

The Point of Precision

ANNIE DILLARD'S *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK* opens with a series of scenes attuned to "the unthinkable profusion of forms" encountered in her daily walks in the woods; "the inrush of power and light . . . the curl of a stem" are not just sensory details described, but material-aesthetic registers of what Wallace Stevens called "the mobile and immobile flickering / In the area between is and was."¹ A "form gulping after formlessness" that can "seem physical if the eye is quick enough."²

On a day still full of summer, when the leaves
Appear to sleep within a sleeping air,
They suddenly fall and the leafless sound of the wind
Is no longer a sound of summer
So profound a change is constant.³

This is what Derek McCormack calls a "radical empiricism," here entrained on a bid, according to Félix Guattari, to "capture existence in the very act of its constitution."⁴ Here, the act of description, then, is a peering, accidental glimpse of what matters—what comes into matter in the cocomposition of objects in contact, what shifts its matter in a moment of recognizable, though unnamed and partial, significance.⁵ Isabelle Stengers calls this a "vivid pragmatics."⁶ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, following Alfred North Whitehead's theory of the prehension of all things, call it "thought in the act": "Every practice is a mode of thought. . . . To dance: a thinking in movement. To paint: a thinking in color. To perceive in the everyday: a thinking of the world's varied ways of affording itself."⁷

Dillard's description of her walks in the woods is not a report of finished events and known entities but a realism of prismatically energetic states: "Mountains are giant, restful, absorbent"; "light . . . suddenly runs across the land like a comber, and up the trees, and goes again in a wink."⁸ Things radically perform their capacities. A mockingbird takes a single step off a roof gutter into the air. "Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the

ABSTRACT This essay proposes a kind of critique aimed at approaching the improvisatory conceptuality of ordinary forms emergent in everyday life. Using a slowed ethnographic attention to the immanent aesthetics of objects, it argues that the singularities through which forms take place animate both event and perception. *REPRESENTATIONS* 135. Summer 2016 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 31–44. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2016.135.3.31.

ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care . . . and so floated onto the grass.”⁹

Thought and practice, telling and sensing, foreground and background, fuse in a soft focus trained on tonal differences, a spark of color, a modulation in tempo, the half-patterned expressivity of a scene teeming with differentiated and marked by thresholds of matter. Subjects and objects are at once taken aback and literally transformed by their own self-surprised acts and effects. When a tree is “charged and transfigured” by a violent sunset, “each cell buzzing with flame,” Dillard finds herself standing on

grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen. . . . I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.¹⁰

A thing still unfolding and yet already unavoidably palpable becomes a call to word, but this is no simple matter of mind stretching to catch up to its perceived object or inspired to flights of fancy. As Graham Harman is at pains to point out, objects themselves, like voices or forms of writing, have style; an orange is more than a visual profile of it in any given moment. A reality composed of autonomous objects cannot be fully, or literally, embodied by a finite catalog of representations or mirrored by any method of knowledge. It withdraws from all phenomenological and representational efforts at reduction and paraphrase, setting off on its own trajectories of form and style.¹¹ Reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to grasp it. For object-oriented ontology, the generativity of a walk in the woods or a patterning of sound first arises in a series of gaps between word and world. Description is an oblique mode of access to its objects; as such, it must become weirdly, robustly realist.¹²

For Michel Serres, we write, initially, through “a groundswell that comes from the background noise, . . . maybe from the depths of the world or through the front door, . . . carrying its complicated rhythm, its simple beat. . . . One cannot grip one’s pen but this thing, which does not yet have a word, takes off.”¹³ Dillard’s cat’s nightly forays through the open window are suggested by a floral pattern of bloody footprints on Dillard’s chest in the morning. Dillard comes across a small frog perched precariously on a lily pad in a pond, its back end already strangely slumped in the water. Then it suddenly deflates. She sees its skin “ruck, and rumple, and fall” and then “formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water.”¹⁴ The shadow of a giant water bug moving away under the water only prolongs the spell of the strange description, rather than wresting us out of the scene by means of a causal logic of bizarre but categorical predation.

