The Mythical Touchy-Touch

ALYSSA BÖEHLE

Strange all this difference should be,
Twixt Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee!
—John Byrom (1692-1763)

At fifteen I am touched by a Horror who takes my Human Touch away.

To my riddled mind, my friends’ nudges, my parents’ hugs all appear to be sexual advances, sexual threats, and I react by keeping my physical body removed from communication. The years of physical self-exile collect under my skin, while calluses fail to form the way they do upon regularized human touch. In its preserved state, my skin becomes raw, thin like an embryo’s, painfully sensitive to the brine of sea breeze, to the grains of sand on the shore.

My sister, her boyfriend, and I are at the Jersey Shore. The September seawater feels warmer than the air, sort of stupid in its hope for the return of summer. And though the waves seem all riled up in a rage, it is the fluid wind and invisible moon that set today’s storm into motion.

My sister and her boyfriend look like two lame poles lodged between the cream-capped waves, appearing and disappearing without moving, but surely warm from the blood of each other’s bodies. I watch them from the shore, where my hands coat balls of ocean-wet sand with the powdery dry sand upon which I sit.

They are twenty, in love and fascinated with each other, and I am eighteen, in mania and memory of a ritual my sister and I performed as kids. We would make these sand cannonballs for throwing, not at people but at the Atlantic. “Give us Wawa Waves!” we would scream while catapulting the balls into the tide, the name Wawa stolen from the South Jersey mini-market where we’d get ICCEs and milk. This ritual, we thought, would make the sea rise and swell into a surge more suitable for bodysurfing, for riding the waves as human torpedoes. We’d tumble with the current, crashing onto shore,
slapped by jellyfish and slimy seaweed on the way. I never minded these touches, not me.

I could barrage the couple, but I aim instead for the waves. I will not admit to myself how jealous I am of the lovers, their ability to bear each other’s bodies without pain.

The waves stay the same. Accompanied by no one, I enter the ocean. Rainer Maria Rilke might applaud my descent into the sea, an unaccompanied dance, an affair with the water. In *Duino Elegies*, he tells us of a “Land of Lament,” a place where we must go alone to realize our disconnection from the Earth. We cannot gain entrance there with a lover, or an ersatz mother to protect us from the urging, primal world within. We must open ourselves to the Earth as our singular, monogamous partner.

And so I do. I have my way with the ocean. The seaweed lodges itself between my thighs, my breasts; my hypersensitive, untouched body takes in the saltwater of the ocean.

And it seems so noble to reject infatuation and save my sensual attention for the body of the Earth. But it also becomes too easy to separate human bodies from the body of the earth, humans with bodies that were once and will again be dirt of the body of the earth. It becomes easy to keep repeating, “I will not touch” and thus “I will not love” until it seems like a fine affirmation, a chant of the holy. I forget the fear behind the words, why I needed them in the first place: to cope. The words, the chant, the repetition, the ritual cease to be mine. They become too general, too removed from the specific origin of private hurt they were meant for. But they preoccupy me.

Virginia Woolf tells us in “A Sketch of the Past” of how her half-brother inspects her private parts, awakening in her “instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestors in the past,” specifically how “this seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must not be touched; how it is wrong to allow them to be touched; must be instinctive” (69). Her point is not touch but instinct, and yet I cannot help fixating on touch. The ocean touches me, and I seem to be fine. And theoretically speaking, these parts are *allowed* to be touched. Otherwise, recreational sex would disappear from the human and dolphin populations. My sister and her boyfriend would spend less time in the bedroom, a place where it seems touch is good. So the problem is not in allowance but in perception, which can make all human touch seem taboo.

The problem of touch dwells in sight, in the sight of the same darkness Persephone sees when Hades steals her from the earth and rapes her in the Underworld. He literally takes the ground from beneath her feet in a feat of
blindness and disequilibrium, creating a chaos of the senses. This chaos feels a lot like being submerged underwater in the matte twilight of a September afternoon.

At eighteen I unconsciously reenact the Horror by stepping into the Angry Atlantic.

