

Anne Wilson

the Sky & All That Was Formed from Earth

If We Asked about the Sky and
All That Was Formed from Earth

Anne Wilson

**If We Asked about the Sky and
All That Was Formed from Earth**

Companion texts

Edited and annotated by Casey Carsel

Written on the occasion of Anne Wilson's 2020 solo exhibition, *If We Asked about the Sky*, at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, this collection of texts speaks to and around the exhibited works. The collection grew out of extensive discussions between the artist and Casey Carsel spending time together in Anne's studio experiencing the developing artworks. All texts in serif font are quoted from the sources noted at the bottom of each page, while texts in sans serif were written by Casey in conversation with Anne's work and the sources. We give special thanks to Surabhi Ghosh and Jovencio de la Paz, who contributed writing in response to Anne's work and the ethos of this volume.

If We Asked about the Sky

The work begins through the chance operation of throwing ink onto white damask cloth fragments. Through capillary action, the ink absorbs into the fibers of the cloth, expanding out to form irregular edges around spherical shapes. The quick, action painting-like gesture is then developed with the deliberate, slow stitch of hand embroidery using silk thread and hair.

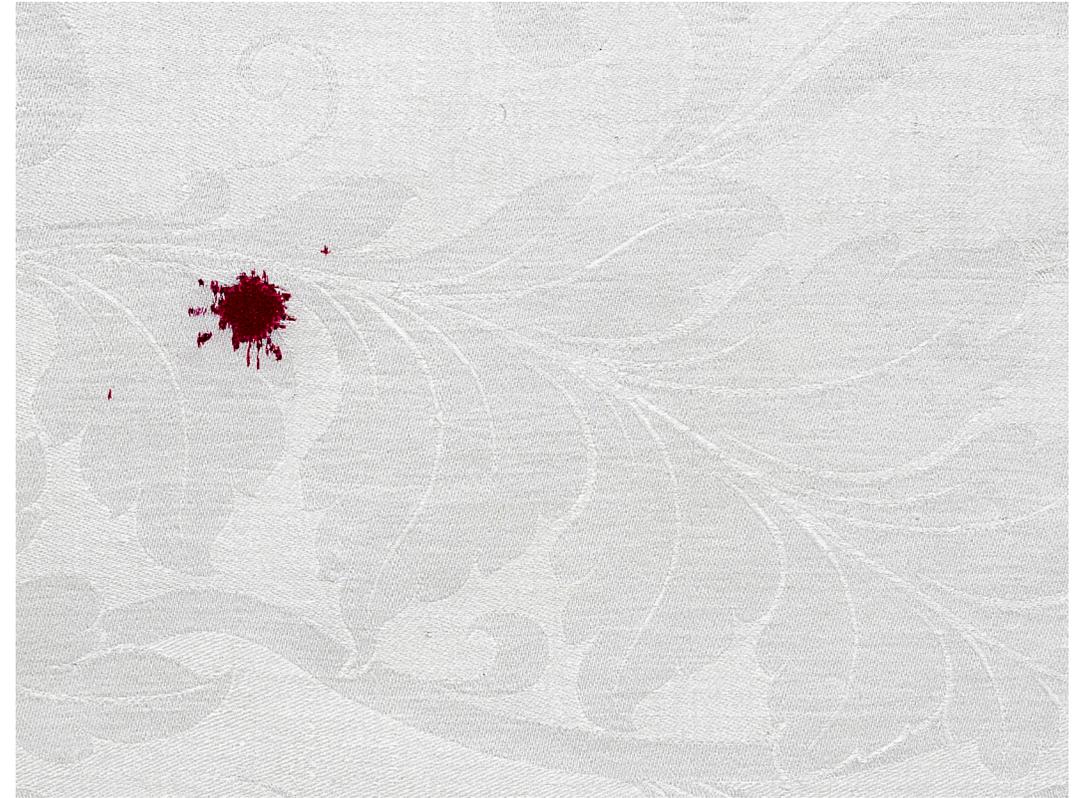
The resultant image associations shift from everyday phenomena—a pin prick, a spill or splatter—to the celestial—planets, craters, galaxy clusters. Moving between the bodily or earthly and visualizations of the cosmos, there is a paradoxical juxtaposition of ordinary and extraordinary, at once an expanding pedestrian stain on a tablecloth and an image referencing cosmology and the expansion of the universe. The work proposes both smallness and vastness and inhabits a space of contemplation between the mortal world and a celestial universe that is infinite and unknowable.

With the proliferation of media images of death, destruction, and injustice that constantly surround us, this work is a meditation on living in and through loss. How does one recognize and respect a life? What is the space between living and dying? Can a drop of blood be placed in a galaxy beyond the trauma of mortality?

Anne Wilson, *If We Asked about the Sky* exhibition statement. Chicago, 2020.

