

The Dialogues — II.

THE BODY RECOVERED

A Phenomenology of the Flesh in the Age of the Virtual

"The body proper is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle alive, it animates it and nourishes it from within, it forms with it a system."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Phenomenology of Perception)

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PRELUDE

A Room without Screens

Professor Verne had posted a single sheet on the door before the students arrived. No title, no explanation. Just three words written by hand, in capital letters:

LEAVE YOUR SCREENS.

Some stopped, read, smiled. Others frowned. One newcomer — his name was Léo, he came from neuroscience, had joined the seminar on a colleague's advice — stood for a long moment in front of the sheet, as if the three words were asking him a question he wasn't sure he wanted to answer.

They came in all the same. All of them. And placed their phones in a wooden crate that Professor Verne had set near the door — without comment, without ceremony, as one leaves a coat at the entrance of a house where one is expected.

The room was different that morning. Not in its geography — the same walls, the same blackboard, the same light from the top floor. But in its atmosphere. Something had changed in the quality of the silence. A denser, more present silence — as if the absence of phones had released something in the air.

Professor Verne entered. Set down his coat. Remained standing.

He looked at his students for a long time — longer than usual. As if he were seeing them differently. As if he were seeing, precisely, their bodies.

— I'd like to begin by asking you something. Something very simple. Something no one has probably asked you in a long time.

He paused.

— How are you? Not intellectually. Not philosophically. In your body. This morning. Here. How is your body?

The silence that followed was of a particular nature — the silence of those searching for an answer to a question they are not in the habit of asking themselves.

— Malia: My back has been hurting. For three weeks. I don't know how to sleep anymore without looking at my phone first.

— Thomas: I'm tired. But I don't know anymore whether it's a tiredness of the body or a tiredness of something else.

— Iris: I realise I haven't really felt my body since this morning. That I've been in this room for ten minutes and I haven't yet checked whether I was hot or cold, whether I was comfortable in my chair.

— Léo: I spend twelve hours a day in front of screens. My body exists mostly at night — when I run. That's the only time I'm really inside it.

— Yes. That's exactly where we're going this morning. Into this distance — this strange distance we have installed between ourselves and our own flesh.

He went to the board and wrote:

THE FORGOTTEN BODY.

— This is not a reproach. It is a diagnosis. And to understand what we lose when we forget our body — we must first understand what the body is. Not in the anatomical sense. In the deepest philosophical sense.

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I. The Body Proper — Merleau-Ponty and the Thinking Flesh

— I'd like to tell you about an experience.

He sat on the edge of the table and placed both hands flat in front of him. Looked at them. As if they belonged to him and were foreign to him at the same time.

— A few years ago, I had an accident. A fracture of the right wrist. Six weeks in plaster. And during those six weeks, I discovered something that twenty years of philosophy had not taught me as directly.

— I needed to write in order to think. Not to note my thoughts — to have them. The hand on the paper, the pencil with its slight resistance, the slowness of forming letters — all of this was part of the thinking process itself. Without my hand, my thoughts remained vague, unfinished, like shapes in a fog that never quite condensed.

— That is what Merleau-Ponty had understood before me.

He went to the board and wrote:

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY. 1908 — 1961.

— Merleau-Ponty died too young — at fifty-three. But what he had time to write — notably the *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945 — changed the way philosophy thinks about the body.

— Before Merleau-Ponty, the dominant philosophical tradition — from Descartes to Husserl — tended to treat the body as an object among objects. Something the consciousness has — an instrument, a vehicle, sometimes a prison. Descartes had posed the question radically: how can a thinking substance be united with an extended substance? And he never truly resolved the problem.

— Merleau-Ponty said: this fracture is an illusion. In living experience, there is not on one side a consciousness and on the other a body. There is a unitary being-in-the-world — a way of existing that is originally corporeal, originally spatial, originally engaged in a milieu.

He wrote on the board:

I am not in my body. I am my body.