I almost forget that in my somersault beneath the sea, I still need a sense of gravity. I need to distinguish up from down, I need to shoot through the waves that want me drowned. My skull, my knees scrape the bottom of the ocean floor, and my mind realizes that my body cannot bear the physicality any more. They, my body and mind, work like awkward, mad scientists, separately trying to find a solution to the Problem of Touch. They work at the expense of an instinct that tells me the riddle must be solved soon, the pain of All Touch must be stopped before it grows and grows into something forever unsolvable.

At seventeen I am obsessed with the riddle of body and mind.

I find a way to bridge the two, my love of bodies and my fear of human touch. Energy healing, healing bodies bridge the two. I heal the slow vibrations in peoples’ slowed down bodies, helping them quicken, helping their seven main energy centers turn and churn the way healthy wheels do. I learn symbols at Reiki seminars. I learn Sanskrit symbols that I picture in my mind’s eye. I draw them in my head while I let my hands hover over other peoples’ slowed bodies. We never touch. When I’m seventeen I find a boy who wants to believe, so I lift my hovering hands over his body, and intuit a knot near his heart. Why?

“My mother died two months ago,” he says.

I do the best I can to unknot the knot, but I know I can’t. It’s a riddle his body will never solve. I know, he knows, but we hope he can cope with its presence. We talk about circuses and aliens to downplay the strange exchange, until my mom walks in, my mom who introduced me to Reiki and ritual. Later when he leaves, she asks me, “Did you guys have sex?”

No. He’s a boy. He’s a being. He’s a being caught in a conversation with the ghost of his mother, and I’m a being searching for the ghost of my body. We are two bodies, riddled by the unearthly, unable to let our live flesh touch, nonetheless express the libido beneath.

Carl Jung, master of the archetypal, says in his compendium Symbols of Transformation, “If it is not possible for the libido to strive forwards, to lead a life that willingly accepts all dangers and ultimate decay, then it strikes back along the other road and sinks into its own depths, working down to the old intimation of the immortality of all that lives, to the old longing for rebirth”
Libido, he suggests, is not a singularly sexual force but a more general lust for life. It is a force that comes like instinct from our ancestors from ages back, from a well of riddled voices and messages, a collection of calls that can pull us back into the Underworld.

The boy and I do not yet know that we lie in risk of lingering in the realm of the dead too long; that we, like Woolf, may be giving our ancestors too much voice, too valid a claim on our earthly lives. We meet and seduce each other at our crossroads, at our thresholds, our limen. We meet within the liminal, the limbo between two worlds where the dead and the living touch, the Underworld and the earth, where we build a provisional home and work out that which has been taken from us in our earthly realm. It is a place where we must waver while waiting for the new, the post-liminal, where we the wounded emerge healed and transformed, better for the process we’ve been through.

But it is so easy to get too comfortable, to forget to move forwards into the post-liminal. As Jung tells us, the seeds of libido can be planted, can grow into the wrong direction, pulling the living too far into the comforting depths of the limen. According to myth, those who linger in the liminal for too long become tricksters, deceivers, sphinx-tongued hybrids neither dead nor living. Tricksters take on the forms, the faces of others, and pretend to provide entertainment, diversion, relief from pain with their two-faced nature, their playful games. The boy and I fool each other into pleasure.

For a moment, I cradle the boy with a mother’s touch.

For a moment, the boy looks at me without desire.

Neither of us means to deceive, but the communion can only be provisional.

We are stuck in the liminal, in the limbo where libido lies festering, “betwixt and between” neurosis and transformation. Imagine our crossroads, imagine a room. You are in the middle of a white room. A colossal stretch of hot rolled steel sits below your feet, pressed to the ground. It is rectangular, like a river dock. Above you, flattened onto the ceiling, hangs suspended another massive steel rectangle, rotated at an angle perpendicular to the slab of steel you stand on. The sculpture is inspired by a Christian cross, yet it forms a severed plus sign, a pagan cross, lines cushioned from each other by a thick layer of space.

