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Living as Water¹

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I. Buoyancy

The Netherlands is synonymous with water.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 1; my translation).

The essence of the new water policy is easy to explain, but perhaps more difficult to understand. We are going to give water the space that it needs, before it takes it itself. This has positive consequences, such as more nature in our direct surroundinas. But sometimes the effect will not be positive, because we will have to move or miaht not be able to live and work in places we would like to as easily as before.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6; my translation)

Watery worlds envelop continents, masses of blue and grey containing land, liquidising its edges. Creating a viscous inbetween, liquid worlds permeate low-lying coastal areas inhabited by millions. At the tip of the European continent lies a flat land without horizon, coated in a perpetual fog, where cities are built on circling waterways, creeping alleyways, the smell of stagnant water constantly in the air. Concentric canals growing ever narrower, denser, a bottomless trough of slimy brown water at their centre. Air of fog, droplets descending on canal side railings, bicycles, on pavements and doorknobs. Cities such as Amsterdam float on watery worlds, its buildings infused with the watery presence. Buoyed by water, cities are held by the force they are trying to master, domesticating watery worlds, liquidising. Eternally slippery surface of cobblestone, liquid permeates thinking, informs cultures and decision-making processes. Fog floating into human heads, it is not just cities that are buoyed by water, so are governments. In fear of watery intrusion, water is given more space (Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6). Planned retreat, managed flooding to prevent watery worlds from encroaching on solid worlds, from dragging them into viscosity. Conceding, so water may not take (Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6). Planning, reports and assessments must prevent water from suddenly running over areas deemed dry land, ruining crops and livelihoods, necessitating widespread evacuations. This is living with water – watery thinking at governmental level, thoughts

If I dive into the water, if I plunge into it, if I let myself sink in it, I experience no discomfort, for I do not have any fear whatsoever that I may dissolve in it; I remain a solid in its liquidity. If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it; that is, that I may dissolve in the slime precisely because the slimy is in process of solidification.

(Sartre 610)

Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middleclass hell of course, peopled with bad dreams. When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through those circles, life – and hence its crimes – becomes denser, darker.

(Camus 13)

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Stacy Alaimo defines her concept of buoyancy as "a sense that the human is held, but not held up, by invisible genealogies and a maelstrom of often imperceptible substances that disclose connections between humans and the sea" ("States of Suspension" 478). She researches the potential of origin stories linking humans to oceanic ecosystems and the far-flung effects of human practices to create human awareness of marine ecological crises. According to Alaimo, humans are thus 'buoyed' by these connections, and an awareness of this can contribute to contemporary ocean conservation. More widely applied, her concept can be interpreted creatively. inviting experimental and symbolic explorations of

Nematocyst: specialised cell containing a venomous coiled thread that can be projected in self-defence or to capture prey.

buoyancy.

Sessile polyp: larval jellyfish attached to a surface.

Ephyra: a freeswimming larval jellyfish post separation from the polyp.

Planula larva: freeswimming larval jellyfish, pre-polyp-stage, covered in minute hairs enabling swimming. informed by fog encroaching on urban canals. Policies buoyed by watery worlds just beneath them, barely concealed. Politics held by streams of water running under coastal cities, skyscrapers and lopsided houses bobbing metres below sea level. Domesticated by water, cities and governments float collectively, toil in fear of the day buoyancy becomes drowning, living with water turns into becoming water, overflowing all carefully researched government planning.