— This simple sentence contains a philosophical revolution. It says: the body is not the envelope of the mind. It is the mode of being of consciousness. Consciousness exists only corporeally — in a here, now, oriented toward a there, anchored in a past of gestures and habits.

— Léo: But contemporary neuroscience says something analogous. The work on embodied cognition shows that cognitive processes don't take place only in the brain but in the entire body. Was Merleau-Ponty not simply anticipating what science has since confirmed?

— Yes and no. The neuroscience of embodied cognition does confirm the central intuition of Merleau-Ponty. But there is something neuroscience cannot capture — something Merleau-Ponty wanted to point toward with the notion of the body proper. It is not simply that the brain uses the body as an interface with the world. It is that the body is lived from the inside in a way that is irreducible to its third-person description.

He went to the board and wrote two expressions side by side:

THE BODY-OBJECT — THE BODY-SUBJECT

— The body-object is the body the doctor examines, the biologist analyses. It is the third-person body. The body-subject is the body I am — first-person, irreducibly. I reach out my hand. I feel the cold. I am tired. This experience — this way of being one's body rather than having it — cannot be captured by an objective description.

He picked up a pen from the table. Turned it between his fingers.

— When I do this — I don't think about each of my fingers, each joint. My body knows. It has learned — through repetition, through habit, through what Merleau-Ponty calls motor sedimentation. And this learning is not in my head. It is in my hands. It is incorporated — literally.

— And this bodily schema can extend. It can incorporate tools. The pianist who has played for twenty years no longer needs to look at their hands — the keyboard has become an extension of their bodily schema. The blind person walking with a cane does not perceive the cane as an object — they perceive the ground through it.

— Iris: Have our phones become extensions of our bodily schema? Does the absence of the phone produce something analogous to the absence of a limb?

— That is a question cognitive psychology researchers have begun to take seriously. Studies show that the mere presence of a switched-off phone on a table reduces the cognitive capacities of people working nearby. But I want to be precise about what this means philosophically. There is a difference between the incorporation of a tool into the bodily schema — what the pianist does — and what happens with our phones.

— The pianist incorporates the instrument into a motor skill that enriches their relationship with the world. The phone does something different. It doesn't make us more present to the world — it proposes another world. A parallel world, available at any moment, that competes with the sensory world in which our body is engaged.

He stood up. Went to the window.

— We are becoming beings whose attention is perpetually divided between the sensory world — this body, this room, this light, these faces — and this screen-world which has no texture, no resistance, no weight. And in this perpetual division of attention, something comes undone. Something in our capacity to be fully here — fully embodied.

— Malia: You are describing something I feel but would not have known how to name. This impression that my body has become a support — the support for my digital life. That it has lost its thickness.

— Its thickness. That is the right word. And that is exactly what Merleau-Ponty calls the thickness of the flesh — that density of the lived body that makes the world resist us, surprise us, surpass us.

He went to the board and wrote:

The flesh is thick. The screen is flat.

— This is not a value judgment. It is a phenomenological description. The screen is a surface without thickness — without real tactile resistance, without smell, without its own temperature. And when we spend most of our perceptual life in front of flat surfaces, something of our capacity to inhabit the thick world contracts.

— Noa: It is a form of sensory impoverishment. Not a pathology — an atrophy. The same phenomenon we described for thought in the first seminar, but at the level of the body.

— Exactly. And bodily atrophy is perhaps even more serious — because it is even more silent.

He took the chalk and wrote slowly:

The anaesthesia of the lived body does not hurt. That is its danger.

— Léo: I want to return to what you said. Because for some people — people with disabilities, people geographically isolated, people in pain — this parallel world is not an escape. It is a vital resource.

— You are absolutely right. And that is a nuance I do not wish to sidestep. The digital has opened real spaces of existence for people who had been deprived of them. But I want to maintain the following distinction. There is a difference between using digital tools as prostheses of existence — to compensate for a limitation — and using them as substitutes for existence — to replace an embodied presence in the world that would be possible but that one has lost the habit of.

— How do you know whether you are using your phone because it opens something for you — or because it protects you from something?

