

## *Editorial: “Lived Things”*

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Listen more often to things rather than beings.  
Hear the fire’s voice,  
Hear the voice of water.  
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees,  
It is our forefathers breathing.  
—Birago Diop, *Breaths*

Apples, alarm clocks, ATMs; backpacks, barcodes, buildings; cats, clouds, credit cards. We humans are inextricably intertwined with our things. Everywhere we turn, we encounter them, “in space, in the air, on the earth, in the street, along the road” (Levinas, 1969, p. 130). Things “saturate our world with their presence” (Benso, 2000, p. 143); they anchor and structure our everyday surround, orient and shepherd our practices, shape and habituate social relationships, and sediment and render meaningful our cultural traditions. Things are what are most near to us (Heidegger, 1962). They are our intimates, crowding our eyesight and seductively winking their secrets to us. Yet even though they are always close by, the things of our everyday world also withdraw incessantly into our taken-for-granted background. Is it any wonder then, that their founding presence and formative influence in our lives is so easily passed over with little comment, let alone sustained reflective attention?

Indeed, for the most part, things abide in silence, subsisting modestly on the verge of invisibility and intangibility, abandoned to their proximal nests and hopelessly entangled in vibrant networks of human meaning. Things stand available and ready-to-hand alongside their equipmental brethren, waiting patiently on our comings and goings. In their radical exposure, things suffer our warmth, whim, and final disposal. Things are jugs that hold and outpour, and bridges that open onto new worlds (Heidegger, 1951/1971). Things are “gifts of excess, they gush beyond their bounds as ecstatic existences”, and too, things “forge connections between what exists around them,...throw[ing] a bridge between our surroundings and ourselves” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 14). Like the radial and orbital threads composing a spider’s web, things not only adumbrate and scaffold the human lifeworld, they resonate its singular and supple tones of meaning. Things thing.

We humans are always already involved and implicated in a hermeneutically rich but primarily silent corporeal rapport with and attunement to our thingly surround. As a material

presence, a thing stubbornly “prescribes a specific comportment that is appropriate to it” (Gadamer, 2008, p. 70). It beckons and seduces, cajoles and suggests, and at times, demands that we pursue a new avenue of activity, or engage in an already well-worn pattern of thinking. “Things touch us, transform us, and conduct us along a meaningful path in the world” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 14). As Martin Heidegger (1972) shows, “when we handle a thing...our hand must fit itself to the thing. Use implies a fitting response” (p. 187). Appropriating a new thing, it lays claim to our gestural being and “our existence changes” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002, p. 143). A thing is not merely passive and patient; it is formative and formidable. Matter matters.

## The Call of Things

In this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice*, we invited practitioners and students of phenomenology to respond to the call of things, and to take up the challenge of reassembling, resembling and then reflecting on a thing’s silent intonations, provocative utterances, and compelling hints and gestures. In a very concrete sense, the authors were charged with phenomenology’s “return to the things themselves.” The concern was not with things as objects, but things as lived. To describe a thing as it is given to us prereflectively means engaging the basic phenomenological project of uncovering human existential situations, ethical predicaments, and concrete, praxial involvements. From Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology-making cup of coffee (in Moran, 2005) to Heidegger’s (1962) broken hammer, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) knowing, typing hands to Don Ihde’s (1979) dental probe, phenomenologists have long been striving to capture a thing’s elusive dance partners: occurrence and withdrawal, *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*, manifestation and adumbration, murmur and quietude, concreteness and transcendence, amplification and reduction, focus and background, institution and transformation, earth, sky, mortals and divinities. To construct a phenomenology of a thing demands an out-of-the-corner-of-one’s-eye attentiveness to everyday life, “an *ear for meaning* and an *eye for materiality*” (Aagaard & Matthiesen, 2016, p. 41, emphasis in original), and cultivating a writerly sensitivity for the vocative and poetic dimensions of languages that are whispering just beyond earshot. Such “thing writing” or reflecting phenomenologically on a thing revives a long tradition of *doing* phenomenology, and too, situates this research practice among today’s sociomaterial, affective and posthumanist methodologies (Adams & Thompson, 2016).

In his most recent methodology text, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (2014), Max van Manen added “lived things” (materiality) to his original set of four existentials or fundamental themes that belong to the human lifeworld: lived time (temporality), lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), and lived relations (relationality). More than a decade earlier, Max van Manen and Cathy Adams had begun experimenting with “thing writing” as one of multiple writing exercises assigned in the *Phenomenological Research and Writing* doctoral seminar at the University of Alberta (see Adams and van Manen, 2017). In the “thing writing” exercise, students first read Heidegger’s essay “The Thing” (1971), and consider how he uses the example of a jug to show how a thing cannot be understood by merely cataloguing its outward appearance, material properties, and functions. A thing may only be meaningfully apprehended and revealed in the context of human practice. A jug, for example, shows itself in the midst of nurturing, sharing, and pouring:

When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel...But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No—he shapes the void...The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 169)

Students then choose an object or thing that they use or encounter more or less regularly (such as a book, an iPad, the bus, etc.). Their task is to describe and reflect phenomenologically on their thing as it appears or is given in their everyday lives. To maintain the concrete, lived-through quality of their reflections, these budding practical phenomenologists may try opening their “thing writing” with a brief anecdote, or weave snippets of lived experience descriptions throughout their text. Or they may begin by first describing their thing not as lived, but as it is given in “*circumspection*” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 65). Then having “set aside” the thing as a conspicuous, inspectable object, they turn to how it appears in the absorption of everyday practice, that is, in its “handiness” (*Zuhandenheit*).

