

Waterbodies:

The sea, the senses, and art as inquiry

Thorey Munro

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As Poetry Recycles Neurons: Flocks of Words, Tracks of Letters

The Evergreen State College

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The Belly Identifies Best With the Sea:

An introduction to the creative/scientific process of delicate empiricism



*(Of the body,
the belly identifies best with the sea.
The belly identifies best with the sea
where the closed-sphere skull and the rib-cage
gradually open below,
one unfurling rib-finger by one to the breathing,
fluid, belly.)*

This project began with a question:

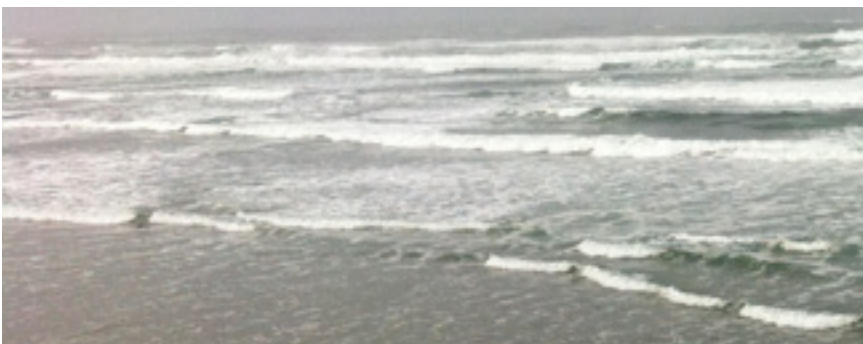
How does the ocean affect the body and the imagination?

*(Why does the opening from vertical land to horizontal sea seem to mimic
a shift from brain analyzing to belly sensing?)*

*Why does it feel that thoughts turn to substance and churn, settle, spread
when in the presence of the sea?*

*What do artists render in art about the sea? How does art then illuminate
ocean-experience in turn.?)*

Over a month-long field study, I sought answers to these questions in paintings, photographs, poetry, science, and in the saltwater itself. This booklet serves as a manual to the method I lived while sensing through art, the ocean, my body, and memory. The regular type poses the prompts; the italicized type is the poetic voice of my experience with the wide, churning, sensual, somatic, deep, horizontal, salty subject of the sea, encompassed in the oceanic whisperings of parenthesis.



I re-worded the seven aspects of this booklet from the practice of delicate empiricism, a method of scientific inquiry initially introduced by natural scientist and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. They are aspects, not steps, and thus the order is flexible and fluid, much like the sea. Each aspect tends to inform the others in a dynamic sense of progression and wholeness. This delicate scientific method is rooted deeply in the body's senses as the source for knowledge--smells, sensations, sights and associations based on direct perception with the phenomenon itself.

(Salt, wet, luminosity, diffusion, depth, motion.)

Delicate empiricism holds equal the truths found through art and science alike, through both metaphor and data, imagination and experiment, heart and mind. Here, the analytic voice of the question speaks alongside the poetic voice of the findings, and this fusion of art and science is what the core of delicate empiricism stems from—holistic through poetry and pragmatism.

*(We are all waterbodies, evolved from the sea and gestated
in the ocean-amnion of the womb. Our bodies know and remember
the pull of the tide and the vitality in saltwater.)*

The process depends upon love. Love is the energy that sustains curiosity, and it is love that translates through from the initial questions, to the prolonged observations, the imaginative musings, the conversations, the consideration, to empathy and into art. Art has the capacity to translate the sensual, intuitive, ancient, phenomenological knowledge of experience into language, image and form.





Passion

“For every appetite, there is a world. The dreamer then participates in the world by nourishing himself from one of the substances of the world, a dense or rare, warm or gentle substance clear or full of penumbra according to the temperament of his imagination.”

-poet and philosopher Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*

Delicate empiricism must start with a passion. It starts with an “appetite,” an open-ended desire to be in orbit with an idea and to know its character from infinite perspectives.

(It starts with the sea.)

It starts with a bodily response and a magnetic draw that directs one’s attention, hands and eyes.

(It begins with the pull of the ocean on the body, memory, creativity. In the conscious part of my memory, it begins with coastal life and the summer bay rhythms of tide, water, wind and daydreams. In the unconscious, it has always started with water. Our mammalian ancestors crawled from the sea and all human bodies are born from the ocean-amnion of our mother’s wombs. Our first breaths before birth are an exchange of water in the amniotic fluids. Cell division is a fluid and circular dance.)



