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Vernal

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 *J Vernal Dilworth*

Richmond, VA

2007–2009

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For Helen who, in patience and love, taught me how to work, eat vegetables, and to be thankful for what I have.

Culminating with a dream, this project transverses theoretical and geographical boundaries with explorations into the message-carrying potential of video, sound, performance, print, and web. Stories and content are extracted from an autobiographical history of one small western town turned boomtown. That town, the center from which the project emerges, is Vernal, Utah.

Specifically, this is a project about Vernal, a noun in the true sense of the word, for Vernal is among many things a person, a place, and an idea.

Generally, this is a project about confronting the memories everyone has of their childhood and the effort that must be exerted to preserve them in an ever-changing world.

It is 11:30 and he is just now eating breakfast. He wonders why it has taken him so long to decide what to eat. He wonders if he should have just fasted today. He wonders why certain decisions are easier to make than others. He once read a book about a man who stopped eating because he no longer found anything he liked. That would never happen to him. He likes too many things. On the counter he has arranged a bunch of green garlic, some spinach and kale, three eggs, and a glass of milk. He is cutting the garlic, and washing the other greens in a large mixing bowl placed in the sink. The greens are soft and tender, from new plants in cool weather. He thinks it is nice to be here in this place with so many opportunities and so much time. It is March 21, it is the Vernal Equinox.

Myriad geological processes have altered Vernal, both in composition and appearance. Of notable significance is the presence of one inland sea called Lake Uinta. The sediments deposited from this sea have resulted in vast reserves of oil and natural gas. From 1986 to 1999 Vernal lived in Vernal. He lived simply, enjoying all aspects of life. Every canyon begged to be explored, and Vernal answered their cry. He swam naked in the rivers and streams. He would walk for hours on end till he was lost in the maze of junipers and cedars. He did everything, and took it for granted. He knew Vernal was his, and he thought it would always be his.

He will open the box and see one thing, everything. The smell of dried sage present early on but growing weaker with each opening. He will slowly pull each item out of the box placing it on the table next to him. First, there is a single sheet of paper, folded two times. Next a pamphlet. Again another pamphlet. Then a book with a stab binding with a paper dust jacket. He will notice sand, dirt, clinging to the cover of the book. After lifting out the book he will see the source of the detritus. He will see more items too, a rock, a small piece of drift wood, a fishing lure. He will now have a little of Vernal on him, and be ready to engage with the objects.

In 2006 Vernal had traveled home to visit his parents when he came to the realization that time does not stand still. The home he knew so well had become surrounded by new suburban tract homes, each one a mirror image of the next. A frustrating sense of powerlessness came over him. He knew he needed to do something. This is when the seeds for the project were planted.

As a youth he struggled to find a footing in either world (the natural or constructed), pulled in opposite directions by both. Now, in the fragments caused by the collision of the two worlds, he is left to walk amongst the debris and collect artefacts and experiences. He does this as a way of finding meaning in the tortured relationship with nature he has developed as a result of existing between the two worlds. He does this as a way of coming to understand himself.

To assist you in learning more of this project is J Vernal, the narrator, protagonist, and author. Vernal is a white male a hundred years old. He is from Vernal by descent. He loves Vernal more than anything, yet despises certain aspects of her, and is ashamed of this love.

Vernal is a small, western town located between the western states of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, and is the northern most point of the geological feature named the Colorado Plateau. The area is comprised of Jurassic sediments that now form striking rock features. Vernal was a runt, a puppy smaller than the others, as such he has always had affinity for similar things. This affinity remains a motivating force in his life and work.

To properly set the stage for this project one must understand that the house he speaks of sits on Jurassic age sediments, over the fossilized remains, the last remaining evidences of a former world. Through extraction and excavation this former world has collided with the present.

This all begins with a house located in a precarious position between society and wilderness, the present and past. The home was his parents; the home was where he grew up.

Through the process of petrification organic materials are slowly replaced by inorganic molecules. This is how I have been waiting. Experiences (the organic) happen, but aside from those immediately effected the existence of the experience matters little. That is unless the experience can be preserved by outside forces intentionally or unintentionally. The original experience is not repeated, it becomes transformed, in a way so close to the original that it is almost indistinguishable from the original. An impression of it has become permanent. It has become a fossil (the inorganic).