Staying with the powerful realism of what can’t quite be assimilated leaves the reader “improvising with already-felts,” along with the rabbits

startled out of their warrens, the cat bringing home the prize, the tree on fire, or Dillard as a ringing bell.¹⁵

The objects of Dillard's description—these leaves, this frog-water bug pairing, these bloody footprints and burning grass—are, like an hour, a river, or a walk, not exempla of a generality or embodiments of anything, but actualizations of things that have *no kind*. A predatory impulse, a quality of light, and a bit of wind knot together into *this* thing now. To describe such a thing is to suggest its style, its whatness, through any of its points of precision in moments, scenes, forms, and states of matter. The object of the description is also its agent: a woman walking, a frog dissolving, a bird testing its wings' capacities, the shift of a season in a leaf falling.

In the shaken profusion of things throwing together, flourishing, or collapsing, it is not a determinate structure or an order of representations that matters, but, first, the minor composition of a note struck, an image synesthetically remembered, a skin floating on the water as scum.¹⁶ The engineered bridges of the purely social or the purely natural imagine a flatly describable world composed of fully present states of being. Instead, we might start again, with Bruno Latour's compositionism, Serres's thing that does not yet have a word, Manuel DeLanda's assemblage, and Harman's weird realism to note the way "the stylus cuts the wax, the chisel sculpts the marble. . . . The wind forms blades in the sea like lines on a page . . . the tip of the diamond inscribes its trace on the glass. Let us not pretend that we alone write."¹⁷ If description is an approach to an ungraspable thing, it might begin by deliter-alizing the properties and appearances of that thing, and then, in its very faithfulness to its object's energetic, multiplicitous possibilities, it might find itself overwhelmed by an excess of surfaces, aspects, and remainders.

In his book *Checked Out OK*, Corwin Ericson gathers police reports from small-town western Massachusetts papers. When residents call to describe suspiciously mysterious things they've witnessed, police respond by "checking it out." A Wendell Road resident told police someone had been using a pruning device to remove branches from trees on the property. Police determined the damage was actually being caused by porcupines. . . . Police determined that a child reported home alone at the Brook Estates was actually an adult who was OK. . . . A suspicious man seen looking into car windows on Spring Street was determined to be a blind man who was just waiting for a bus. . . . A swimmer at Puffer's Pond reported that three people with weapons and holding walkie-talkies were loitering in the area. Police determined that members of the department's detective bureau were working there. . . . A dangerous-looking animal moving about on a man's property turned out to be a black plastic trash bag blowing in the wind. . . . An Amherst Road resident reported that there was a rabid mole in her yard snapping and attacking a plastic trash bag. The resident drowned the mole

in a bucket of water. Police said there was no sign that the mole had been rabid, and the resident was advised to bury the animal. . . . Threatening graffiti on a lawn were markings made by phone company employees. . . . A strange noise was wind in the trees.

Ericson's composition hinges on the distributed gap between residents' reports and police determinations. But it is not a literalizing debunking of residents' misperceptions; on the contrary, it is a sideways staging ground for people's perceptive, even hypervigilant, attention to the weird possibilities emergent in the ordinary. Things that catch perception's eye even while they give it the slip are not fully present to appearance but, rather, true enough, weird enough, to prompt a call, to set off an effort at description. Nor are the police themselves mere debunkers in this story but seemingly good-natured characters working as a first line of response to the expansive panoply of semi-events residents call to attention. For both residents and police (and writer and readers as well), mysterious patterns with precise details bring into relief a background, a zone, a worlding in which things become perceptible in a weirdly realist way.

In my own reading of the book, I counted four reports of men crawling in the middle of the road; in most of them, the men also seemed to be licking the road. There was also a report of a man licking the locks on doorways of apartments on North Pleasant Street. The man was gone when police got there. But the suggestion of this licking everywhere remained. A human hand in the middle of the road was a rubber glove; a blood-soaked glove on the ground outside the DB Mart was a pink glove, but the pattern of possible hands in roads had been established. In, again, four cases, women reported that someone might have been entering their apartments while they were gone, leaving urine in their toilets. In one case someone also ate bananas, though police advised that the roommates be questioned. And in each case there were, again, precise details involving objects: four 60-watt light bulbs and four boxes of cranberry bread mix were stolen (or something else).¹⁸