Within watery worlds far removed from floating cities, fearful buoyancy is replaced by a deeper sense of buoyancy. Watery creatures buoyed by ocean currents, invertebrate bodies as liquid as saltwater, not held by water, but within it, bodies nearly absorbed in their surrounding element (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 143). An abundant pelagic being drifts along, a scalloped bell, eight-lobed, lamented tentacles extending from under a hood of jelly (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). The centre of the body sometimes orange, yellow, even deep crimson, yet somehow still transparent, coiling entrails exposed through layers of crystalline skin. The largest of such individuals are entwined with the Arctic Ocean, quietly swimming through ice-cold waters, humanless. Enormous bells several metres in diameter, seven metres of tentacles rippling out beneath them (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). Predatory agent, tentacles enhanced with nematocysts, stinging cells immobilising zooplankton, small fish, ctenophores. Enormous cannibalistic gelatine-blob, small members of its own species are entangled in lethal tentacles, dying a slow, suspended death of paralysis. Oral arms, specialised tentacles, transporting the prey into the mouth at the centre of the bell, paralysed jelly enveloped in orange jelly-entrails, digested into willowy tentacled movements, into pulsing swimming motions (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane"). Wavy yellow mass of gelatinous matter, constituting the bestowal of its name, human-given. Lion's mane fluttering in the wind, terrestrial animalisation of amber-yellow liquid body-centre hovering, pulsing. Muscular contractions like a beating heart, a blinking eye, nudging the liquid body gently forward. Minute sessile polyps budding off the bodies of young medusae, asexually, ephyra growing into males or females, or changing

Write! and your selfseeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed.

(Cixous, Cohen and Cohen 889) sex as they grow. Or fusion of egg and sperm creating an embryo, brooded in transparent guts, set loose, becoming a ciliated planula larva, miniscule hairs enabling locomotion. Alive for merely a year, the pelagic being starts as larva, becoming polyp, ephyra, medusa (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Jellyfish"). Relying on ocean currents to drive its immobile body forward, assembling in sheltered areas toward the end of its life, it is washed up by the tides onto rocks and beaches, a suffocated oozy mass (Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lion's Mane").

Pulse, extend. Stretch out, small currents are felt through long thin appendages. Straight through them, they become like waves, slowly dancing, within, not through water. Every movement a wave. Currents pulsating, bulbously liquid centre of body powerfully contracting. This is swimming in a watery way, no terrestrial limbs, unwebbed digits. Instead becoming watery, body transparent, muscular yet layers of thin skin, delicate, lucent. Watery skin absorbing oxygen from water, transparency metabolising seawater. Soft body is a strong body in the ocean, when beached a weak blob of jelly, useless, stepped upon, torn with the smallest movement. Flowing out of mother-body, my consciousness slowly floats into me, elementary tentacles waking, coiling delicately. I start a small papule of the ocean, a speck against dark waters, snap-shot of jelly-life eternalised in a photographic image. Descending through the water column, I grow my polyp-roots, adhering. Expelled further into waves, I roll off my skin, gently. A current grips onto me, severs me from my body. My own body like mother, stack of selves swaying on the seabed. I utter no goodbyes to mother jellies, I float into them, they are my sea. This is how life starts, flowing on ocean currents. A medusa is not a destination, it is becoming liquid. My feelings always drift slightly behind my body, sense-endowed tentacles creating a small halo of perception around me, responsive, alert. I cannot flee, lithe but immobile body, I do not really swim. I am swim, I am sea, saltwater is within and without my body, enveloped. A vague outline all that makes me animal, oceans are buoyed within me.

"Ah, there's her sea," he will say as he holds out to me a basin full of water from the little phallic mother from whom he's inseparable. But look, our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-weed. beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves More or less wavily sea, earth, skywhat matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all.

(Cixous, Cohen and Cohen 889)

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world:

we are bodies of water.

(Neimanis 1)

II. Watery Thinking

There is no direct path from gelatinous aesthetics to a bluegreen environmental politics, however. As we have seen, most portrayals of jellyfish abstract them from their environment, as they pose one creature against a black background. This portrait-like style encourages a sense of encounter with a distinctive creature but it discourages an understanding of the animal's habitat. As aesthetic and taxonomic purposes converge in this style, the sea itself disappears, rendered transparent rather than substantial.

