

Ocean

It was a slow persistent desire, a process rolling over me. It was everywhere, it was nowhere exactly, but it didn't go away. I had been softly considering it for twenty years. I used to fantasize about it together with my mom, we'd sit on her bed and make lists. She understood that I didn't need my father's name. I didn't really know him and so why, with all the love I have and have been given, am I identified by a name I don't have a living connection with? Many people have this disorientation through estranged family, gender assignments, and the impacts of colonial and slave histories. Names can be a place where people claim, define and exercise power over others. I've written a new one for myself, a new sentence, Every ocean hews.

Ocean is giving me space as I go about telling people I feel differently. As a sound, a space, a shape, a territory in the middle of my new name, I asked for it. But I made this change without understanding it completely and whenever someone says Every Ocean Hughes I am surprised to hear it. Willful and blind, I announced my new name thinking people would skim over 'ocean' and that it would be just for me, like some form of shelter. And a part of me feels that I still don't know, can't believe you know, have heard, and are calling me that.

My first disorientation could appear to be a classic single parent story, but I'm happy to say there is an unconventional punch line. I have three moms. My mom, her best friend and my grandmother raised me. And now I've taken a name from that lineage.

Hughes was my grandmother's name. She was Welsh, born into a family of singers and boat captains. She was my emotional home. I helped her die. And when she died, I didn't think about it anymore, I felt it, and I stepped into her name. I've wondered what she would think of this whole thing. She was humble. Gentle, generous, quick to laugh, comfortable in silence. Music soothed her, everything could be talked about. She knew her own struggle and met it in others. She would have understood. When she was dying I used my hands to soothe her, stroked her hair and head. On her last day I kissed her forehead and she said, "I know you love me." A little while later she said, "I just want to get out of my own way."

Enid loved the ocean. When she wasn't living with us, she lived on the ocean. She revered and feared it, never once going in above her ankles even though she sat quietly on its shores for a lot of her life.

My family, funnily shaped and rarely sharing space, would gather at the ocean. We: grandmother, mother, other mother, brother, other brother and me, we used to know where to find my dad. Even if he hadn't come around in a long time, we could find him on 12th street. He didn't really communicate much, he's deaf, phones were difficult, and so when I was young we'd go there to check in on him. I'm surprised to be writing this, but changing my name is paradoxically making me think about him more than ever.

I remember the first time I moved away from home to go to school and we were introducing ourselves through family narrative and geography. I said my dad was a beach boy. In that privileged environment the other new students thought I meant 'beach boy' as in pop harmony Beach Boys. But what I was saying was I grew up visiting my father in the sand while he rented umbrellas and boogie boards every sunny day from his mid-teens through his forties. It was the only job I'd ever known him to have, until later when he tried to open a health food store between an industrial chicken factory and a coca cola plant on a long rural road in rural Maryland.

After the years of visiting him, knowing he was with the umbrellas on 12th street, and then at the health food store (short-lived) I lost track of where he was. I only know a few things. I know he's always stayed close to the water. I know he made a campaign sign in 2012 that was pro-Obama, against Mitt Romney and had flip flops hanging from it. I know he's alienated from everyone he's ever known. I don't know where he gets money to survive. I don't know how lonely he is or if he likes being alone. I don't know if I'll ever see him again.

I've chosen to change my name away from the one he and I have shared, yet he still seems

to be a part of the story and has a place in my new name. Apparently there is a lot of room in ocean, even for alcoholic dads.

Changing a name is negotiating history, family, inheritance, but I've mostly thought of the spaces it opens up. I'm forty-one years old and instead of consolidating my narrative I've dropped the thread. I've taken pleasure in not knowing how to introduce myself, stuttering between names. Pleasure in the moment of recognition when someone says this new name and I get to reply. Pleasure in knowing that some people won't know that I've also been Emily Roysdon, and just being Every in front of them is fine.

The questions of administration of self are also opportunities for complexity, messiness, simultaneity. I'm embracing these, to be more than one thing. I think each person who changes their name invents their own individualized method but I can say in my case that having friends as role models opened a world of courage. I was animated by the spirit of queer invention.

Queer invention. Feminist lives. Gay art history. Gay beaches. A few weeks before Enid died, I was on Fire Island staying in a collective house of friends. It was absolutely my heaven. No cars and lots of nudity. The gay beach of my dreams. Friends galore. I remember one afternoon in particular. After a morning of group swimming and beachy-ness people settled into solo afternoon activities. I was in the double height living room standing by the windows looking at the ocean. After a while, maybe thirty minutes, Nicole Eisenman, who had been nearby painting, looked up and asked me if I was working. At first I thought she was making fun of me... I felt a flash of formless next to her masterful form, but then I realized that Nicky respected my process. She saw it and named it.

For a few years, I have been writing about transitions. About 'not being the thing itself,' uncounted experience, waves expressing the contour of their bottoms, and finding long lost things underwater that could shift dominant paradigms and ordering energies. I made work about alive time. Then I helped my beloved sister-mother-grandmother die and that experience shifted *my* ordering energies. To be a part of helping someone have a good death has been the most meaningful thing I've ever done, and since then I've been thinking about something called 'queer death,' wondering what it could mean and building a platform to understand it.

Many years ago, Enid was in her mid-80's and she visited me in NYC to attend her first LTRR event. The next morning she said, "You wouldn't have known anyone was any different (read: queer) if they hadn't all been so nice to each other." She was attuned to enthusiasms and kindnesses where she could find them. Being kind was queer. Helping someone you love die is queer. Changing my name is a kind of queer death. I got out of my own way.