Ericson tosses out speculative little clumps of things suspended between fact and fiction, or ping-ponging between one iteration and another. When people half-witness a thing of no kind, when they see, in other words, that something is a little off, they are moved to make a report not exactly by way of explanation, but out of a stranger faithfulness to the spirit of the unnamed thing they witnessed. Their vaguely relevant descriptions of the ungraspable things are like bread crumbs left to initiate the very recognition of a problematic that has to be walked around and examined from angles and lines of egress. The objects themselves have a vital, even explosive, tension and torque of qualities. Their points of precision are not a content but a pause in the very move to represent a finite, categorical real. Reality,

Harman argues, is weird (and, I would add, generative) because it is itself incommensurable with any attempt to grasp it. Being in a world of autonomous things is a matter of writing in the gaps.¹⁹

In what follows, I gather episodes, some from literature, some from life, in an effort to describe the ordinary decoupling of Dillard's "unthinkable profusion of forms" from the violent and deadening humanist politics of truth claims and paranoid/illuminating knowledge. The objects of my literary-auto-ethnographic approach are the gapped thresholds of compositional reals. I throw out their striking points of precision as a challenge to modernist anthropology's mantra of a literally "grounded" writing anchored in the deadened realism of finished forms and social facts. Where the flat metaphors of a so-called "grounded" ethnography actually interrupts its own dream of a real with an anxious gesture at predetermined codes and structures as if this were explanation enough, I suggest, instead, the possibility of a more generative grounding in a world's variegated poesis and the need to make room, through a strangely realist description, for its emergence into theory.

You take a walk. Something throws together around you. Something weighted but incipient, precise but strewn across a field of bodies and things. A walker with a routine gets used to the little apparitions of something throwing together in his or her vicinity. He might develop the habit of arming himself with giant headphones and a stick. Or she might stay alert to the need for a quick response to comments from passersby. But with each encounter there are questions of points of contact, like what to do with your eyes.

One day, Ronn is walking Copper, the ancient Dachshund runt, on a busy Austin street. A man in a truck waiting for a light to change calls out in an Irish brogue, "What a beautiful dog." And then, perhaps noticing that the whiteness of her face is age, not a miracle, that her toothless mouth caves in to the blackness of death, that her eyes are blind black with cataracts—a creature not what she once was—he revs up his proclamations. "She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen." Ronn is a little taken aback, but he's on it. "Thank you very much! She's a doll." He would have gone on, stepping up to the opening, but the light changed. I imagine the two men gazing at each other for a few seconds as their paths pull apart, interrupting something set in motion.

Another Ronn story (he mostly talks to animals): "I'm buttoning up my shirt and all of a sudden I smell this smell and there's this soft poop at my feet and Copper's standing there looking up at me like (shrugs his shoulders and stares with a deadpan 'Hooray for me and fuck you')." Ronn walks away with a hint of jauntiness, putting a point on his story as he goes. I'm the slightly giggling co-witness and not the judge.

One day I'm walking Kuka past the schoolyard. A young boxer runs up to a man whose dog is on a leash. The man yells "Hey! Get your dog!" The boxer's owner is cavalier, slowly starting to amble over from the other side of the field. He calls out way too casually, as if it's not necessary to say anything at all, "He's friendly." The worked-up guy includes me in his retort. "We don't know that! Get your fuckin' dog. This ain't

even a leash-free park so don't give me that shit." His body is now bouncing up and down but moving fast-forward, too, like a beach ball blown by the wind. I'm a little worked up too, fashioning possible reactions in my head: "Ya, that's right!" or "Hey, leave me out of this!" Strange, how the quick surge to rage becomes interchangeable with a cutting edge of the bearable. A dog loosed by an oh-so-casual owner sets another man aflame. But, also, he sounds like he's from New England. That explains something.

Ethnography's mantra of grounded writing, or writing from the ground, potentially enables attention to the shakiness of difference encountered or imagined. But when it is coupled with a humanist realism of flatly known entities, it short-circuits the very work of describing a disturbance in a field or a material-aesthetic moment of surprise. It takes a much more robust and serious realism than that to approach the grounds on which dogs sometimes master the art of deadpan or accents set off a line of associations. What kind of "ground" is it, then, that sends people bouncing, takes place as a threshold, hits the senses as a set of provocations, or presents as a problematic sensed in circuits of reaction already set in motion? A ground on which, as Mark Doty puts it, "every achieved poem inscribes a perceptual signature in the world,"²⁰ and, at the same time, a ground on which strangely ordinary acts resonate with the gap in any call to words.

