

Dislodgings

Kit Webb

The posture could be one of reverence, the head thrown back, eyes cast up. Perhaps it's a little too extended, the neck, craning; looks a little too uncomfortable, the degree to which the chin's raised. This is how dead men once obliged anatomists, I think, but with skin, muscle, tendon, vein each cut away to share with us our workings. The pose, like of those dead men, is a performance of display—(I think of how, as a child, I might have insisted dinner was finished: jaw aloft, *Look, all done, I'm ready. Let me go*)—of demonstration, but this body, intact, composed, gives less away. Doesn't greet us. Averts its gaze. Instead draws our eyes to the centre of the image. Its declaration. *Here is my throat, its veins. Here I am softer. Here cartilage must do the work of bone. Here—this ridge, this prominence, this gendered token of our avidity—is a morsel caught, a gobbet lodged.* That we could cough it up.

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Remnants he calls them, as if they'd washed ashore. Salvage. Perhaps this prompted my approach, regarding these objects as an inventory, courtroom exhibits. Moving in pursuit of his antipode, the point furthest from his birthplace (coordinates cast in the North Atlantic), these were to serve as evidence for absence, for the artist's efforts at effacing. To arrive where he might be thought to be least. Where he is not.

Before he got there, the wind left him. He wouldn't make it. So the logbook stops, the photographs (of north, south, east, west) remain to-be-taken. Empty frames are displayed, nothing-placeholders. The logbook, in its terseness—only what's measurable is recorded, 'Sails down' the only comment—also aspires to the end he sought. And also misses it. For how could he report, whether in images or words, on its attainment, when the workings would always have annulled the result? How to show that you've got there, when the there, the getting, would each preclude the you?

It seems fitting that his map of the world has the two points pricked out, vortices unreachable except by falling through; apt that this might suggest the approach is as an asymptote, not-being a trajectory. Not a place achieved, but a staggered displacing. The effect is to warp even what might feel least doubtful, most established: his birth certificate, in this context, takes on qualities of roots unearthed—blanched and meagre, a little silly, grasping for nothing.

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The index is written on the wall; its referents arranged, serried, on the table. 525 globules of chewed paper that were once the 525 passages of *Cause et cure*, a twelfth-century 'Book of Holistic Medicine' by the abbess and visionary, Hildegard von Bingen. Where once the text located the cause of our ailments, bodily and mental, in humanity's sinfulness, in Adam's eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Eve's responsibility was less, von Bingen explains), now each page has been pulped, mushed, so the index on the wall points not to a book's contents, but traces of them. It's as if Judith Deschamps has performed a travesty of *ruminatio*—the

medieval ideal of a reading where text is dwelt on so long that its meaning is incorporated (words made flesh); here the text has been chewed but not swallowed, all nutritional value jettisoned in the work's regurgitation. Rather than being clarified, elaborated upon—the duty of cloistered ruminants—the text is further obscured, made blank, scrambled into inscrutability.

The first taste of language, as Michel Leiris remembers it, spooning his alphabet soup—it was like trying Adam's fruit; it taught him that language was always kneaded, sculpted in the mouth; that, even when brought back up (having been guzzled too hastily), the letters remained as legible as a newspaper's subheads. But Judith's browsing brings back not words but their wreckage; communicates a failure, in failing to communicate. In one sense, it corroborates our Fall, figuring the difficulty with which we comprehend another; our incapacity, our dyspepsia. In another, it might seem to enact its undoing, Deschamps hawking up five hundred Adam's apples. Dispensing of language. As if in its mulch there were something restorative. Or that it could be that simple to spit out sin.

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He had made it seem so easy, like something slipped into, the way he recast himself as No One. As if all it took were poor enunciation, a fumbling of the tongue, a cup too much wine, and Odysseus would become Outis. He selected nothing for himself, a name with which he could worm his way from incident—out of caves, away from danger; out of obligation—non-identity applied like a mask, shrunk into like a coat. As if it weren't the twenty years passed that had appalled him as stranger—drifter, vagrant, an alien at home—personhood licked by sea-spray, gnawed by salt. It explains his surprise though, his anger when he's not recognised: this had felt like a choice, a trick he'd played, a spell of the gods. But now the mask was stuck, compelling No One to disprove his none-ness, disclose old marks of his *is* (trace the scar on his thigh, re-craft his conjugal bed), hoping, furiously, to unwork the effect of this *not*.

In such manner, I had thought it might be fitting to parade my reading. There were so many other journeys one could consider parallel. Where not-being is an end of travelling. Thus Odysseus's becoming No One, somehow both adopted and inadvertent. But each antecedent felt misappropriated; Odysseus's arc is always homeward, his aim restitution of family, property, of self. To have Alasdair Asmussen Doyle's work inherit meaning came to strike me as misguided; the voyage out elicited a shedding. The Azores left behind, I didn't want to dredge Coleridge or Conrad, Melville or Mandeville, to re-bed his film in literature; wanted instead to account for the work's slowing, its tending-towards-stillness, the elision of elements; describe the vitreous, molten, rippling surface, the billowing of the waves, their tempered restlessness, the uneasy calm; and regard the final shot—still sea, blank sky, the crease of the horizon—as the extent, this time, of an unlearning. No return is scheduled (we won't conclude at port); Doyle's film intends to remain *at sea*, to persist adrift—no longer wholly something, if not nothing, not yet.

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Unmoor. Cast off, cast out. Dislodge. These seem to me the imperatives of Deschamps's and Doyle's work. Work that wants to unseat its subjects, and in so doing, depose itself. In Doyle's

weather vane, the anemometer kept indoors; in Deschamps's mass of paper; in my own swaddling in verbiage, perhaps, my argument's overstating—we accumulate evidence of what we'd cede. Capture lack in redundancy. With each pivot, each squirm away from, lodge ourselves more firmly.

Some things escape though, some material shifts. I draw a line between Doyle's empty frames, with their coordinates imprinted, and Deschamps's text, diptych to her self-portrait. Here Hildegard's passage on the decline of Adam's voice has been etched in paper, the letters lipped with yellow where the laser burnt through. It's through these gaps I think, these spaces opened; we could be known by the edges of our absence. By the ground given. By the positions held, those we've exhausted. By the others yet, that we've since slipped through.

Sources

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