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Learning feeling

1: FEELING

there are so many ways to die

*exposed,
elementally displaced kelp feigns leather, invertebrate
life on this stretch of beach
the strength, and the sleek, of the once slipping-up limbs
now wilted, give in
to the weight of the open air*

*lie still,
hold on*

*these supple arms once wrapped themselves around
otter
(almost gone)
necklaces, linking hands
giant kelp
thwarting floating away*

*sinuous grace, furling unfurling
densely furred flak, trying to get some rest.*

*now, here, on the sand to hold it between my fingers is
touching ghosts,
feeling
a dislocated frond, vegetable tentacle
is to put your palm on the back of another beached soul
(porpoise skin, whale cheek)
still breathing, this
multispecies synaesthesia
as elemental as*

breathing.

*I remember the cold jolt, the breathtaking
arrival of everything
going under*

*flashing against my thinnest skin
the world is sharper in the dark.*

*i feel alive
i feel alive --*

2: FELLOW FEELING

In their feeling, other beings become known to us. And feeling is how we become alive to the world.

Human bodies learn how to feel from the more-than-human world. Consider the sea otter that spins its body into the giant kelp's grasp so that while sleeping, the otter won't float away. The kelp forest mentors us in tenacity, vegetable pelt anchored to the bottom of the shallow sea. We learn that an unctuous bind can be tender, when trust is well-earned. The resting body of the kelp-hugged otter, belly-up to sky, teaches us an uncomplicated dependence: how to be held even when we have left the sure tether of the shoreline behind. The seawater schools us in floating, between fear and home.

Our own bodies feel their way into this multispecies symposium: we sense a lack of perturbation in the otter, a resolute kelp frond, a vigilant sea. Yet, imposing such adjectives upon these more-than-human bodies is sometimes mistaken for human mastery. Always centering the human (so the theory goes), we foist a human feeling-language of our own invention onto non-human bodies whose interiority, presumably, we cannot possibly know.

This is a double-sided paranoia of both feeling and language, then—of both bodies and poetics. Some critics, hypervigilant towards charges of anthropomorphism, maintain that humans could never suppose to know the feeling of a non-human body. The second related concern insists that the words we use to describe our own interiorities—rage, joy, love, fear, shame, grief, compassion—have no application beyond our own human skin. To use this language, and in doing so to presume that we have access to the inner worlds of non-humans, is denounced as species-superciliousness and mastery. Such moves would presume that the world can only come alive according to our terms; we parse everything through our own frames of feeling.

But what if in saying that the sea holds me with indifferent grace, or that the kelp pines for the missing otters, an empty leathery frond palm with nothing to hold – what if our attribution of feeling to non-human entities, using human language, were not an extension of human mastery, but a recognition of the very source of our own affections and sensitivities in the world around us? What if this were not some anthropomorphic arrogance, but rather an elemental, multispecies synaesthesia? On this view, the sensory experiences of one species or body would find pathways of expression through the feeling organs of others: I feel the slippery toughness of the kelp with my tongue against the inside of my taught cheek.

Although “we take emotions to be distinctly human phenomena,” writes Alfonso Lingis, “not only do emotions discharge their forces on the outside environment; they have their source in it.” In other words, what if the appreciation

of a sensate more-than-human world were not a centering of our own colonising language, but rather to risk decentering our human selves, as we give ourselves over to a humbling awareness of this fellow feeling? To decenter requires that we refuse to see humans as the origin of language; instead we admit that we merely participate in the sensuous languages of the world.

“Emotions get their force from the outside,” Lingis claims. In this sense, the sea, the otter and the kelp not only believe the myth of anthropomorphism, but also the view that feeling is an internal state. This is not to say that the non-human world is a vending machine of feelings, whereby we could access trepidation, or giddiness, or a deep sense of calm, by simply slotting in a coin and keying in the right combination. Feelings are no more locked up in the non-human world than they are uniquely enclosed within some interiority of the human.