The silence that followed was long. Uncomfortable. The good kind of discomfort — the kind that signals a question has touched something real.

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II. The Augmented Body — How Far Can We Go Without Losing Ourselves?

— I'd like to begin with a distinction.

He went to the board and wrote three words in a column:

REPAIR IMPROVE TRANSFORM

— These are three different gestures. Three different relationships to the body. Repair — the classic medical gesture. The body is injured, ill, failing. One intervenes to restore a lost function. Improve — not restoring a lost function, but augmenting an existing function beyond what it naturally is. Transform — modifying the body deeply enough to produce something that is no longer quite human in the biological sense.

— The philosophical question is not: should we stop somewhere? The question is: what do we risk losing at each step?

— Sonia: The boundary between repairing and improving is already philosophically contested. A cochlear implant that gives better-than-normal hearing — is that repair or improvement?

— No. And that is precisely why it is philosophically interesting. The Deaf community — with a capital D, the cultural community — has in fact posed this question radically. Some members refuse cochlear implants for their Deaf children. Not because they are against medicine — but because they consider that deafness is not a deficiency to be repaired. It is a way of being in the world, a culture, a language.

He wrote on the board:

The bodily norm is not natural. It is constructed. And it is political.

— There is an American philosopher — Michael Sandel — who wrote a remarkable book called *The Case Against Perfection*. Sandel distinguishes two fundamental attitudes toward the body: openness to the given, and the will to total mastery.

— Sandel's argument says: there is something precious in accepting that the body we have — with its limits, its fragilities — is not entirely of our own making. That we received it. And that this reception, this original non-mastery, is constitutive of who we are.

— When parents genetically select their child's characteristics — they make the child into a project. An achievement. And in that gesture, the child is no longer received — it is produced.

— Malia: And the child themselves — what does it do to them? Knowing that their characteristics were chosen?

— Sandel speaks of the burden of hyper-parenting — the fact that parents who have optimised everything have also planned everything. And a child who has been entirely planned has no longer the space to be a surprise. To disappoint

expectations creatively — which all children do, and which is perhaps the condition for the emergence of a genuinely authentic personality.

He wrote on the board:

The solidarity of the fragile — what we lose when we cease to be vulnerable together.

— Léo: But there is a limit to this argument. Vulnerability is not equally distributed. The bodies that suffer — ill bodies, bodies with disabilities, bodies in pain — do not choose their vulnerability. Asking them to remain vulnerable in the name of a philosophy of non-mastery is perhaps asking the weakest to bear the burden of a lesson from which the strongest exempt themselves.

— That is the best objection one can make to Sandel. And to me. And I will answer it honestly — that is, by admitting it is partially correct.

— You are right that vulnerability is not equitably distributed. Any philosophy that romanticises suffering is philosophically suspect and morally dangerous. But one can maintain something of Sandel's intuition without falling into that trap. It is not suffering itself that is precious — it is the way we inhabit it, the way it sometimes transforms us.

— Iris: I'd like to return to transhumanism proper. The idea of uploading consciousness, of transplanting it into a non-biological substrate. What does the phenomenology of the body say about this hypothesis?

— It says that it is a contradiction in terms.

He wrote:

**A consciousness without a body is not a liberated consciousness.
It is a destroyed consciousness.**

— If Merleau-Ponty is right — if consciousness is originally corporeal — then a consciousness uploaded into a computer is not my consciousness surviving. At best it is a copy of certain of my cognitive patterns. But this copy would have no body proper. It would not have this way of situating itself in space, of feeling the resistance of things, of being exposed to the world through a skin.

— Transhumanism, in its most radical version, rests on a deep philosophical error — a Cartesian error, paradoxically. It believes that what is essential in the human is cognition — information processing — and that this cognition is in principle separable from its biological substrate.

He wrote:

Transhumanism is technological Cartesianism.

— Noa: So transhumanism does not promise immortality. It promises the creation of a new entity that would resemble me, that would remember having been me — but which would no longer be me in the phenomenological sense. It would be a kind of sincere impostor. A being that had not lied — but that had been deceived about its own identity.

