

What Water Is

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In Memory of Coach Gary Fahey

I. MEMORIES OF WATER FROM THE 1970s

A compulsory swim lesson at Friday Mountain, a sleepaway camp in the Hill Country outside of Austin, Texas. The counselor posed me at the edge of the pool, where the shallow end slanted into the deep, told me to curve my arms over my head like a swan's neck, one hand pressed on top of the other, to bow my head as in prayer and fall forward. When I hit bottom, the thud had a stifling thickness to it, which stayed inside my skull long after the shock of the impact. I inhaled water, kicked and clawed my way to the surface, and dragged myself choking and crying onto the side of the pool, where the counselor applied pressure to my head, to stop the bleeding.

An afternoon at the beach in Manzanillo, Mexico, with my mother and her beloved friends, known to me as Tío Jorge and Tío Lalo. Playing in the waves, I felt the tide surging around my legs, knocking me sideways, dragging me under, away from shore. I floundered uselessly against the water's pull, all my limbs flailing like a trapped animal intent on escape, panic surging through my body. After what seemed like an eternity of desperate, frenzied thrashing and shouts for help, which no one on shore could hear, the tide all at once dumped me onto the beach, as if I were something unsavory the ocean had swallowed and spat up. I stumbled out of the water, exhausted, trembling, sobbing and

covered in sand, and staggered to my mother. Worried that I would get Tío Lalo's station wagon sandy, she sidestepped me like a bullfighter, wrapped me in a towel and stuck me in the way-back for the drive to town.

A birthday party at Robin Baker's backyard pool in Farmers Branch. Robin must have invited our entire class, including the boys, who were loud and splashy and boisterous. With so many kids in the pool, so much jubilant shouting and cannonballing and Marco-Polo-ing, I stayed in the shallow end, cautious, nervous, scanning the surrounding waterscape, as if I were wading into enemy territory. Despite my vigilance, someone swam up behind me, rocketed out of the water, planted two palms on the top of my head and pressed down with all their weight, plunging me below the surface. I struggled with a kind of manic urgency against the grip holding me down, holding me under, struggled in what felt like an all-out fight for my life, my lungs, my muscles, my nerves strained past all reason, until something, I don't know what, suddenly gave, and I managed to haul myself up to the surface. Though I don't remember who dunked me, the dunking is my only vivid memory of the party, and the party is my only memory of Robin Baker. An association more than a memory, really, since I don't remember Robin at the party. I do remember spending the rest of the afternoon on the side of the pool, wrapped in a towel.

II. "THE BODY HOLDS MEMORIES"

Toi Derricotte says this in her poem "The Undertaking." Meaning that certain decisive experiences—of panic, of pain, of peril and helplessness—become part of the body. Derricotte's assertion is especially eloquent regarding childhood, when we haven't yet fully grown into our bodies, or into ourselves, and are therefore more vulnerable to the greater forces. Long after these formative experiences have passed, in time and even in memory, they remain on us, in us. We walk around with them as if they were another limb, another skin or skeleton, but visible to no one, not even to us. Nonetheless, invisible as they are, the memories our bodies hold are there; they've made us, shaped us, much as what we've consumed has made and shaped us. And there's no getting rid of them, is there? No, getting rid of them an absurdity, like un-eating all the meals of childhood.

My body holds memories of water. Like many people's bodies do, I imagine. Not only memories I can recall, but countless others, locked in the most remote caverns of my unconscious. If I try to articulate the sense of water that abides in my body, try to describe its qualities, its essence, to say what water is, I feel as though I'm grasping in many directions with tentative fingers, like someone closed in a windowless room with no source of light. I touch something formless, dense, cold, and back away in terror. I touch something immense and overwhelming, something crushingly strong. I touch something with a body that, whatever its dimensions, is all spit and swallow and stomach. I touch something that will surround me, invade me, smother me, carry me away.

All at once it hits me: My body remembers water, regards water, as an enemy. Yes, and every time I go to a pool, every time I go to a lake, a river, an ocean or a sea, every time I take off my clothes and ready myself for immersion, I'm preparing to face an enemy, my body bracing for combat. This enemy is ruthless. This enemy is heartless. This enemy possesses superior fire power, superior staying power, superior tactics. There's little hope of victory against this enemy, only the hope that I'll survive the battle with minimal damage, that I'll manage a nimble withdrawal or narrow escape, with my legs on dry land, air in my lungs.