This attraction must arise internally in order to be powerful enough to sustain a process of experimentation and dynamic discovery.

(Wholeness is sea salt-wet air on my own salt skin, is the harmony between of gravity and the motion of the hull known as ‘sea-legs’, is the generous encompassing and upwards-lift of salt water around a body in water, is the familiarity of salt water eddies, vortices, spirals and waves within and without.)

It starts with a question, an object or an ineffable affinity towards a phenomenon.

(Why do I feel centered/humbled/impressed/cleansed/inspired when I am on, in, or at the sea?)

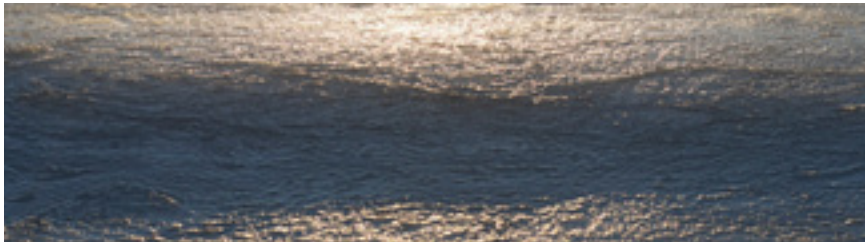
*Why is the ocean attractive to the human body and resonant to the imagination?
How does the ocean hold light, motion, diffusion, transformation and life?)*



Observation

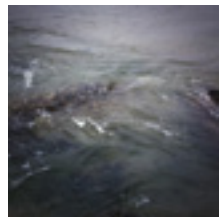
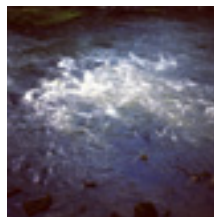
“All the senses, including vision, can be regarded as extensions of the sense of touch – as specializations of the skin. They define the interface between the skin and the environment – between the opaque interiority of the body and the exteriority of the world.”

- architect Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*



We know the world through the senses. Openly invite the clues of the world into your body and mind and write, photograph, sketch, measure or memorize to document the subjective experience of sensing.

(Internalize the contours of the world and express them in line, shadow and color through drawing. Use photography to investigate how light plays, how elements interact, how perspective can shift with height, angle, light. Write to record details, movements over time, orientation, context.)



Do not censor your note-taking techniques at this stage: include anything and everything that you observe during this time of intentional observation, including emotions, memories and impressions.

(The slow, blue light of memory -- the quick clarity of presence.)

Include the classical five senses of sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound, but also note other input such as orientation, temperature, time.

Use these prompts for direction:

Notes from the eyes: color, motion, gesture, shape, quantity, light, value, depth, relationships with other elements.

(The ocean is sky-colored, blue, green, gold, grey, white, black, luminescent, deep, wide-colored.)

Notes from the ears: rumble, depth, horizon, enclosure, treble, bass, pitch, distance, echo, texture, materials, relationships with other elements.

(The ocean bellows, grumbles, laughs, laps, roars, crashes, whispers, splashes, sustains, diffuses, fills.)

Notes from the skin: texture, temperature, solidity, flexibility.

(The ocean cools, gives, envelops, swirls, warms, responds, presses, speeds, pulls, rouses, reminds, stings, soothes, floats.)

Notes from the mouth: temperature, texture, solidity, sweetness, salt, bitterness, memory.

(The ocean is salty, heavy, rich, wide, deep, vital, humid, ancient, familiar, liquid, wet, under, welcome, foreign.)

Notes from the nose: potency, consistency, attraction, repulsion, heat, variety, memory.

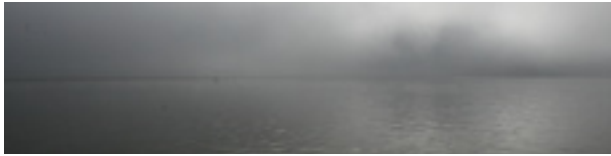
(The ocean smells of decay, wind, birds, fish, mammals, machinery, diesel, freshness, youth, health, summer, substance.)

Notes from the heart: emotions, memory, atmosphere, energy, aura.

(The ocean evokes tranquility, daydreams, destruction, danger, light, sunsets, fluidity, adaptability, generosity, gestation, defiance, blue, depth, exhaustion, diffusion.)