Regardless, the challenge is to push past taken-for-granted divides (e.g., subject/object, human/nonhuman), unexamined beliefs, biases and theoretical constructs, and to catch sight of the thing anew, in its originary, prereflective apprehensions. In the struggle to reveal the thing in its lived-throughness, a student's phenomenological observation skills—the ability to shift back and forth between the “natural attitude” and the “phenomenological attitude”—necessarily begin to quicken, develop, and hone. Too, in straining to “hear” the thing's invitations and express the noncognitive, pathic rapport that unfolds in concert with its human user, the student must enter into a sensitive engagement with the vocative dimensions of their text. The aim is not word count, but to make each word count. Working word by word, phrase by phrase, the student attempts to evoke the unique gestural language of their thing as *lived*. As such, this form of writing is now a staple exercise in the doctoral seminar and methodology workshops.

One example of thing writing developed in the *Phenomenological Research and Writing* seminars is Michael van Manen's (2012) “Looking into the Neonatal Isolette”. Van Manen, a neonatal intensivist and now professor at the University of Alberta, opens his reflection on this specialized piece of medical equipment by situating the reader in his professional world. He provides a simple, concrete description of the neonatal isolette in its objecthood. It is “a structural unit that houses a single sick or premature child within an acrylic glass enclosure” (e4) with small openings for wires and tubes, and larger ones for hands to enter and care for the child. He tells us what it is for: “to incubate the developing child” (e4). He then reflects on what sort of dwelling this may be for the infant: a bedroom? a dorm? a crib? Yet he wonders if there is “something more to this expensive medical-grade plastic box” (e4)? Having attended to its material presence and “in-order-to”, that is, what the thing is used for, van Manen turns to how he most usually and prereflectively encounters this sealed plastic box: by looking through it. Peering through the isolette's transparent polyethylene walls, the physician is distantly aware of, on the one hand, how radically exposed the infant is, and on the other, how separate the child remains. The isolette isolates, and in doing so, may translate or “prevent a normal gesture and caring response” (e3). Such insight does not question the medical utility of the isolette, but asks for more considered reflection on how even taken-for-granted medical technologies may unwittingly frame professional practices in unintended ways.

A second example is Nicole Day's (2014) “The Child's Backpack.” The reader joins the

child's backpack as it is "dumped unceremoniously at the door, lost in a pile of winter boots and snow pants" (p. 39). Over the course of this short and exquisitely concrete text, we discover the backpack as a zipped and unzipped jumble of childhood and scholastic things: a lone mitten, a library book, a half-eaten granola bar, a soggy spelling list and school agenda, a forgotten permission form, and a lunch kit. The next morning, it is freshly packed and zipped up, then hoisted and harnessed onto the child's back, ready for a new school day. The backpack, it turns out, is "a powerful portal that bridges two worlds" (p. 39)—home and school—for both child and parent. Via sensitive observation, concrete description, as well as careful attention to the phenomenological reduction and the vocative quality of their texts, both Day's and van Manen's (2012) short essays succeed in drawing us near to and revealing aspects of the singular and meaningful "ringing" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 180) of their respective things.

Thing writing presents special challenges. As soon as we fix a steady eye on a thing, the thingness of the thing quickly turns into an impenetrable object, and slips swiftly beyond our phenomenal grasp, and back to its wordless quotidian oblivion. Indeed, the predicament in reflecting phenomenologically on a thing is that the more we seek after its everyday occurrence or eventing, the more we are prone to colour and cover over its thingness in the midst of human experience.

No matter how sharply we just *look* [Nur-noch-hinsehen] at the "outward appearance" ["Aussehen"] of Things in whatever form this takes, we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand. If we look at things just 'theoretically', we can get along without understanding readiness-to-hand. But when we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character. (Heidegger 1962, p. 98, italics in original)

Even though things dwell in intimate proximity to us, they are primarily and indeed necessarily taken for granted and absorbed into the midst of our practical engagements and focal projects (Ihde, 1990). When not in use, they reside in the vast shadowy background, "a *dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*" (Husserl, 1969, p. 52, italics in original). Thus, only when we venture into the darker outskirts of our experiential realms, while maintaining an unassuming orientation to the world, might the thingness of a thing rise to our visible horizon. Thing writing, therefore, demands a different if not more sensitive treatment of lived experience: a humble tuning down of the human voice, and a heedful listening to the whispering murmurs of the things themselves. To capture such a phenomenology, one needs to reassemble and resemble a thing's unique language of glancing hints, silent gestures, and tonal atmospheres.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, the protagonist Roquentin finds himself unsettled and ultimately overcome by the uncanny thingness of things:

I lean my hand on the seat [of the streetcar] but pull it back hurriedly: it exists. This thing I'm sitting on, leaning my hand on, is called a seat. They made it purposely for people to sit on, they took leather, springs and cloth, they went to work with the idea of making a seat and when they finished, *that* was what they had made. They carried it here, into this car and the car is now rolling and jolting with its rattling windows, carrying this red thing in its bosom. I murmur: "It's a seat," a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing. It stays what it is, with its red plush,

thousands of little red paws in the air, all still, little dead paws. This enormous belly turned upward...Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves: they are there. (Sartre, 2007, p. 125-126)

At last, Roquentin is so disturbed by the inescapable nearness of his thing-infested surroundings, that he leaps from the tram before it comes to a halt. "I'm suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth...And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have *seen*" (p. 126). What had Roquentin seen?

Like the creatures relieved of their names by Eve (although the name Eve is never actually used) in Ursula LeGuin's (1985) "She Unnames Them", the animals appear suddenly, unexpectedly near to her and eerily transformed:

None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. (p. 27)

Unnamed, the creatures reclaim their creaturehood (and in the case of Roquentin, the things reclaim their uncanny thinghood). Once the animals' taken-for-granted "appellations...and all the Linnaean qualifiers that had been trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail" (p. 27) had been removed, Eve's existence is potently permeated by their perceptual cornucopia of smells and scales and skin and feathers and fur, where "the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food" (p. 27). Stripping away their man-made names, she perceives the animals as other, and apprehends her relationship with them anew. So too must the thing writer proceed—carefully brushing aside taken-for-granted assumptions, meticulously examining one's biases, gently excavating the thing's etymological roots—each gesture aiming to "unname" ones thing, so as to draw nearer to it still.

In this place of "perpetual begin[nings]...accept[ing] nothing as established from what men and scientists believe they know" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xxviii), we may encounter Merleau-Ponty's lived body in the midst of its primordial apprehension of its world, where the perceiver and the perceived palpate one another and intertwine. For the lived body, "there are no things, only physiognomies" (Merleau-Ponty, 1963/1983, p. 168). Or as Eva-Maria Simms (2008) suggests, a thing is not simply, "an object-in-itself composed of mere matter but...a gestural presence" (p. 86). Drawing on Bachelard, Simms reminds us that, "the floor as a gesture is understood as a relationship of support. The roof shelters us from the elements, the walls are an embracing gesture that encloses our world and provides intimacy" (p. 86-87). So the phenomenologist asks: what are the physiognomies of the things of our worldly surround? What gestures are they inviting that daily "call for a corresponding response from human beings" (p. 87)? How may we describe our primal attunements to and intimate relations with things?

## The Tone of Things

Sticky notes, spoons, and mirrors; bathtubs, purses, and vanity drawers; pianos, yoga mats, and some golden paper, a plastic chain and an IKEA bag. With the exception of the last three things (which are instead “queer things” as they are deployed in ways outside of their usual use contexts), each thing in this special issue is “*a useful thing*” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 69). A useful thing is “essentially ‘something in order to...’” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 69). For example, a spoon is something in order to feed ourselves. Each article also strikes a different tonal atmosphere corresponding to the unique character of the authors’ chosen thing or things. Jakob von Uexküll (1934) shows how an object shows up as “functionally toned” or shaded in the lived world or *Umwelt* of a creature, depending on its perceptual and actional endowments. In the human world, a cup has a “drinking tone,” whereas a chair has a “sitting tone.” Things are part of the reverberating symphony of perception and movement that obtains between human beings and their lived world. Each thing bears its own “unique accent” or tonal signature to which human beings attune:

The [existential] unity of the thing, beyond all of its congealed properties, is not a substratum, an empty X, or a subject of inherence, but rather that unique accent that is found in each one, that unique manner of existing of which its properties are a secondary expression. For example, the fragility, rigidity, transparency, and crystalline sound of a glass expresses a Single manner being....The unfolding of sensible givens beneath our gaze or beneath our hands is like a language that teaches itself, where signification would be secreted by the very structure of signs, and this is why it can be said that our senses literally interrogate the things and that the things respond to them....We understand the thing as we understand a new behavior, that is, not through an intellectual operation of subsumption, but rather by taking up for ourselves the mode of existence that the observable signs sketch out before us. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 333)

Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan evokes a similarly tonal or musical sensibility to describe a technology’s unique “utterance” to its potential user. Every technology “is in fact a kind of word, a metaphor that translates experience from one form to another” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 3). As we take up, learn to use, and habituate to a new thing or technology, its unique melody silently disperses and permeates our world, releasing and setting in motion its intoxicating “utterance.” We attune to and are affected by it. A thing’s singularity is most thoroughly revealed in the ongoing, primordial rapport we share with it.