You are standing in the room that houses Richard Serra’s installation Delineator. Your mind quickens in the presence of the huge, menacing steel plates, exhorting your eyes to dart up and down in frantic nystagmus—a series of swift eye movements that cause the pupil to flash back and forth as...
in the experience of watching a train or traffic flitting by. You can track this speedy side-to-side or up-and-down eye movement (as in the case of Delineator, a still object). You can track the shifting black of your pupils and trace a sinusoidal wave; you can trace the shape of a sound wave; you’ll find yourself tracing a song in the face of a visual image, engaging in a logical contradiction, your senses of sight and sound shivering against each other.

Such synesthesia is not just an affliction reserved for the few; it is perceptual sex, friction, for the sensitive masses. Sex means pleasure, birth, and multiplication, as problematic a topic in science as it is in my mind. Even just sticking to sight, we can see paradoxical union in the problem of light. The amount of light that enters your eye is the product of the amount of light emitted from the original light source multiplied by the light reflected from the object’s surface. The two factors cannot be disentangled, cannot be delineated from each other the same way the boy and his mother cannot be disentangled, the way my love for bodies and my fearful ghost of a body cannot be disentangled. The factors’ identities remain invisible, and yet they conspire to create the perceivable phenomenon that is light. You can feel their combined effect, the entanglement of two disparate senses. You can feel the image, you can see the grain of the light and feel the physical photons scraping through the layers of your brain like grains of sand to form a picture. This mental fuck is touch, too, a touch that leaves its residue.

The boy and I entangle ourselves in a nonsexual way that appears quite sexy to my mother. She sees something on our faces, the pleasure of touch, the weird meeting of libidos caught in transition. She sees, on our earthly faces, what I see when I watch my sister and her boyfriend in the sea. I do not know what goes on beneath their skin. But I know that body and mind are not two, because the ocean tells me that I must cease being a trickster, I must stop confusing sky from ground in order to breathe. I must put the argumentative scientists of body and mind to rest in order, literally, to survive. This necessity for oneness shows me that even the lovers have riddled perceptions; the lovers who intertwine their bodies will leave a psychic riddle in the liminal, a riddle of confused libidos to be solved in time, in an unfamiliar realm.

Perhaps the only difference is that I am already familiar with the Underworld and the disorienting forces it insists upon shooting throughout my body, a nausea I can remember.

Nausea comes from the disagreement between the senses: sight says the world looks like this, and balance says the world feels like that. Balance is the sixth sense, making the perception of spirits the seventh, according to my Old Country parents. Balance is the crazy force in our body that measures our
relationship to the gravitational pull of the earth. It is the force that tells our brains, *Flip upside-down-picture of the world coming into your eyes right-side-up!* so that the earth does not look upside down. But sometimes balance and vision do not, cannot agree. They tilt away from each other by degrees. This is the subtle nausea of the liminal.

But underneath the stormy sea, my senses are in such chaos that I can barely keep track of my dislocation. I feel no epiphany, no nausea. In *Delineator*, however, floor and ground play tricks even when they seem plain. Who can say if the steel plate on the ground serves as a floorboard, when it is the plate on the ceiling that appears tarnished with footprints? A weathered ceiling, a spotless floor. We get a riddle born of logical contradiction, an opposition of certainties welded into the space we, the privileged viewers, inhabit as we stand between the plates, and space and perception play with our bodies, our sense of direction. The subtle shivering of my sight, my nystagmus and my balance, my orientation, inspire that nagging nausea.

The nausea tells me to leave the crossroads I have been standing at for the past five years and *grasp*, not touch, the world for support while my sea-legs adjust to the ground, the hard post-liminal ground. It tells me to stop overanalyzing the difference between sexual touch and platonic touch, but just to touch, please just touch, because all is libido. I must stop riddling over the unsolvable fear of being a hybrid, a trickster, too monstrous to engage with the world, when perhaps the boy and I may serve our ancestors better, may serve all of us better, by accepting our entanglement, our strange libidos—explaining them in words and symbols the earth can understand.

---

**WORKS CITED**


