

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'BECOMING MUD'

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- *a microreview*
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The poetry of non-speaking autistic poet Hannah Emerson engages her readers in a conversation regarding cosmic identity and community liberation through self-love. This conversation is less a philosophical interrogation, or even a reckoning, but rather an invitation and a celebration. That's probably not what you would initially expect given the poem's title—mud classically evokes debasement and uncleanness rather than transcendence—but as teacher and poet Chris Martin, puts it, Emerson's poetry "creates a pattern of reaches and roots... to authentically reach—in the direction of thoughts, dreams, or connection—one must also authentically root" (Martin 20). Nestled within her collection *You Are Helping This Great Universe Explode*, "Becoming Mud" accomplishes what Emerson calls a "grownding—" an act of growth that must begin with an honest grounding of identity.

"Becoming Mud" is composed of eight unrhymed, two-line stanzas that lead the reader through this unexpected manifesto of liberation. The poem is narrated in a stream of consciousness with little punctuation to guide the reader, expanding upon this sense of freedom and tilting of existence. Though each line visually takes up relatively equal amounts of space on the page, there is a crescendo of thought into the exact center of the poem that then builds into its final cadence. In its movement, in its allure, it is an unexpected dance of language that begs connection to one another and to the earth: where are you going? This is where I am and here, there's room for us all.

The poem begins with a simple "Please"—more a beckoning than a request. In the first stanza, readers are drawn in with the language of liberation: "free," the repetition of "great" and reference to "beings of light." Emerson offers familiar words and images to frame this theme before her language takes an unexpected turn. The second stanza contrasts with the first as the repeated "great" bleeds into the thought "nobody nobody nobody hell animals" (line 3). It's a rather jarring shift from the "great free animals" of the first line, something that feels more like an intrusive thought,



or at least a voice other than the narrator's own. Perhaps this is the voice of the "helpful keepers of knowledge" in line 4, to whom these animals are "trying to go" (line 3). She does not say who these "keepers" are, but it's difficult not to read without a certain amount of cynicism, "keepers of knowledge" being reminiscent of the term "gatekeeping" or the mythological tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which we are forbidden to eat. However, the slip into the present tense "trying" is only momentary, not so much of a concern for the speaker as it is meant to help us locate ourselves within the poem before she moves back into the imperative: you are trying to reach for knowledge, try to go down instead.

Tension builds into the center of the poem as this destination of "knowledge" in the second stanza is contrasted with "the place in the mud" of stanza three. Consider, if you will, the physical process that one might go through in becoming mud: the reaching, the digging, the "kissing" sounds as it squishes between fingers, the immersion of belly and face—the imagery recalls the joy of a toddler after first rain. She describes it as a place of "peace," but the effect is more like this toddler-in-the-mud explosion of joy as Emerson mashes together a run of contradictory verbs and adjectives: "great kissing loving// earth lovely messy yucky" (6-8). Can you feel the mud squishing through your fingers? The intimacy of the words "kissing" and "loving" lend to this sense of "becoming" from the title; the reader begins to feel a sense of liberation in embracing the mud. What was once debased is now a destination of transcendence. Here, spanning the exact center of the poem, Emerson models this grownding as she calls herself "the great animal// that is named Hannah" (ll. 8-9). The full descriptive phrase along with "kissing mother loving me is" strengthens this assertion of her identity by pulling in the image of a nurturing mother. Not only is her being there in the mud a celebration of identity, but her place in the world has been given a blessing.

Finally, the final stanza deepens the urgency for this grownding as she advocates for her fellow autists. She tells us "Please get that all great animals are//autistic. Please love poets we are the first//autistics. Love this secret no one knows it" (ll. 15-16). This relationship between poetry and autism is the basis of the work of her teacher, Chris Martin, who ex-

plains in his book *May Tomorrow Be Awake* that many of the characteristics typically associated with autism are considered deficits within the medical community while “in poetry circles where intellect is generally presumed... [they are] intentional and fundamental tools” (Martin 35). He provides the example of the autistic preference for repetition called “perseveration” within the medical community and “anaphora” in poetry. This characteristic is particularly prevalent throughout Emerson’s body of poetry—in “Becoming Mud,” her repetition of “please” that would feel out of place in a typical conversation here lends to the poem’s allure and sense of beckoning. Martin explains the larger implications of this disparity—that Emerson and her fellow autists “have been struggling against the constraints of a society built to minimize the complexity of their intellect and expression...these [poets] are often held back by a dam of societal neglect” (12).

Emerson addresses this issue head on, subverting widely held ideas of autism and poetry in two lines. Perhaps the keepers of the knowledge from earlier in the poem are the doctors and medical providers who would dismiss her with the label “disabled”? Or possibly a literary community that has failed to create a space for voices that lacked their same credentials? Emerson’s answer is empathy and connection “please get...please love poets...the first autistics.” Grounding necessitates an honest acknowledgment and respect of others. “Becoming Mud” will not only set you free, but will in turn set all of us free.