Petrification

I am laying by a river. I have been here for days. I can see everything. My feet and arms are in the water. My face is pressing into the clay on the bank. It is winter but it is not cold. The sun is near the water and it is quiet. I could lay here forever. I am sinking.

How long has it been? I can feel the sun on my back It is warm. My skin is clay. You are the clay and you are covering me. The lapping of the water on the bank is now distant. It is above us.

At first, I thought you would crush me. You felt so heavy. Each time I exhaled your body would sink into mine. I would give and you would take. At first, it did not seem fair, but the more I gave, the stronger I began to feel.

We stayed like this for hours, neither moving nor dreaming. If I could exist forever, I would. The river is so far away, but I do not need water. I can feel the moon's pull on the oceans. The tide has become my breath.

The sun is far away and it is dark. I can remember watching it rise and set. It is so dark; you are so heavy. It has become hard to think about the past. Are they my memories, or are they yours? We are so close.

I have been here so long. I have gone everywhere, even though I have stayed here. It feels like we are moving, like we are going up.

I am strong. I can no longer hear the ocean, but I can feel the sun. It is causing the wind to move tiny grains of sand. They are blowing across our skin. I imagine that I am on one of those grains. I am one of them.

I have been here before, years ago. Things have changed. I am waiting for you. Did you feel the rain last night? It has been so long since I have tasted water. I thought of the river I laid down near years ago. I hear it moving over me. I will look for it.

I am in the sun. And it is warm. I am near the river; you are gone. I knew you were leaving. I could feel you pulling away from me. You have changed me; I am you. Was this your goal?

I am in the same spot. The river has moved far from me. It is smaller and tired. I can see the trees lining its banks. I could stay here forever.

For one (1) year, Vernal has worked on projects that revolve around Vernal. The projects are his effort to preserve a small portion of his experiences with the geographical place called Vernal. He is, in effect, mimicking nature by creating a fossil (an impression) of his very experience. As a record, there are holes. Certain things have not been preserved in the process. The project has had its conception, its birth. It has gone through adolescence, maturity, and eventually death. What is left is only a hint of the whole, a fossil. And it asks for your engagement.

dd-1-8 He has built a device to capture images from 25 feet up. The device allows him to see the world from a new perspective. This is how birds see.

ff-1-2: This is a device he used to for recording dreams.
gg-1-2,ii-1-2: He is capturing images from a video performance to use again later for another piece.
hh-1-2: After making a small book meant to be read in a specific place he has taken it there and is reading it.
ff-3-4: He is exploring the role of typography in his life. He thinks it has flattened the world of information.
ff-5-8: This is a picture of him, he is J Vernal.
gghhii-7-8: He has turned on a floor fan and is creating an experience to capture the chaotic effect of falling letters.

Background Left: He is preparing to work with gilsonite® to tell a simple story of meeting a man dying of COPD.
Background Right: His father is helping him gathering rocks in Dry Fork to build a stone oven.

know my next move. Wait. I'd then become boring, easy to ignore, dismiss, I take my prayer back. No! Instead I wish to remain imperfect. Presenting my work through

In the more desert portions of the Vernal vegetation is sparse, but comprises many species of some plant families: *Artemesia* (sagebrush), *Atriplex* (salt bush, shadscale), *Sarcobatus* (greasewood), *Chrysothamnus* (rabbit brush), and those typical of the Mixed Desert Shrub Zone. Cottonwoods, boxelders, willows, alder, and birch dominate stream bottoms, with buffalo berry, *Rinnikinnik*, squawbush (*Rhustrilobata*) and others common. Dry lowland areas (especially alkaline, poorly-drained soils) are dominated by *Atriplex* (shadscale), *Tetradymia* (horsebrush), *Sarcobatus* (greasewood), and many other species of the Chenopodiaceae (igweed, Goosefoot) Family. These plants, together with *Eurotia* (white sage), and *Artemesia* which occurs over a wide range of elevations, make excellent browse for livestock. Following winters of considerable precipitation, wild flowers bloom from May to September in a profusion of brilliant hues.

