

13 April—29 April

Sonya Lacey —  
Infinitesimals

\_the engine room

## The Berlin Wall is a remedy

1. The text is 'On Touching: The inhuman that therefore I am' (*Differences* 25:5, 2012) by Karen Barad; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's close reading is part of the University of Leeds lecture series 'Why matter matters' (part 1) after documenta13. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80TsxPmMvvk>

We weren't talking about health, I think maybe about things that happen in classrooms. Pene Braun, a friend of my mother's from before I was born, told us about a child in one of her classes who pulled her eyelashes out because she was traumatised. A few days later I am listening on YouTube to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev reading Karen Barad, and she starts talking about cilia—her mother was a microbiologist—which are eyelashes.<sup>1</sup> I look them up and see they are more than that too: they are minuscule hairlike things that line the surfaces of cells such as those in the respiratory tract, and pulse to move liquids along the tissue. I think about the two things a long time, the eyelash plucking the always-moving internal hairs; I still do, microscopic images of harm and health.

Sonya emails me that the Berlin Wall is a homeopathic remedy. In the correct dilution, it can treat separation anxiety, insomnia, implusivity. The Berlin Wall was 140 kilometres of block concrete, 1.2 metres thick. I picture and then start to calculate the vast aching reservoir of water that would be needed to saturate that into something to swallow: first into aggregate and cement; then limestone, granite, sand; then smaller, into calcium silicates, silicon, aluminium and iron and sulfates. Homeopathy relies on the Law of Similars (treating like with like); the Law of Infinitesimals (maximum dilution); the Law of Succussion (vigorous shaking or tapping to potentise the solution). The diluted solution is dripped often into a sugar pill—the internet images are all glow-white, and are often pictured by white chamomile flowers, also glowing supernaturally—a solid thing again.

2. When Donna Haraway talks about 'the implosion of the sign into the thing itself', in that *plosive* syllable shift, perhaps that's a way to think about it too.

I'm less interested in whether this homeopathic method is plausible, more in what the Berlin Wall would taste like, and in the transference of the solid thing it was into the whole swimming pool of other chemicals that it would become. If you can infinitely dilute the Berlin Wall, if it's soluble, you can swim in it. If you can swim in it, you can swallow it, parts of you becoming continuous with parts of it.<sup>2</sup> The Berlin Wall would be an under-lit pool, its new geometry given by another concrete rectangle; it would be a pool where drinks were spilled, and where you might lie on your back all afternoon the next day, watched by a rectangle of sky. It would taste like biting your lip.

In the transfer of wall to solution, separation anxiety turns into something able to be ingested—swallow and it's in your gut, your bloodstream, but in the right ratio to everything else in there. Insomnia too becomes something liquid, buoyant, able to carry the whole impassive weight of you, as a chlorine saturated volume of water will. Impulsivity doesn't dilute, becomes instead a sparkling gritty solid at the bottom of the pool, something you'd dive for without waiting to catch breath. You can't be cured of everything. Sometimes even words will dissolve in your mouth like Disprin.

3. This comes from a conversation with Sonya, 28 March. Others have referred to the idea of information transfer as 'water memory' or epitaxy.

The principle of succussion—the shaking or pulsing of the chemical solution—works by transference. What is transferred into the water retains no trace of the original substance, it is the 'information, not the material'<sup>3</sup> that passes from one to the other. In the bruising action of succussion—so like 'percussion' as you say it, feel it hush in your mouth—the material is rearranged as something else. It's a disruption of organisational principles, a material rearrangement with vivid precedents in narrative fiction. (Someone should read this to you; it's from a story about meteorites, but it's also about sculpture, and probably about someone you both know: 'She would crumple the layers of sedimentary rocks into synclines and anticlines, she would change the orientation on faces of crystals and obtain walls of feldspar, quartz, mica or slate, and between one layer and another she would hide marine fossils at different heights in order of date.'<sup>4</sup>)

4. Italo Calvino, 'The Meteorites,' *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks and William Weaver (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [1965], 2014), 330.

5. Type design by David Kindersley, see: <http://www.kindersley-workshop.co.uk/type-design/>

6. ‘...because it brings on death, because its weight is a desire to fal...because its very color is dulled-dead, because it is the metal of the planet Tuisto, which is the slowest of the planets, that is, the planet of the dead.’ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Penguin, [1975], 2012), 73.

