

# in the ink dark

*These are some words to wander with  
as part of In the Ink Dark a new project  
from Luke Pell and collaborators*

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## PODCAST 5 TRANSCRIPT

“ Suppose I begin by telling you that,

I often think about touch...

*What I touch.*

*What touches me.*

Would you feel a prickle of unease  
as if we might be leaning over a cliff and  
it's your job to decide if or when to save us?

*Your tongue on the roof of your mouth.  
My eyelashes against each other as I blink.  
The air we breathe in and then sigh out.*

Those kind of touches are the safe ones to think about.

*Uncontroversial.*

*Benignly neutral.*

Suppose you take a moment to look my way  
As we walk along the path.  
Your eyes follow mine to the water beside us.  
And just at that moment, where we are throws  
scissors at the familiar - making an aquamarine tear in the grey-blue of sky.  
A tear in the shape of a kingfisher.

It hovers - not quite ready to dive,  
its body not quite nudging the water.  
Our eyes follow the shimmering,  
wind-quivering, cyan-blue of feathers.  
We feel the suspension of its glide.  
Meanwhile, the river roams,  
flowing, flowing on.

Blue: *'the colour between green and violet,  
as of the sky or sea on a sunny day...'*

Neither of us can touch the river from where we are,  
but we can both recall an impression of what it feels like.

I think about the time I dipped my hand under its surface,  
letting the soft bite of water run over my fingers  
in early morning sunlight.

The Water of Leith: *'..[this]silver thread in a ribbon of green.'*

When I turn back to look at you,  
the tightness around your eyes has softened.

'Blue gives other colours their vibrations,' the painter Cezanne wrote

We use the Kingfisher's blue to measure the grey of sky.

Blue: the last colour to give way to the black of night.

The first colour I feel when my heart aches.

Impressions are, 'marks produced by pressure',  
as well as images produced in the mind.

The things that have most impressed me  
have shaped me to be as I am.  
Just as the river shapes whatever it passes over and around.

It takes time, but it happens.

There are so many kinds of touch you tell me.

*The longed-for touch of someone missed so much that their absence makes your skin ache.*

*The tender touch of a hand on an elbow to steady the path of someone more frail than you.*

*The feel of a cheek against another cheek, or on another's shoulder.*

*A hand on the back of a neck, with just the right amount of pressure.*

We each have our own grammar of touch, compiled from hundreds of daily encounters.

*The feel of a familiar hand in your hand, its shape and weight effortlessly held.*

*The circle of two arms around you, the bridge of a back to lean on.*

*The surprise of a stranger's handshake.*

It's no accident that to be touched by something is an emotional event.

I touch each of my nearest and dearest in a subtly different way. We don't speak about it, but I know which of them likes a fierce hug, or a soft pressure, or no touch at all.

If I had children, I'm quite certain that they too would each want a subtly different kind of touch and they would tell me exactly how, because I would ask them.

Shall I hold you? How can I hold you? What shape should my hand make?

In my own lexicon there are so many different rules and regulations, indulgences and exceptions. I'm lucky - I get to have different kinds of touch in my daily life.

My mum lives two hundred miles away, by herself. When I hug her hello each time I visit, I feel her feeling the lonesome, unfamiliarity of another's warmth. This feeling catches in my throat and I turn away so that she doesn't see the reflection of this distance in my eyes.

It was sneaky of me to bring up the sliver of river that runs through this city – the Water of Leith. Because I want to tell you about another river. One with an L, two 'e's and no 'i' – the River Lethe.

The River Lethe may have been an actual river, but maybe more importantly it's a fictional one: winding its way through various Greek myths. The sound of it – its murmuring – caused a sudden, heavy drowsiness and if you drank from it you would forget all that you knew.

All that makes you, you.

In this way Lethe is connected to the word, 'lethal' – because not-yet-dead souls needed to drink from its waters in order to forget the life they were leaving.

'Let us strive to part with time more reluctantly' wrote poet Emily Dickenson in a letter to her friend.