Notes from the body: balance, gravity, orientation.

(The ocean disorients, disrupts, tips, tilts, throws, flattens, broadens, diffuses, gathers, defines, confines, reminds.)



Imagination

"Close your bodily eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring to the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness so that it may react upon others from the outside inwards. A picture must not be invented but felt. Observe the form exactly, both the smallest and the large and do not separate the small from the large, but rather the trivial from the important."

- Romantic landscape and seascape painter Caspar David Friedrich

At this stage, invite imagination, memory and emotion to participate as tools in the investigative process.

(The ocean a place of simultaneity, pull, transformation, plurality, tranquility & fury.)



Use imagination to come to a new way of knowing the phenomena, and notice how these truths feel different in the body from the above tools for observation.

(The substance of thought diffuses along the horizontal when released from the confines of the vertical (forest, city, skull)--here it is more heart, more body, less brain.)

Distill the most potent aspects of the phenomenon in your imagination to discover their power.

(The rise and fall of waves, the ebb and flood of tide, the light, depth, the horizon: diffusion luminosity movement latency.)



Imagine the phenomenon over time and its stages of transformation in the process of becoming, manifestation of the present, and how it will change into the future.

(Metamorphosis is the murmuring of a draining beach at low tide, is the swelling of green and salt at high tide slackwater. Plankton & gills & scales & fins & eggs & evolution; whales & legs & hair & air & lungs & amniotic sacs & evolution; hulls & sails & props & nets & food & myth & song & evolution. The roiling line of white horses in a continuous process of becoming and receding.)

Use imagination to transcend the limits of time, space, and the experience of perceiving through a physical body.

(The ocean is here, on this long and shallow shore and also on all the long and shallow and deep and short shores of the planet. It palpitates. The moon's orbit pulls at the sea to peel it back at low tide and to release it again in the flood towards high.)

Use the imagination to know the phenomenon as a whole: continuous over time and space.

(Know that the sea is wide, deep, fluid, present, now, now, now and also always, always, always.)



Conversation

"The taste of the apple...lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way...poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading."

-poet, writer and essayist Jorge Luis Borges

Interaction between the observer and the phenomenon is a conversation.

(It is a dance of beachbreak on the shore. It is surge, crash and suck of each wave pushed up and receded on the sand.)

There will be moments of clarity, fullness and understanding, but there will also be moments of silence and questioning.

(The sea is sky-colored but why is the metaphor important?)



The second stage of observation should act as an opening or as an introduction between the observer and the phenomenon and blends with this fourth stage of dialogue.

(The seafoam of each wave leaves a curve of sea-lace on the smooth shore. Will more curves form if I stand in the wave's path? Does my disruption of its movement matter?)

Delicate empiricism is a dynamic conversation, a process in which both the observer and the phenomenon are constantly in stages of flux.

(The ocean is fluid and mutable, sensitive to the slightest curvature of seafloor or the faintest lick of wind. I am fluid and mutable, sensitive to the slightest ache of the body or the faintest shift in mood.)

The lover of seas must look intently and pointedly but also openly.
(She must form her gaze to include the thin spread of horizon and the lapping waves at her feet in the same glance.)

The lover of seas must be fluid like the waters in her investigation, to prompt questions but also to receive questions, about herself, her history, her particular lens of perception.

(I look for the play of light across surface and into depths and so I see the glint, the diffusion, the permeation.)



An intimacy must arise from direct interaction with the phenomenon itself through the observer's body and memory. This will provide a solid basis of direct perception before the observer turns to other sources for context in the next step. There must be moments in the conversation that allow the phenomenon to express and introduce itself without being confined by the observer's expectations.

(The ocean continues to crash whether or not I am there to write or photograph or look or paddle or walk or listen or taste or feel. It roars and whispers about persistence and inevitability and diffusion and rhythm and beauty and luminosity in the space between each wave-break.)



Context

“Our domicile is the refuge of our body, memory and identity. We are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the Self from its spatial and situational existence.”

- architect Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*

“You don't make a photograph just with a camera. You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, all the books you have read, all the music you have heard, the people you have loved.”

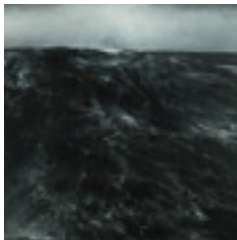
- landscape photographer Ansel Adams

Context is everything.

(My ocean is cold and dark, but also rich in life and tide.)

