

before i was gay i was really into nudibranchs

underneath water the time seems to

stretch

I could never understand how my father could stay submerged for so long. I imagined breaths curled into the edges of his snorkel, pre-orchestrated in a process that I was simply just not old enough to understand.

Queer time recognises the way queers have contended with chronology in ways that are sideways, backwards, distorted and truncated. As children, the realisation of queerness marked the beginning of a countdown to the unknown. The shape of a future - 'marriage, children, generativity and inheritance' - is made uncertain by a newly arrived desire. Looking backwards, the young queer may at first not find any queers at all. With persistence they may find one or two where their perversity could be punished, transgressions transgressed. In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the queer was faced with no futurity, as noted by Edelman. The zeitgeist bundled these stories of tragedy and presented them to the commons with an implied accusation. The child appears to be growing into a life that does not exist. And so, they grow sideways, as Stockton puts it. Where others may find the possibility of freedom and self-determination in adulthood, the gay child understands that their eccentricity may not survive beyond the safety of state-accepted childishness. It is in this post-childhood-death that the gay child is born, and only when the adult learns to conceptualise these premeditated eccentricities as symptoms of a broader homosexual tendency, are they able to understand their childhood selves as Gay. Stockton explains that the key marker of the theoretical gay child is not its homosexuality but its creation of an existence outside normative time and space. It is in this 'queer time,' as Halberstam puts it, that queers produce alternative existences not marred by the constraints of capitalist and heteronormative expectations.



underneath water the time seemed to

shrink

for me, at least. i was always aware of the instability of my lungs and throat and will - I didn't trust them. time underwater felt stolen, stealing from the atmosphere and plunging it below into foreign territory, stealing from the depths as water bled into my orifices and spectacularity obscured the on-land, stealing from my body as I milked it for every ounce of life it could sacrifice.

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As a child I refused to play make-believe, the possibility of non-reality seemed too vast and I feared I could not control it. Succumbing to peer pressure, I partook once or twice. Where the other children created worlds out of their own, manning shopfronts and building families, my playtime found its shape in agony and darkness. So, I stayed away from the pretend and grumbled as other children embraced fiction as fact. In place of my childhood, I devoted my time to categorising the world as best I could, embracing the safety of rules and order. Yet, my tendency for darkness could not be entirely halted, instead appearing in recurring nightmares that plagued my early years. These dreams I would keep secret, fearing the child they would lay bare if someone could piece these alternative existences together.

The rules I had built for my mind would blur underwater. It required too much concentration to stay submerged and the foundations would inevitably begin to dissolve. Without these guards in place, I was faced with the impending threat of my own internal wildness. The water, however, always managed to soften the darkness. Where on-land the atmosphere is rarely visible, within the ocean, water shows itself in response to your bodily encounter, the movement causing ruptures in its liquidated makeup. The ocean exhibits the penetrability of the body in plain sight: soaking hair, softening nails and pruning skin. It moves amongst us and sits within us, claiming our bodies as its own. Hypersea, coined by Mark and Diana McMenamin, is 'the interconnected system of terrestrial life that has extended the sea and taken it along for the ride' illustrating the centrality of water to our being. The impending threat of disorder seemed to fold into the masses that move amongst my skin when underwater, moving in and out of focus. The fear had moved from all-encompassing to transient, the water offering me resolution for my troubles.

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The first great phallus I encountered was an eight-toned 5-inch wet-to-touch nudibranch. The nudibranch had drawn me in, a technicolour lure for the unqueered child. There seemed to be a tether between our bodies, I could not resist but tug at it, my body lurching towards its extravagance. Where this magnificence fends off other creatures, in fear of its poisonous delights, it only drew me closer. The water had handed me over to the nudibranch, invisible tendons extending out from its fluorescent extremities, tying our limbs together. Holding me in place it inched closer, contracting its limbs against the seafloor. Nudibranchs are carnivorous beings, they consume to become, cannibalising the attributes of other species for their own benefit. The *Glaucus Atlanticus* feasts on blue bottles, lining their skin with the poisonous cells that were supposed to protect the prey. The *Phyllodesmium Longicirrum*, or *phyll*, feeds on soft corals, syphoning their photosynthetic algae to ensure it can feed off the sun alone, becoming photosynthetic. The photosynthetic algae contained below the translucent boundary of the *phyll* is the *Zooxanthellae* or *xanth*. These species live in symbiosis, *xanth* providing sustenance via its photosynthetic properties and *phyll* providing shelter. They come to fruition through each other, becoming inextricable in the process. It seemed the water and the slug had formed an alliance with a common goal, and I wondered what they wanted from me.

