

Gutter with Rags

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Gutter With Rags (#1) (2000) shows a grimy gutter struck hard with sun from the upper left, a high mid-day angle, causing the curb-stone to throw an almost solid black shadow. Near the top of the picture, and furthest from the camera, is a clump of rags out of which protrudes a paper tube with a shredded end. The tube just touches one of a couple of shoelaces strung down the gutter by the flow of water before things dried up. The clump is not an animal but it is difficult not to think it's a dead and forgotten animal. The animal is coming to pieces and the next time water flows down that gutter some parts of it are going to detach and move off, either right down the grate or at least a some distance from the carcass. Closer to the camera are smaller entities that look to be shreds of cloth or paper in varying states of decomposition. The composition of the picture hints that they might be detached bits of the carcass, stopped by heat and lack of moisture on their way to the drain into which everything may eventually disappear. What has died here is the phantom thing brought into being by the photograph, the thing whose existence is denied by the same photograph that suggests it.

On the sewer grate are stuck (as I count them) five scraps of paper or other materials in various states of decomposition. One, near the centre-left of the grate, is still pretty much intact, obviously not having been lying there long. It can be clearly identified as a scrap of paper. Another one, lying on the same bar of the grate is older, and is further along in the process of disintegration. Water has been running over it, carrying away shreds of fibre. This one is beginning not to look like a piece of paper anymore. It might not be one. Closest to us, at the end of the nearest slot in the grate, is a grey and slightly bumpy form about the same size as the fresh bit of paper. It is probably another scrap of paper although it's impossible to tell for certain from looking at the photograph. To be sure, you'd have to go there and pick at it to see what it is. It might be some other substance, like bread, or cheese, or animal fat. Slowly, all these scraps are heading for the state in which we see the closest one, and then beyond. They are going to disintegrate completely and disappear. Just to the right of the closest entity is the corner of the grate. It is slightly coated with a layer of street dirt, or grime. Grime is a complex chemical mixture, comprised of any number of elements — rubber, oil, vegetable matter, sand, carbon, plastic, and so on. The layer on the metal is probably a quarter of a millimetre thick. As the scrap we have been considering is reduced by sunlight, water, and abrasion, as it vanishes, the metal of the grate under it will appear again, also coated with a film, a part of which will—for a while—be comprised of some few remaining molecules of the entity we see in the picture.

This blot of molecules on a horizontal plane, itself only a larger blot of similar molecules, is a subject Arden has returned to consistently over the years. The subject is the falling down, falling apart, and dissolving of an entity. The entity disintegrates and apparently becomes indistinguishable from the grimy or muddy segment of the earth's surface where it has ended up. Evidently the end of something, so a kind of death. But also not, since on the molecular level there is only the continuous transformation of matter into different forms, different entities, — or not, as it turns out, for the moment.