ABOUT PAINTING BUT NOT IN PAINTING
or
THE SURFACE OF AN OBJECT THAT STOPS IT FROM BEING MORE THAN -OR WHICH MAKES IT MORE THAN IT IS

This is about four objects:
1. Handbook of Diseases of the Skin
2. The Ghent Altarpiece
3. An octopus
4. A quilted clutch-ball

And four quotations. They’re from the following politicians:
3. Slobodan Milosevic, Serb Nationalist, President of Yugoslavia and then of Serbia.~1989-2000
Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.

-Donald Rumsfeld

McNamara: It was just confusion, and events afterwards showed that our judgment that we’d been attacked that day was wrong. It didn’t happen. And the judgment that we’d been attacked on August 2nd was right. We had been, although that was disputed at the time. So we were right once and wrong once. Ultimately, President Johnson authorized bombing in response to what he thought had been the second attack; it hadn’t occurred but that’s irrelevant to the point I’m making here. He authorized the attack on the assumption it had occurred, and his belief that it was a conscious decision on the part of the North Vietnamese political and military leaders to escalate the conflict and an indication they would not stop short of winning. We were wrong, but we had in our minds a mindset that led to that action. And it carried such heavy costs. We see incorrectly or we see only half of the story at times. Morris: We see what we want to believe. McNamara: You’re absolutely right. Belief and seeing, they’re both often wrong.

Sparrows are noisy when they flock and are eating the newest shoots from an otherwise bare bush in the earliest days of spring. They chirp jovially until you approach the bush. Then on a dime they stop. All movement, all sound. The silence whooshes up from the branches. If you were a cat your whiskers would itch.

Carefully one bird, then many, then all birds unlatch the hush. And it goes back to how it was before you came
Each object and quote describes a way of approaching a distinction; us v them, knowing v not knowing, there v here. The politicians talk about wars they're involved in. Vietnam, Iraq, Yugoslav nationalist conflicts, and the U.S. liberal/conservative culture wars. They play the roll of the angelic choir, providing accompaniment to the objects.

And the objects are chosen for their tactile and conceptual qualities. They function, in different ways, through their surfaces, their contents or the environments they inhabit.

The painting has mapped the world and followed on the waves of history and is peerless. The copy of the book contains what doctors knew about skin disorders in 1949, but it's also heavy and pretty. The clutch-ball is also one of many, made of quilting scraps, but it forms a connection between the baby who holds it, the family member who made it, and everyone else in his or her extended family.

And the octopus. The octopus is the opposite of the Ghent Altarpiece. It sees.

The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb is a massive and ancient painting. Its also called the Ghent Altarpiece but has been around a lot. Traditionally, losers of wars lose it as well. As of now it is in Ghent. In Belgium. It is a masterpiece by two van Eycks. Jan and Hubert. Eyck means oak. Two van oaks. It has lots of parts. 17 Panels and assorted hardware. Some are painted on oak. Some are copies of parts that were stolen. Parts get stolen a lot. Some parts are returned by the thieves who feel they cannot keep them safe. Now it stands behind thick glass.

The nazis gave it special shelter during world war two. They put it in a castle. Then they put it in a salt mine.
The good guys protect it. The bad guys protect it. It is a masterpiece. A world treasure. Peerless.

The flowers and grass and saints and angels and donors are painstakingly depicted. You can see every flower and know what kind it is. Know every saint by its attributes. There are popes and antipopes and sinners saints and angels.

The angels are many and they all have the same face.

The lamb spouts blood into a metal cup between a naked cross and a stone pillar that supports nothing.

It is as precise systematic and logical as a circuit board.
All the animals belong to zoos.

My grandma's sister, Lil, makes a quilted clutch ball for each baby born in our family. Gently colored, they are plush but firm and easily held. They let babies hold a piece of the world. When I was born I got a quilted ball from Lil. When my kids were born they got them too; theirs in the mail with styrofoam peanuts and customs declarations stating that contents' value was $5. Though different colors they have the same exact size weight and smell. I can pick up any one she's made and it'll be familiar.

I used to pick over pictures of Ghent Altarpiece and fall in love with the smallest of details, combing out every flower and saint but I never went to see it.
Handbook of Diseases of the Skin is a medical manual. First edition 1949. 1057 illustrations. The author signed it “For George C. Andrews with every good wish” with a fancy pen in blue ink. I imagine it was a gold pen though I have nothing to support this. It could have been bakelite or velvet covered. And George was an old friend. But George could have been his landlord. Regardless, when he signed it for him he would have felt the same weight of the book that George and me felt and now that you feel. I thought it felt it like lead or jungle wood. It’s bound in a deep red fake leather.

Out of the dark
there’s rain falling on the windowsill
and here’s a quilted ball from Lil:

This book is filled with small text and 1057 photos of skin. There’s a woman with a bride of Frankenstein streak of white hair and a boy with extremely elastic skin. Teenagers with acne. A baby with eczema. Flea bites and skin cancer.
Borders are always dictated by the strong, never by the weak. We simply consider it as a legitimate right and interest of the Serb nation to live in one state. This is the beginning and the end… If we have to fight, by God we are going to fight. I hope that they will not be so crazy as to fight against us. If we do not know how to work properly or run an economy, at least we know how to fight properly.

Gingrich -- primary mission
Advocate of civilization
Definer of civilization
Teacher of the Rules of Civilization
Arouser of those who Fan Civilization
Organizer of the pro-civilization activists
Leader (Possibly) of the civilizing forces
A universal rather than optimal Mission
This retains a primary focus on elected political power as the central arena and fulcrum by which a free people debate their Future and govern themselves.
Some octopuses see with their skin. They have very good eyesight as well, but light-sensing neurons in their skin allow them to instantaneously match the color of their bodies to their surroundings. I want to think that the octopuses feel color since I associate touch so closely with skin, but the sensation probably just disappears like when you can’t ask a fish about how the water is.

They also have a decentralized nervous system, octopuses… a big brain too, but if a tentacle is detached it can continue reflexive movements. The nerves responsible for each arm are in that arm; the sensation and response are local.

If you touch or see something the information has to travel a length of wiring to your brain to be processed and forwarded to another part of the brain which responds to the stimulus. The response is sent back along wires to a battery of muscles and glands.

And reflexively, you move.

Anyway… This circuitous route doesn’t seem to be better or worse for people.

Octopuses -while it seems they have a mental map of themselves- don’t have an encompassing map of the wider environment. Not like people do.

People have an idea of what is around and also what could be and what is not. We have a storehouse of solutions to combine and apply where appropriate. That makes it so you can make a stew with ingredients which are similar enough but not really the ones you had where you grew up…. or you can fret about the weather.

When a more complicated problem arises octopuses have to systematically test solutions. Except when they match their skin to the surroundings. That’s reflexive and immediate. -CL