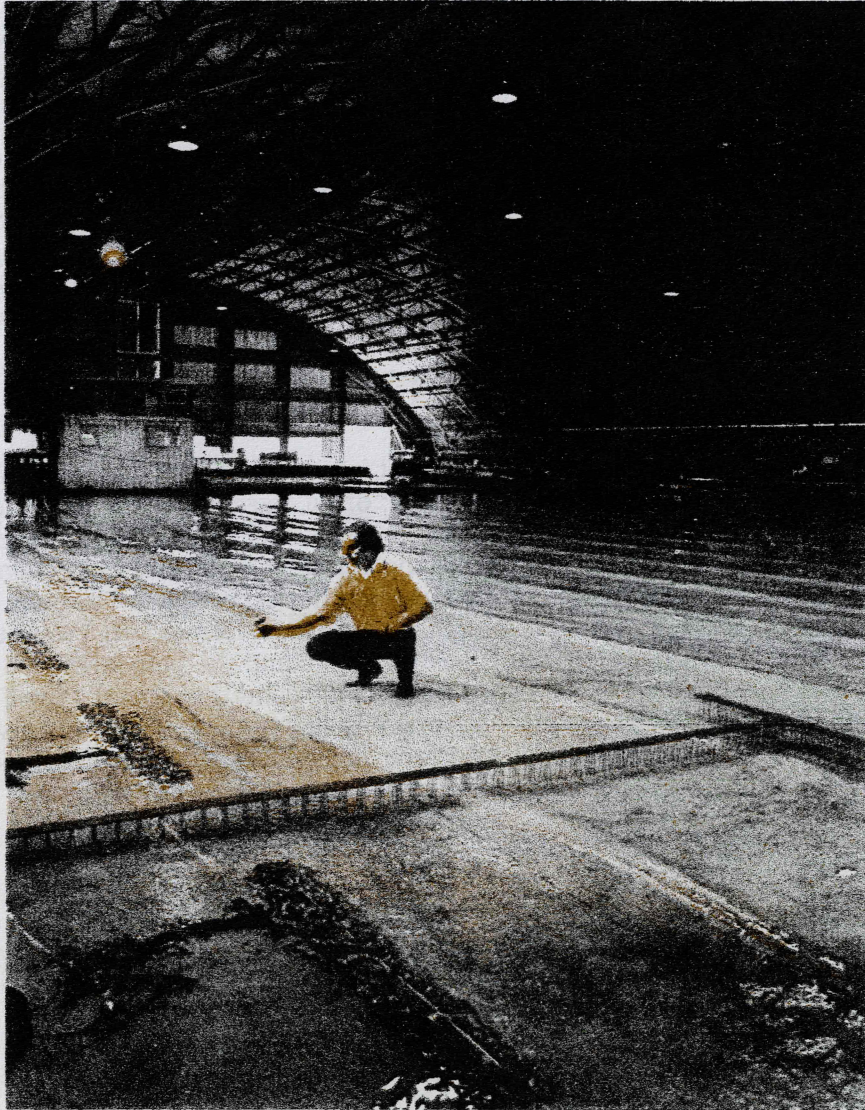


Drawer 63 contains the folder that initially brought me to the Picture File earlier this year; I was writing an essay that brushed up against erosion, and my friend Will, who studied geography, encouraged me to write more into the topic. I opted to visit the Picture File and go through every single photograph in the erosion folder. I've photographed erosion regularly in the coastal Jersey neighborhood I grew up in — the land was continually reshaped by tropical storms, hurricanes and regular flooding. There was once a tile factory along the bay, so after storms cleared there would often be pastel ceramic chips amongst the sea glass and dead fish.

A few years ago, my onetime gynecologist informed me that I had vaginal erosions. This isn't the term normally used; often, harmless growths are called cervical ectropion or entropy. The organ turns itself inside out, and the cells begin to grow on the outside wall of the cervix. It is normal and benign and expected to happen sometimes, though I was not expecting it. The body holds surprises as you age, as illness stretches out in time. Last month, I went to the emergency room because it hurt to breathe in, and the pain stretched from my left collarbone to the lowest rung of my ribs, and they found a small dead piece of tissue attached to my lung, which is slightly less normal and also benign. My body was trying to kill the piece of dead tissue, which it now viewed as a foreign object, what had once part of me. *This could be the result of prior trauma to the lungs, the doctor said. I've never seen it before.*



fig. 1



Civil Engineer Charles R. Curren, Vicksburg experimental station, simulates wave erosion along

California coast, only one of the hundreds of Engineer projects (see map, opposite page).

fig. 2

I associate erosion with wetness, the lapping of the sea against indomitable cliffs, waves crashing against sand (fig. 1). The folder in the Picture File reflects more wind erosion than water erosion, but it's the water pictures I'm drawn to, the striations in magnificent color that make tiny islands in tide pools, winding channels filled with smaller rocks huddled together. In one of the pictures, a civil engineer crouches like a giant inside a simulation of coastal

erosion, a miniature pier stretching past him (fig. 2). If not for the scale of the pier and the height of the ceiling, he could be standing in the shallowest part of low tide, when the waves barely skim the surface of the sand before they peter out, when it looks glassy and clear.