It must have been twenty years ago, the day my sister and I decided to take our mother's car to the garage in town and walk the six or seven miles up the foothills to her home. I remember it was harder than we had thought it would be and a little disappointing in the end as we walked along the shoulder of the road. We had set off on the thread of a poem we did not quite achieve, ending up one foot in front of the other. I remember that we didn't bring water with us, or the money to buy it when we passed through the village of Gilford. Our talk hit flat plateaus weighted with grooves of reaction laid down in childhood. In our New England, especially mine, truth be told, the sensorial habit of peaks of performative sociality would drop into a ravine of stillness as if the initial intensity needed backup or a compensation. The village appeared as a still life on the other side of a rocky brook. History gathered into the whiteness of the houses, country store, town library, grange building, church. Orange daylilies grew in clumps along the road. Mountain peaks sparked greens and blues. Two hundred yards further down the road, we came to the town's proudly modern colonial-style town hall plaza surrounded by a parking lot. As if to correct the stylistic mistake of the modern plaza too close to the picturesque village, the firefighters had led a community effort to build a covered bridge across the brook connecting the plaza to a back street of the village. It was as if the two distinct compositions in close proximity could not be left unabridged.

We now remember that walk as an event of our New Hampshire years—a time we didn't know was only for then.

*That New Hampshire was a contact aesthetic of histories and rogue trajectories set in motion by every object encountered.*²¹ *We were a “slipstream of sensations” in points of contact with low-bush blueberries, porcupine quills in a dog’s snout, the way, in the push to find the way out of the woods as dark fell, the light turned a cold navy blue.*²² *Scenes at the Wal-Mart of scruffy middle-aged men with elderly mothers buying them food and clothing became a thing referencing a problematic after only a few repetitions.*

That New Hampshire was also a compositional habit we learned by moving in the manner of our mother. We had grown up in the 1950s when our parents, along with other people and other things, were becoming middle class through an architecture of relays, rhythms, and refrains. Mundane forms of care and renunciation had formed a scaffolding for living that people couldn’t quite claim as their own. They said it was just what people did. Habits took hold as judgments somehow held in common with others. There was spaghetti day, laundry day, vacuuming day, a week of spring cleaning; you lined up the kids to go food shopping; you made meals with one green and one yellow vegetable every night. A phone call during dinner always got the same response, “I’m sorry. We’re having dinner. Could I have her call you back?” Tips circulated. Gadgets came and went. Scenes of pleasure floated by. Every night they listened to the nightly news. The world had become something to see. A life had become something to have. There were family vacations at the beach or at a lake: the rowboats, the women on chaise lounges, the intimacy of those bathing suits. Winter clothes went into cedar chests for storage. Plaques mounted on walls offered aggressively mundane inspirations: “It’s not the mountains ahead that wear you down, it’s the grain of sand in your shoe.” On our mother’s dresser, just above her jewelry drawer, was a milky statue of the Virgin Mary that glowed with a blue-ish hue when the lights were turned off.

My partner, Ronn, is of the same era; one of the things he and I have in common is those small, round, silver-rimmed glass ashtrays scored on the bottom with ridges in a design somewhere between a snowflake and a geometric form. When Ronn’s mother died after sixty-one years of marriage, his father’s house became an infrastructure of an upright life. The same can opener mounted on the kitchen wall for forty years, the same bottle opener on its stand in the pantry, a proliferation of precisely designed tools to core a tomato or a strawberry. A pan for poaching eggs. Soup bowls with silver rims that had to be washed by hand after every use. Tiny white glass bowls for the potato chips that occasionally replaced the oyster crackers with the soup at lunch. He kept an inventory, revised monthly, of the food stocked in his freezer in the basement: barbecue sauce (1), barbecue (4), marinara sauce (1), chili beans (1), chicken broth with chicken (5 quarts), chicken broth pints (8), yellow squash (2), green peppers (1), mixed greens (17), vegetable soup (2), chicken and vegetable soup (14), turnips (4), chicken and pasta soup (9), deer sausage (1), deer steak (2), chicken legs, long (10), chicken legs, short (8), deer steaks ground (1), pork ribs (2), sirloin steaks (1), sweet potatoes (22), biscuits (30), rolls (1 box), chicken and broth (5), sugar cake (1), turkey and broth (3), spaghetti sauce (27).

A collective experiment of worlding, not exactly of their own making, had set people off on the wings of a series of somethings to which they remained loyal.