The nine articles also vary significantly in length. This is in part because we welcomed the submission of full-length manuscripts as well as more abbreviated pieces. We described the shorter pieces as *brief phenomenological snapshots of a thing*. Like Michael van Manen’s (2012) “Looking into the Neonatal Isolette” or Nicole Day’s (2014) “The Child’s Backpack”, such condensed thing writings were expected to be carefully crafted and maintain a concrete, phenomenological focus throughout. For the full-length paper, Utrecht scholar van D. J. Lennep’s (1987) “Hotel Room” can be viewed as an early exemplar. Here, authors were given larger textual space to explore multiple aspects and variations of the everyday experience of a particular thing, architectural structure, or material object. In all cases, the submissions had to attend to the *lived through quality of a thing*, and seek to reveal phenomenological insights through rich, evocative, and coherent writing. To some extent, the length and structure of the

articles should also be chosen as a proper methodological treatment to approach its relative thing. Reviewers evaluated each manuscript according to the following appraisive criteria:

- **Heuristic questioning:** Does the opening of the text immediately draw the reader to a wonder about the thing? Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder about and questioning attentiveness to the thing?—*ti estin* (the wonder what this is) and *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all).
- **Descriptive richness:** Does the text contain rich and recognizable experiential material? Does the text have enough concrete descriptions to elicit the everydayness of the thing?
- **Distinctive rigor:** Does the text remain constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the thing? Does it maintain a disciplined orientation to the thing? Are there any obvious or hidden assumptions, pre-understandings, theories, or “common sense” notions about the thing that still need attention in the writing?
- **Interpretive depth:** Does the text offer reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted, everyday understandings about the thing?
- **Unique whatness:** Does the text address other “things” that are similar to but different from this “thing” (does it vary the example)? Does the text consider the thing when it breaks down or is used in unexpected ways? Does this writing touch, or lead us to see, the “whatness” of the thing?
- **Strong and addressive meaning:** Does the text “speak” to and address our sense of embodied being? Does the text speak the language of the thing? Does the language evoke the lived-thoroughness of the thing or otherwise resemble how it may appear in everyday life?
- **Experiential awakening:** Does the text awaken prereflective or primal experience through vocative and presentative language? The nearness of the thing?
- **Inceptual epiphany:** Does the “thing writing” offer us the possibility of deeper and original insight, or an intuitive or inspirited grasp of the ethics and ethos of life commitments and practices? (Criteria adapted from van Manen, 2014, pp. 355-356)

There was no expectation that any given manuscript meet *all* these criteria. But it had to demonstrate some attention to the reduction, that is, some of the questions above could be answered positively. Each question expresses an aspect of the epoché and the reduction, thus the criteria served to define the text as phenomenological.

Finally, in reviewing the nine manuscripts finally selected for this issue, we must admit our surprise that none were about a digital device or a piece of software. After all, we are living in the 21st century. Our groping, coping grip on the world is increasingly caught up in oceans of sensors, networks, databases, and software apps tailored to and tailoring our thinking, sensing, gesturing, and social selves. Moreover, pre-digital things have not been entirely immune to this development. Like us, they are increasingly being implanted with and infected by the designs of the digital, and quietly absorbed into the expansive Internet of Things. In this way, the digital is reprogramming our foundational infrastructures, and thereby reshaping ways of thinking, being, and doing in the world. Thus, it is possible that one day soon, the thing writings found in this special issue may be read only as bits of nostalgia, allowing us to reminisce and reflect on some of the gentler potencies of our pre-digital relations to things. If so, all the more reason to take special note of what is still most near to us: things.

## Things as Lived

### *The Mnemonic Thing*

An empty chair in our living room stirs us to remember a lost loved one, an old boarding pass repurposed as a bookmark recalls an eventful holiday. Our memories are not “contained in our brains” so much as in the things we encounter everyday. Some things, like Marcel Proust’s madeleine, may awaken long forgotten events through their sensual presence or unique location in our world. Other things, like a photograph or hand-written letter, accomplish remembrance more directly. Such things are not mere utensils of memory; they are the lived materiality of our mnemonic capacities. We mark our meaningful passage through the world via things, and we rely on their continuity in imagining our future. Whether ancient clay tokens or talking knots, quill pen and parchment, modern books, notepads and computer keyboard, mnemonic things invite us to code or decode systems of notation, notably through language or other culturally developed rituals or habits. The challenge of describing a mnemonic thing in its lived handiness is to uncover its pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive invitations in the midst of linguistic and interpretative experiences.

In “The Reader’s Sticky note”, Yin Yin approaches this mnemonic aid by noticing its everyday residence on the modern office desk, adhering neatly to a yellow pad of others just like it. At first, the gesture of sticky-noting appears utterly trivial, a perfunctory note in the larger context of a life. Yet as Yin follows the Post-It note in the midst of its lived-through appropriations, we witness ourselves inscribing then attaching our most cursory thoughts to our physical surroundings, forever in hopes that we may retrieve them again later. Such fleeting attempts to speak with punctum to our future selves arise in the otherwise unremarked flow of everyday life. Such sticky-notable moments are uniquely fraught with an urgency and emergency of meanings that demand to be marked. Yin then turns to a particular kind of sticky notation: the sticky note in the lifeworld of the reader. Using an transitional anecdote where a reader quickly attaches a sticky note to a page of a book, she makes an eidetic comparison with other reading devices that bear similar hermeneutic and experiential significances: the bookmark and the practice of highlighting and underlining. The unique promise of sticky note is its invitation of annotation, a marking of a reader’s creative entanglement with the text. A sticky note expands a book’s pages, and makes visible a portion of the reader’s writerly encounter and dialogue with the text. Yet its presence is also superficial and transient. Not unlike other mnemonic things, the sticky note paradoxically materializes the possibilities but also the limitations of meaning making.

