

Symposium: Critical Restoration Geographies

You'll Find Him in the Sea

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In one of my favorite photos of my father, he stands over a rocky cliff in a windbreaker, eyes closed, hair blowing in the wind, a smile on his face. In another, he reclines on the beach in sunglasses, handsome, tan, arms folded behind his head. In yet another, he winks and laughs as he bites into a lobster, fresh from the sea. And above my desk, beside the book of poems I found in his apartment and the film canister holding the last of his remains, sits a photo of him holding me and my brother as we sit on a seaside wall in Bretagne, the three of us grinning, overlooking the French Atlantic. These photos archive my father's most enduring and caring companion: the sea.

In January 2000, doctors found a golf ball-sized tumor growing on my father's brain. The tumor affected his memory and his hormone production, altering his body's ability to regulate itself. It also sat on the part of his brain that determined his personality, his emotions, behavior, and short-term memory. Neurologists attacked it with radiation, poison settling in my father's brain and body. The effects of this intense radiation eroded his skull, and eventually he also lost

his teeth and ability to hear. We adjusted to a new reality; these physical and neurological symptoms could never be reversed.



View of the Atlantic Ocean's rocky coastline, in western France.

It is near here that I threw my father's ashes into the sea.

Disability justice activists reject the notion that those living with chronic illness and disability must be cured in order for their lives to have value. As Eli Clare (2017) has written, those living

with disability and chronic illness deserve to experience joy and pleasure even as they navigate their situated struggles. For my father, the shore, ocean, and beach remained a source of happiness even as his life shifted. Reflecting on this relationship to the sea as an entity, place and space reveals relations of more-than-human care and knowing, relations that flourished not in spite but by virtue of his chronic illness and disability. Throughout my father's illness, the beaches of western France offered him care, love, and joy. The sea was a reprieve, a friend. Each year, we would voyage to the Atlantic, even in winter, our hair whipping in the cold Normand wind. The ocean – and the western French Atlantic in particular – took care of him, and has continued to take care of him even after his passing in February of 2020.

The summer before my father passed away, he and my grandmother took what would be his last trip to the sea. When he had strength enough, he swam, strolled along the beach, sunbathed, and ate mussels with cream. In one of the last photos taken of him from that summer, he stands ankle-deep in the Atlantic. Behind him, blue water meets blue sky. His arms are raised in two triumphant fists, eyes closed, a grin across his face. It was there that we would scatter his ashes less than a year later, fulfilling his final wish to join his friend forever.

Reference

Clare E (2017) *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham: Duke University Press