.

I'd like to be there when all the dervishes spin, each focused on reaching a trance-like state of divine ecstasy. I'm curious to find out if the collective twirl creates a breeze. Each dervish has one hand tipped up towards the heavens, and the other curved down to the ground. Round and round, the rhythm of bells and tambourines surrounding the circles of dancers add to the growing pace of concentric circles rippling out from Rumi's shrine, the central axis. Spinning clockwise, hundreds of white skirts fanning out, heads cocked to the side topped with a red thimble-shaped hat, eyes softly closed in contemplation. The heat, the sweat, the puffs of dust.

Does the centrifugal force created by whirling purify the soul by separating out the dense and heavy ego, like plasma from red blood cells? Would it be enough to witness the spectacle in close proximity, to feel the breeze? Would all troubling doubts and fear of death vaporize as the hundreds of dervishes reach the tipping point of their mystical journey? Or would the motion of the collective

twirl combined with their focused attention create a vortex so powerful that it would engulf, like getting sucked into a tornado?

Visit 3

I'm getting used to his aftershave. It's mixing well with the moxa smell people often mistake for cannabis. Today he's wearing shoes that turn up severely at the toes.

Again, he makes a graceful plunge for the table without looking at me.

"It's better. No more ache when I go to the toilet."

The tissue has eased, softened. More fresh blood flow is getting to his muscles, even the delicate intercostal ones. The marks from the spooning are gone. Lymphatic tissue has been woken out of its lazy slumber, and is back on the job of flushing out metabolic waste. The space is starting to open.

I linger on the scar for a moment. My hand waits, listens.

"It's from a knife. Didn't go deep. No stitches."

All at once his body eases, surrenders.

"I'm on parole. Aggravated assault."

As I slip my thumb under the margin of his scapula, it yields. A boulder shifts. A howl from below is discernible. The warmth from my hand answers.

I leave his back to get the direct moxa gear on the treatment cart.

The Heart *shu*, or "transport" point, located just above the scar, is still knot-like. That's my way in.

"Has the pain been there at night?"

In the silence I hear him think, carefully considering my question.

For a teasing second, my dead brother stands on the door's threshold. He has his arms crossed, leaning against the door jamb, grinning. I look his way and he vaporizes.

"I'm not sure." Tom's tone is hesitant.

I put on my glasses. With the tip of my pinkie, I mark the entrance on his back with a freckle-sized dab of purple shiunko cream. I'll add a needle if the moxa doesn't reach it.

"And sleep? Still working overtime?" I ask, placing a bit of moxa on the cream, the size of a caraway seed. I pinch the top of the soft punk into a point so it's easier to light.

"One more week and I'll have enough."

Lighting the moxa, it burns down. The thin layer of cream keeps his skin from getting burned. A sliver of heat finds its way through the cracks, reaching the pain.

My heart gives an expectant thud.

"Enough for what?"

I continue to burn more bits of moxa, finding a steady rhythm. It's starting to open. His body sinks.

"Emre's grave. His memorial. Costing me ten grand."

Emre. The source of his heartbreak. The loss that's unravelled him.

"Emre?"

"My son."

We're both quiet as I focus, working. My fingers go into automated action, knowing what to do, giving me the space to be with my strong feelings. My grief for my brother's death is awoken and mixes with Tom's grief. Our breathing is in sync: slow, steady.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

I keep up the pace burning moxa. The space gives way. Open sesame.

The mouth of the cave opens. The pain slips out.

Visit 4

What I notice immediately when Tom enters the room isn't his overwhelming aftershave, but his eyes resting on mine. The sadness is there but the dullness is gone. His *shen* has returned. He sits.

"Fifty per cent better. Pain is much less. Even slept better this week."

"Good. Today I want to do some points on the front, then I'll do some more on your shoulder at the end."

With his usual quick, light-footed movements, he places his shirt on the chair and slides onto the table. He hooks his thumbs into his belt loops. I stand by the side of the table.

I check in with his belly. His navel is shaped like a perfectly symmetrical sinkhole. The "sugar lump" on the side of his navel is thick, like the texture of a stiff caterpillar embedded under his skin. People with diabetes often have the little lump. I press the anxiety-button in the middle of his sternum. It doesn't even elicit a blink.

I tap in the needles.

"When do you see Dr Shepherd?"

"Next week."

"Is he sending you to a diabetes doctor?"

"Don't know."

The answers come back too quickly. He seems preoccupied. I continue to tweak the needles, and check to see if the sugar lump softens. Back at the desk I stand to jot down notes, add the sugar lump to the map of his belly.

"When he was a baby he got hepatitis," Tom says. "I was here in Australia. His mother didn't take him to a doctor."

I sit down.

"She didn't want him." His thumbs tighten on the belt loops.

