

PETRIFIED WOOD

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I turned the lump
of wood over in
my hands.

Through the thin plastic wrapping I could feel slight undulations rippling across the timber's surface. Every indentation marked a moment, a moment where stone hit wood, and where that connection was captured within the timber itself. Peeling back the cling wrap, the wood was still wet, as it had been for over 7,000 years. Thin, broken lines in a lemony coloured chalk, traced the edges of each tool mark.

Halos
agitated
instants
into
a
convoluted
present.

The wobbly yellow ovals clustered together, rounded at one end, and cut off by more marks at the other. On a piece of paper nearby, arrows corresponded to each gouge. Imagined flakes of wood were imaged in their absence; the trajectory of the flying chips recorded in the spongy chock.

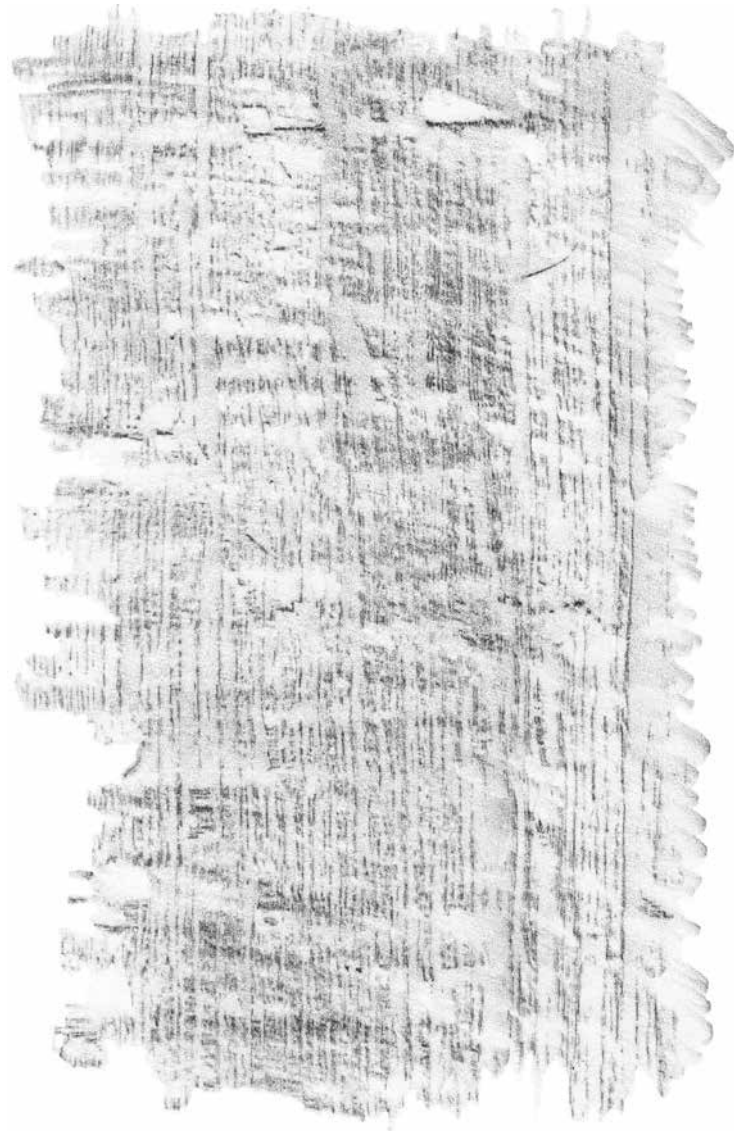
Damp splinters clung to my palm. The piece of timber retained marks from every repeated gesture, grooves exposing the forces that caused them to emerge. The width of each tool mark indicated the minimum width of the blade that was used. The continuously altered surface of wood held traces of a sequence of material and embodied encounters that began with rhythmic meetings between hands, tools, and trees, thousands of years ago in the depths of a forest.

Tool marks are present, presenting pasts, and making visible singular material moments. As each mark was analysed, a reverse chronology of gestures was established – if inconclusive. The soggy lump of wood unravelled in a complex of past movements, where histories are embedded in timber, and impressed within bodies.

Data from the timber's analysis was projected back towards the forest – although this forest is made up of vastly different trees, composed in vastly different arrangements, and absorbing vastly different air. At some point in the aftermath of the last Ice Age, oaks planted themselves in the dirt. They grew thick and close. The canopy was full, and the ground below was dark and dank. Even in the middle of the day, the sun rarely reached the floor, blocked out by dense foliage. When one tree fell, another grew in its place. It shot up, extending towards the sunlight pouring through the small gap in the canopy.

The oaks were hard and heavy, pulling iron-rich water out of the soil through millions of tiny pores. They carried the metal from their roots to the tips of their branches. Along with the oaks, glaciers edged their way south, transporting masses of rocks on their journey. Eventually the oaks and rocks would meet; the stone shaped into a blade, and the blade slicing through the waxy edge to the tree's core. Oaks were felled, split, shaped, and used to build structures – houses and wells.

Over
time
the
dense
canopy
thinned.



The trunks of the new
oaks are narrow,
and the forest is full
of open meadows.

A small town nearby manages the plantation like a mosaic. Large areas of trees are felled on a 30-year cycle. Only a few trees are left to keep growing, chosen based on the quality of their growth. They should be straight, healthy, with few branches, and limited kinks. The oaks in the clearing are all 30, 60, 90 or 120 years old.

They sway in the space around them. More light, more wind, more room to stretch, means that these trees branch outward, twisting and turning in response to the sun and the icy gusts. Because of the branches and the bends, the new trees are tricky for building. Twists and notches make it difficult to split lengths of timber, and the beams are often not straight or even. Instead, most of the timber from oak trees felled in this forest is used for firewood, warming the town's hearths.

We arrived in the early afternoon on the third Friday in March. Winter was hanging around, and the air was crisp. The forecast rain was being held at bay, at least temporarily. I'd been picked up from a nearby train station. We drove a short way, through the German town of Ergersheim, in Middle Franconia, to a forest on the outskirts, stopping to get water along the way. The back of the blue van was full of rattling steel cases, containing supplies of tools.

A dirt road coiled through the trees, past a gypsum quarry, and around a small rise to a collection of cars parked in a recently cleared field. A tarp had been strung up between branches, the bright blue glowing against the grey sky. I wandered around, getting my bearings. There were scattered piles of cuttings stacked neatly on the forest floor, and a few trees that had escaped felling. Fluorescent pink numbers had been sprayed on their trunks. 37.