Untermann. Guide to Dinosaur Land and the Unique Uinta Country. UFHNH: Vernal, 1972)

Flora

Cheatgrass
Mullen
Sagebrush
Rabbitbrush
Greasewood
Tamarisk
Fremont Cottonwood
Pepper Weed
Alfalfa
Lichen
Rice Grass
Juniper
Pinon Pine
Ponderosa Pine
Blue Spruce
Locust
Poison Ivy
Stinging Nettle

Geo

Hydrocarbons
Sandstone
Juniper
Clay
Jurassic
Mancos frmtn
Navajo frmtn
Weber frmtn
Moenkopie frmtn
Shinarump frmtn
Anticline
Syncline
Faulting
Uplift
Petrification
Sedimentation
Cementation

Carto

Vernal
The Uintah Basin
Split Mountain
The Oil Patch
DNM
(Dinosaur National Monument)
Red Mountain
Yellow Hill
Green Field Downs
Yampa River
Island Park
Jones Hole
Seep Ridge

Fauna

Mormon Cricket
Cameronasaurus
Apatosaurus
Cottontail Rabbit
Cicada
Blue Bellied Lizard
Scorpion
Mule Deer
Morning Dove
Great Horned Owl
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Prairie Dog

Anthropos

Drill Rig
Petroglyph
Pictograph
Oil Field
Frac Truck
Water Truck
Hot Shot
Well



Speaking in One Word Sentences:

He is sitting in a car with his head against the window feeling each and every crack in the road. This is how he likes to travel, He has done it since he was a kid. He likes it because no matter where he is going he can always find himself directly below Ursa Major, one of the two (2) constellations he can name and still see in the city. It has been quite a long time with silence when the driver asks, "is everything alright?" There is a noticeable pause, "Yes." He replies.

Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Hill and Wang: New York, 1972.
Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida. Hill and Wang: New York, 1980.

The writings of Barthes play an important role in the work of J Vernal. As a mythologist, Barthes, writes about society from the perspective of one detached, a model Vernal is working towards. In Camera Lucida the tone changes and a much more personal account of experience floods the work. Cl offers questions, and it does so beautifully, what is the role of photography in one's life?

Berger, John, Selected Essays. Edited by Geoff Dyer. Pantheon Books: New York, 2001.

In the Essay Drawing Berger lays out the case for art and highlights the role of the artist. Always on point, thoughtful and holistic, Berger's insight permeated the work especially during September-October. He should very much like to own a leather jacket and live in France.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. Schocken Books: New York, 1969
Inspired by the flanuer of Benjamin, Vernal threw out any reserve he had to compulsively collect things, He felt justified.

Brinckerhoff Jackson, John. A Sense of Place, A Sense Of Time. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1994.
Looking first for an answer into a topic about place, this seminal work of Brinckerhoff. offered Vernal answers to the questions he had about the role of people and their environment.

Bracewell, Michael. "For Immediate Release: Time Machine Wheel Clamped." Dot Dot Dot, 16: 1.

Calvino, Italo. Invisible Cities. Secker & Warburg Ltd: London, 1974.
As kindred spirits Calvino's Italy assisted Vernal in helping him decode the American West.

Dillard, Annie. Mornings Like This. Harper Collins: New York, 1995.
Stealing a line from the Mornings Like This, Vernal created a personal philosophy meant and mantra "Give Me Enough Time in a Place Like This, And I Will Surely Make a Beautiful Thing." If only He had more time.

Dow, Jim. Marking The Land: Jim Down In North Dakota. University of Chicago: Chicago, 2007.
An impressive body of work complete with haunting images of an unpopulated prairie state.

Dundas, Zach. "Boomtown: What Happens When An Oil Field As Big As Any In The Middle East Is Discovered In The Desolate Border Towns Of Montana And North Dakota" Good, 010: 90-94.
A short but timely read about the effects of a booming economy in today's world.

Eliasson, Olafur. Your Engagement Has Consequences: On The Relativity Of Your Reality. Lars Müller: Baden, 2006.

Harmon, Katharine. You Are Here: Personal Geographies And Other Maps Of The Imagination. Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 2004.