As Tim Ingold has argued, the social and the natural are not the domains of particular phenomena but constitutive ontological moves.²³ A life is a mixed ontological entrainment lodged in things in composition. In *The Maytrees*, Dillard's characters, Lou and Toby, lived out their lives in a cottage filled with books, dreams, stars, sand, and sex on the beach at the edge of Cape Cod facing the ocean. Toby's thing was books: "Every book he read was a turn he took. . . . Whole unfulfilled systems littered the kitchen and beach. . . . He wanted to spend himself broke in the brain, to master something and start again."²⁴ When Toby goes off on a twenty-year tangent to an elsewhere with another lover and their eventual child, Lou redoubles her own attentions to living her own life in an ascetic cutting-away of the extraneous. "Lou had long since cut out fashion and all radio but the Red Sox. [Now she] let go her ties to people she did not like, to ironing, to dining out in town, and to buying things not necessary and that themselves needed care. She ignored whatever did not interest her."²⁵ She became a co-motional readiness with the night sky, the movement of the winter wind in the trees, the awaited return of Toby. Alphonso Lingis describes this post-phenomenological suspended state as a noumenal material opening: "Light silently fills our home, awakening the density and support of reality. [It] summons us outside, to fields of swaying leaves. . . . Our perception . . . envision[s] the possible in what it sees, anticipates what is coming."²⁶

In the memoir *Townie*, Andre Dubus describes his 1970s childhood in Newburyport and Haverhill, Massachusetts, as a series of edgy, fleshly cuts of class into now gleamingly restored eighteenth-century perfections. The channels of autonomous objects lay down stakes and swerve at points of contact with the itineraries of other things, creating a distributed zone of robust realism:²⁷ "empty mill buildings, their windows boarded up, some of the plywood rotted and hanging by one corner so you could walk in and step over loose papers, dusty machine parts, dog and bird shit, maybe human too." Market Square, now the bricked-road, flower-planted core muscle of a retro land of bookstores, soda fountains, bakeries, and gorgeously restored bars was then a zone of randomly abandoned cars. Lime Street was called Slime Street: "The inside of the house hot as a box. . . . You could smell . . . the piss and shit of the drunks in the weeds, . . . the sweet lead of the paint flaking off our clapboards."²⁸ Tight channels of expressivity sliced through matter, word, and action, locking them together in a harshly half-formed world: "Kids roamed the neighborhoods like dogs. . . . 'What're you lookin' at, fuck face?'" Hungry, depressed teenagers sometimes found warm subs in wrappers in the dumpster behind the sub shop. Kids didn't know how to throw a ball.²⁹ Here, the hyperordinary precision of the details fuses the description to the improvisatory conceptuality of a world riven, buoyant, energetic, and prolific.³⁰ It approaches the germinal aesthetics of the problematics of class rather than its

fixed conditions or social facts. Here, the real of class is a series of “transversal arrays of qualities or activities which, like musical refrains, give order to materials and situations, human bodies and brains included, as actions undertaken act-back to shape muscles and hone senses.”³¹ Emergent in singularities without ground and against the background of nothing, a real is a matter of the holding together of the disparate itself.³² It is a corporeal and incorporeal capacity to be in a continuous variation of matter and form that sets off questions of discernibility and, hence, questions of realism.³³

This is the real we enter in Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*, when the afterlife of a tragedy is described as a problematic that inspires the novel’s townies to a speculative interest in forms. They notice that “the Larkin couple . . . didn’t move. . . . Their blinds remained drawn . . . day and night [and] . . . there wasn’t a soul in town who wouldn’t have chopped off a baby finger for news of any kind.” And yet when Mary Blackwell reported that Louise had spent some time in a mental hospital, “There was that small outpouring against [her].” Her expressivity mistake clarified the town’s investment in following the unfolding partial legibilities lodged in bodies, feelings, and objects. People wondered how the Larkins got their groceries. “It was assumed the daughter from Boston must have some hand in [it], because once a month or so there would be a car parked in the driveway with a Massachusetts license plate, and while she was never seen in the local grocery store, perhaps she brought with her her husband, . . . and maybe he did some shopping.” Over time, their realist attention to things sharpened into the strange remainders of dogma and visceral avoidance; “after a while people did not talk too much about it: sometimes people driving past the house . . . even turned their heads away, not wanting to be reminded of what could happen to a family that had seemed as pretty and fresh as blueberry pie.”³⁴ But this is a strong remainder to the tragedy rather than an erasure. It remains a thing still generative because it is never fully simply present or literalized (except when people, carried away by the social pressure, make a descriptive mistake).