7. From the Greek *anti* and *monos*, which mean ‘not alone.’ Antimony’s chemical symbol comes from its historic name, stibium

Sonya is casting 60-point metal letter-type, using a typeface originally designed to be read at high speed from the motorways of 1950s Britain.<sup>5</sup> To make the type she uses tin and lead, and antimony. Even at maximum dilution, and at an infinite distance from the metals they begin as, these are heavy remedies. As metaphors, they weight the language. Primo Levi writes as a chemist about lead as ‘the metal of death.’<sup>6</sup> I think of it as the weight of a fishing sinker in your hand, an exact measure of gravity as it sits in your palm, something which sinks according to the straightest line down. Like-with-like, lead (*Plumbum Metallicum*) is used by homeopaths in third to thirtieth potency to treat sluggishness of the muscles. I don’t know if your muscles are sluggish, if you type as I do, one shoulder turned away like you’re about to leave the room. No one said you should try metal type as a remedy. So you know though, it tastes like the dentist, the 1980s amalgam fillings, before fluoride was part of the municipal water supply. Dilute it more, it tastes like an asthma inhaler.

Tin (*Stannum Metallicum*) is 50 on the periodic table, makes up 0.001% of the earth’s crust. Tin is for a ‘sinking, empty, all-gone sensation in stomach’, for ‘dread of seeing people’. For typewriters’ paralysis. For stopping typing, for stopping.....spent. For sinking, deep in your own stomach. Tin is for extreme exhaustion of mind and body. Tin is also a twin: an ally, an alloy with copper to make bronze, with lead to make pewter and solder. It’s for tin cans, for preventing rust on ships, and for *milagro*, ex-voto symbols of arms and legs and other limbs, used for healing purposes.

Antimony (sb: 51 on the periodic table) is a semi-metal.<sup>7</sup> As *Antimonium Tartaricum* it’s used to treat the ‘weak and waterlogged, and especially the lungs’. Antimony is for staying in the bath so long that the pages go soft like the expensive toilet paper, and for the night there was an earthquake when you were in the bath and I ran in to see if it had broken and what it felt like and if you were okay. So that every time you have a bath I think of earthquakes. Johan Guttenberg discovered it was the necessary third metal to lead and tin in making letter-type, bringing durability and sharp edges to the type design, not shrinking or sagging as it set from the mould as does lead. Today antimony is used for bullets, for microelectronics. You have to believe that scale matters—all scales matter—to be good at grammar.

8 Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes of *things*, and it works well for the thing which is language, too: 'The thing is a certain carving out of the real, the (artificial or arbitrary) division of the real into entities, bounded and contained systems, that in fact exist only as open systems within the real.' 'The Thing', *Architecture from the outside: Essays on virtual and real space* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 170.

You have to believe in the transfer of meaning through recognisable material forms—glyphs, letterforms, words—into arrangements that make a completely different sort of sense: into sounds, or into images you return to without recalling it was the grammar first held them up, still, for you to look at.<sup>8</sup> I learned this from my mother, who reads and proofreads like it's a joint and a reflex. So that reading your essay is also choreographing all the commas into the sure pauses of an ankle that knows the step, the semi-colons allowing the line of light under the door to show the next room is where the people are. That is, the comma matters as much as the sentence, as much as the paragraph. And then the rest will be okay.

9 Alice Oswald, *Memorial: A version of Homer's Iliad*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 41.

Arranging the words also relates to scale: ask any typographer, ask any writer of headlines or of road signs, or things to be read aloud. So when Alice Oswald writes, 'A black block of rain coming closer over the sea'<sup>9</sup>, she has to believe that the *black* and the *block* will be equally heavy and square in your mouth, that the sea will sit still in your consciousness long enough to let the advance of the rain seem like architecture, and inevitable. She has to leave it there, after the sea, so that you are all alone and the space of the page is all that's there, after the sea.

This morning my grandmother said she was worried she might swallow her wedding ring. Her hands are smaller now, or there's less of flesh and more of bone. They are as beautiful as x-rays, and the ring sits with space for air. I'd worry too; we're of the same line. The treatment for this specific worry is to swallow a wedding ring, only gold, in the ocean of your stomach.

Abby Cunnane

Exhibition

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