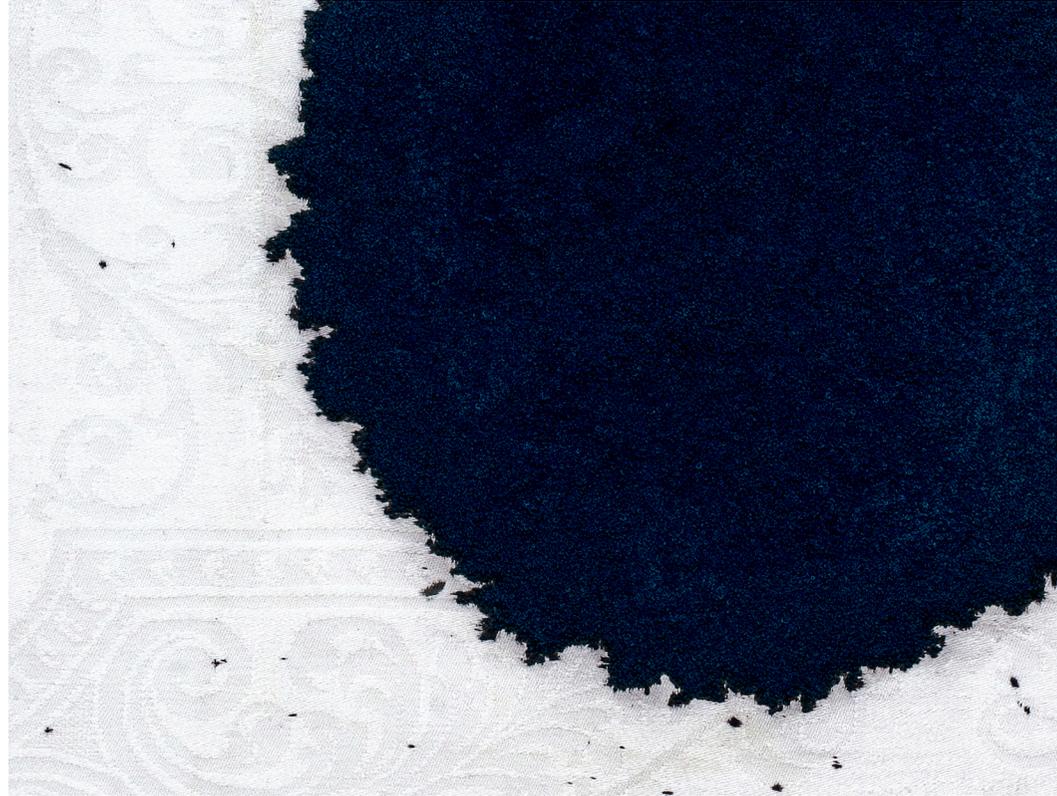
The book of books

Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible.



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 1.26 (detail)*, 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 12 x 17³/₄ inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions: Volume I*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), p. 13.



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 10.12 (detail)*, 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 14³/₈ x 11 inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra

Ink

The first time I watched something die, its eyes
opened at the last lived moment, death's first. A razor
between the two. The fledgling hawk's pupil turned so black
I felt as though I had been blindfolded and led high up
a cliff, then pushed. I didn't know dead eyes darken
or that watching them darken meant for the rest of my life
knowledge would carry with it a bottle of ink.

Excerpted from Melissa Cunsieff, "Ink," *Darling Nova* (Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press, 2018).
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Da Vinci's stain

Don't underestimate this idea of mine, which calls to mind that it would not be too much of an effort to pause sometimes to look into these stains on walls, the ashes from the fire, the clouds, the mud, or other similar places. If these are well contemplated, you will find fantastic inventions that awaken the genius of the painter to new inventions, such as compositions of battles, animals, and men, as well as diverse composition of landscapes, and monstrous things, as devils and the like. These will do you well because they will awaken genius with this jumble of things ...

Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. John Francis Rigaud (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005), quoted in *Anamorphosis, the Imaginary, Alchemy*, <http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/anamorphosis.pdf> (accessed September 10, 2019).

Pareidolia

pareidolia: para—beside; eidolon—image

A psychological phenomenon in which significant meaning is ascribed to a vague stimulus (faces in clouds, images in smoke).

One might be inclined to seek the tangible from the abstract. One might be inclined to seek meaning out of loss.

One might be inclined to see loss's shape in a larger plan.

On the other hand, rather than trying to refigure loss into something ostensibly more logical, one might be inclined to sit with it as is.

Loss, like a stain that catches the eye, does not leave. Slowly, like the stain, it expands according to the infinite contexts that were the catalyst of its being. Then, one day, it stops expanding.

Both the loss and the stain are much more than what they are, as well as exactly what they are.

Trompe-l'oeil

In his *Historia naturalis*, Pliny the Elder tells the story of a competition between the artists Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes so lusciously real that birds flew down to peck at the painting. Confident of his success, Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to draw back the curtain covering his work, only to realise that the curtain itself was the painting and that Parrhasius had won the competition.

The curtain is at once what must be withdrawn to see the truth; and what must be looked at to reveal it.

That is, the illusion both hides the truth and reveals it, just as the shape both shows itself to us exactly as it is, and is shrouded by our search for more digestible narratives.

Kathryn Murphy, "Drawing the Curtain," *Apollo Magazine*, Aug. 15, 2015, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/drawing-the-curtain/>.

remember

remember
when the sky was split with stars
when we could see the glitter-
bound edge of the galaxy, our own
bodies spinning with it, counter-
wise to the earth, mechanisms of immeasurable
time

Kate Ingold, "remember." From the image/text series 21st Century Retablo, in the Permanent Collection of the USC Fisher Museum of Art.