### *The Supping Thing*

A knife, a fork, a pair of chopsticks, a cup, a bowl, and a spoon. Household utensils may be among our most ancient implements: they belong to the human and often communal activity of eating or feeding ourselves. With the aid of cutlery or eating utensils, we bring sips or bite-sized portions of food or drink to our lips, to consume and swallow for nourishment. Bernd Jäger (1999) draws attention to the difference between “human eating” and “animal feeding”. In German, for example, people *essen* but animals *fressen* (p. 72). We humans eat, feast, dine, and sup. Too, “human eating...cannot help but reflect the particular relationship that exists between

person and world” (Jager, 1999, p. 77). The things we use to eat with are not just for “self-serving” purposes, but inevitably open up a relation of serving and giving to others.

Resembling an outstretched arm with cupped hand, the spoon’s gesture of supplicatory giving is quickly evident to the one who picks it up. The spoon is often the first utensil put to an infant’s lips, and offered to a toddler to feed themselves. Yet, as Kacey Neely shows in her short piece on “The Spoon”, we might not notice the meaning of spoon-ness until we are without one. She begins her exploration with just such a broken-down moment. A spoon not only carries food, but certain kind of food that seems too liquidy or too messy for other utensils to pick up. Then Neely turns to reflect on the pedagogy of the spoon: its humble place at our dinner table, its relational significance in an infant’s world, and its unexpected appearance as a tourist souvenir. “Perhaps,” says Neely, “a spoon’s collectability lies in its utter commonness, its portability, its harmless roundness, its gesture of holding, and its entanglement with most every food culture.” The humble spoon quietly shapes the moody, relational spheres of serving ourselves and others, and reveals normative aspects of supping alone or together.

### ***The Reflective Thing***

We humans are determined by and reflected in our things: “we are the bethinged, the conditioned ones” (Heidegger, 1951/1971, pp. 178-179). Our co-constitutive relations with our things are at once miracles—a thing of wonder—and mirages—illusory events. Such wondrous human-thing performances produce “a mirror effect whereby one, looking at itself in the other, is both deformed and formed in the process” (Stiegler, 1998, p. 158). The challenge in describing a reflective thing is capturing the reflexivity of it: the moment we look into it, in a concrete and writerly sense, we may only see ourselves. The reflective thing appears as the appearance of ourselves. It reveals a version of ourselves to ourselves, yet the revelation may be at best an aspect of our superficiality. In “Mirror, Mirror”, Leslie Robinson reflects on what we see reflected back to us when we look in a mirror. Is mirrored reflection an exacting silvered truth or illusive self-deception?

Through the directness of touch, we come to know our body as our own. In a mirror, our body is also encountered in its familiarity and foreignness, yet this knowing is of a different order:

There is no such thing as a touch mirror, nor can there be. In a mirror, I can, indeed, see “myself,” but what appears to me in the mirror is an image of that which I know immediately represents me. That it belongs to me is not directly and immediately apparent. The physical reflection of light is understood only on the basis of mental reflection. Eyes never see themselves. Both face and back are withdrawn from our vision. By habit [of looking in mirrors], we are familiar with the image of our face, and through lack of habit, the image of our back remains foreign to us. A three-part mirror sometimes helps us—to our displeasure or dismay—to get an idea of what we look like from behind. In such a case, our attitude is one of detached examination. (Straus, 1966, p. 368-369)

Reflective things are pure appearance. In a mirror, we stand remote from ourselves, consumed by analysis. As Robinson shows, Narcissus may never consummate his love, for his beloved remains forever at a distance and just beyond the reflective surface of his touch.

### ***The Private Thing***

A mirror mirrors, a spoon spoons, and a sticky note notes in a sticky sort of way. But the thinging of a thing is never wholly given simply by shifting its name to its verb form. It is true, we may say a tub tubs, since the verb “to tub” can mean to wash or to bathe in a tub or bath. But a bathtub is also a place of privacy, where we perform our ablutions, and may bask in a moment of solitude, sanctuary, and quiet relaxation. It is a personal or private thing. Like the marital bed, a comb tugged in one’s purse, or one’s bathtub at home, some things in their everyday appearance seem to include or exclude a unique relational sphere around them. They belong to and are for one user alone, or they may be shared but only among and between one’s intimates. In “The Bathtub”, we join Karly Coleman in the privacy of her home, and more particularly in the warm midst of her “slow, idle, languorous” rituals of full bodied cleanliness and bathing pleasure. The daily rhythm of this idyllic scene is soon disrupted by a home renovation, and Coleman takes us on an adventure of eidetic encounters with other bathing and bathtub moments. A visit to a friend’s house to enjoy a longed-for bath reveals that the bathing experience she desires is unattainable. She asks, “How come using my friend’s tub was strange and disquieting? Was it the tub or the experience that was an unexpected surprise?”