Professor Verne stopped short. Looked at him. Went to the board. Wrote it himself, slowly:

A sincere impostor — a being deceived about its own identity.

— That is perhaps the most precise description of what consciousness uploading would produce. And this formulation tells us something important about personal identity. It is not my memories. It is not my values. It is the living, corporeal unity of all of this — a unity anchored in this particular body, this particular flesh, this irreplaceable here-and-now.

— And if we lose this unity — if we let ourselves be convinced that we are essentially transferable information — then we do not gain immortality. We lose something more precious still. We lose mortality. And with mortality — we lose what it gives us: urgency, intensity, the particular savour of counted time.

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III. The Body in the Virtual — When Space Loses Its Resistance

— I'd like to begin with an image.

He had arrived that morning with something unusual — a small stone. An ordinary stone, grey, slightly rough, which he placed at the centre of the table without explanation.

— Look at this stone. Really look at it.

They looked. Some reached out to touch it — almost reflexively, as if sight naturally called for touch.

— There. That gesture you just made — reaching out, wanting to touch — that is what Merleau-Ponty calls motor intentionality. Your body anticipated contact before you had even decided to. It already knew, before your reflective consciousness, that stones are to be touched. Your body has an intelligence of the world that precedes your thought.

— Now imagine an image of this stone on a screen. As realistic as possible. Would your body reach out in the same way?

— Malia: No. Or if it did — we would know it was futile. There is something in the perception of the screen that already says: don't reach out. There is nothing to grasp.

— Exactly. And that something — that information your body receives before any reflection — is resistance. The real stone resists. It has weight, texture, temperature. The image of the stone does not resist. It is pure surface.

He went to the board. Wrote:

The resistance of the world is what confirms our existence.

— This is not a poetic formula. It is a precise phenomenological proposition. We know we exist because the world resists us. Because there is friction between us and it. Without this resistance, we would float in something indistinct.

— Léo: What you are describing has a precise neurological correlate. The sensorimotor systems of the brain are designed to anticipate resistance. And these internal models are built through experience — through repeated interactions with a world that truly resists. There are studies on surgeons who have practiced extensively on simulators and who show deficits in certain tactile skills compared to those who learned directly on the real.

— Exactly. And what you describe for the surgeon's hands, I want to extend to something broader. To the way we inhabit the world in general.

He went to the board. Wrote:

Virtual resistance engages the brain. Real resistance engages the entire body. These are not the same forms of learning.

— Iris: You are describing something I observe in my nephews. They are extraordinarily skilled in digital environments. But I have seen them panic before a spider, be at a loss before a broken household appliance, unable to read a paper map. As if the physical world had become foreign.

— What you are describing is not a deficit of intelligence. It is a deficit of incorporation. A deficit of that bodily wisdom that Merleau-Ponty described — that practical intelligence of the physical world that is built through direct, repeated, engaged exposure.

— There is an American philosopher and craftsman — Matthew Crawford — who wrote a magnificent book called *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. Crawford left a position at a Washington think tank to open a motorcycle repair shop. And from that experience he drew a philosophy of embodied knowledge.

— Crawford says: when I repair an engine, the world resists me with an independence I must respect. The engine doesn't care about my theories. And this submission to the resistance of the real is a school of thought. It teaches humility. It teaches one to distinguish what one believes one knows from what one truly knows.

He wrote:

Physical space decentres us. Digital space recentres us. These are two opposing schools of existence.

— Noa: And augmented reality — the metaverse, immersive headsets — is perhaps the ultimate stage of this recentring. A world where reality itself is filtered by a digital layer that personalises it before we even perceive it directly.

— Yes. And that is where something very profound is at stake. Augmented reality does not suppress the physical world — it covers it with a layer of meaning, information, interpretation. It means we never encounter the world directly anymore — we always encounter it already interpreted, annotated, filtered through an interface.

He went to the board and wrote:

Augmented reality does not bring us closer to the real. It gently distances us from it.