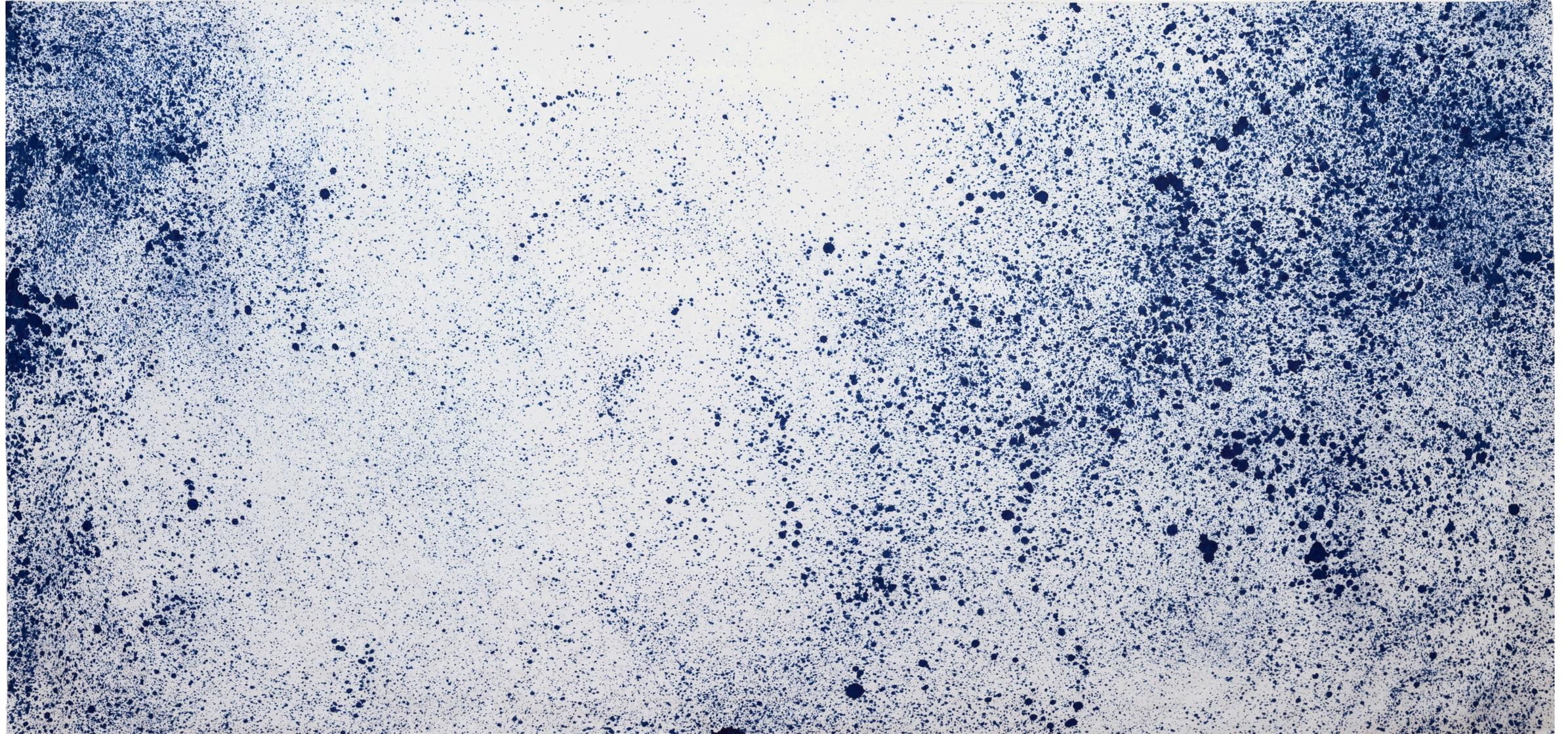
Earthrise

It's never easy to identify the moment a hinge turns in history. When it comes to humanity's first true grasp of the beauty, fragility and loneliness of our world, however, we know the precise instant. It was on December 24, 1968, exactly 75 hours, 48 minutes and 41 seconds after the Apollo 8 spacecraft lifted off from Cape Canaveral ...

This first full-color view of the entire planet gave humankind a new insight into the way they were such a tiny part of such a large whole. The image spurred the environmental movement, opening an angle of inquiry into how a single stitch or human's existence can forge a whole both immediate and tangible, and simultaneously beyond the grasp of the single human eye.



"This Photo Marks the First Time Humanity Could See Its Place in the Universe," TIME 100 Photos, 100photos.time.com/photos/nasa-earthrise-apollo-8 (accessed September 10, 2019).



Anne Wilson, *If We Asked about the Sky*, 2020
Damask tablecloth, ink, hair, thread, 54 x 106 inches
Photo: Jake Silby

Action painting worldwide

Around the globe, World War II hideously expanded previous notions of humankind's capacity for destruction. The Japanese avant-garde art movement Gutai, known especially for extending painting approaches into performative and sculptural realms, sprung up in the 1950s to confront this strange and sudden new world. As individuals' subjectivities shifted and morphed into grief-stricken abstractions of themselves, the old rules of painting no longer worked; rather than painting on paper, artists were compelled to run clean through the paper, amongst other acts.

Meanwhile in the United States, reacting to similar paradigm shifts catalyzed by the brutality of World War II, Abstract Expressionism rejected traditional artistic approaches in search of something truer to the chaos and horror of contemporary experience.

For further reading, see "Feet first: Kazuo Shiraga and Gutai, the radical art movement that startled Japan," Christie's, October 12, 2018, <https://www.christies.com/features/The-Story-of-Gutai-9464-3.aspx>; Brad Evans, "Wounds in Time: Why We Need Rothko More Than Ever," Los Angeles Review of Books, October 3, 2018, <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/wounds-time-need-rothko-ever/>.