Hayes, Carol, and Joshua Glenn. Taking Things Seriously: Seventy Five Objects With Unexpected Significance. Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 2007.

Isay, Dave. Listening is an Act of Love. Penguin Press: New York, 2007.

Large, E.C. "A Sleep in the Afternoon: Chapter 1 On The Floor." Dot Dot Dot, 15: 11-22.
All pleasant reads literally and visually

Lesy, Michael. Visible Light: Photographs by Angelo Rizzuto, William Burke, John McWilliams, and Andrea Kovács. Times Books: New York, 1985.
What can be learned from the hundreds of photographs taken during the course of Vernal's graduate studies? Visible light tells three simple stories about photographs and what one can learn from the images they take.

Lippard, Lucy. The Lure Of The Local: Sense Of Place In A Multi-Centered Society. New York Press: New York, 1997.
Inspiration for Vernal, and other artist to begin again to return to take inspiration from the environment.

Other Books Vernal has enjoyed throughout the two years of this project, their importance is noted.

Saint-Exupery, Antione de. Wind Sand And Stars. Harcourt: New York, 1992.

Eggers, Dave. How We Are Hungry. Vintage Books, New York, 2005.

Sagmeister, Stegan. Things I Have Learned In My life So Far. Abrams: New York, 2008.

Weingart, Wolfgang. My Way to Typography: In Ten Sections. Lars Müller: Basel, 2000.
Born in war-torn Europe, Weingart life has been one lived and defined by his work. He never tries to draw a line dividing accident from opportunity. It was seeing the many elegant spreads contained in this work that Vernal found validation for much of his work.

Sontag, Susan. On Photography. Picador: New York, 1973.
Made Vernal never want to use his camera.

Stegner, Wallace, Mormon Country. Due1l, Sloan and Pearce: New York, 1942.
Attaching this book to the rack on his bicycle Vernal road through the wide streets of the Mormon empire. More than 60 years after it was written Stegner's insight borders on prophetic, Relevant for anyone looking for a historical account of Utah. Individual regions and characters that should have slipped away unnoticed become immortals through the authors words.

Stilgoe, John. Outside Lies Magic: regaining history and awareness in everyday places. Walker and Co.: New York, 1998.

Inspiration for the project and personal philosophy of Vernal. Stilgoe teaches one how to turn their neighborhood into a rich classroom with nothing more than a bicycle and a willingness to avoid trespassing signs.

Turkle, Sherry. Evocative Objects: Things We Think With. MIT: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007.
Beginning as a simple project, this book soon exploded with volunteers offering personal experiences about simple objects and their relationship to them. Objects appear to evoke memories, semiotics transferred to tangible artifacts.

Other persons of importance

U. Utah Phillips
folksinger, songwriter, hobo.

Matthew Barney
artist, storyteller.

Bonnie Prince Billie
songwriter, performer.

Everett Ruess
artist, wanderer.

Earl Douglass
paleontologist, journaler, photographer

Butch Cassidy
outlaw

fractured lenses marred with scratches. Seen through the detritus of life, -->

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF THE ARTS AT
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN DESIGN: VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

