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Water

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WATER

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I present a poem that attempts to unearth productive tensions between normative expectations and the life one lives, between articulating experience and claiming voice. It aims to deal with the overwhelm of coming to terms with multiple crises, like the breakdown of climate, health and relationships, and the impact that has on our ability to even vision futures both personal and universal. The poem highlights physical experience with our world and how this impacts our relationships with others and our work, but also the connections between these and the personal barriers faced to succeeding in and beyond university. I attempt to connect an inner and outer world to see how we might literally (physically) inhabit it while narrating our differences.

Water

I ripple down pebbles at first then over stones that hurt;
my body flops and shimmies in orbits of itself, sometimes split into rivulets which
really is a sensation.

I hit upon and against things as I travel, never meeting the same
folk again—which I'd say was a shame,
but I highly doubt I actually think that.

I shoot around bends feet first, tumble down falls and plummets,
squeezing myself through spots murked with moss and land spilled over,
spaces encroaching—then I think I'm done for.
Squeeze myself through, though—that is key—and I once tasted salt
that climax where my edges fizzed as foam and I connected with every other body
in existence.

That really knocked me out of my flow and if I'm honest I've been chasing
that feeling ever since, now I find myself here bound in frozen mounds
of non-water awaiting my melt.
I've been here before—listening, listening, listening for the drip, drip to begin
to loosen up and slip; this restlessness manifesting in my trembling sense of self
and I reflect my state right back.

You think you see yourself in me, but you only see me, yet overlooked I'm not
when you designate me dangerous, when I swallow your children,
when I uproot your home.
Sure, I don't mean to scare and I would never knowingly harm, but we all know that
it is only a matter of time before this demeanor so carefully curated
bursts its banks.



Figure 1. Coastal Erosion and the North Sea, Tyneside 2021

Academic Commentary

Succeeding becomes increasingly difficult with the rerouting, meandering, and painful diversions I come up against when competing forces in my life intersect with my studies and goals beyond that. Work feels arduous, as pain from long-term conditions makes it difficult to sit or stand at a desk for long periods of time. Environmental, social, and economic policies, cultural representations, and individual attitudes bound up in the university institution all play their role in disabling people with health conditions, but there are more nuanced and pluralistic approaches (Shakespeare, 2014) that acknowledge the physicality of bodies too. Taking a holistic view of the person, the learner, as an embodied creature might allow much broader and deeper understandings of their barriers to success. My hopes of further study become entangled with and feel impossible in the face of the complex, affective labor we call caring (Ruddick, 1980): mothering, tending the ill mental and physical health of family members, my own care, and that of the planet. A further dimension of struggle becomes apparent in the somatic norms of the sector I aim to work and study in; where those entering from working class origins do so without the same social resources (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2020). Thus, imposter syndrome seeps in: opportunities are not applied for, ideas go un-shared, I doubt and retreat. The culturally constructed and socially organized worlds that make up these dialogic dimensions of identity

(Escobar, 2008) are nonetheless bound up in an organic body that responds and often finds itself in peril (Turner, 2012), like the bodies of water in my poem. The question is: how sustainable is it to keep squeezing myself under and over, contorting to fit normative expectations and systems? I tell myself I should just knock it all on the head, keep the banks from bursting.

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