

habitus

Held by cloth's hand, we are swaddled at birth, covered in sleep, and wound in death. A single thread spins a myth of origin and a tale of adventure, interweaves people and webs of communication. Coat and tent are the first portable architecture for the body, a flag carries the symbol of nationality, a folded blanket is a story of trade. Like weather, however changeable, cloth envelops experience.

With cloth we cover our extremities. A glove holds my hand; a wool cap covers the top of my head; a sock, my foot; a sweater, my heart; a blanket, my lap. A coat buttons my arms and torso into one warmth. I sleep under a sheet, dry myself with a towel, hold a cotton napkin in my lap, secret a thin handkerchief in my pocket. A curtain shuts or reveals my window view. The thin white finely knitted cotton closest to my skin breathes with my heat, absorbs my moisture, is insulation between me and everything else.

The first white cloth, made from woven strands of plant fibers about 7000 B.C., was found wrapped around an antler. Naked flesh is vulnerable. The thick cotton pad shielding a hand from heat on the stove is cousin to the fabric cushioning a hand from the abrasions of a bone tool thousands of years ago.

Just as the work of a weaver and a loom is to hold horizontal and vertical threads in balanced tension, cloth is exchanged as a symbol of a social agreement or bond to maintain or forge social concordance. Dowries of linens representing years of handwork were once exchanged along with marriage vows. A luminous bolt of white cloth at the center of Benjamin West's 1771–72 painting *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, represents the offer of manufactured goods in exchange for

land. Taking and giving, bond or betrayal, are held in cloth's many windings.

We speak of a tightly or loosely knit social fabric, of a complex tapestry of cultures, of political and technological webs. Not all relations and not all fabrics are woven. Felt is a fabric made by bonding long fibers into dense sheets with heat and friction. Contemporary non-wovens are often produced for a single use, can be anti-microbial, flame-resistant, disposable. Thin versions line envelopes, thicker ones wrap bedding, but neither will likely pass to another generation as do the coveted scraps of dress fabric which pass in mother-daughter scrap books or in a hand-stitched quilt made of silk squares from ties, vests, and coat linings worn by ancestors whose identities are anonymous.

Habitus is filled with scraps, with strands, with pieces and fragments of texts and of textiles at the scale of the lap. *Habitus* is the turn-of-the-century Bancroft-Eddystone textile sample books, sitting beside a Japanese merchant's striped cotton swatch book, beside the looped and crocheted lace samples made by South American needlework students for a turn-of-the-century world's fair, beside the slanted cursive of verse and inspirational texts hand copied into commonplace books, beside dolls with faces, beside dolls without faces, beside hand-inked pattern books, beside dye books of wound thread, beside stitched pages of sewing exercise books. *Habitus* is the cut pieces of nineteenth-century Pennsylvania printed cotton that resemble twenty-first century canvas decking, the linen bedcovers and woolen blankets that covered eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sleepers, the shuttles that carried the thread that wove the blankets, the model of a loom and a skeining wheel. *Habitus* is the hands from previous generations inhabiting these objects, miniatures,

and fragments—evidence of the mutual shaping and possibilities of bodies and materials.

Habitus is the words found by one reader offered on printed paper to another, a reader reading, the capacity of words to touch at a distance greater than the reach of a hand.

Habitus is the landscape made from reelings and turnings, unravelings and gatherings, spinning and scrolling, continuous and discontinuous threads, in circles and in lines.

Habitus is the cadence of the eye reading, the hand reeling *CHANNEL**, the words of the poem and the river you stand upon, the wetness you remember but do not feel. *Habitus* is the plush woolen grip in the linen rope, the ropes pulled downward to be released upward, the weighted wheel the rope pumps, the sounded air, the cloth propelled into motion. *Habitus* is the inside and the outside, the concealing and the revealing, the enveloped and the enveloping, in a field of spinning curtains. *Habitus* is the sweaters, the strands of yarn pulled from their interlocking stitches, the holes made that cannot be filled. *Habitus* is the naked sheep, their sheered fleece, the drop spindle, and the spinner drawing the long fibers into twisted yarn. *Habitus* is the hand and weather turning, the stillness in the motion, the eye reading, the hand reeling *MIRROR**, the words running backwards as the river never can. *Habitus* is sitting and moving together, absorbed by words, sound, cloth, each other. We cover ourselves. It is a commonness. This is our condition.

**poems by Susan Stewart*

—Ann Hamilton