A set of questions

Can the space between living and dying be found in a stitch?

Can the space between living and dying be found in a scrap of fabric?

Can the space between living and dying be found in the space between a droplet of ink and the fabric that accepts its new guest?

Can the space between living and dying be found in the space between a threaded needle and the fabric it will pierce but as yet hovers above?

Capillary action

Capillary action: The movement of a liquid through or along a surface in spite of repellant forces.

How plants take in water from their roots; how tear ducts secrete tears into the eye; how we spill, look back, and the stain has spread.

Capillaris—like a hair

I worked with indigo once (*polygonum tinctorium*). Between tiny cells, molecules of cellulose, the same thirst shared is a kind of sociality.

Soaking up dye flowing through narrow spaces, bits of cloth change stance, posture: a handing-off of the dark blue, one to the next. It is a model of “on-goingness,” necessary in the way times of crisis require the search for systems blown apart.

Filaments twisted together, networks old and new (Indra’s Net), nodes followed by nodes, nexus after nexus, what flows flows everywhere even against the grasp of gravity, of normal force.

That aching blue is not all that flows up and down each warp and weft, but stories too, histories, contradictions, heartbreak. Difficult loves. The story of colonial trauma does not settle, is not written (,) still (unmoving/yet to be written).

It has a flow that is passed, hand to cupped hand, shape of longing. I have buried that color in my heart. There it is absorbed outwards. Difficult to parse: the boy told the story cried.

Jovencio de la Paz, 2020.

Damask

Damask: A self-patterned weave with one warp and one weft in which the pattern is formed by a contrast of binding systems. In its classic form it is reversible, and the contrast is produced by the use of the warp and weft faces of the same weave, usually satin.

A good piece of damask can be taken care of, preserved, passed down through a family. It can also be damaged, repaired, damaged again. It can tell a story, it can change with the times, it can be clung to, it can be let go of.

Dorothy K. Burnham, *Warp and Weft: A Textile Terminology* (Toronto, Ontario: Royal Ontario Museum, 1980), p. 32.

And what remains

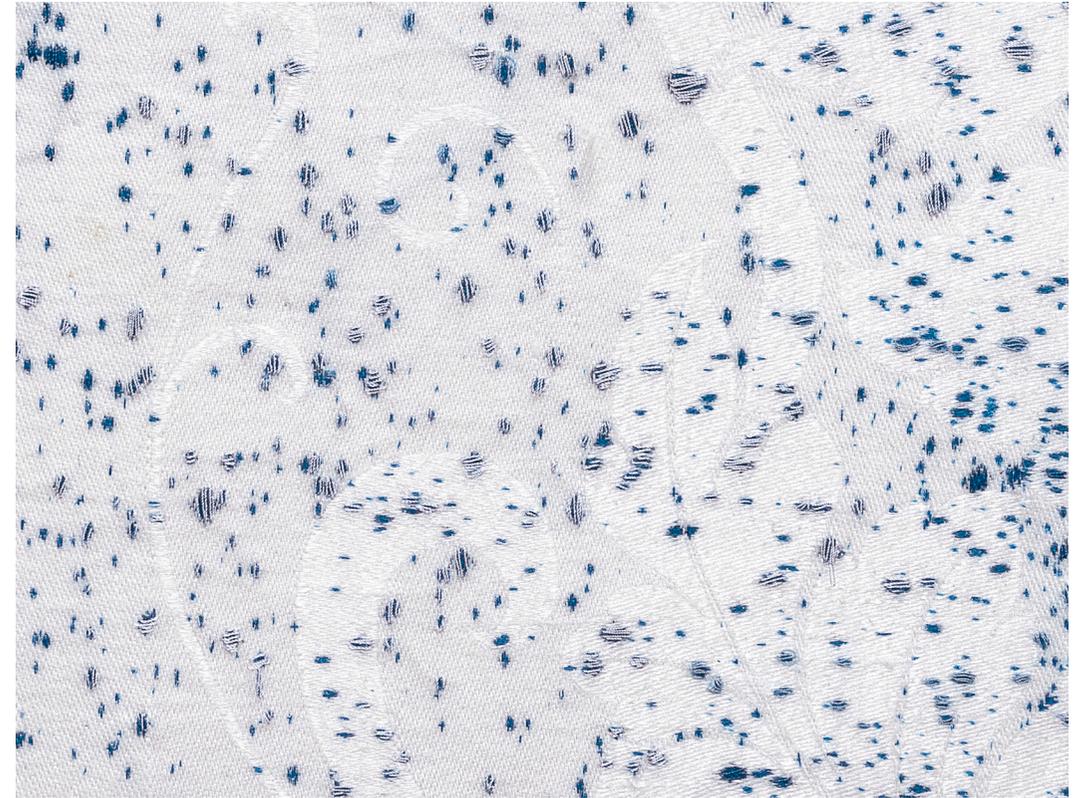
We can manipulate a physical thing. Bend it, weave it, smear it across a piece of paper. But we can't change that it exists. We can only behold. And this fact leads to a suggestion: we must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material.

Grace Edquist, "Listening to Threads With Anni Albers," *Vanity Fair*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2019/09/listening-to-threads-with-anni-albers>.