III. "TO SUBDUE THE ENEMY WITHOUT FIGHTING"

This, according to Sun Tzu, is the supreme art of war. Unfortunately, when it comes to water, fighting is the only way I know how to get in, get through, get out. Perhaps because of my early encounters with water, or my anxious disposition, or flawed aquatics instruction, I was always a fearful and floundering swimmer. Navigating any body of water presented an exhausting challenge, one to be dreaded, then grimly endured. Though counselors and coaches had always assured me I was as buoyant as the next person, I never felt buoyant. On the contrary, in water I felt hyperdense, like one of the heavier minerals, liable to sink as soon as my feet left bottom. Staying afloat, therefore, entailed prodigious effort and energy. I flapped, pumped, lashed, hammered, thrashed, all my limbs in a continual struggle, trying to propel the leaden lump of my body through the water. With all that furious kicking and pulling, you'd think

I'd have zipped along like a torpedo, but no, a single length of the pool felt as long and arduous a journey as Odysseus's return to Ithaca.

Sun Tze also says, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Sage advice, to be sure, but how to know an enemy as changeable as water, with so many fearsome attributes? Imagine an opponent as vast and deep as an ocean, for example. Imagine one that at certain temperatures turns solid, while at others vaporizes. One that in liquid form can burn or freeze you. One that can move with such force that a fast-rolling wave a mere six inches high will knock you off your feet. Imagine an opponent that's also an entire world, a dim, mysterious realm inhabited by toothed and tentacled creatures that can bite you and sting you, microscopic creatures that can seep into your crevices and devour your flesh. Imagine immersing yourself in this world, whose primary element comprises over half of your body's substance but will soon kill you if you breathe it.

Given the many daunting qualities of water, I dared only meet it on fields of combat meant to curtail its powers. In smaller volumes, at warmer temperatures, with little movement and minimal wildlife, water could be a somewhat manageable foe. The ideal arena for combat? A heated pool, well chlorinated, with the other swimmers on the side, enhancing their tans and drinking beer out of koozies. This strategy of risk mitigation allowed me to let down my guard a bit—I could try a lap or two of my dithering crawl, then retreat to the safety of the side stroke; I could try a dive, into the deep end, of course; I could try a handstand in the shallows, a delicious sip of childhood; I could turn onto my back and try to float, perhaps even close my eyes for a moment—but I could never relax. After all, as one learns at some point, under the right circumstances a person can drown in a puddle. Given that I would only confront water with its formidable capacities greatly diminished, there was no way to get to know my enemy. And, alas, as little as I knew about water, I knew even less about myself. Regarding such a circumstance, Sun Tze has this to say: "If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

IV. FASCINATIONS

The intensity one feels toward a powerful enemy is a form of passion much like being in love. There's the obsessive focus on the enemy, the overblown feelings sparked by any encounter, even imagined encounters, the stubborn attachment to the enemy, even if unreciprocated, and the exaggeration of the enemy's attributes. Like the beloved, the enemy becomes an idealized object, albeit in the negative. The fact that we legendize an enemy's dark powers only reinforces the hold the enemy has over us, since the negative tends to leave a deeper impression than the positive. As a consequence, to the degree that we despise and dread our enemies, we also find ourselves drawn to them.

Like anything ungovernable and potentially deadly, water is fascinating. The very qualities that alarm me—water's extremes of temperature, its enormity, its prodigious energy in motion, its strange flora and fauna, its unbreathableness—also intrigue me. As if I needed more evidence, a pair of memorable films from the 1970s confirmed my sense of water as a captivating enemy. In *The Poseidon Adventure* a roaring tsunami capsizes a luxury liner and swallows up its tuxedoed passengers like so many breadcrumbs; spectacular explosions, death plunges, and water gushes ensue, and only the lucky few survive. As rattled as I was during *The Poseidon Adventure*, I've never entirely recovered from *Jaws*. Watching the opening scene of the skinny-dipping woman, whose last words before getting mauled by the shark are "Come on in the water!" literally made me sick, nauseated, sweaty, breathless. Nevertheless, I was unable to tear myself away and had nightmares for weeks. After that, a mere glimpse of the *Jaws* poster, or a brief snippet of the ominous theme music, would flood me, as it were, in water-terror.

Less threatening, though equally enthralling, were episodes of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* and *The Cousteau Odyssey*. These shows, which ran from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s, provided a safe view of the vast alien world beneath the waves via the small box of our television. Armed with a spirit of scientific enquiry, a sense of adventure, and various seaworthy crafts, including *Calypso*, his research vessel, and his diving saucer *Denise*, Jacques Cousteau faced the enemy and triumphed, again and again. For his bravery he was rewarded with astounding sights: undulating vegetation; corals as colorfully textured as jewels; fantastic creatures, finned and unfinned, their graceful glidings, their jellied masses, their pulsings, puffings, and shimmerings;

otherworldly mating rituals; complex waltzes of predators and prey; sunken human artifacts, including skeletons, lost treasures both eroded and preserved by the cold deep. All these images of life under water made me ache with a sort of primitive longing, though longing for what I couldn't say, even now.