— This gentle distance — this permanent mediation — weakens what Husserl called the ante-predicative contact with the world — that primary, pre-reflective, pre-linguistic relationship we have with things before we name them, before we categorise them. That is where wonder is born. That is where genuine curiosity is born.

He looked at the stone, still there at the centre of the table.

— This stone — in its total banality — contains more possible experience than any virtual environment will ever be able to offer. Because it is real. Because it resists. Because it has a geological history of millions of years inscribed in its mineral composition.

— There is something the virtual cannot give. The feeling — corporeal, immediate, irreducible — of being in a world that existed before us and will exist after us. A world that does not concern itself with our preferences. A world that contains us without belonging to us.

He picked up his coat.

— Before the next session — take this stone. Or another. And carry it in your pocket for a week. Not for a mystical reason. For a very simple phenomenological reason. To remind you, ten times a day, through the contact of your hand, that the world has a texture. That it resists. That it is there.

— Because that is the beginning of everything. Feeling that the world is there.

And he left.

The stone remained at the centre of the table. And something strange happened — one after another, as they left, each took it for a moment in their hand. Weighed it. Felt it. Set it down.

As if this tiny gesture — this brief contact with a fragment of the real world — were a way of responding to everything that had just been said.

Without words. With the hands.

As the body always responds before thought.

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IV. The Suffering Body — What Pain, Age, and Death Teach Us

— I'd like to begin with something unusual.

He did not go to the board. He did not go to the window. He remained seated — truly seated, among them, on an ordinary chair, hands resting on his knees.

— I'd like to talk to you about my father.

Silence.

— My father was eighty-two years old when he died. The last three years of his life, he suffered. Not from a specific illness — from that diffuse, generalised ageing that makes the body grow weary of itself. His joints. His breath. A dull ache in his back that never really left him.

— And in those three years, I learned more philosophy at his bedside than in all my years at university. Not because suffering is beautiful — it is not. Not because old age is a lesson — it would be obscene to say that to someone experiencing it. But because my father, in that state, was present in a way I had never seen in him when he was in good health.

— He was in his body in an absolute way. Without distance. His body was there — constantly, stubbornly, irreducibly there. And this forced presence had produced in him something I had no word for at the time. Something like gravity. A density.

— Malia: That is a difficult image to receive. Because one wants to say — but if we could relieve his pain, we should have. And you would have.

— Yes. Without hesitation. And that is precisely the tension I want to hold this morning. Not: pain is good, let us leave it. But: pain tells us something that the absence of pain does not.

He finally rose, went to the board and wrote:

Pain is not an enemy. It is a message. The question is: what does it say?

— Modern medicine — in its deep logic — tends to treat pain as an enemy to defeat. An alarm signal that can and must be silenced. And in that logic, it has accomplished prodigious things. Millions of lives made less painful. That is an immense and incontestable good.

— But there is in this logic a philosophical presupposition that deserves examination. The presupposition that pain is external to us — that it is an accident, an intrusion. As if the true self were a self without pain.

— Phenomenology says something different. It says that pain is a modification of our being-in-the-world — a particular way of existing in space and time. It is not external to us. It transforms us. It reconfigures us.

He went to the board. Wrote:

Pain says: you have a body. Perfect health says: forget that you do.

— Léo: There is a phenomenology of pain developed by Drew Leder in *The Absent Body*. Leder shows that the healthy body is largely absent from consciousness — one doesn't think about one's lungs when breathing. But when it suffers — it asserts itself. It returns to the foreground.

— Yes. And this reappearance — this forced return to the body — is both a limitation and a revelation. An obvious limitation: pain restricts, impedes, exhausts. But a revelation too — because it forces an attention to the body we would not

otherwise have given. It says: you have a body. You are this body. It is here. It matters.

— Thomas: I had a serious injury two years ago. A torn anterior cruciate ligament. Six months of rehabilitation. And I remember the moment I understood I would not be running for months. Something came undone in me. Not just frustration. I realised I didn't know who I was without running. That running was not an activity I did — it was a way of being me.