No phenomenon exists in a cultural, historical or environmental vacuum, just as no human perceives objectively.

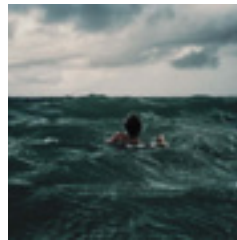
(The sea connects my childhood to my present to the ancients to the futures.)



Thierry de Cordier



Caspar David Friedrich



Tomek Niewiadomsky

Others have studied the sea before me: painters, photographers, artists, sculptors, writers, poets, singers, children, beachcombers, surfers, sailors, fishermen, boatbuilders, oceanographers, biologists and any seashore-resident.

(Caspar David Friedrich, Ivan Aivazovsky, J. M. W. Turner, Ran Ortner, Tomek Niewiadomsky, Thierry de Cordier, Roni Horn, H.D., Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Jorie Graham, Lila Zemborain, the vikings, the Inuit, Charles Darwin, NOAA, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the coastals.)

What have they discovered about the character of the sea? What nuances of the ocean attracted them and what of their discoveries did they communicate through art, story or science? What is the cultural-, historical- and environmental-knowledge context of the phenomenon?

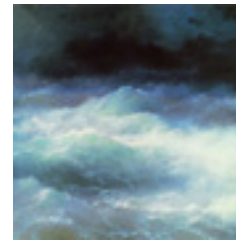
(The painters speak of color, luminosity, vastness, scale, horizon, texture, movement, disorientation.)

The photographers speak of process, power, intricacies, bodies.

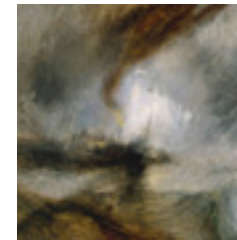
The poets introduce substance and diffusion, creatures, color, time, simultaneity, process, interaction.

The boatbuilders and sailors and fishermen know about curves, hulls, corrosion, wind, lines, fish, motion, storms, respect.

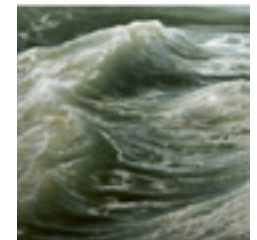
The oceanographers speak of depths, life, light, process, form, storms, wind, waves, mammals, plankton, algae, seafoam, chemicals, oxygen, salt, evolution, tides, perspective, details.)



Ivan Aivazovsky



J.M.W. Turner



Ran Ortner

Take into account your own physical, emotional, and cultural history with the phenomenon.

(My sea is an Alaskan sea, a biting salt bath, a fluctuating waterbody where sun, moon, horizon, ice, mountains, tundra, boats, fish, mammals, shellfish and people oscillate. I am the daughter of fishermen, a captain, a poet, an artist, a lover of salmon and river-mouths and tides, and sea is home, food, family, reverie and spirit.)



Empathy

“Any object well contemplated, opens a new organ of perception within us.”

- 19th century philosopher, natural scientist and poet
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Delicate empiricism is a phenomenological process that creates an exchange of energies and thoughts between an observer and a phenomenon.

(My thought-substance easily follows the crescendo and crash of the beachbreak just as easily as it spreads across horizon. The waves form vortexes where the water surges around my legs.)



Like the hydrologic processes of the ocean, water and ideas pass through membranes, are altered based on their context and continue in a cyclical process of change.

(We consume plant waterbodies and animal waterbodies, altered into blood and plasma and fluids, released to streams, mist, oceanbodies.)

Delicate empiricism introduces new lenses and layers through which to observe and participate in the world.

(The nuances of luminosity become magnified after falling into the paintings of Aivazovsky and Ortner. The ethereal substance between my body's heat and the vastness of horizon becomes apparent through Zemborain's poetry. My own movements of body and thought become more fluid and interconnected after observing and dreaming the sea.)

Nuances of the world reveal themselves to observers in different ways based on one's particular state of perception at any given moment.

(The sea is a place of discovery (agates and fossils and creatures and forms) and adventure (boats and walks and wave-chasing). The sea humbles when it trumps my own display of saltwater tears. The sea brings sleep in the form of ebb-tide wavelets against my hull. Sometimes I see the ocean's power and capacity for destruction, sometimes I see its lucidity and fertility. Sometimes it calms sometimes it silences sometimes it frightens sometimes it incites.)