Susan Sontag, within her infamous *Notes on Camp*, writes that “nothing in nature can be campy.” Deemed unnatural by the hegemon, queers revolt in the artifice, making claim to the constructed rather than the innate. Which makes sense, perhaps, coming of age long after our heterosexual peers. To the gay adult, the unqueered child appears a farce, a badly imitated construction of the normative child. Retrospectively it appears obvious; small limbs lined with boys’ clothes and chosen crushes. Post-realisation, the gay adult must construct themselves again, piecing together various versions of themselves. Perhaps most difficult, the gay adult searches for a self that was not hindered by denial, repression and refusal; something innate, something *natural*. But it is hard to locate the *natural* child, the *untouched* and the *un-influenced*, harder even in a being so bound up in contradictions. As an adult I find myself returning to parts of my childish existence, taking up forgotten hobbies and neglected traits. But inevitably the *natural* child is no longer and they cannot remain pristine into adulthood.

‘Camp rests on innocence but also, when it can, corrupts it’

Susan Sontag



Crawling upon the arm of the child, I begun to nestle in.

I know you,
 can feel you.
 Thin hairs riding up against my tentacular underbelly.

 You were no longer constrained to exist with me.
 You had decided to stay.

 Perhaps you had embraced my brilliance, admitted your
allegiance to my floundering fabulousness.

I had left part of myself on the ocean floor, a tentacle or two. I would be gone for a while now.

 I lay my eggs on you, within that fold between forearm and upper arm.

I can feel the change in time in the friction between my body and yours.
 My offspring are developing fast.

 Overtaking you developmentally

and

 taking over your extremities.

I share my breath with you, pushing oxygen through your pores to allow us to stay together.

My youth help me, squirming limb to limb to disseminate life throughout your body,

I have told them about our kinship.

The gaps between the bodies of my offspring reveal your body.

The gaps are getting smaller.

You seem to be disappearing.

The viscosity of
our lustrous
exterior is
getting looser,
seeping to
meet the slime
of their siblings.

The folds of skin layered to form the boundary of the child had been enmeshed in fluorescent scaling.

Where we had donated our breaths, we began to donate our bodies. The chemical worlds we had consumed to construct our brightly lit exteriors we gift to you, braiding these submerged worlds into the fabric of your infancy.

My offspring understand the uncertainty of our survival on the seafloor, the threat of a life in a body evolved in the post-shell era. I laced my eggs into the basins of your youth to ensure they join me in the shelter of your body.

Perhaps you cannot see me anymore, our colour is fading, and the child underneath is reappearing. We, my children and I, have forged our way into your body. We no longer sit atop the gay child but instead fold ourselves into your fibre.

I can feel you releasing yourself to us. The desperation to conceal your otherness could not reconcile the way our bodies had congealed together, this new existence we had formed.

You seem tired.

You seem so tired.

underneath water the time seemed

to stop.

We had become one, this nudibranch and I. I felt scared to return to the surface, fearful of the ways my inner world hummed under the boundary between myself and the world. I decided to stay submerged. The nudibranchs had shared with me their ways of photosynthesis, allowing us to feed off the light that passed between the bounds of liquid and gas. In rays it travelled towards my prepubescent body. Caught at the right angle, the colours of the nudi's could be seen shimmering beneath the layers of my skin. I liked the companionship we formed together that afternoon. I liked that we made it together.

We are not marred by the bounds of time nor the threat of sensibility. We exist only in relation to one another. The form of our cohabitation had taken shape in the gay child who would never grow up. Their world had changed and the threat of maturity seemed less significant. Cast in the shadow of technicolour bliss, they had found future in a different form.