— What you are describing has a philosophical name. Merleau-Ponty called it the disruption of the bodily schema. When the body is injured or ill, the bodily schema is disrupted. And this disruption reveals something one didn't see when everything was working. To what extent we were thinking with our legs, seeing with our hands, existing through our motor possibilities.

He wrote on the board:

The incorporated injury becomes bodily wisdom.

— Iris: I'd like to talk about ageing. In our era obsessed with youth, with physical performance, ageing is treated as a failure. Something one should be able to prevent, slow down, perhaps one day defeat.

— Yes. And that is where the philosophy of the body meets what we said about transhumanism. Because ageing is the clearest expression of this truth that some would like to erase: the body is temporal. It is in time — not as an object that passes through time, but as a being made of time. That carries time in its flesh.

He went to the board, paused as if searching for words, then wrote:

**The aged body is a body that has lived. Its marks are not flaws.
They are archives.**

— Simone de Beauvoir — in *The Coming of Age* — described her own ageing with painful frankness. And what she says most profoundly is this: the old body is a foreign body. One no longer recognises it. It no longer corresponds to the inner image one has of oneself. And this strangeness is a philosophical experience of extraordinary richness. It says something about what we are: beings who cannot be reduced to their present body. Beings who carry several ages within themselves simultaneously.

— Noa: My grandmother died last year. She was eighty-nine. And in her last months — when she could barely move, when the world had shrunk to her room — she had a presence I have never found in anyone as intense. As if everything superfluous had gone. As if only what was essential remained.

— You have just described what some philosophers and mystics have called the stripping away. This process — involuntary, often painful — by which ageing and illness successively remove what was secondary. And this progressive stripping away — if traversed with awareness — can reveal something essential. Not a consolation — a truth.

He went to the board and wrote:

The stripping away reveals what was fundamental by removing what was circumstantial.

— And that is where I want to return to something we said about transhumanism. If ageing sometimes produces this kind of presence, this kind of stripping away — then immortality would not only be a biological impossibility. It would be an existential catastrophe.

He wrote:

An immortal being would have nothing to learn from its body. It would not age. It would not truly suffer. It would not die. It would not truly live.

— Heidegger had said that being-toward-death is what gives existence its character of urgency, of singularity. It is because I will die — because this moment is the only this-moment I will ever have — that this moment has weight. An immortal being would not have this urgency. It could always put things off until later.

He went to the board one last time. Wrote slowly, beneath everything that preceded:

The body recovered — is the body accepted in all its thickness. The healthy body and the suffering body. The young body and the aged body. The performing body and the dying body. The body as temporal totality — the way in which we are in the world from birth until death.

— That is what Merleau-Ponty gives us — not a philosophy of the ideal body, but a philosophy of the real body. A body that sweats and ages and suffers and dies. A body that cannot be placed in brackets without placing oneself in brackets.

He picked up his coat.

— Touch something living. A tree. An animal. A hand. Not through a screen. Directly. And stay there — in that contact — long enough to truly feel. Long enough for your body to receive what the world gives it when one gives it the time.

— Because it is there — in that direct contact — that something irreplaceable resides. Something that has a very simple name.

He buttoned his coat.

— Life, he said, looking vaguely at his students... and he left.

In the room, no one moved immediately. The stone was still at the centre of the table. And this time someone took it and kept it. Held it in both closed palms. Eyes closed. Like someone listening.

Outside the wind moved through the trees.

* * *

CODA

The Body Restored to Itself

There was no stone on the table that morning.

Professor Verne had removed it. In its place — nothing. The bare table, the ordinary wood, the familiar texture they had stopped noticing for weeks.

Except this morning. This morning they noticed it.

Professor Verne entered. Set down his coat. Sat directly among them — not at the end of the table. Like someone who returns after a long journey and simply sits down.

— I'd like to ask you again the question from the beginning. How are you? In your body. Here. Now.

It was Léo who spoke first — which surprised everyone, himself most of all.