(Alaimo, 'Jellyfish Science" 158) In saltwater zones, icy and elusive, jellyfish such as the lion's mane dwell. They float there beyond human comprehension, in a realm where science and aesthetics interweave in baffling ways (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 139). No scientific description of the gelatinous beings seems possible without reference to their unknowable elegance, their bodies like works of art. Perhaps flimsy and superficial, jellyfish-images inspire brief moments of wonder, contemplation of watery otherness (140). Gelatinous zooplankton, bodies so fragile in air yet so agile in water, can mean something for aquatic environmentalism. Radical images of nonhuman otherness, Gelata cannot easily be anthropomorphised. No faces are suggested in bells of jelly, no cuteness emerges from creeping tentacles. Fluid, nearly invisible in dark oceans, jellies soon become unrecognisable as life. A mere nebulous glow in the distance, white edges enveloping nothing, in human imaginations jellyfish are lost at sea (140). Jellyfish are like the element they float in, hovering indistinguishable from the watery realms they inhabit (143). Translucence impossible to fully capture, unappreciated by the light-dependent human eye. See a completely black background, a white ghostly appearance drawing near the camera, jelly photographically removed from its environment (152). A flimsy skeleton, so soft it is barely there, it may as well not be. Or tentacles flowing, not apprehending what they are, a stinging apparatus, but so much more. If any comparison is made it is the analogy with the plastic bag, floating and destroying, likewise ingested by beloved sea turtles (Marland 2). Tales of overabundance of jellyfish are easier to tell than ecosystem-tales, than a kaleidoscopic sense of the lion's mane right there, its role in its ecosystem, slowly making its way through icy seas (160). In search of something, connected to more than a sterile black background, it flows elusively.

The turtles are, in a sense, eating a metaphor. However, their "error" suggests that we humans may be seeing too much difference: while we may view the plastic waste as inert, dull matter in comparison with the vital, living forms of the jellyfish, and so assume that any connection between the two is coincidental and largely figurative, the turtles appear to recognize and respond to material correspondences of pattern, texture, and movement. For the turtles, the relationship between the two material phenomena is more-thanmetaphorical.

(Marland. 2-3)

To avoid misunderstandings: in the future, too, we cannot make do without pumping stations, dikes, and dune reinforcements. Human safety determines the limits of the space that water is granted. But moving along with the natural development of brooks, rivers and the sea is the only way to keep our head above water in the future.

(Ministry of Public Works and Water Management 6; my translation) Gelatinous mass like water, a jellyfish appears as life at its minimum. Aqueously uncanny, outlines of a ghost, it unsettles human worlds buoyed by repressed watery systems just underneath cities. Radical watery antagonist, stinging tentacles constitute human fears, buoy human ideas of otherness. With their minimalist mode of being, jellyfish break down categories, simultaneously exposing them (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 151). The lion's mane, photographed and contemplated, opens up a small window for consideration. Its limbs of jelly coil into human thinking, become a dancing thought floating into the margins of anthropocentrism. An opening between watery worlds and terrestrial worlds of air, tentacles reach out. Appealing to imaginations, inviting contemplations of living as water, of what it means to perceive in water as water (153). Lion's mane's orange-hued oscillating motions nudge perception, pulsate toward strange frameworks transcending the human as the default of condition. Dancing gelatinous spirit in watery depths, jellyfish agency is as strange as it gets, promotes flowing ideas to replace old, rigid ideas of rationality, of subject-object. It renders them extraneous, unworthy of their axiomatic status, buoyancy slowly falling away. Foundation undermined by long stinging tentacles, paralysing history of ideas, streaming out into a watery void at the centre of concentric canals, into oceans and realms of pelagic gelata. Anthropocentric ideas float unbuoyed, held by cemented myth. Inflexible foundation, like cities built on sand and water, slowly sagging, sinking back into swamp, ideas easily unmasked, liquidised by the movements of the lion's mane jellyfish. By bodies writing water, thinking water, being water, presenting a liquid buoyancy so integrated there is no exterior. The lion's mane lives within its ecosystem, is constituted within saltwater rather than by it, inviting watery thinking. A photograph of a whitely glowing jelly-skeleton against a black background seems to show everything in transparency, see-through sea and jelly, its true meaning remaining withdrawn (155). It is within apparent translucence, within the perceived flimsiness of the jellyfish, the infinity of the salty blackness, that buoyancy hides. The sum of all these parts, the void between them, constitutes the enmeshment between sea and jelly, a liquid buoyancy as a productive force of life.

