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Learning to Swim

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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.