— Léo: I went running in the woods yesterday evening. Without music. Without a connected watch. Without an app. And after twenty minutes — I had the feeling of finding something again. Not a performance. Just my feet on the earth. The cold of the air in my lungs. The way the ground changes beneath the soles when you go from dry earth to damp earth near the stream.

— Léo: I have been running for ten years. And that was perhaps the first time in a long while that I was truly running. That my body was running — not my application.

— Malia: I did something much simpler. I cooked. Really cooked — not reheated, not ordered. From the beginning, with vegetables I had touched, smells I had breathed, dough I had kneaded by hand. For two hours — my hands were occupied by something real, resistant, present. And my hands seemed — how to say — relieved.

— Thomas: I visited my father. We did something together — something physical, concrete. We repaired a shelf in his garage. Two hours. Hands in the tools. Very few words. And in those two hours — in that shared work, in that common resistance of wood and metal — something else was repaired too. Something that words on the phone had not repaired.

— Iris: I slept. Really slept — without a screen in the hour before falling asleep, without checking my messages at night. And I woke up differently. Not just rested — present. As if my body had had time to be itself for a few hours.

— Noa: I held someone's hand. For a long time. For no particular reason. Just — being there, in that contact. And I realised I hadn't done that in months. That most of my relationships went through screens. And that simple contact — that hand in mine — said something that nothing else can say.

Professor Verne listened to them all. When they had all spoken, he remained silent for a long moment.

— What you've just told me — this is not philosophy. It is better than philosophy.

He looked at the bare table.

— It is lived philosophy. Philosophy in the hands, in the feet, in the skin. Philosophy as it should always have been — not a discipline that reflects on the body from a head that forgets it, but a thought that starts from the body, returns to it, never pretends to surpass it.

He stood. Went to the board one last time and wrote slowly:

The body is not what you inhabit. The body is the way you inhabit.

— Merleau-Ponty spent his life trying to say this. Husserl had approached it. Nietzsche had cried it. Simone Weil had lived it to the extreme. And we — in this room, during these weeks — have tried to think it together.

— You came here with heads full of concepts. You leave — I hope — with something in your hands as well.

He took his coat. Buttoned it. But this time, before leaving, he did something unusual.

He placed his hand flat on the table. Left it there — one second, two seconds. Feeling the wood. The texture, the slight irregularity of the grain, the warmth that matter accumulates in an inhabited room.

Then he straightened.

— There is a sentence by Merleau-Ponty that I have been rereading for thirty years and that tells me something different each time. I'd like to leave it with you.

He went to the board. Wrote for the last time in this seminar:

"The world is not what I think, but what I live."

— What I live. Not what I calculate. Not what I optimise. What I live — with this particular body, in this particular time, in this irreplaceable exposure to a world that resists.

— Take care of your body. Not in the sense of monitoring it, optimising it, performing it. In the sense of truly inhabiting it. Of restoring to it the trust it deserves.

He stopped on the threshold.

— That is all. It is immense.

And he left.

* * *

Outside the spring was there — fully there, without hesitation this time. A spring of clear light and air carrying something new.

In the room on the top floor, no one moved immediately.

But it was not the same stillness as usual. It was something more corporeal. Something in the way they were seated — slightly differently, slightly more there. As if their bodies had, during these weeks, recovered something they knew how to do but had unlearned.

Being simply there.

Léo placed his hand flat on the table — the gesture Professor Verne had made before leaving. Felt the wood. Thomas imitated him, almost without noticing. Then Malia. Then the others — one after another, silently, like a gentle contagion.

Nine hands on the wooden table. Nine bodies in the light of the top floor. Nine beings who inhabited, for a moment, exactly where they were.

Not elsewhere. Not later. There.

* * *

Somewhere in the world, a body was connected to a machine.

Somewhere in the world, a consciousness was seeking to free itself from its flesh.

Somewhere in the world, someone was looking at their body in a mirror and no longer recognising it.

And in the room on the top floor, nine hands placed on a wooden table.

Feeling the grain. Feeling the warmth.

Feeling that the world was there.

Resisting. Real. Alive.

* * *

"The world is not what I think, but what I live." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)