To be astounded or astonished is to be unmoored, cut loose from an established order of things, to find oneself floating somewhere as yet unmapped, where unexpected, unrecognizable forms of life seem to demand some sort of recognition and response.

(Alaimo, , "Jellyfish Science" 151)

Jellyfish – being watery – exist at the edge of the "visible, the sayable, and the thinkable," barely distinct from the seas that surround them, existing as flowing, pulsing, gelatinous, and just barely organized bodies. Jellies somehow live as the very element that surrounds them. (How does this make sense? How do they make sense?)

(Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 153)

But crucially, this watery gestationality is also decidedly posthuman, where human reprosexual wombs are but one expression of a more general aqueous facilitative capacity: pond life, sea monkey, primordial soup, amphibious egg, the moist soil that holds and grows the seed. (..) We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir hodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean hodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies - which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean's dark belly.

(Neimanis 3)

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The motor tissue in these Medusae is of the simplest kind, and consists, in most cases, simply of bands of the granular substance just described. (..) I have paralysed one side of a Rhizostoma Aldrovandi, whose disk measured more than a foot across, by removing with a scalpel the bands of that half, whilst the other side contracted and expanded as usual, though with more rapidity, as if the animal was alarmed or suffering.

(Forbes 3)

Glide, contract, let body ripple. Feeling soft self upheld by soft water. Liquid, a creature of gentle movements. Predatory, tentacled extensions ever ready. No ambush, I am too slow. I float, in green-blue light. Jelly-body without clear edges, a ghostly spirit, a faint otherworldly glow. Float, buoyed by ocean currents, is a way of being. I am not going, I do not make my individual way through oceans. I pulsate, subtly suggesting direction. Liquid within and without me decides where I emerge, never to stay, passing through. Stretching out, elastic tissue expanding, condensing into a ball. Immediately disbanded, think anew, entrails are coloured. Do I see them, I do not know a lion's mane. I am pure symmetry, body composed from a centre point, roundness makes me. Layers in circles, concentrically, the same all around. Senses placed on tentacles, like eyes, feeling pressure, orientation, smell. I think roundly, in circles, single orifice at my centre. Thinking like water, liquid thoughts ripple out over tentacles. Angular thinking, instilled in hard calcium bones and rugged bodies, is impossible. Thinking is connecting, flowing, not severing. I am flow, depth, an antidote at the centre of fearful buoyancy's flipside. I await not far from the void beneath politics, the feigned buoyancy of air, treacherous. Perhaps a link, a little liquid connection, circular perspective on cities floating next to seas and under them. Think of me waterily, liquidise brains already bathed in strange liquids. Let them seep in, let flowing begin, let go. Of a body mild and stiff, become a flow to me, abandon individual direction, you have always been watery.

They <Medusae> are members of the lowest section of the Animal Kingdom, (..) They are active in their habits, graceful in their motions, gay in their colouring, delicate as the finest membrane, transparent as the purest crystal. (..) They have the power of emitting light, and when on a summer's evening the waves flash fire as they break upon the shore, or glow with myriads of sparks as they curl and froth around the prow of the moving ship or under the blade of a striking oar, it is to delicate and almost invisible Medusae that they chiefly owe their phosphorescence.