Coleman explores variant aspects of what may make a bathtub *her* bathtub, that is, a place to discover bathing as spiritual sanctum and bodily renewal. She wonders whether its location, its content, the people in the tub, the size of the tub, or even the duration and frequency of use, may be what matters. In taking a bath, we not only submerge and linger our body in the bathtub’s warm soapy water, but we partake of and embrace the rituals that the tub gives shape to. “The ritual, like the water enveloping me, envelops the tub.” In Coleman’s experiential ballad, the “I” dances between autobiography and phenomenology: indeed a phenomenology of bathtub may only be properly approached as a personal narrative of bathtub. Coleman reveals the bathtub as a private thing, a bathtub that is foremost her own.

### ***The Hiding Thing (In Which We May Keep Transformative Things)***

A drawer is a box that can be “drawn” out of a cabinet. It is normally closed, so that its contents are hidden from unwanted eyes. In Erika Goble’s “The Vanity Drawer”, we discover a drawer especially for harbouring and hiding away transformative things. Opened, the vanity drawer reveals its gathering of lipsticks, eyeshadow, mascara, foundation, blush, etc., each ready to “makeup” or render oneself presentable to the outside world. This box and its secret collection participates in a maquillage, a daily transformation—sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic—of the personal face to the public face. The vanity, where the vanity drawer resides, is a dressing table with mirror. The word vanity is of course associated with being overly proud and especially concerned with one’s appearance. It comes from the Latin *vānus*, meaning empty or void. So the vanity drawer is a drawer full of emptiness. This strange image recalls Psyche’s fourth task: to fetch a little casket of Persephone’s beauty ointment for Aphrodite. Reemerging successfully from the underground but thoroughly exhausted, Psyche thinks to take a little of the precious ointment to make herself beautiful again for her beloved Eros. She opens it only to discover it empty. But this emptiness is the merciless nothingness of Death (Heidegger, 1962), which immediately lays claim to her. In this moment, Eros flies from his hiding place in his mother Aphrodite’s home to save her; the mortal Psyche is subsequently installed as a goddess on Olympus. What are we to make of this? The vanity drawer is indeed an “empty” box: the beauty

one truly seeks will not be found there, only death. Yet, as Goble reveals, the vanity drawer nonetheless holds the power “to transform, to transition, to transgress, to imagine, to expose, to tyrannize”. Its alchemy of potions, ever promising a more beautiful self, is transfixingly seductive.

### ***The Carrying Thing***

Some things stay in place, some things we take with us. And other things, like a backpack, a suitcase, or even our car, allow us to carry the things we take with us from place to place. Carrying things hold our belongings and accompany us as our domestic selves move into different worlds and back again: institutional worlds, professional worlds, social worlds, public worlds, or distant and unfamiliar worlds. Sitting in her front hallway “waiting”, Nicole Glenn reflects on “The Purse”, and how utterly forgotten it is until she leaves her home. Then, in the moment of departure, the purse is swept up and transformed into a “steady weight” against her shoulder as she moves out into the world. Returning home, her purse is once more abandoned at the door. Yet in these moments that the purse is no longer needed, Glenn shows us what the purse is needed for. A purse attaches to us and extends our intimate selves outside of our home. It pronouncedly guards our personal things from the pry of public eyes via zippers, buttons, caps or other security features. “In this way the inside of the purse is a liminal space that both represents the domestic and the ‘outside’ world.” A purse is a shelter for one’s secrets, and a forbidden place, never to be entered without permission. We carry a purse and the purse carries our practical needs, our identity and its transformations. Glenn offers eidetic examples across possible different moments in the purse carrier’s life. As a child, there might no practical needs to carry a purse. As an adult, a purse not only symbolizes a personal/public separation, but also easily turns to an emergency toolkit with the tissues, ointment, bandages residing in it. For a new mom, her purse may transform into a stuffed-to-the-brim diaper bag. A purse indeed carries adulthood, responsibility, and the care for others: “In this way, my purse carries and will continue to carry my care, needs, and worries of self and others for the day while conveying aspects of my identity to the world.”

### ***The Stretching Out Thing***

The word “mat” derives from the post-classical Latin *matta* meaning a rush mat or bedcover, and is a cognate of the Hebrew *mittāh* or bed which means to stretch out, incline, bend (“Mat”, 2001). This ordinary mat covers a section of ground, and invites its user to sit, kneel, or simply lie on it. Its gestural invitation is one of inclining and of stretching out. Gillian Lerner invites us to join her on “The Yoga Mat”, to roll it out flat, and incline on its supple and slightly sticky, 24-by-68 inch expanse. Unfurled, the mat convenes a place for the body to dwell and to engage in meditative and reflective stretching. It gives cushion to one’s bony extremities: the spine and tailbone, the head, knees, heels, the balls of one’s feet, palms, wrists, fingers, elbows and shoulders. As the practice unfolds, every movement, every pose is oriented to the mat and its perimeter. Under pressure, the mat’s non-slippery surface grabs hold, anchoring one’s footing and helping to steady balance. As Lerner shows, for those who regularly practice yoga, the mat not only beckons its owner to stand, sit, lie, or stretch on its generous, human-body sized surface, but also to “draw attention inward,...to let go of thoughts from before and concerns for

after.” Rolled up, the mat is stood in a closet corner, near the back door or thrown in a car trunk, and the yoga practice is done.