The main character, Olive, is the hero of the story not because she is a stable center or moving engine of the plot, but because her shockingly hard-edged realism brings her into a rough contact with objects human and non-human; she does things to and with them, they do things to and with her. As with Dillard’s Lou, this begins with a renunciation of social niceties and any other such bridges into a realm of some imagined purely social, natural, or emotional realm of phenomena. When a woman at a party asks Olive if she believes in estrogen replacement, Olive thinks to herself, with a harsh impatience for categorical belief of any kind: “*I believe in minding my own business, that’s what I believe in.*” In grief group, after her husband dies, Olive hears that it’s normal to be angry. Her reaction is to turn on the inadequacy of the

normative itself. “God, people are stupid, why in hell should I be angry? We all know this stuff is coming, not many are lucky enough to drop dead in their sleep.”³⁵

Her husband, Henry, appears at first to be her opposite. He had been a character bent on seeing the possibilities in things. Even after retiring, he would still wake early and remember “how mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were his secret, tires rumbling softly beneath him and the light emerging through the early fog . . . and almost always he rode with the window partly open because he loved the smell of . . . the cold. . . . And any unpleasantness that may have occurred back in his home, any uneasiness at the way his wife often left their bed to wander through their home in the night’s dark hours—all this receded like a shoreline as he walked through the safety of his pharmacy.”³⁶ His foolishness, as Olive had called it, had been the source of her constant scorn. Yet in his absence she recognizes him, and his very different tune of openness to what was coming, as her true companion. Not an annoyingly over-present simplification of life but a newly noted alternative line of thought and action through the noise of social niceties and anesthetizing platitudes. The other townies keep their distance from Olive; they watch her out of the corners of their eyes as if she is a thing—a problematic—that accrues weight and has to be walked around. They seem to see her as what they might call a force of nature. She herself insists upon this. What she seems to see in them, on the other hand, is an unreadiness. She knows they will not catch her when she falters. When her intestines become enflamed with the too-muchness of the crowded, inattentive yet role-driven sociality of a wedding party (that is, a wedding party filled with roles and dressings), there is no sensible, efficient help to be found, nothing at the ready, not even in the emergency room. Instead, there is a crazed ricocheting relay of unbelievable effects at the hands of the criminally clueless. As Olive might say, you have to keep your wits about you, especially when others don’t. It’s not just that the social has its limits but also that the humanist dream that meaning will hold things in place is a matter of serious consequence.

Every day, in perfectly ordinary moments, there’s an activation of the details of something suddenly somehow at hand. A pressing crowd of incipencies that might set off the immanent lines of some kind of a life or get stuck in an ideological stranglehold incited by the irritants coming at its ideal plane of the same. In all of this, there are, of course, missteps, receptivity mistakes, maybe the poise of a balancing act, at best, the fluidity of a perfect timing. You might find yourself suspended in a partially compelling form of eye contact, or a tendency to warm up to strangers that only goes so far. Some things etch into you like tree sap baked onto a windshield over a month of triple-digit temperatures in Texas. You wouldn’t think of

putting your old stuff out on the street or that's exactly what you do. Then you watch to see what happens. Someone who stops will look to see if there will be objections, some information or a missing screw, some sign of good will or irritation. An opportunity stained with social caste creates a problematic of contact.

I was a townie in a place north of Boston. That "townie we" had a loyalty to the expressivity of things. We knew when a few pansies stuck in a window box was a failed gesture at spring and when it succeeded, that a front porch slightly cluttered or too bare was not just the sign of a shut-in inside but the actual matter of a slackening, as if the plastic siding, long-ago layered over the wood, was itself necrotic. We watched others through uncurtained windows or read drawn curtains as a bad sign. We felt the bony truth in the mantra that the beach is cold and gray in the winter, and windy in a bad way. Eye contact pinged around the Dunkin' Donuts. It was as if whatever there was to notice was already scored onto matter, not in a way that ended it, but rather in a way that demanded our co-motional sharpness.