The heartbroken quest

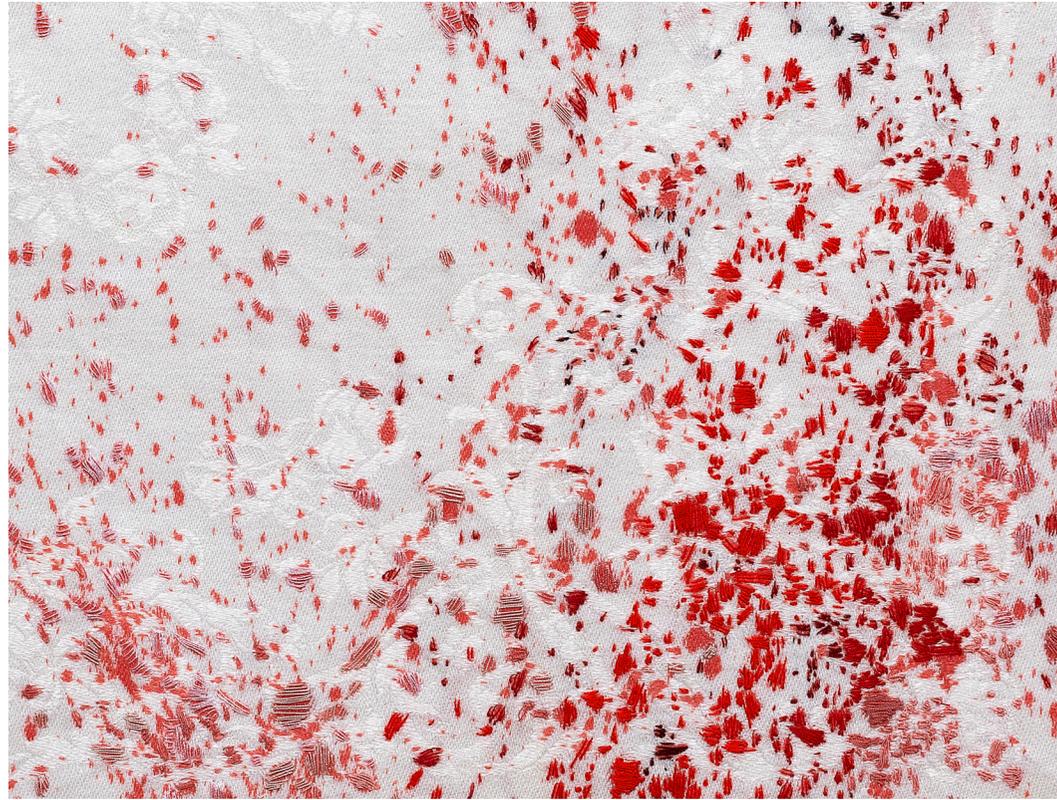
[Samuel Beckett's] play *Krapp's Last Tape* features an old man who tries, and fails, to put to rest a memory from his youth that continues to haunt him. In the play, Krapp both recites and listens to his memories recorded onto different tapes, his memories spooling and spooling, though he finds within them no closure. Surely, at some point in his life, the man will find the right words, the tapes will finish, the memory will be complete. But the tapes are never finished. They are always being rewound, replayed, revised. The play is a study in both memory and time, about the repetitive losses none of us can escape.

As with pareidolia's search for a standardized meaning out of chaos, Krapp's search for a precise rendition of the past is a continual push and pull between the Janus of representation and abstraction. And yet, each case makes do with what it is given, living in and through the parameters of the human imagination. Grief is lived in and through similar parameters—an eternal push and pull that is ultimately another memory to carry.



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 11.29 (detail)*, 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra

Paisley Rekdal, *The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2017), p. 17.



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 4.28* (detail), 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 10³/₄ x 10⁵/₈ inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra

Little Ice Age

I have one good memory—a total
Eclipse of the sun—when out of brilliance
Dusk came swiftly and on the whole
At seven years it felt good on a summer afternoon
To be outrun by a horse from another century—
The next morning I washed up
On land like a pod of seals
Struck with a longing for dark at noon—
If the cessation of feeling is temporary
It resembles sleep—if permanent, it resembles
A little ice age—and the end of some
Crewelwork by a mother who put honey
Into my hands so the bees would love me.

Kathy Nilsson, “Little Ice Age,” *The Infant Scholar* (North Adams, Massachusetts: Tupelo Press, 2015).
Used by permission of the publisher.

The House That Grief Built

The Duke of Aumale renovated his home, the Château de Chantilly, shortly after he got married in 1844. Four years later, he and his family fled to England at the collapse of the monarchy during the French Revolution. More than twenty years later, he was able to return home. By that time his wife and older son had died; his younger son would die shortly thereafter.

After the Duke regained Chantilly in 1871, he turned the rooms into exact replicas of their former selves, calling them his “cemetery.”

The rooms are luxurious, walls dressed for a party. I wonder how exact his replica was, if the details nagged at him, if he sat at his desk, staring at a tear in the wall, scared to disrupt it lest the whole room unravel, but constantly churning on its imprecision.

Time doesn't stand still; it isn't even the same all over the world. Even if the replication were perfect, it would be imperfect because each moment is a new context. The stain has not stopped spreading.

