

*Asleep in a familiar sea*



The sea divides the horizon into water and the sky it reflects - the same way night reveals my desires to my self that is awake in daytime. In the moments between wakefulness and sleep I become hollow, pleasure floods my body in search of ghosts to animate.

The sea's line under the sky is constantly redrawn in its impatience for touch. Never fixed in its desires, it abounds on the land and retreats from it by turns. Marguerite Duras describes how time spent by the sea permits reflection on pain - the sea's continual reshuffling of its cargo an apt mirror for the struggle to contain trauma within a body. Duras observes the circular conversation the sea has with itself reflected in the conversations that litter its shore like inconsequent shell fragments - *"The ladies talk on the terrace overlooking the sea until dusk, when it starts to get cool... They've been there for forty years, perched on the debris of the war, talking about central Europe."*<sup>1</sup> The sea continually re-describes its waves, permitting women to test the words that describe destruction and remaking in the

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<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Duras, *'Practicalities'*, (P.O.L, France, 1987), p. 6.

comfort of knowing that mis-chosen sentences will sink in the wake of the words that follow. *Practicalities* as a whole drifts between the seaside and the home, both a place for bodies. While Duras unpacks the home as place to keep men and children, the sea contains her ghosts and her pleasure. The home is where Duras orchestrates her perceived desires - the construction and maintenance of a family. The sea differs in being out-with her control, containing visceral memories that overwhelm her body and must be divided into lines on the page in order to uncover their form - “*the sea in Summer 1980 is something I never experienced myself. It’s something that happened to me but that I never experienced, something I put into a book precisely because I couldn’t have lived it.*”<sup>2</sup> Duras loses her virginity on the shore of a lake, a body of water that gives way to the sea as her sexuality grows. As her ability to contain pleasure expands so does the body of water that produces it. I take my grief for a grandmother I never knew to the sea, where the coldness of the water forces me to re-encounter the edges of my body, making space to acknowledge the hands whose touch I will never feel. My body yields to the sea the same way that Duras’s did, the same way my grandmother’s must have.



For Margaret Tait the sea drifts into the beds of her characters in her film *Blue Black Permanent*. Attempting to trace the move from the rural to the urban, the domestic to the professional in the lives of three generations of women, the sea

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<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, (P.O.L, France, 1987), p. 5.

serves the same purpose as dreams in reuniting bodies and desires that struggle to coexist in the real world - *the sea is like sleep, it joins everything up*<sup>3</sup>. The sleep, the sea that drifts between Tait's women, connecting their lives so that they could become one continuous string of experience that is facilitated by different bodies. The central character, Greta, struggles to blend her duties as a mother and her aspirations as a poet. In the end she gives in to the sea, wandering into its waves in her nightdress to join her grandmother's slumber. The pleasure and memory that Tait's characters could contain is fluctuant, as ceaseless as waves lapping the shore. Annie Ernaux is similarly distracted by the contiguity of experience, her writing on memory could describe the embodied knowledge drifting between the women in Tait's film;

*"They will all vanish at the same time, like the millions of images that lay behind the foreheads of grandparents, dead for half a century, and of the parents, also dead. Images in which we appeared as a little girl in the midst of beings who died before we were born, just as in our own memories our small children are there next to our parents and schoolmates. And one day we'll appear in our children's memories, among their grandchildren and people not yet born. Like sexual desire, memory never stops. It pairs the dead with the living, real with imaginary beings, dreams with history."*<sup>4</sup>

The sea, pleasure, sleep - these are connective materials who, unlike time, are non-linear - and thus are challenges to mortality.

The child might imagine sleep as a vehicle that transports us to the dream space, which is true in the distancing from the physical body that occurs in sleep. Sleep's

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Tait, *'Blue Black Permanent'*, (British Film Institute: United Kingdom, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Annie Ernaux, *'The Years'*, (Galliamard: France, 2008), p. 16.

speculative location permits co-existence. The mind and the body run on parallel paths through the night, like the sea that underlines the sky. This points toward the question of what the connection between the two consists of. The sea's surface reflects the sky's colours, but its depths are unknowable. Embodiments of previous women lurk beneath my surface, unknowable and inextricable from the parts I call myself. Memory and sexuality can be delivered to the blue body when the mortal flesh gives way to the earth. I cannot part with my grandmother's plates because their ceramic surface felt her touch. The sea, too, has held our bodies both. It is the closest our bodies can be, outside of sleep.

Isobel O'Donovan