We were agoraphobes drawn to an edge. The town line's patch of gray concrete held the promise of sentience itself. Race, class, and ethnicity hovered above it in the mode of the really real as if the world literally burst into color on the home side and went gray in the instant of passing over the edge. And yet the town line had to be breached; it stood as a faltering into a venturing out. We crossed it alone and mapless, almost deliberately unprepared, in a kind of free fall, driving with our heads in a fixed position straight ahead, as if we had no necks. Things happened when you set out to get pita bread from the Lebanese place one town over and only one mile away. No one knew the names of streets, as if there was no circuit between the street signs our eyes must have seen and what we considered our business to know. I now remember seeing street signs a few times but always as a lonely surprise, and I still can't put together a name and a street, as if I'm still shielding my eyes/brain from an element that wasn't part of the picture for a townie.

Everything we did was a turning point ending up in a quagmire. Nothing ever happened without first registering a commitment to exhausting webs of complication, resource issues, and dark little tunnels of limited choice. That "townie we" relied not on intentionality or agency per se, but on the energy of small things made consequential for no conceivable reason. We were on the far-out end of the mindfulness spectrum, as if the point of living was to spend ourselves down to a nub on whatever was at hand: a taste for Pecan Sandies, the habit of wearing sandals in the snow. In the end, we ran the gamut of down-to-earth voicings as if running a gauntlet. "It is what it is." "That's enough of that." "No more beer for you." "No more talking to her."

Years later. I'm back visiting in New Hampshire. There's no trash pickup, so every day I find a place to dump a bag: at the boardwalk, outside the supermarket on the far end of the sidewalk where the cashiers and stockers take their cigarette breaks, at a rest area, a restaurant. I have to case-out places, rush in and out for a victory, a guilty

fear. The signs on every trash can and dumpster announce that violators will be prosecuted. But no local would pay to dump trash.

I'm bossier here. I'm talking again about bedbugs and cockroaches and the horror of a heat wave. I remember that toasters have to be unplugged when you leave the house.

I see the outline of laughable topics that lead from the gut. Peg and George shove grocery bags into the backs of their shorts to walk the dogs. George perks up when I tell him that Ronn buys doggie bags. "What? How much does he pay for them?" I say, well, there is a law against plastic bags in Austin. "Well, ya, Duh! It's only a matter of time here, too, but that's why I get them to double-bag my groceries." George is serious but he takes my laugh in stride. I wonder how long I can go on like this.

It's fun to tweak a regional nerve, but I'm starting to want to branch out on my own. At the hotel an egg-cooking machine is driving me crazy. There's one dial for temperature and another for time. You lower your eggs into one of two baskets of steaming water. I keep opening still-raw eggs and throwing them away with loud sound effects. Others are getting upset that the eggs are getting mixed up. Finally I notice that there's a huge sign with detailed operating instructions, but we've all already had enough of all this, poised between a fuck-you shrug and an eye roll.

It was the end of the school year and loud noises were making me jump. Back in the traffic-free north woods I became afraid of hitting moose on the road at the sight of signs warning of moose crossings that made some reference to death. And in the lake, the light green water and sandy bottom would give way to darkness; the waves picked-up; the bite of the spawning pickerel could draw blood.

Once I saw a woman standing on a sidewalk in downtown Laconia, chain-smoking while she talked to a buff youngish man. She was trying to get him to give someone else a break because he means well or he didn't mean it or there are circumstances. Maybe her son. "He don't know no better." She was hanging in there, but someone had some explaining to do. The whole top half of the woman's black hair was a helmet of white roots.

Every day I would take a walk. This one day, at first the houses are a little disheveled and bruised. The yards are piles of split wood, pine needles, axes and chain saws, coolers, pickups, campers and boats, a fire pit, a shed. Inside, I know, via the Trulia real-estate app, there's green carpeting and a bareness tipping into the almost-hoarding of inadequate closets. An aesthetic aimed at filling in the empty spaces overwhelms itself: decorations manically thrown at a wall, baskets crammed along the tops of the kitchen cabinets. It's a realism half realized and half succumbed to.

Sometimes there are piles of plastic boxes in a corner of the living room or spilling out over the couch and onto the floor, littering the living with something not right. As if things can't stand up anymore. Painfully steep stairs lead to tiny upstairs bedrooms painted hyperbright colors in paint so flat it makes my fingertips dry just to look at it. Here there's just dull, dark oversized furniture or again the collapsed piles that started by the windows. In the self-made photos on Trulia, all of this is terribly smudged, turning near-abjection into a question of horror—a truly weird realism.