Forgetting ourselves and losing ourselves.

I was born ahead of time and too fragile yet for this world, I spent a week in an incubator. No tender touch of my mother's body for me – just scratchy tubes and the feel of hospital cotton underneath my spine.

I can't remember the loneliness of this week, but it must have been profound, like suddenly floating in blank outer space after the comforting cave of my mother's womb.

Maybe this is why I'm drawn to touch.

A touch as light as the light of the sun.

There's something fragile about the colour blue. Visible light – light that we can see - goes from red at one end of the spectrum, to violet at the other. Light from the violet end is short and easily disappears, scattering amongst molecules of air and water.

Words describing blue have been late to arrive in language.

For the ancient poet Homer, the river Lethe was not blue, but, 'wine dark.'

Blue: the last colour to be shaped in language; the last colour that we humans were able to see.

Now when we think of water we can think of the colour blue.

But water is colourless – revealing the tone of what's beneath it, or reflecting what's above it.

Blue is the colour at the far edge of what can be seen: of horizons and mountains.

As the writer Rebecca Solnit writes, Blue is the colour of loss. The endless distance of longing, for the parts of the world we can never touch: “The color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not.”

My childhood was full of testing the line between near and far.

How far away can I go and still find my way back? How far is the drop between my hands and my feet, in a handstand, a cartwheel, a fall..?

When I was little, I remember feeling the kindly arm of a teacher, around my shoulders when I needed consolation; the hand of a stranger taking my hand to cross a road when I was lost. This stranger, and this teacher didn't think twice about offering their nearness to me to take away a sense of loss.

They didn't need to.

Don't get me wrong - I'm not romanticising the past. I grew up in the time of It's a Knockout, and Jim'll Fix It.

But I can see that I learnt about touch – good touch and bad touch - because the world was available for me to cradle, to grasp and grab; to pat, stroke, skim and hug.

And I experienced many different kinds of touch for what they were – kindly, rough; wanted or unwanted. I was free. Free of the idea of touch as a problem, as something 'inappropriate'.

Neurologists know that gentle touch as a baby is crucial to the development of our social brain. That without it, we lose a part of ourselves - our ability to thrive in relation to one another; to measure the distance between near and far.

*The skin is a social organ.*

When we're tiny almost any distance is a bad distance. Without the constancy of our parent's touch or in the cleft of the gap created by the glass of a neo-natal unit, we're vulnerable to a future loss - the ability to build closeness to those around us – to easily form social relationships.

Meanwhile, whilst touch is the first sense to develop when we're forming inside our mother, it's the last sense to disappear within conditions of memory loss.

This is a clue to the pattern of us. It's delicate logic makes my throat catch and I turn away so you won't see it shape me.

“You're out of touch, I'm out of time.”

The goddess Lethe was the daughter of Strife and the sister of Hardship and Stories. To drink from her river was to unlearn a lifetime. To un-know.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm having to unlearn what I know in the face of another kind of river – the constant stream of media images that warn and confuse us about touch, about touching other bodies.

I'm no longer free in what I think about the gestures I make between myself and another. My mind, like your mind, is full of impressions I'd rather not remember.

Touch is now regulated and questioned, the border of the space between my hands and your skin subject to suspicion.

'Break, Break, Break, - oh for the touch of a vanish'd hand', wrote the poet, Alfred Tennyson.

Suppose I were to ask you:

What are hands? How do they vanish? Are they broken?

Will you remember the kingfisher? Does the light hurt your eyes? Is your skin feeling tight? /

How do you measure time? What does it weigh? What's the word for its colour? Is space empty or full? Does it hold you, or do you hold it?

Can I hold you?

How far away is too far? Did you hear the river, murmur? Will you forget?

If I forget to breathe, can you remind me?

Shall I move closer? Would you let me take your weight if you needed to? Have you ever felt blue? What's shaped you? Where does loss live? Can you measure the distance between here and there?

How can I feel what you're feeling if I'm not sure whether I should be feeling you at all? ”