### ***The Instrumental Thing***

The term “instrument” often denotes a specialized piece of equipment for accomplishing work of some delicacy or precision. For example, an instrument panel is found in the cockpit of every aircraft. This collection of dials, lights, meters, and gauges allows the pilot to monitor critical measurements such as airspeed, vertical height, pitch, performance, etc. A pilot must learn to “read” the significance of each of these instruments as part of learning to fly. But when an instrument is of the musical variety, its user does not so much learn how to “use” or to “read” it, but to “play” it. Someone who can play with some skill and musical talent may be described with reference to their instrument’s name: a flutist, a pianist, or a drummer.

In “The Piano”, Carolyn Wagner runs her gaze lovingly across the majestic contours of her grand piano. The reader is reminded of this instrument’s commanding presence and too, the hours, weeks and ultimately years of training and practice it will demand of its devotee, the pianist. Wagner’s accomplished hands, wrists, and fingers hover above the piano’s expansive palette of rectangular white and black keys of tones and semitones, ready to play. With each soft or staccatoed, long or legatoed keystroke—whether pressed alone or in the chorded company of others—a unique note of music is produced. Each tone resonates with, belongs to, and inheres in the flowing, choreographed composition of a single musical performance. As a pianist, Wagner finds it “impossible to speak of the piano as a *thing* apart from my bodily space.” In the midst of playing, her grand piano fades away and she finds herself touching not the keys but melody, emotion, and meaning.

An instrument is both “a means and an agency” (“Instrument”, 2017): once our human hand becomes fluent in the language of its sophisticated gestures, the instrument becomes both a transparent tool and a liberating agent. Vilém Flusser (2011) describes the experience of using his writing instrument, the typewriter, as both transparent and mechanical, programmed as well as free.

I know, when I strike a key, that I am dealing with a programmed instrument that reaches into the swirl of particles and packages them into texts. I know, therefore, that my keys are inviting me into a determined mesh of accident and necessity. And in spite of it all, I experience my writing gesture concretely as a free gesture...For my being is concentrated on my fingertips when I am writing: my entire will, thought, and behavior flow into them and through them, past the keys, past the particle universe those keys command, past the typewriter and the paper and into the public sphere. (p. 28)

In the hands of the virtuoso, the instrument may slip most thoroughly from view, its thingness dissolving in a transparent embodiment of human desire and freedom. Within the constraints of instrumentality, “fingers may realize their virtualities” (Flusser, 2013, p. 63).

### ***Queer Things***

In its usual use, context, and place, a thing silently brings order, structure, and predictability to

our existence. For Sara Ahmed (2006), when a thing is employed in ways other than its “normal” or “straight” usage, it “queers”, disorients, and “certainly disturbs...the order of things” (p. 161). A thing deployed beyond or outside its prescribed purposes, inflects events off center, and veers toward the unusual, the novel, and the unexpected. Such a thing is no longer Heidegger’s (1962) everyday “useful thing”; it is queer. Taking their cue from Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Kristin Vindhol Evensen, Øyvind Førland Standal, and Borgunn Ytterhus follow two children with severe and multiple disabilities as they engage with their teachers and nearby “queer” things—golden sheet of paper, a chain of plastic pearls, and a big bag—in a Special Needs Education Unit. These things are queer first because they are “out of place” or otherwise dislodged from their normal context, and thus are positioned to obtain new significance outside their ordinary, prescribed use. The big, blue IKEA bag, for example, is not usually found in a classroom, and indeed has been brought there for a purpose beyond its use as a carrying thing. Secondly, these things are queer in that they “provide an invitation to new openings”: the bag is apprehended not as a bag as such, but as a thing that crackles delightfully in response to a child’s movement. Evensen, Standal, and Ytterhus go on to show that in their “queered”, out-of-context use and handling, the golden paper, the chain, and the bag serve to co-constitute meaningful and sensually rich “nodes of a relation” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 11) for and between both children and their teachers. Yet, phenomenologically speaking, are these things really “queer” in the lifeworld of the two children—Hilde and Oskar?