I was also able to observe the mesmerizing underwater world from the safety of my house via another small box, an aquarium, purchased by my father, probably to satisfy the latest of his many consumer impulses, which flared up and died out soon afterward, like sparklers. Our aquarium came equipped with a filter, light and heater and was populated by an assortment of tropical fish, including mollies, guppies, a gaggle of neon tetras, and a catfish I named Oscar. Feeding time was terribly exciting: The fish—except for Oscar, the bottom trawler—would ascend to the surface to gobble up the flakes I sprinkled from above, like a child god raining manna upon them. I spent hours, my nose pressed to the glass, following the supple sweep of their bodies through the water, and I imagined myself among them, sprouting gills and diving downward, down to the lower realms, where I, like Jacques Cousteau, could behold the secret marvels of the depths.

V. GETTING IN

Perhaps because of my time spent gazing at water through small boxes, I didn't avoid getting in altogether, though I still considered water a forbidding enemy. At Brush Ranch, a sleepaway camp in the Pecos Wilderness outside Santa Fe, I even signed up for swimming of my own free will, determined to conquer the pool, another small box of water, at least compared to the ocean. The camp offered synchronized swimming, which thrilled me, as the nimble movements of fish seemed much like an elaborate dance. Alas, each time I attempted a ballet leg—while on your back you extend a leg at a right angle to your body, toe pointed, while keeping yourself afloat by skulling—I sank. And I failed the Red Cross skills test, which required swimming a length of the pool, a task I still wasn't able to accomplish. I could never decide which was worse, failing the swim test or receiving the certificate anyway, since a counselor felt sorry for me.

In college I summoned my nerve yet again and headed for the cavernous natatorium. Among the tireless lap swimmers, my stroke seemed even more

bungling and chaotic. Even so, I stuck it out, scrutinizing their movements—of arms, legs, head—often plunging myself below the surface to watch them under water, an experience much like being inside the fish tank with the fish. After extensive observation and experimentation, I could get from one end to the other without stopping, though one length was my limit and even that distance exhausted me. That the stroke I was so desperate to learn was called “the crawl” made sense: My progress through the water felt like a crawl, whereas the swimmers in the adjacent lanes seemed to soar from one end to the other with minimal effort, as if swimming were as easy as getting from the sofa to the fridge. When I learned the proper name for the crawl, “the freestyle,” I had to laugh. Never did I feel less free, and more bereft of style, than when attempting the freestyle. Despite my ongoing efforts to improve, my swimming plateaued; subsequently, I decided to forgo any future battles with the water, instead settling for the occasional scuffle in pools, streams, calm surf.

VI. TOTAL IMMERSION

After my underwater adventure at the natatorium, I exercised solely on dry land for over thirty years, ploddingly content, loping a five-mile circuit around my neighborhood. Eventually, however, my body began to protest, the accumulated memories of so many pounding strides on asphalt perhaps too much for my joints to bear. “You should swim,” my nearest and dearest advised. For years on end they said this, but I resisted. I was a terrible swimmer, and water was my enemy. However, at the request of my son, who wanted a reprieve from the Atlanta heat, I joined our local Y. At fifty-two years old I headed back to the pool with the sense that the water had been waiting for me all along, a cosmic inevitability, like fate. Or death, I suppose, but no, this time around I was trying for optimism. I would finally learn to swim properly, many laps in a row without stopping, and defeat the water.

Again I observed the swimmers around me and tried to imitate their grace of motion, to match their stamina. My stroke improved slightly, but I wasn’t able to make it more than one length without becoming breathless. Swimming still felt like a fight, me against the water, and the water was still winning. Even though for decades I had run many miles without getting tired, I concluded

that to swim continuously I needed to get into what I dubbed “swimming shape.” Where I got this idea, I couldn’t say, perhaps from my ignorant inner know-it-all; needless to say, after eight months I was no closer to getting into swimming shape than when I started. However, I soldiered on, fought harder, day after day, determined to win this encounter with the water. When my husband told a good friend about my swimming odyssey, he recommended total immersion. “But I already get in over my head,” I protested.

When you type “total immersion” into your search engine, you’ll discover, as I did, that Total Immersion is a swimming method, with a website offering many avenues of instruction. You’ll also find a video called “Total Immersion Freestyle Ultimate Demo,” which features two swimmers, TI’s Founder/Head Coach and TI’s former President, gliding with magnificent ease through open water and various pools, separately and together, perfectly synchronized. Their bodies look relaxed, almost languorous, their arms as sinuous as seaweed, gently lifting out of and dropping into the water, no heaving, no grasping, no splashing. And their legs, well, their legs barely move, floating behind them like bridal trains stirred by the wind. With calm, measured pulling and kicking, motions that seem almost like an afterthought, they cut through the water at startling speeds, so much so that they appear to be propelled by hidden motors. After watching this video more times than I care to admit, newly astonished at each viewing, I was—please, I beg you, forgive the pun—hooked.

