

The name escapes me, but someone once compared the act of writing to a specific type of rain that never quite reaches the ground. A *virga* (derived from the latin for twig or branch) is an observable streak or shaft of precipitation that evaporates before meeting the surface of the earth. The lament is old, and well rehearsed: the written word never quite reaches the lived experience, and robs the latter of its purity.

In 1819, Czech scientist and former monk Jan Evangelista Purkyne published a paper describing visual effects whose source is within the eye itself. A snapshot of the retina, reproducing itself.

Amongst these are Phosphenes, those tiny shaking fading Rohrschachs we see when rubbing our eyes, or standing up too quickly.

'When I close my eyes, they begin to shine [...] it all ends with a dark rhombus with blunt corners, surrounded by a dull shine resembling a phosphorescent light. A total darkness follows. [...] As soon as I release the pressure on the eyeball, the pattern breaks up in several places and the bright branches flow in curved lines and disappear like dying sparks of a burning paper'

Illustrations accompany the description. I can only imagine the bitterness with which Purkyne, after extensive probing and prodding in his own eye socket, looked at the collection of neat shapes, lines and words scattered across the paper. No amount of literary embellishment really gets you there. The patterns invariably dissipate under the weight of language and remain irreducibly private.

Polyglot, science advocate and staunch empiricist James IV, King of Scotland, undertook just one of the many recorded attempts throughout history to find the origins of, or the *original*, human language. In 1493, he ordered two new born babies to be sent to live on the isolated island of Inchkieth to be raised by a mute woman. The language, for surely there must be language, the children would eventually speak, was to reveal the innate language stripped of any external influences.

My first memorable experience of a Phosphene came about as a result of a conker fight to which I was an unwelcome spectator. The eyeball has a curious way of recoiling when in danger; tiny fireworks accompanied by a sound that I can now only link to the sound an amp makes when the audio jack is forcibly removed.

Contrary to popular belief, the first moveable type system for printing texts originated in China more than four centuries before the process was mechanised by Gutenberg. Porcelain blocks carried each individual character and could be rearranged in various permutations on an iron plate.

Afterimages are another example. If photoreceptors in the eye are exposed to the same un moving stimulus over time, they lose their sensitivity and the image remains visible after the initial exposure.

Machines, too, have this memory. The phosphor in the screen of a monitor eventually loses its luminance, so a non-moving image displayed for a prolonged period will burn itself into the screen, permanently a ghost image.

Some people have said the drawings of Phosphenes look strangely like cave paintings, the oldest art. Evidently, the earliest humans must have ascribed enough relevance to these fleeting patterns to begin the long and arduous journey into representation.

We lament the insufficiency of our songs, [but still] we sing.