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# Learning to Swim

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## *Learning to Swim*

The jetty was a letter L written  
into the murk, and when the “kingies” ran  
it was a hook that dragged them in.  
The red arrow of the navigation marker  
was the talisman that lured us out  
over our depth, before any  
of us could really swim—algae  
blooms swaddling, keeping us  
afloat. The simple strokes  
we learnt before the tautology  
was understood—jets of water  
from frantic hands and feet,  
trauma of bow-waves  
as a speedboat blasted past.  
Show-offs relished impact, their  
spectacular effects, skiers  
letting go and furrowing into shore,  
white beach littered with halves of bivalves,  
flywheels of jellyfish that have lost their oomph,  
the strandings of tide and heat. The murk  
formed a coating that protected you  
from being burnt when you emerged,  
small cuts on your feet from razor shells,  
and bull sharks that specialised  
in striking river-swimmers, especially  
those paddling towards a first certificate.

Lined up in our imaginary lanes, late '60s Speedos  
grasping our skinny hips,  
we struggled to the markers,  
adults wading up to their waists,  
clutching at us when the plimsoll line  
began to shift, their legs wavering curves  
and angles, their feet lost. A flurry

of mothering and fathering. Of sex  
without epistemology. Bravura  
of bodies and exposure. Early morning,  
sea scouts sailing their pelicans, cutting  
past us, catching the gentle but compelling  
breeze into the sun.

The group  
floundered like the injured offspring  
of a leviathan, and the river fed us  
ear, nose, and throat infections,  
mixed its fluids with our fluids,  
let us know the truths of drowning:  
a lonely gasping, a flowing out, a passing  
through all others who've swum there before,  
who might reach out to hold you up,  
or might let go, or just fail to see you pass;  
where treading water becomes the step  
up a stair that isn't there, and everything  
gives way, and water is just air  
that suffocates.

Lesson learnt.  
Or is it? Forty years pass and the dive  
from the L of the jetty brings you sweating  
out of slip, dripping with the slurry  
of the river. To struggle beneath the water  
around the barnacle-encrusted pylons  
merges the vivid and unresolved,  
like opening your eyes to yellow light  
and ochre shadows, cold places  
where pylons obscure the light,  
to find a brick dropped off the jetty's edge  
for you to prove your worth, heavy  
but drifting down, swinging down,  
a pendulum through silt, contradictions

that bend all sense, as panic to hold  
what can't be seen and to drag it upwards  
to the surface, seeming heavier  
than your own body.

Lesson learnt.

A foot up on the stage of proficiency.  
To swim in a dry, wide country  
surrounded by water. Your life  
is inland now, where kids drown  
in farm dams consistently: in the murk,  
in the ochre water. The sheep come  
down to drink, nudging at the corpses  
long before the parents have discovered  
you missing. Long after lessons  
have been learnt.