I imagine the sellers drew the line at paying for professional photographs, but then what happened next?

All summer there were surreal wedding scenes of bridesmaids in yellow and lavender floating down to the harbor along the brick sidewalk. A bride standing in her dress on a dock, waiting. Groomsmen clumped in black formality. Suspensions in the mode of pause, poise, and pose.

Wednesday nights the town orchestra plays in the bandstand. People sit in lawn chairs on the grass. Everything has a near-parodic touch, like a New Yorker cover or a Maxfield Parrish painting. Clumps of teenage boys swarm the fields at dusk dressed as one of two awkwardly experimental kinds: responsible young men in the making, in chinos and golf shirts, or bad boys, in hoodies and sunglasses, hips swaying. Across the green at the library, Try It Out bags include everything you need to get started hiking, tying fishing flies, candy making, being grandparents, reporting your own abuse, or saving energy. A flyer titled "You're Not Alone" contains calmly detailed descriptions of your options in various bad situations.

In the points of precision of any act or story, what matters is not, first, a meaning but the singularity of an angle of approach, a surprise contact, an opening onto some world's cocomposition, a groundswell of a thing that does not yet have a name thrown into a soft focus as a threshold, a voicing, an overlap, the momentary flourishing of some capacity. Evaluative critique, in its rush to decide a thing's value, misses the shaken profusion in things, the slightly reckless impulse to venture out, in which points of precision act as the initiating gaps and still lifes in the very move to describe an incommensurable real. These are the channels of an improvisatory conceptuality, a germinal aesthetics so ordinary and problematic that they recede from view, but only long enough to create the disturbance in the field we call experience.

Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York, 1974), 7, 8. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1954), 474.
2. Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 411, 301.
3. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York, 1957), 82.
4. Derek McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies* (Durham, NC, 2013). Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London, 2000), 30.
5. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC, 2007), 142. Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do* (Minneapolis, 2012).
6. Isabelle Stengers, Brian Massumi, and Erin Manning, "History through the Middle: Between Macro and Mesopolitics—an Interview with Isabelle Stengers,"

- Inflexions: A journal of research creation* 3 (2009), http://www.inflexions.org/n3_stengershtml.html.
7. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in The Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis, 2014), vii.
 8. Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 3, 10.
 9. Ibid., 8.
 10. Ibid., opening epigraph.
 11. Graham Harman, "Realism without Materialism," *SubStance* 40, no. 2 (Issue 125, 2011): 52–72; Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester, UK, 2012), 50.
 12. Graham Harman, "DeLanda's Ontology: Assemblage and Realism," *Continental Philosophical Review* 41 (2008): 367–83.
 13. Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nelson (Minneapolis, 1995), 138.
 14. Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 6.
 15. Erin Manning, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 30.
 16. Deleuzian philosophy suggests that singularities "throw together" disparate elements into partially recognizable phenomena or thresholds of expressivity. See Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh, 2005).
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 18. Corwin Ericson, *Checked Out OK* (Hadley, MA, 2013).
 19. Harman, *Weird Realism*.
 20. Mark Doty, *The Art of Description: World into Word* (Minneapolis, 2010), 21.
 21. Pine, *The Art of Making Do*.
 22. Doty, *The Art of Description*, 21.
 23. Tim Ingold, "Reply to David Howes," *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (August 2011): 19, 3, 325.
 24. Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York, 2009), 34.
 25. Ibid., 131.
 26. Alphonso Lingis, "Irrevocable Loss," in *Non-Representational Methodologies*, ed. Phillip Vannini (London, 2015), 165.
 27. Harman, "Realism without Materialism," 52–72.
 28. Andre Dubus III, *Townie: A Memoir* (New York, 2011), 27.
 29. Ibid., 27, 57, 60.
 30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, 1987).
 31. Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," in *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, ed. Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison (Surrey, 2010), 8.
 32. J-D Dewsbury, "Language and the Event: The Unthought of Appearing Worlds," in Anderson and Harrison, *Taking Place*. Marcus A. Doel, "Representation and Difference," in *Taking Place*.
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 34. Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge* (New York, 2008), 140, 141.
 35. Ibid., 141–42, 148.
 36. Ibid., 3, 4.