When my partner and I moved to California, we bought an annual pass to Cabrillo National Monument. I mostly wanted to see the tide pools, and we wandered a bit around the lighthouse, hiked along the Pacific to a trail that ended abruptly, scurried quickly past a particularly large nest (wasps? bees?). The ocean is impossibly far away on this part of the coast; to get close, at least at Cabrillo, you have to drive to the bottom of a hill and park in a very small parking lot. The winding drive down is incredible, the Pacific blue and immense, the scrubby green landscape bright. One of the parking lots is now closed, because the water has steadily washed away the land beneath the asphalt, and it is in danger of collapsing. And the land around the tide pools is incredible: if you close your eyes, or turn your back on the ocean, you might think you are on Mars. The crevices are deep, and the sun casts black shadows against their edges. I saw an octopus for the first time at the tide pools, easing its body along. Parents carry children on their backs, hopping from rock to rock, or wading through the water.

There is a primordial sort of curiosity, a collective peering.

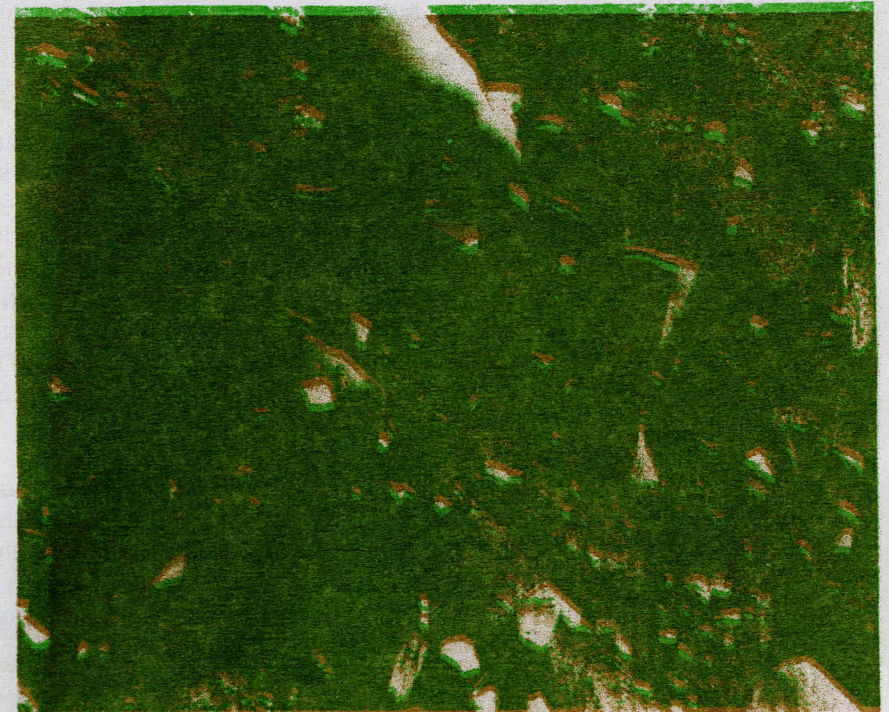


fig. 3

Sheet erosion over wide, gently sloping surfaces is almost imperceptible but in time leaves a rocky surface like this with nothing but tiny pillars of topsoil underneath the rocks after rain

DRAWER 63
ENGLAND – LONDON – AERIAL VIEWS
TO ETOSHA PARK, NAMIBIA

On the Jersey shore, the Atlantic feels much closer. The distance from boardwalk or parking lot to the water's edge is easily crossed. From my childhood bedroom, the bay was visible through the trees in winter as a sparkle. During Hurricane Sandy, the bay breached the seawall, built in the 1970s to hold off the water, and washed fish into the neighbors' living rooms. Our house was spared. The dunes that protected the shore road had washed away during Hurricane Irene the year before, and a Nor'easter the year before that. Sandy took out an entire neighborhood north of us, where all the houses were condemned with red X's in their windows. Some of them have been rebuilt on stilts, to allow the flooding to flow beneath them, and the rest of the lots are vacant and overgrown.

Erosion has shortened the beaches; the waves are closer to the boardwalks and the beach houses, and further north and south, the regular houses. The wealthier neighborhoods pump sand back onto the beach, while the poorer towns wait for state or federal money. It is futile; New Jersey is the third fastest warming state in the country; it is a peninsula, jutting into the Atlantic, bordered on the west by the Delaware River and its corresponding water gap. It is also the densest state, containing the most people per square mile in the United States. It is getting smaller, hotter, stormier.



It took me a long time to understand that the beach where I grew up would never look the same. During the first storm I remember, Floyd, the sand was visibly washing away in tiny rivulets, the water crashing over the jetty, the bay dark and gray and angry. My glitter Furby rainboots filled up with water and grew moldy on the back porch. After the Nor'easter, I thought they might build the dunes back up, smooth rounded sandcastles scattered with cattails. But it remains flat, leveled off. You can see a lot from the road now: the beach, the seawall, a gazebo where you can sit and watch the water or see the NYC skyline on a clear day. You might see horseshoe crabs, families on Jet Skis, two people fucking in the bushes, men with metal detectors.

It has taken longer to understand that my body may never be the same. I am still trying to understand this: that something out of your control may lead to endless bleeding, damage to fertility, a newly intimate relationship with a menstrual cup and the toilet, pain that is uncontrollable and random and debilitating. The shape of my body has changed, the smell of it, the way I move throughout the world. There is no way to get it back.