



Water, Water, Everywhere

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THERE WAS THIS TIME in my childhood when I was afraid of water. I can't exactly point to what brought on the fear. I know it wasn't always there. It showed up around my seventh year, after my mother's father died in the room just off the parlor, and my mother

disappeared into long hospital visits to save my baby brother.

While I was afraid of water, I wore life vests even when they were unnecessary and I dreaded that moment on summer vacation when someone would suggest that sitting in a boat in the middle of drowning-depth water would be fun. I didn't want to go fishing or swimming. I didn't want to go on the class beach trip and when a friend had a pool party, I would happen to be ill that day. My parents never asked. We never talked about it. Everything went on with our life. My brother lived, my parents worked, and I went to school and avoided this and that.

“NOTHING IN THE WORLD IS AS SOFT AND YIELDING AS WATER. YET FOR DISSOLVING THE HARD AND INFLEXIBLE, NOTHING CAN SURPASS IT.” TAO TE CHING

For a while I thought my fear was limited to the ocean, where water depth was unknowable. Unknowable things had become frightening. But why then my fear also of glittering, astringent swimming pools? The trepidation wasn't the pounding of the surf or temperature of the water, either. It was the feeling of suspension in that airless space between the water's surface and the theoretical ground that was unsettling. Between ground and surface, the world was a slower, heavier place where even simple movements were protracted and everything was unpredictable. There was no

control in that space.

I kept my aquaphobia to myself. Even today my father says he'd never known. My family didn't talk about the stresses and sorrows we were wading through. My parents didn't think much of the beach anyway. When we visited Hawaii on the last vacation I took with them, we hardly set foot on the sand. “We aren't the sort of people who lounge around on the beach,” my mother reminded me. What sort of people were we?

ONCE UPON A TIME, *there was a woman who fell in love with a fish. The woman lived with the people of the high, dry country. Her people talked very little and when they did, they talked about the wind and the soil, the sand and the stones. They rarely talked about the water, and they mostly kept to themselves. The people did, however, need to drink water and the woman was given the task to go down and check the pumps and pipes that moved the people's water up to the high, dry country where they lived.*

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It was on one of these trips that the woman met the fish. He was swimming near the new pipes the people had laid; the ones the woman was supposed to check that day. She'd never seen anything like the fish before. She stood a long time and watched him swim. She didn't understand water, but the way he moved made the woman think of the smoke that rose from the night fire and of the snake that slid through the sand and stones. How could he move so much like these other things, she wondered.

The fish heard her question, but he didn't know how to answer. He told her he had been swimming all of his life. He didn't know what it was like not to swim. He didn't know whether he'd ever learned it or whether he'd always known. The woman and the fish

talked for a long time that day and for many of the days that followed. The woman would go early to inspect the pipes and pumps and she would stay very late. She learned about swimming and about how water had very different tastes and different temperatures and textures. She didn't understand much of what the fish told her, but she was happiest at the edge of the water with the fish. The fish was also often confused by what the woman told him about the place where she came from where the water from his lake went in those metal veins on the shore. But, he was happiest swimming near the woman and spending days talking with her.

WHEN I MOVED away from my family, it was thousands of miles away to Seattle. Embraced between Puget Sound and Lake Washington, and holding several lakes in her limits, the city is marked by her water. We moved at a respectful distance to one another for a while, but water was pivotal to my daily landscape. It punctuated my view and dictated my transportation options. I always paid attention—I watched kayakers on Lake Union and studied the colors the sun turned the sound as it dipped below the Olympic Mountains—but, over time, the city's water began to exhibit a stronger pull on me. At the ragged end of a long week, I began to feel an insatiable need to stand on the bank of one of her lakes or on the salty lip of the sound. Even just leaning against the pilings of the downtown Seattle waterfront to hear the tide slosh in and out felt like medicine.

One late October night, a group of friends gathered on the beach at Golden Gardens to wish a bright birthday to the woman who'd brought us all together to perform a momentous show about love and imagination that drew more than 5,000 of our neighbors one night. The bonfire was crackling and people were laughing and singing and occasionally dancing. The water might have moved closer to us, or we to the water, but soon someone was swimming and then another and more were on the edge, reaching out their toes. I was up to my waist and the water pulled forward and back like breathing.

I was startled that I had so naturally leapt into the autumn water, but even more startled that the water was full of light. I moved my legs forward and back and set off a storm of little lights like the static lightning my sister and I had made running our feet fast back and forth under our covers as children. These submerged stars flashed and flickered and burnt out in scooped handfuls of water. I couldn't hold them. They weren't there when I looked, but were everywhere on my periphery; stars that were neither plant nor animal, eating light and spiraling on their thin arms through the dark water where they would ignite suddenly like fiber-optic tinsel. I squealed and ran through the water like a dog with a ball or a child chased in a game. And when I was worn out and the cold caught up to me, I drew close to the fire and stared back at the dark water that gave no sign, in the distance, of her magic luminescence. I felt like I'd been given a precious secret.

WHEN THE WOMAN *told her people that she had decided to move her home to the edge of the water where she could always be near the fish she loved, the people were confused. "You have nothing in common with that water creature," the woman's people pointed out. "You are from this place, where it is clean and dry." The people told her that the water was dangerous; deeper than she thought it was and full of slimy green weeds. They begged her not to go, but she went. And when the fish saw*

her come to join him, he grew bright with his happiness. The woman reached her hand into the water and when she did, the fish stretched his fin to her and there, where there were none before, he had fingers. And attached to his fingers was a hand, connected to an arm that joined a torso across from a second arm with a hand and fingers. He saw then two legs with knees and feet and toes and the woman reached out again and touched his face.

The man and the woman settled on the far shore, away from the pumps and pipes. They planted a little garden and they spoke every day and told stories and laughed. They scooped up water to feed the garden and all along the shore where the couple lived the trees bloomed and stretched toward the sky and fruits and vegetables thrived and so did the people who lived there.

I HAD CALLED Seattle home for more than a decade before I met a local boy for whom moving over and through water was second nature. We shared our first kiss on the starboard side of the Bainbridge Island ferry with the cold Puget Sound roiling below us. He folded his arms around me and we stared up at the stars that were so much brighter than those I infrequently saw above the city lights in Seattle. Below the inky black sky swelled the inky black water, spangled with its own array of tiny lights.

As winter set in, the two of us took a vacation to Maui and saw all over the island how water overcame. The ocean carved the soft sand and the hard stones alike. It shaped the island, put out fires, pushed down trees and boats and buildings. Bobbing in the swells near the shore, though, was smooth and womb-like. I rose and fell with the clear water like I was part of a breath pulled in and pushed out of salty lungs. Over and over again. After a long day of swimming and snorkeling and sitting in the sun, we would go to our bed and once my eyes closed, and I lay my head against his chest, the phantom waves would lift me up and down as his chest rose and fell and my breath pulled in and out. I had never breathed so well, so fully. I did it for days. For days we repeated this walk to the warm sand and into the gradient blue of the ocean and back upon the shore. For days we sat on the beach, rested, breathed, and were saturated with water. We were those sort of people, I realized. And I was pleased.

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