"The fevers, his brain cooked," he continues. "And the fits. He got cerebral palsy. I went to Turkey and brought him back."

He keeps his eyes fixed on the ceiling. His bare feet, jutting out over the end of the table, start to squirm.

"Two years ago, his lungs stopped. They put him on a ventilator. They said he wouldn't get better. They said he was dying."

He pauses, and then continues in his swaying, soft accent. His feet settle.

"They told me he would die okay after he was unplugged. But it took three hours."

I sit, transfixed. Here it comes, the source.

"He kept looking at me. Like he was pleading with me. For three hours. I still see his eyes. That's why I can't sleep."

I watch him watch the ceiling.

"He was nineteen. Last week he be twenty-one."

His enormous body looks so vulnerable on the table, like Gulliver pinned down with absurdly puny needles. I feel a humble awe for this gentle giant and his contained pain.

I can't not ask.

"Which cemetery?"

He frees his thumbs and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Fawkner, in the Turkish section."

A few weeks after Tom's course of treatment, I put my bike on the train and go to the Fawkner cemetery, located ten or so kilometers north of Melbourne. At the gatehouse I pick up a map, and locate the Turkish section on an outlying edge on the opposite side.

It's a Sunday, late autumn, sunny and clear. I start riding. Past a dense clump of willow trees, over a bridge, past the Russian section. A bin made of thick wire holds plastic vases. It's nearly empty. The sign reads: Flower Vases: Only two per grave please. On a pink granite monolith, a middle-aged woman is on her hands and knees with a scrub bucket. Then past the Italian mausoleums, where

a new Mercedes straddles the narrow road. Following a half-moon curve in the road, I join up with another narrow road, turning back in the direction of the gatehouse.

I decide to ride aimlessly for a while. I'm not in a rush. I meander through a Protestant section, past the low-lying crematorium, and stop by crypts the size of mailboxes. Hundreds tucked in the concave brick wall, about three meters high, that follows the curve of the road. I get off my bike and stand on one end of the crypt wall.

The Whispering Wall in Beijing, an ancient engineering mystery, was designed to carry sound. A person on one end would whisper to a person at the other end, a good 30 meters away, who would hear what was said as clearly as if standing close by. I imagine whispering along this crypt wall, and all the ghostly ears that would hear my whispers.

I reorient myself in the direction of the Turkish section. According to the map, it's at the end of a gravel road, along a creek. Picking up speed along a straight stretch, I pedal hard, enjoying the late-afternoon sun's warmth on my back. The shades of red and orange and yellow leaves underneath blur and rustle as I ride over them.

Something off to the right catches my eye. From a distance it looks like rubbish has been strewn along the grass. Leaning my bike against a tree trunk, I realize it's not rubbish but dozens of toys, some wrapped in clear plastic, but most looking soggy and abandoned. A Bert and Ernie doll face down, arms just out of reach of each other, a purple plastic unicorn, toy cars, several Bananas in Pajamas, and lots of butterflies and angels stuck on the ends of wire jammed into the ground at the edge of the grass. Gumnuts and autumn leaves litter the surface between the toys. Wilted and decaying flowers are still wrapped in ribbon. Only one fresh bunch.

Rows and rows of small, rectangular brass plaques. Babies, many of them stillborn, most of them with names. A rainbow spinning wheel catches the wind, blows around.

It seems wrong, deeply wrong, that no one else is around.

I walk away, aiming, I think, towards the Turkish section. The gravel under my feet is loud as I walk towards dense greenery along a creek's edge.

A glimpse of the crescent moon symbol of the Turks pulls me out of my stupor. I'm here. The section is a mix of flat graves and shoulder-high memorials, roughly 10 rows. I start to look for Emre, beginning at the end by the creek. It doesn't take me long. His memorial stands out: taller than the rest, the black marble glowing in the late sun. "Emre Hatsya" I recognize among the flowing Arabic script.

His picture, a photo embedded at the top, sits square in the center. Above his lopsided grin, Emre's eyes shine.

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Acknowledgments

With respect I acknowledge the peoples – all Traditional Custodians – whose unceded lands and territories I roam, write and live. And since the more-than is motoring this book's worlding, I am grateful to the marauding choughs, chugging woodstove and laptop, tireless coffee pot, microbats and magpies, sharp and dull pencils, kookaburras and phascogales, who kept me company on the Wurundjeri land of the Kulin nations, where it mostly came to be.

Many have entered one coming together.

Besides the nonhuman entities, my gratitude extends to the bounty of human presences and influences that have been a part of this book's process of becoming. In some way or another, the force and flow and intensity of your presences are twirled into the text's tissue. We are, after all, a multiplicity.