(Forbes 1)

III. Orbicularity

The future future and the strange stranger are the weird and unpredictable entities that honest ecological thinking compels us to think about. When we can see that far into the future and that far around Earth, a curious blindness afflicts us, a blindness far more mysterious than simple lack of sight, since we can precisely see so much more than ever. This blindness is a symptom of an alreadyexisting intimacy with all lifeforms, knowledge of which is now thrust on us whether we like it or not.

(Morton, *Hyperobjects* 124)

When a creative scientist, artist or philosopher has been for some hours or days intent on his work, his mind often takes on an almost physical character. That is, his mind becomes his real body. His over-mind becomes his brain.

(H.D. 18)

Cities floating on watery worlds, a politics of aquaphobia bobs at the surface, anxious movements rippling out through oceans, into realms of jelly. Suspend fear, buoy cities on currents inhabited by aqueous lion's manes flowing, a more balanced world emerges. Circular in nature, informed by round watery thinking like a jellyfish which is swim, is water, is a flow making sense of the world. Erasing rugged shapes, sharp corners, smoothening anthropocentric edges. Concede to human intimacy with strange things, which was always already there, though restricted by rigid structures, rationalist labels, systems of organisation claiming nothing slipped through the net. Yet water always does, always has, it is permeation, resistant to linear logic. It has always rendered daily things strange, rounding off rectangular corners, uncanny presence dripping from damp railings. Orbicularity was already there in sound, strange melodies from other worlds slipping through the cracks of the water-buoyed city, the rush of a lion's mane's slimy tentacles acoustically nearer than assumed, nonhuman presences droning into cities. Sound rounding spaces, a room upheld by watery worlds becomes round like a globe (Vian 112). Night emerges from a small round centre, core of light, developing in small concentric ripples, symmetrically like a jellyfish, retreating when the glow of dawn creeps through windows (Vian 111). Round windows on crooked circular canal sides, snaking around, thoughts, movements, governments meandering. To think roundly is to float like water in water, to think like a cloud of fog slowly floating into a human head. To let go of oblivion, for a thought to be a viscous tentacle reaching out into circling waterways, gripping onto sticky liquidity, entangling organic matter for metabolization into watery movement.

At the spot where a river joins the ocean there is a barrier that is very difficult to navigate. Wrecked ships dance helplessly in the great eddies of foam. Between the night outside and the light of the lamp, memories flowed back from the darkness of the past, banging against the light and, immersed in its glow, gleaming and transparent, flaunting their white fronts and their silver backs.

(Vian 112)

I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me. Its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of the solid nor a dvnamism like that in water which is exhausted in fleeing from me. It is a soft. yielding action (..) it lives obscurely under my fingers, and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. There is something like a tactile fascination in the slimy. I am no longer the master in arresting the process of appropriation.

(Sartre 609)

Ecological awareness is a loop because human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops. (..) The loop form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing.

(Morton, Dark Ecology 6)

The swing from normal consciousness to abnormal consciousness

It is to be a body, even human, conceding to floating, absorbed into true buoyancy within watery worlds. Body is a realm of water, within realm of water, become a nebulous outline against a black background. Become the gaps between a spooky white frame and black water, integrate what is withdrawn into self, for the jellyfish is not just withdrawn from human onlookers, an elusive part of it remains forever withdrawn even from itself (Morton, Hyperobjects 62). Let body pulse, feel flow of water within and without, trembles in stomach just like the wavy movements of a jelly, a lion's mane flapping in underwater currents. Skin non-crystalline, but translucence can be a thinking process, of becoming watery in thought. Let cities be buoyed, not on fear, but on watery collaborations. Let water saturate land, terrestrial mud and cemented cultures becoming a viscous in-between. Solidliquid world of extended coastal area, think in intertidal zones inhabited by saline smells, rush of wind, thick-stemmed samphire, salt marsh. Rounding off continents naturally, interzone of sandflats buoys cities better than seawalls do, nudging them into circular futures. Lion's mane pushes perception, so can watery human thoughts, if attention is paid, if angularity slowly flows, loosely, becoming orbicular, developing concentrically from a centre of buoyancy, in symmetrical layers of consideration. In watery writing, a human body often floats, this is always toward orbicularity, an understanding of the human body as a body of water within a body of water, indistinguishable like a jelly. Loop-formed water world inhabited by water-humans and water-jellies, equally liquid, this is living as water, giving space without conceding, for there is no non-watery space to begin with. There is no solid ground in orbicular watery worlds, there is no need for solid foundations if we are buoyed in floating.