Phenomenological pedagogue Martinus J. Langeveld (1984) shows how every child engages in different modes of sense-making or meaning-giving with the “objective” world of things. He gives the example of a slipper:

How many things can this slipper actually be [for a child]? It can be a slipper; it can also be a hairy something upon which one can slobber. In the first instance, it is a simple object-of-use; in the second it is a purely sensual object-for-me. The child can also use the slipper as a hammer in order to pound a nail. In this case the slipper is no longer just an object-of-use; it is a used object: certain objective thing properties—here the hard heel—are chosen to fulfill a thinglike function directed toward another thing. It is therefore a used object but not an object-of-use whose complete properties are directed toward a certain proper use, in this case, as a slipper. But a child can choose a specific property of the slipper whose use is not thing-directed. The slipper could be used as a doll’s cradle, for example. In this case, the slipper-become-cradle takes its meaning from the realm of the world of play and not from the common world as a tool directed toward accomplishing a task. And the slipper can also lose itself in the background against which our actual life is lived. If this is the case, the slipper is simply there and is almost an otherworldly thing; it has little actual significance in the life of this particular child. The slipper can also come to us as from a distance if it is presented, regarded, or treated as a sketched or painted object, or if it is presented as an art object itself. Or, the slipper can be a reminder, a symbol of our loved ones—the small child, the little brother who died. Or (again in another connection), it can be the slipper of the father, and the child realizes the connection. This slipper is a symbol of father, and the child says in his glance not “slipper” but “papa, papa” as if the slipper were *pars pro toto*. What a lot of things a slipper can be! (pp. 217-218)

The child encounters things in ways that vary well beyond the “normal” or “common world” of

useful tools. A child's work is not so much *use*, but *play*. Moreover, in the child's work of play, "she is not altogether free" (Langeveld, 1984, p. 219). These "barriers to the child's freedom—his body, his dependence, his fellow human beings, the 'objective' world of things, his life history" (p. 217)—each constrain the child differently.

For the children in the Special Needs Education Unit—Hilde and Oskar, their sense-making and meaning-giving freedom is limited dramatically by their bodies. But Langeveld also shows how a child's freedom in the world of things may be expanded (or constrained) through the fellowship of others. He gives two examples: a see-saw and a ball.

The see-saw only works when there are two players who are together, each of them playing his or her part. Human communion is publicly decreed in the communion of these two players. The players are brought together through the object. I call this form of communion "conjoint-ness" (the state of being gathered in togetherness)...The see-saw accomplishes this total being-together. When there is no partner, then the see-saw is a lost opportunity, a demonstrable impossibility. So we find that here the object necessitates the second person. It does this quite concretely. There are many objects which have this referential character but where the referential character is not as concretely visible or experiential.

A ball shows us this quite clearly. As a rolling sphere it issues an immediate challenge to be handled: a provocation of the pathic or invitational character of the things of the world. That which rolls (is roll-able) demands to be rolled, kicked, or pushed. But let us push this ball away and what happens? Another person comes and pushes it back to us. That is the discovery of a possible reciprocity, a possible human mutuality which was not evident with the ball as immediately as it was with the see-saw. The ball plays with us as long as it bounces back, but once we push it some distance from us, then it sometimes brings a fellow human into our world. (Langeveld, 1984, p. 220-221)

In relation to a golden sheet of paper, a red plastic chain, and an IKEA bag, the support of the special education teachers extends and expands Hilde's and Oskar's possibilities for reciprocal "human communion" or "conjoint-ness". In such moments of intersubjective mutuality, the queer, "out of place" object becomes reachable, orienting, and coherent. Child and teacher playing together, the crackable bag is crackable, pleasurable, and shared. It is no longer queer.

## **One Last Thing**

Thing writing is decisively bound by the same impossibility that indentures all phenomenological projects. "Since...we are [always] in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture,...there is no thought that encompasses all of our thought" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xxviii). To lift a thing from its dark, equiprimordial world is akin to hauling a deep sea creature up from its oceanic depths: "Like the giant squids of the Marianas Trench, tool-beings are encountered only once they have washed up dead on the shore, no longer immersed in their withdrawn reality" (Harman, 2005, p. 4-5). Dragging the thing aground, out of its relational context, and into the sunlight of direct examination, its vitality may be all but extinguished. Instead, like Orpheus

leading his veiled Eurydice up from her dark underworld home, the phenomenologist must trust in the promise of a momentary glimpse. Such ineptual gaze is granted only through a fateful turn to the thing itself, even as it is snatched swiftly back to the “nocturnal darkness” (Blanchot, 1981, p. 100) of its quotidian home. But to steal this single glance, the phenomenologist must first make the intoning and devoted Orphean descent to the thing’s subterranean world, by way of “writing in the dark” (van Manen, 2002).

Thing writing aspires “to make contact, to achieve phenomenological intimacy with an object of interest” (van Manen, 2002, p. 245). The writer attempts to trace a thing’s physiognomy and situatedness, discover its pathic and tonal “call for a corresponding response from human beings” (p. 87), and thereby give voice to its gestural intimations and significances as it appears in the world. The thinging of a thing reveals itself as belonging to an equipmental network or family of things that weave through our experiential webs of meaning. To achieve phenomenological access to a thing involves “thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies, which keep thrusting themselves upon us and running along with us” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 96). Proceeding by way of the epoché and the reduction is thus indispensable. In the end, describing and reflecting on a thing and its world phenomenologically give both writer and reader access to meaningful webs of relations and insight into how the thing may uniquely shape our everyday life, realize our endeavors, compose our dreams, desires, and fears, and extend as well as limit our human possibilities.

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