Every place traveled through or lived in or dreamed of, every word written or spoken or heard or read, every photograph or painting or drawing seen, every object touched or created or broken and every person loved or remembered is brought with a body to the experience of observation.

(A list too long, too buried, too integral to experience of the world to tease out into fragments.)



Delicate empiricism conjures up new organs of perception that allows the lover of seas to perceive and understand more deeply the way light, water and wind interact with land through motion, nuance and color.

(The sea is made of infinite sky-cups that bring the grey blue gold red white moon from above into the liquid sky below. The sea brings a curvature to all that it contacts: shores, bodies, hulls, nets, dreams.)



Love

"...one learns that ... at certain times, internal lights render opaque bodies translucent..."

- poet and philosopher Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*

"When experiencing a work of art, a curious exchange takes place; the work projects its aura, and we project our own emotions and percepts on the work."

- architect Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*

"Poetic language – and by that I mean the language of image, sound, rhythm, color, sensation – is probably the closest we bring language to experience – poetic language takes you to the edge of sense and deep into sensation...Even if some of the sentences seem to lose their meaning, I want the rhythm, the image, the cry to remain with your body."

- writer Lidia Yuknavitch, interview in *The Chronology of Water*



Delicate empiricism is a process towards love. As with any love, it begins with a passion, progresses through a dynamic dance of curiosity and discovery, and changes the way the observer perceives the world.

(The sea is my companion, a partner, one that whispers watery secrets into my skin when I visit and into my dreams when I sleep. I learn of ambiguity and latent depths and process and presence.)

With delicate empiricism as a creative and scientific process, this love of a phenomenon is energy for art, research and creativity.

(Art is a process of evaporation and condensation to the heart of things. It is a process of experimentation with materials and emotion. It's a gathering of forms and a reordering through the artist's body, words and motions.)

Then, through well-crafted word, image, music or movement, the object of art creates an experience for the viewer, reader or listener. *I am disoriented, churned and lifted. Now aware of the watery roundness of my body and the engulfing power of the sea-context. I am in love-I am lost-I am learning.*



Art is a physical remnant of a prolonged courtship of discovery and investigation between the observer and the phenomenon. The series of translations start with the phenomenon itself.

(It begins in water-reverie. The ocean-roar first, ever-present, ever-constant in its rumble across aeons. It begins where the body learns about sound, light, heat, smell, rhythm, salt, moisture and reverberates in imaginations.)

The phenomenon then undergoes an act of translation as it enters my body and awareness through my senses. My body is a sieve that is only open to a small range of light-waves, sound waves, heat waves, and electro-magnetic waves that contribute to my understanding of the ocean waves.

(Eyes, ears, skin, mouth, heart, brain, ocean.)

From these physical clues, the artist or the scientist must struggle to articulate the essence of that experience and passion into a communicable medium.

(Paint, film, pencil, word, poetry, lyric, rhythm, dance, data, diagram, book, exhibit, presentation.)

That object then becomes a phenomenon itself. When a new perceiver encounters this object of art and science, created through the profoundly subjective experience of research and creation, the reverberations of the original phenomenon echo through in a new translational experience of the senses and memory.

(The painting is pigment but it is also the sea—the artist's sea and my sea and every sea before and in between and after. It is about salt & blood & wind & water & vortexes & eddies & currents & tides & light & waves & poetry & the feeling of lying on my back in the brine with a full chest of air and eyes filled with the blue and light-streaked sky.)

References

Place:

Egegik River, Bristol Bay, Alaska
Kachemak Bay, Alaska
Lopez Island, Washington
Nye Beach, Newport, Oregon
Ocean Shores, Washington
South Puget Sound, Washington

Art:

Ivan Aivazovsky
Joseph William Mallard Turner
James McNeil Whistler
Caspar David Friedrich
Ran Ortner
Roni Horn
Tomek Niewiadomsky
Alessandro Puccinelli
Corey Arnold

Poetry:

mauwe sea-orchids Lila Zemborain
Never Jorie Graham
The Chronology of Water Lidia Yuknavitch
Trilogy H.D.
We Are All Bodies of Water Astrida Niemanis
Cantos Ezra Pound
Under Milk Wood Dylan Thomas

Philosophy, Phenomenology & Creativity:

The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses
Juhanni Pallasmaa
Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos
Gaston Bachelard
Poetics of Space
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* photographs taken by Jordan Dyer
all others by the author