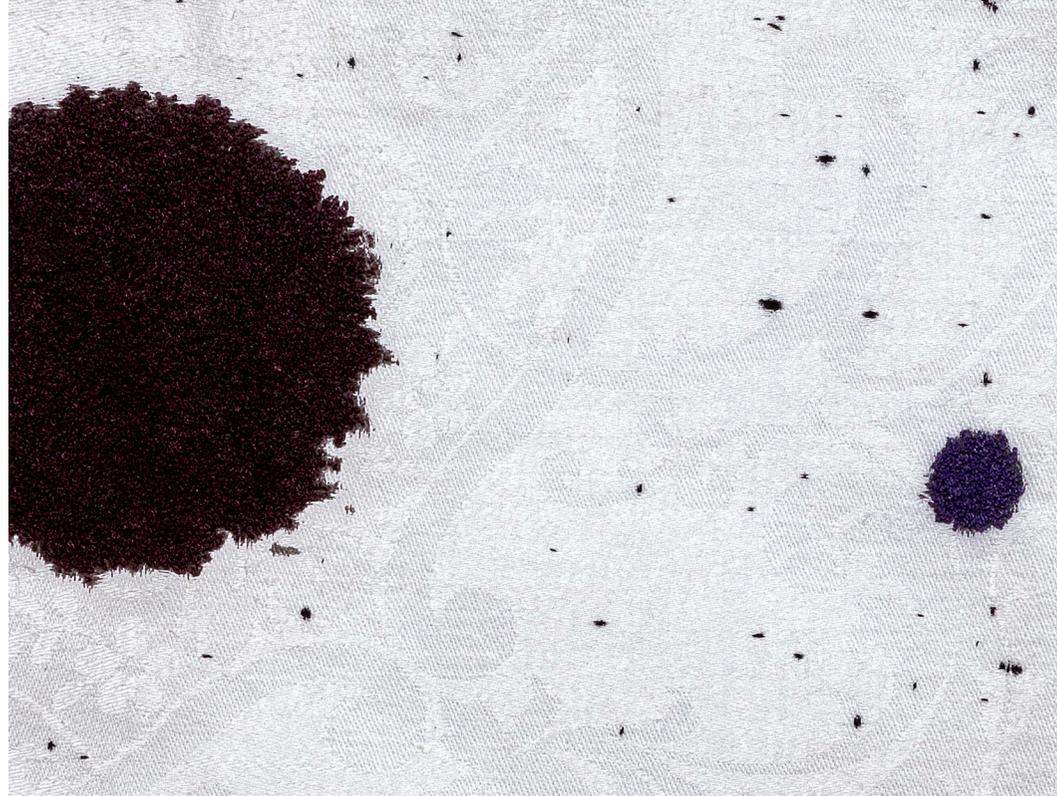
For further reading, see Wendy Moonan, “The House That Grief Built,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/style/chantilly-chateau.html>.

The countless

I feel overwhelmed by the kind of quantity where counting no longer makes sense. And by the uniqueness within this quantity. A crowd of people or birds, insect or leaves, is a mysterious assemblage of variants of a certain prototype. A mystery of the workings of nature which either abhors exact repetition or is unable to achieve it. Just as the human hand cannot repeat its own gesture twice.

A moment in time cannot be relived, infinite changes barring any sincere return. But we may hold these infinities close instead, and when we die we multiply them even further. It is overwhelmingly sad and lovely.

Magdalena Abakanowicz, quoted in “Magdalena Abakanowicz: Flock I (1990),” MUZEUM SUSCH, <https://www.muzeumsusch.ch/en/1082/Magdalena-Abakanowicz> (accessed May 26, 2020).



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 3.24 (detail)*, 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra



Anne Wilson, *Immerse (detail)*, 2020
Damask cloth, ink, 39 x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
Photo: Anne Wilson Studio

The closing of a gigantic circle

... the infinitesimal is every bit as remote from us as the infinitely great is.

In his essay “The Dangerous Idea of the Infinitesimal,” Jim Holt journeys through the history of the concept of the infinitesimal—the affections and rejections it has received throughout the years. A part of the reason for its lengthy journey to gain respect in intellectual circles is the way it disrupts math:

Defenders of the calculus were made to confront the following dilemma: either infinitesimals are exactly zero, in which case calculations involving division by them make no sense, or they are not zero, in which case the answers must be wrong. Perhaps, [philosopher George] Berkeley derisively concluded, we are best off thinking of infinitesimals as “ghosts of departed quantities.”

These immeasurably small measurements not only frustrated the philosophy of mathematics, but also of the world at large:

If there is no such thing as the infinitesimal, then, as [philosopher Bertrand] Russell observed, notions like “the next moment” and “state of change” become meaningless. Nature is rendered static and discontinuous, because there is no smooth transitional element to blend one event into the next.

This disinclination towards the gravel path still persists—the distaste for the idea that one moment does not quite bleed into the next but is instead pulled together with stitches too fine for any eye. Maybe we will fall through the holes of these stitches, and then where will we be? Who will we be?

Excerpted from Jim Holt, *When Einstein Walked with Gödel: Excursions to the Edge of Thought* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2019), pp. 149, 157, 159.

In the palm of your hand

The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet, like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up, as if somehow I could grasp the heavens. And in that moment I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. I had thought in terms of man’s own limited dimensions. I had presumed upon nature. That existence begins and ends is man’s conception, not nature’s. And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away.

“The Incredible Shrinking Man,” 1957, quoted in Jim Holt, *When Einstein Walked with Gödel: Excursions to the Edge of Thought* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2019), pp. 165–166.