Watery world, absorb me. Simultaneously depth and surface, ungraspable space continually reproduced by mobile molecules, absorption is not synonymous with disintegration (Steinberg and Peters 252). Watery world as an event of bodies and their meanings intermingling, challenging hierarchies, binaries (Idema 56). Oceans wavy at the surface, storms raging far within, never once the same, never once pinned down. Dividing watery worlds into rectangles for industrial exploitation cannot

If I could visualise or describe that overmind in my own case, I should say this: it seems to me that a cap is over my head, a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes. Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water.

(H.D. 18)

It is a fluidity which holds me and which compromises me; I can not slide on this slime, all its suction cups hold me back; it can not slide over me, it clings to me like a leech.

(Sartre 609)

That over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space. It is like a closed seaplant, jelly-fish or anemone.

(H.D. 18-19)

In that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water.

(H.D. 19)

is accompanied by grinding discomfort of mental agony. these stood in the same relation to the nervous

system as the over-mind

to the brain or intellect

be done straightforwardly, water and watery beings do not follow terrestrial paradigms of space, of boundaries. Watery worlds that envelop me suggest nonlinear, immeasurable notions of time (Steinberg and Peters 255). Of time loop-formed, circular, spiralling out in subcurrents, through oceans and urban waterways. A time of orbicularity, my jelly-centre is a bell-shaped human head, my arms are tentacled, nematocystenhanced. My thoughts are like body, bell-shaped bubbles of air emerge from single orifice at my centre, multiplying, creating bubble-webs, reaching out, forming long bubble-tentacles buoyed by watery currents. Tentacle translucent, a glow of white against a black background, nerve-endings sensitive to temperature, to touch. Willowy white limb reaches tentatively into water, into viscous solid-liquid worlds connecting to floating cities. Sense-endowed details dotted on white transparency, my tentacle curls through concentric canals, feels human feet hurrying over quaysides of cobblestone, feels the tremble of urban ferries droning through water-bodies. My symmetrical liquid body formed concentrically around a point of buoyancy, I flow in a direction, pulsing and contracting. Round air-thoughts, bubbling up slowly, to surfaces of water

long feelers reached down and through my body

set of superfeelings

extend out and about us; as the long floating tentacles of the jelly-fish reach out and about him.

They are not of different material,

The super-feelers are

super-mind,

My spherical mind emerges from my water body, from a body of water, evaporating thoughts into terrestrial worlds, liquidising. Becoming water, rounding off rugged edges, creating cities buoyed within watery worlds, liquid within and without. All is swept on current, canals and salt marsh.

Agile like a fish, life as water emerges elastically from and within taps, estuaries. Slowly terrestrial thinking decomposing language, nearly destroyed

which buoy cities bobbing under the sea.

bending. Words become crooked solidly meaningless. Words are are swim and flow, watery

stretch out. Extend letter pulsate write in wave. Write liquidly like jelly

non-logos language of circle-flow. Become a flow to me to me jelly, pulse, contract. Translucence in wordless thought.

extraneous to the gray matter of the directing brain.

part of the

as the jelly-fish feelers are the jelly-fish itself

Do not go not individually be swim be nebulous cloud looming. be sea *Until slowly, like falling asleep, liquid jelly within* elonaated and without. Rounding away, into flow suggest direction pulse extend like tentacle bubble-formed loop rippling out in fine threads. as water

(H.D. 19)

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