

P R E F A C E

BY NICHOLSON BAKER

In the old black-and-white TV series, Superman, when he needed to pass through a wall, would put his palms against it and lean, frowning. Gradually his caped form would merge with the plaster, pass through lath and two-by-fours, and then reappear in the next room. It wasn't as easy as flying, apparently, but it could be done. Reading works in a similar way. You press your mind, your forehead, against the beginning of a book, the cool cover of it, appreciating its impenetrability. It is rectangular and thick, heavy enough to stop a bullet or press a leaf flat. It will, you think, never let you through. And then you begin to lean into it, applying a little attentive pressure, and the early pages begin to curl back with a soft, radish-slicing sound, and you're in. You're in the book. The thick, segmental chapters fan out into their component pages, and each turned page dematerializes itself, once read, into the fluent, cajoling voice its words carry. And then you're past the midpoint, and the book stretches out before you and behind you like a string of paper lanterns in a huge shadowy tent. Now you're almost

done; the pages are beginning to shrink and solidify once more. When you reach the last sentence, there rests under your left thumb a monolithic clump of paper through which, it seems, you could not possibly have traveled. ☹️ What unites all books, as Abelardo Morell is able to document in these magnificent photographs, and what is responsible for a good measure of their appeal, is their interdimensional ambiguity. Does the printed page inhabit two dimensions, or three, or four? As we read or look, we pretend that a page is an ideally flat and code-bearing plane, with a measurable height and width but no thickness and no curvature. But a page is almost never flat except when a book is closed; opened, its surface rises up slightly toward the inside margin and then veers south into the binding, like a mounding wave. ☹️ And of course each page has thickness. Your fingertips know this perfectly well: they inform you immediately when they have by mistake snagged two corners together, rather than one, in preparation for turning. The embossed letters in a book for the blind cast sharp shadows. Some paper is marvelously thin: the thickest books, the big dictionaries, for instance, whose bindings arch upward into mining tunnels when opened, sometimes have the flimsiest, rattliest pages. And into these tower-

ing cliffs of reference the publisher scoops out a series of alphabetic finger-holds as an aid to the word hunter; crescent-moon notches that then become worn, so Morell's camera records, as if made of soft sandstone, by the impatient touch of many queries. ☞ Bad things happen to books all the time, and then the books hold in their pages the record of those disasters, too. Books become water-soaked and writhe into the shapes of giant clams, and they wait in warehouses for dealers to cut pages out of them for piecemeal sale. Over many decades, paper changes color and becomes more fragile (though considerably less fragile than some apocalyptists have claimed)—the particular fragility of an old volume is part of what it has to tell us. ☞ Some of the most evocative photographs in this collection are the ones in which a book is allowed to fall open slightly, so that we glimpse the foreshortened secrets (an upward glancing face, a coliseum) it may hold. Pages, for the most part, live out their long lives in the dark, keeping hidden what inky burdens they bear, pressed tightly against their neighbors, communicating nothing, until suddenly, like the lightbulb in the refrigerator that seems to be always on but almost never is, one of them is

called upon to speak. And it does.