VII. SURRENDER

I immediately ordered a Total Immersion book, as well as a DVD, poring over them like a convert learning my new religion’s holy texts. Shortly afterward, in need of further instruction, I signed up for a TI Effortless Endurance weekend seminar, offered in my area by a grizzled, sunbaked, slightly cantankerous middle-aged man from Miami known as Coach Gary. In a suburban community college’s gym lounge I joined a small group of students, mostly older, swim-challenged triathletes, for Coach Gary’s eloquent lectures on the fundamentals of Total Immersion. We then waded into a frigid indoor pool, where Gary’s assistant, a mind-blowingly fit former Olympic swimmer, filmed our “before” strokes. After Gary hopped into the water to demonstrate the TI method, broken down into easily digestible, discrete steps, we practiced each drill as

Gary barked encouragements from the side. Later over lunch Gary screened our “before” footage, supplying a detailed critique of each swimmer, with suggestions for improvements. The following day, we did the whole thing again, this time filming our “after” strokes.

During the seminar I started to feel as though the halting crawl with which I’d struggled most of my life wasn’t swimming at all but an ill-advised water-based enterprise only tangentially related to swimming, the way that violently convulsing one’s arm is related to waving. Total Immersion freestyle was a different activity altogether, elegantly simple yet precise, a challenge both physical and mental. To learn it I would have to forget everything I knew about swimming and start from scratch. I read somewhere that TI’s president took two years to perfect his gorgeous stroke, captured, in case you’re interested, in a video entitled “The Most Graceful Freestyle Swimming,” with over ten million views and counting.

The Total Immersion method, its skills, drills, and philosophy, has been well documented by its founder and its many passionate adherents, but the wonderful Coach Gary, who died unexpectedly at age fifty-seven during the pandemic, emphasized again and again one crucial point above all others: Effort creates drag. To move with more efficiency through the water, one must minimize the body’s drag, rather than maximizing the body’s effort. A sleek, streamlined body shape and calm, quiet limbs allow a person to glide weightlessly through the water like a fish. In other words, rather than fighting the water, one should surrender to the water, feel the water, work with the water as it is. After the seminar I tried to swim with surrender in mind. Only then did it dawn on me that water had never been my enemy. I’d been fighting it all my life, but the fighting itself was the problem, not the water. Yes, all that tiresome fighting, mostly with myself, fighting that got me nowhere and only kept sinking me, swim after swim.

VIII. WHAT WATER IS

Much to my surprise, I now call myself an adult-onset swimmer. Most days you’ll find me at the pool, swimming back and forth, back and forth, trying to perfect my stroke. Perfection not a goal but an aspiration, the pursuit rewarding for its own sake. I’m gradually feeling my way into my body’s natural buoyance,

slowing and lightening my limbs, trying to release a life's worth of tensions. Each time I swim I make the small, incremental improvements that come from a purposeful practice sustained over time. Nevertheless, my progress is glacial. As it turns out, even after you realize that water's not your enemy, it's hard to stop fighting, since fighting's what you've always done, every time you've gotten in. I'm no longer crawling, but I still feel far from free in the water. I am, however, developing a style, perhaps even a graceful one.

Nowadays the idea that water was my enemy seems absurd, the notion of a child, a child who thinks that just because she struggles to swim, the water has it in for her. I wish I could say I'm beyond such fancies, but fighting imagined enemies is something I still do every day—how else do you explain road rage? I sometimes wonder if other people have made the same childish error in perception, mistaking water for an enemy. No, I conclude, who else could possibly be that ridiculous? On the other hand, I think about how humans so easily, one might even say naturally, find enemies everywhere, how they make an enemy of any feared other. They subjugate the enemy, use the enemy as a resource, exploit the enemy, mistreat the enemy, torment the enemy until they destroy it. Viewed in this way, one could argue that most humans have treated water as an enemy, have commodified it for profit, have dammed and stored it as a means of control, have squandered it, misused it, polluted it with plastics and chemicals and sewage and centuries of our refuse. Hard not to imagine that water is having its revenge on us, with this era's intensifying droughts, floods, tsunamis, tropical storms. Hard not to feel we deserve it all, every vengeance water wreaks upon us.

But no, water isn't vengeful, and I no longer consider water an enemy. Though I don't think of it as a friend either. Water still intimidates me. And after nearly two years of Total Immersion, I'm not any closer to knowing what water is. Perhaps the ancients have it right when they imagine water as a sort of deity, a power beyond their reckoning, an uncanny presence to be approached with awe and respect and a healthy fear. Perhaps water is ultimately as unknowable as the unnamable God of the Hebrew Bible, a dynamic lifeforce that isn't one thing or another but simply is. With that notion, along with a swim cap and a pair of goggles, I get back into the pool yet again, and I surrender to the flow, my body like a prayer I hope the water will answer.