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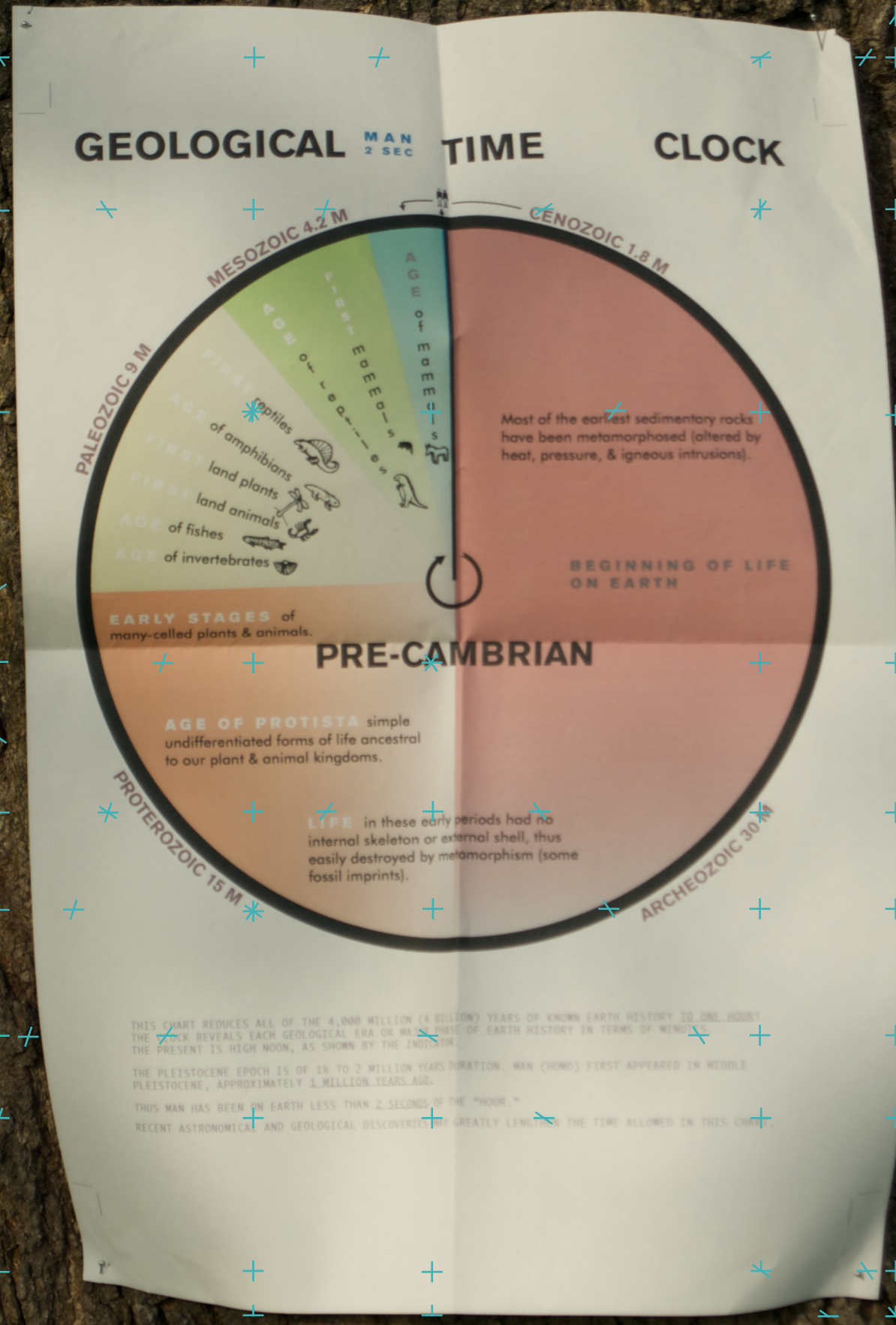
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It is 9:00 and the sun is just going down. He doesn't know what to expect, but already feels uncomfortable. He can't tell if it is like a concert, or a circus, or a state fair. Teenagers walk around with glow-in-the-dark bracelets and necklaces. Children run with cotton candy mounds attached to their arms. "Cowboys. Where are the cowboys?" He asks himself. He had seen a poster advertising a tightest jeans competition and he thought that would be something he would like to go to, but now is only thinking that he will stay for a bull ride. Then he can leave. The stadium is nearly full and there are cowboy hats. There are cowboys. "What time did this thing start?" He asks himself. Most of the crowd is enjoying themselves and several of the riders have already ridden. He is still excited he will see his first bull ride. The voice over the PA is loud, western, and harsh. It announces the next rider, Caleb Lewis, and the bull he will be riding, Casey's Shadow. There is a long wait and then a buzzer and the gate is opened. Even from the top of the stands he can tell that there is a lot of anger in the animal. He once protested the rodeo, 10 years earlier, believing that the way the animals are treated is inhumane. He is reminded of this, but he is trying to be objective. He is looking for his story. He takes some photographs. That was it. The event is over. He can't believe that it ended so soon—just ten o'clock. Wanting more out of his \$16, he begins to interview others. Some people are loyal fans and others are experiencing the rodeo for the first time. *(beginning p.6)*

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