**Becoming Water: Self-diagnosis in Three Parts**

Polly Orr

**I Am Beside the Ocean**

If I look straight ahead and keep my head perfectly still, all I can see is the ocean. Neglecting my presence, it continues to wash up on the sand, grey and frigid, even as I stand there in disgust. I am not disgusted by the water. I am afraid. The noise reminds me of the muffled way I cuff my hands against my ears to catch a moment of peace, the rumbling togetherness of soundwaves soothes. I try to isolate the villainous parts of the ocean. I like the sounds, for now, the gentle lapping, the slow steady raindrops over its surface. I like the smell, fermenting, delights that will fall from the belly to the cavernous bottom below.

 A bigger wave comes, and I stumble backwards.

 The roar vibrates my insides in a way that could be interpreted as excitement, or terror. Today, I call it terror. Maybe I have been taking it out on the ocean, my newfound sensitivities. Not new. Always there. New to me to name them. To tend them. To believe I deserve tending.

 Too many loud noises tangle the kelp fields inside and I can’t swim through.

 The ocean is viciously loud now.

 I don’t hate the ocean. I hate the reminder that I am only now learning that volume strikes upon me like a hand held close to a flame. I am allowed to move away. Not just allowed. At times, I need to. Even on beautiful sunny days, I sometimes need to take breaks from things I’m enjoying. I didn’t always understand why.

 I thought I hated being social (what I hated was being dysregulated with no awareness or tools). I thought I hated big crowds (what I hated was uninterrupted periods of overlapping sounds). I thought I hated the ocean, and now I wonder what other misplaced hate was just decades of troubled swimming.

 It felt unfair to ask for a quiet riptide, so I silenced myself instead. I thought pretending I have no needs would make me less afraid of the ocean inside my cells that I can’t always swim through, the vast gulf between what I know and what others tell me I must do to survive. It only made me more afraid of myself. I am not dangerous. I do have needs. Different needs? More needs? A flotation device to keep me above?

 I am disabled.

 Disabled? Me? I thought I hated the ocean, but maybe when I return next, I will call what vibrates inside by a different name.

**I Am in the Ocean**

 Divergent.

 A new way of being, from single cell to splitting, from gills to lungs, from the worn-out pathways of self to deserted islands. Many of them. Places torn from the maps. How did I get here, surrounded by ocean? How is each droplet something I no longer know of myself? How is there still this much mystery?

 Even though I am terrified, one night, I find myself in safe company next to the water, and they are taking off all their clothes, and the full moon sits on the horizon, none of them are afraid, and they know that I am; they won’t judge me if I don’t go in, but I want to.

 Two things can be true at once, more than two. I am floating completely supported. And the water is my pain. I’m floating and surrounded on all sides by my fear. If I thrash around, I won’t make it. Even now, as I’m touched by icy rivulets of shame, I relax. Even as memories bite, I soften.

 No one noticed I was different. Everyone noticed. But quirky different. Artsy different. Walks to the beat of their own drum. No one asked whether the drumbeat was shattering my bones. Was my thrashing and lashing out seen as a dance?

 The water carries me away from the shore. I don’t cause a scene. Today, I stay still and float. I hear my drum beat echo as the water laps up to my ears, I stay still and do the one thing they didn’t: listen. It’s crystal clear, purified by the fear in the water; I know I can’t look away. If I am an ocean, I won’t be upset if some things in my depths are hard to find.

 I become the silent fisher at the edge of my own questions, waiting to bait the truth, waiting to catch something wriggling and alive; I waited too long, too quietly to ruin it now. I want to know what I’ve caught.

 The ocean has its own currents it floats on. What wave am I riding? And where will I crash on the shore?

**I Am an Ocean**

Holy words are sudden.

 They don’t come from sanctified books but second-hand looks at shadows until light sources appear.

 Tensile: capable of tension.

Tensile. The non-binary answer to my prayer: Who Am I?

There are patterns in me that crack down to my bones, hijack my trigger points. In a semiautomatic frenzy, I question free will. There is another without my shared visions and values holding on tight to my internal dashboards. We are in the cycle together, the pattern unfolding, the pattern withholding, the pattern of loss.

 If I am tensile, I don’t lose sight of how, in the very same moment, Grace is keeping my heart beating; my feet chug electrons from the earth, and the sun licks my face like a lost kitten that has found its way home. I am alive, and this is a choice.

 Tensile tells me I am flexible from my electrons to ethereal fields; if I need to stretch out, I have all the way to the ocean, and whenever I am ready, I can roll out into the waves, return my borrowed water, borrowed time, back to the sea.

 They saw the result, but never the effort. Not tensile enough to understand my excellence came at a price. Silent, yet piercing—the agony each time I tried to decide what they needed from me, what face shapes to make, what intonation would let them perceive me.

 So good at guessing, I got many pats on the head. Why was it never seen as concerning that I am 80% made of water and mortified of the sea? I am afraid to let the fire creatures see my wetness. The ones that gulp oil, burn fuel, strive towards the sun. I absorbed my waves, folding their swell back into themselves. They asked for a quiet riptide; so, I ripped aside the part of myself that was screaming. Too tired, I never learned how to swim.

 When a spirit falls down, and there’s no one around to hear it, where does it go? I am at the center of my ocean, learning how to let myself sink down and touch it. I am finding the joy in swimming. I am finding the joy in splashing. I am finding the joy in calling back my waves. I’m knocked over constantly. I don’t see another face anywhere on the shore. Then it appears. Far off on the horizon. Another island. And perhaps I am not alone.