Co-composed; always made in relation. To the *Immediations* Book Series and its editors, Toni Pape, Andrew Goodman, Andrew Murphie, Brian Massumi, and Erin Manning¹: thank you for recognizing its bodying before I did and poking me to put it into the world so it can

- 1 What would have happened had we not met on that hot, snaky day in Avoca? One thing is for sure: *Sweet Spots* would never have realized its appetite for middling tendencies. I am so very grateful to you and for the lure into the wonderful world of process philosophy.

do its work. *Sweet Spots* also extends huge appreciation to its various readers – in particular, Steve Clavey, Peta Murray, Lone Bertelsen,² and Sher Doruff – thank you for your generous feedback, incisive insights and enduring its most prickly stages of development. And to punctum books³ for providing a way for *Sweet Spots* to do its interstitial work, as well as activate the aims of 3Ecologies Books: trans-disciplinary experimentation and accessibility to all.

To the Montréal-based SenseLab/3Ecologies and all the many zesty creatures and concepts and fabulations that come and go in the thick of things: always more-than one as a collective subjectivity.⁴ And thanks to the ongoing Reading-Gathering events that take place virtually all over the world, regardless if I lurk at the edges or actively lean in, a more-than quality always seeps in. My appreciation goes to the Melbourne hub, especially to those who persevered with Spinoza's *Ethics*: Norie Neumark, Tessa Laird, Sue Pyke, and (again) Andrew Goodman. Further afield and still amidst the SenseLabbing multiplicity, big thanks, Zehorith Mitz, for teaching me the dizzying technique – with a Whiteheadian twist – of backwards writing-reading. And big thanks too, Doerte Weig, for the chewy chats and shared recognition of fascia and fibroblasts' ever-present capacity to create and move. I'm grateful to the *Immediations* Grant/SSHRC/RMIT University for the help to make possible my fleshy presence at several SenseLab Events over the years.

Rolling the book's tissue back to its embryological beginning as a PhD thesis – long before it became a twinkle in the eye of a potential book – my deep apprecia-

- 2 Your words bodied the concept before I did: "connective tissue is the tissue of relation!"
- 3 Vive la Open Access!, and a hearty *Vive!* shout to Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, for your always *qi*-full exchanges, and indefatigable capacities and patience.
- 4 An Undercommons is calling!

tion goes to an assortment of rigorous influences. To my supervisors, Jessica L. Wilkinson and Craig Batty, for using a long stretchy leash as I set off to explore how to think and write across body and language, and for the wisdom to know exactly when to tug me back to task. I give thanks to (onomato) Pia Ednie-Brown and Lyndal Jones⁵ for inspiring bold risk-taking in Creative Practice Research. And thank you, Steven Chong, for such incisive editing. And to my examiners, Nicole Walker and Anna Gibbs, for illuminating the potential twinkle within the thesis and urging its publication as a book.

My sincere thanks goes to numerous people whose encouragement, support and friendship – in one way or another – gave us the necessary stamina and enthusiasm to see out its bodying forth as a book: Polly Stanton, Paul-Milo Mylecharane, Indira Shanahan, Louise Poland, David Spitzkowsky, and Viv Waller (you are deeply missed, Viv). To Gali Weiss and your cello: thank you both for lending “Becoming Nar” its multiple whaling voices, starting in the rickety kangaroo shed. Thank you, Holly Huon, for all of our rousing rounds of ping-pong and the use of your spacious kitchen table where *Sweet Spots* found its name as it bodied itself into a manuscript. Tina Stefanou: thank you for rescuing “The Bodyguard” just in the nick of time. And big thanks to Emma Flavian for making *Sweet Spots*’s hind end quiver with thresholds: an index really is a wonderful way into a book. Huge appreciation goes to Jen Davoren, Karen Jones, BB, and Rosie Fridays: for your steadfast support, generosity and countless nourishing meals all along the way. And to my sister, Sarah Sempert: thank you for your dogged insistence to “keep sending me stories!” Your tenacious love is felt in so many ways.

- 5 Your advice to “always wear comfortable shoes” when giving a presentation, catapulted me out of the usual dread and dry-mouthed terror into actual enjoyment of the task.

To my many acupuncture clients over the years: thank you for meeting me in the middle and teaching me that, indeed, our bodies do *think*.

Finally, to my mother, Mary Zerelda Gaines, for instilling in me – and Craig and Sarah – a deep love for the nonhuman world. I hope this book carries that love by bringing a more-than human voice to the fore. We miss you, Mom.

> > >

I wish to acknowledge and thank the following publications in which some of the essays – and some of the immediating strands of text – have already appeared: *Unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts*; *Immediations* (OHP); *The Lantern: A journal for practitioners of Chinese Medicine*; *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research*; *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*; and *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

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