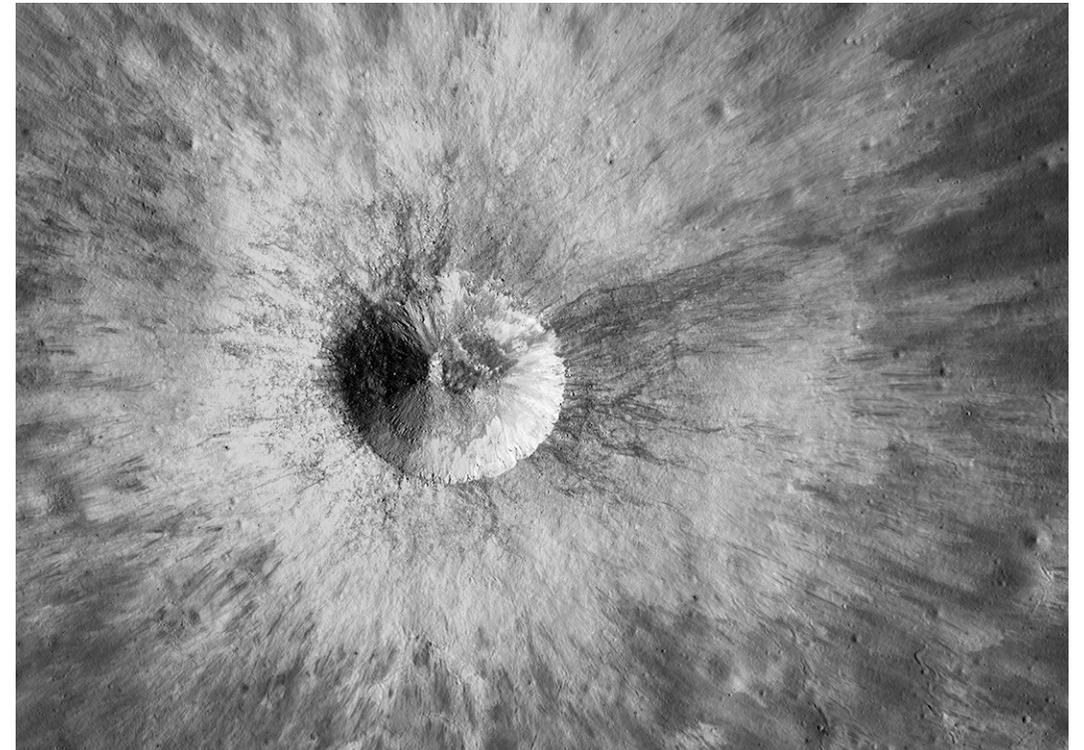
Collisions

An impact crater is formed when an object like an asteroid or meteorite crashes into the surface of a larger solid object like a planet or a moon.

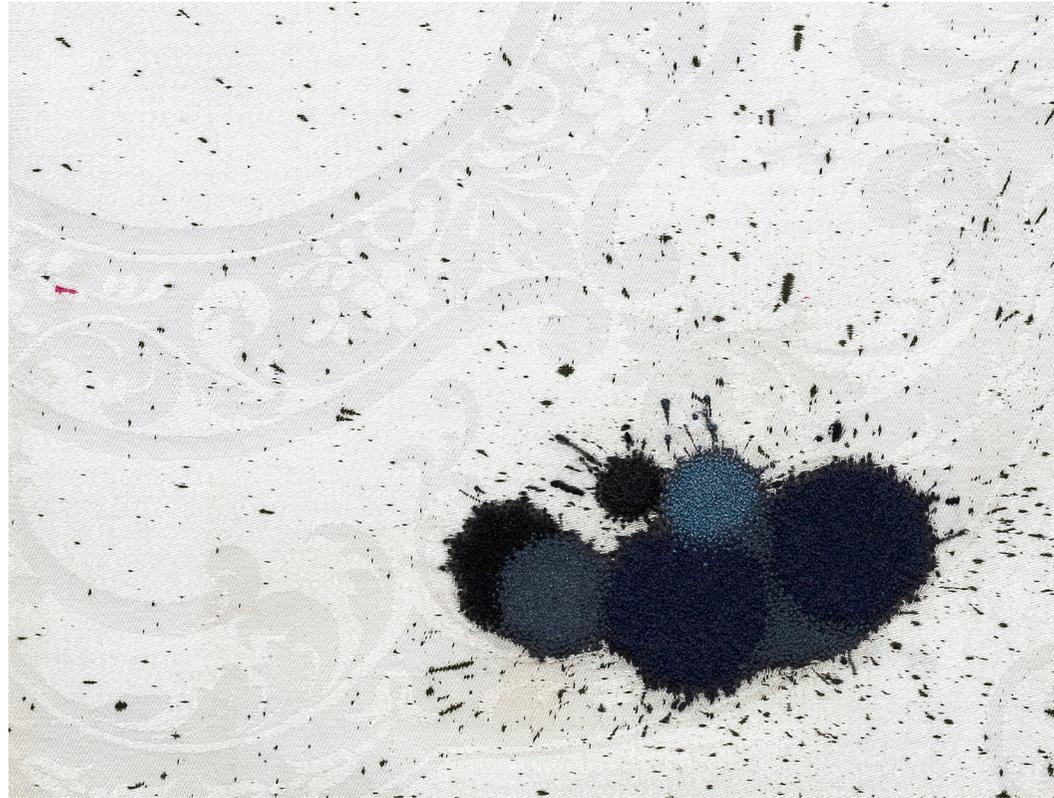
An asteroid or meteor is more likely to fall toward Earth than the Moon because our planet's stronger gravity attracts more space debris. But we can see many thousands of craters on the Moon and we only know of about 180 on Earth! Why is that? The truth is both the Earth and the Moon have been hit many, many times throughout their long 4.5 billion year history.