Isn't it more accurate to say that feeling is intersubjective—a body's way of moving in the presence of other bodies, its mode of relating? It is the character of the milieu that a body engenders, or the orientations it encourages. It is an energetic call-and-response, a mode of connection. Rather than “just” poetics, the search for adequate language to hold these phenomena is a true story of sensory learning and material relation. I neither imagine nor conjure the bereftness of an ocean bed with no forest; I feel the loneliness enter me and nestle, somewhere close to my spleen.

And still: even if feelings are how bodies become alive to us, this does not splay the world out before us, all feeling there for us to know. This is why language can feel inept, incapable. Human words may provide approximate markers for such feeling, but our strain for precision alerts us to the fact that we are already reaching beyond a species-specific possession and towards something larger than ourselves. The elusiveness of a precise language is evidenced, too, in metaphor's inevitable descent from startling recognition into cliché. For example, to call the otter playful or the ocean mysterious tells us almost nothing now — we've all heard this before. Multispecies synaesthesia insists that we keep paying attention, for human language will rarely get it right (as in: right in the gut so that you feel the fellow-feeling in your own flesh). And even then, it will hold for only as long as it can keep the synaesthetic relation alive. So, we continuously reach for new expressions of relation (perhaps the ocean is instead an archive of dumped desires? perhaps the otter is self-assured?).

This may also be why humans who have supposed mastery of language find it particularly difficult to catch a fellow feeling and hold it without breaking it. Too much certainty! Using human language badly, wildly, unfaithfully, or errantly, may do a better job at feeling something that is yet to be translated. Our attempts to hold these complexities in language can be a humble extension of our relation to the world.

Both feeling and the words in which we stow it can come from nowhere else than the world. Feeling is bodies learning from other bodies. Learning feeling is to be in relation.

3: FEELING EXTINCTION

Things are not looking great for the sea otter, nor for the majestic underwater forests of giant sea kelp, nor even for the sea. In the Pacific Northwest, these lifeways are threatened by the violences which tether them together. The cascading disasters of colonial expansion and fossil fuel extraction, leading up to contemporary manifestations of climate change, have meant, in the words of geographer Rosemary-Claire Collard, “a disintegration of social and ecological relations” for these kelp-otter-ocean ecologies. As we learn from paying attention to these relations, extinction does not entail a neat excision

3 Rosemary-Claire
Collard, "Disaster
Capitalism and the Quick
Quick Slow Unravelling of
Animal Life," *Antipode* 50.
4 (2018)

of a species, but the snipping of a knot tasked with complex connecting. Citing extinction studies researcher Thom van Dooren, Collard underscores this collapse as a "great unraveling of intimately entangled ways of life."

So in a time of extinction and climate catastrophe, how are we to feel? Feeling intensifies, but also loses certainty. Feeling's temporal container is pulsing, expanding, its membrane now more porous: the past seeps in, the future jumps the gun. How can feeling anything right now not also be steeped in a feeling for what once was, in a feeling for what will or will not remain tomorrow? A singular loss echoes and anticipates others, both known and unknowable. Feeling cannot keep up with the crash of change; all feeling becomes palimpsestic and provisional. This is a differently queer time of feeling, held by the kelp, held by the otter, held by the sea — none of them holding steady.

Language, that supposedly masterful tool of Man, must become more agile, more capacious, but also more resourceful. Words are stretched to their limits, while their labours seem more necessary than ever. But I still don't have words that can adequately hold the shared grief of these collapsing worlds of kelp and otters and oceans. I keep pushing errant syllables around my mouth, none of them quite catching.

It seems reasonable to imagine that poetics will not always keep a pace. Such hard work. And then what becomes of feeling? Does it still circulate through our flesh, lost and looking? Do we inhale, our mitochondria unsatisfied by a changed molecular composition of the world, taken in? Our bodies swell up with phantom feeling, awkward and unsure. If we learn feeling from being in relation to the world, then no language will save us when those relations dissolve. The words might remain for a while as placeholders. But, as relation without relata to anchor it in the world, is some feeling unlearned altogether?

No call, no response. What feeling will quietly unravel as the world becomes undone?

4 *Ibid.*, p.912