The impact is quick, and then slow. But moving, always moving. Spreading. Always spreading.

With each hit, a thousand patterns are disrupted and a thousand more appear.



"Why Does the Moon Have Craters?" NASA Space Place, <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/craters/en/> (accessed August 10, 2019).



Anne Wilson, *Material Drawing no. 5.19 (detail)*, 2018–2020
Damask cloth, ink, thread, 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
Photo: Céleste Cebra

The universe is expanding

From our everyday perspective, when we see something expanding, we immediately also see what it's expanding into. An inflating balloon grows outwards into the space surrounding it. We can easily picture this because we are seeing things from the outside. We see the balloon and its surface growing as air is pumped into it. This is the privileged observer's view, one where we have a detached and complete grasp of what's going on, a view "from the outside" ... What really complicates things is that we are trapped inside. We can't step outside the universe to see galaxies moving away from one another. When we measure the cosmic expansion, we must do it from the inside, sort of like a fish that wants to describe the ocean as a whole.

We know of the many systems larger than ourselves and outside of our control that sustain life. We know that in a photo taken from space an individual strolling along a lakefront might become invisible. One could feel despondent, tiny. Or we could appreciate the intricacies, feel our way through them, reach through them toward the fabric of the present moment.

"What Does An Expanding Universe Really Mean?" NPR, May 24, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/05/24/529675773/what-does-an-expanding-universe-really-mean>.

Within / Without

If pattern-language builds by repetition over time, brick by brick
If we are meant to stay in place in order to cohere
If we ever did that
If we never did that
If meaning shifts, splatters, scatters, and accumulates
If meaning soaks in and leaves a stain
If meaning is based in our bodies
If we scatter and gather by chance, choice, plan, or force

If the bindu is sacred for its potential to build infinity
If infinity is the sum of its parts
If the bindu brims with both nectar and poison
If nectar is sipped, but poison seeps

If time is finite
If form could be delineated
If time is infinite
If form could be ever unsettled

If space is finite
If I could only go this far
If space is infinite
If only I could go that far

If time moves, it is located in my body
If my body is my self (shift, splatter, scatter, gather)
If my body came from you
If my body is part-you
If I will never again cross paths with you
If I ever knew you
If I never knew you
If there is no rhyme

Surabhi Ghosh, 2020.



Anne Wilson, Remember (detail), 2020
Damask cloth, ink, gold thread, 42 x 31 inches
Photo: Anne Wilson Studio

Another house

In the Victorian era, social norms dictated that a mourner wear black for up to three years after the death of a loved one. Accessories to these mourning gowns included black ribbons weighted by pendants of gold.

Now shrouding plastic mannequins, or perhaps folded in drawers, those clothes once pressed against the mourner's skin, exchanging the physical absence of the loved one for the physical presence of grief.

The clothes do not replace the person, but stand in for them, acting as the physical manifestation of the feelings that linger.

For further reading, see "Mourning dress," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/155840> (accessed February 18, 2020).

Kisses or stones

The difference between things and events is that things persist in time; events have a limited duration. A stone is a prototypical “thing”: we can ask ourselves where it will be tomorrow. Conversely, a kiss is an “event.” It makes no sense to ask where the kiss will be tomorrow. The world is made up of networks of kisses, not of stones.



Anne Wilson, *Absorb/Reflect* (installation detail), 2020
Mourning garlands (ribbon, thread)
Golden roundels (damask table napkin, ink, gold thread embroidery)
Photo: Anne Wilson Studio

Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), p. 87.

Absorb/Reflect

The embroidered golden roundels reflect up—a reference to the sun, a constant presence.

The black garlands are objects of meditation on a subject of loss—the loss of a person, a community, a home, a place, an event, or an ideal. The loss may be tragic—a devastating rupture—or signify another kind of life-passage or transition. The garlands offer a way to remember, transferring the care of a maker to another person.

I first started making these black garlands in the late 1980s for friends mourning the loss of loved ones from the AIDS epidemic. Over time, I also made them for friends experiencing other kinds of losses. As art objects, these garlands may be displayed as formal wreaths, or positioned in a less formal way; they are intended to be relational in response to the needs or wishes of others. I hope they are useful.

A portion of the proceeds from these garlands will be donated to Doctors Without Borders.

Anne Wilson, *Absorb/Reflect* installation project statement. Chicago, 2020.

For further reading, see Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London: Verso, 2020); “Mourning: On Loss and Change,” curated by Brigitte Kölle, Hamburger Kunsthalle, February 7–June 14, 2020, <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/exhibitions/mourning>; Caroline Bellios, “Memories of Time and Touch—The Bodies of Victorian Hair Jewelry,” lecture delivered March 6, 2019, Kings College, London; “Colours of mourning around the world,” <https://www.funeralguide.net/blog/mourning-colours/> (accessed December 2019).

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Edited and annotated by Casey Carsel

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