

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Tom Sheehan

Brute Immersion

The mirror folds in on itself. Images separate. At seven years of age I was drowning!

It was simple as that. Water, water everywhere and not a drop I should drink.

Cut the crap, I thought. It's not funny. It was strange, my mind still working, conjuring images, associations, and the pressures coming to bear.

My younger sister Patricia and I had come much earlier to The Pit at the meeting edge of Saugus and Revere on Massachusetts's North Shore, Boston but a few miles off and but a few needles on the horizontal skyline. Mass was over, Sunday school done in a jiffy, and the water of The Pit or any of the other salty places of the Rumney Marsh calling us in the heat of an early September day.

Summer, as yet, had its grasp in place. We had been summoned the odd way sweat crawled about us in church, making demands of its own, droplets at bare announcement. And our father on a solitary day away from work, starchy yet newly elegant in the only suit we had ever seen him wear, presumably a gift, was off to an hour's union meeting. The suit seemed new though the shoes were the same old handoffs he'd been wearing for much more than a year. Straight down the tracks of the Saugus-Linden Branch he had marched, the easiest route to the union hall, the collar tight on his neck, the pants with an iron crease a long day would take care of, the suit and the shoes strangers in the one. His route had required no cab fare, no bus fare, no minor or harsh demands on his wallet mostly holding pictures by the inseparable dozen.

At a distance, unseen, we had followed him part way on his route and then we left the railroad tracks for The Pit, the posse leaving the trail. Short cuts in life always pose the best adventures, or something like that I had once read, my father demanding two hours a day be spent over a book good, bad or indifferent, but always of my own choice...my choice made it the special bent. Once I had hoped such reading would shape my life.

But not now. Not this instant. Not with water everywhere.

The indisputable fact I was drowning, like a weighted rock with its own hardness, flopped down through me, though I did not know how deep I was. Nor did I know what was still dragging me down; the oversized, quickly-borrowed swimming trunks yielded by a friend, or a found bracelet on my right hand wrist a friend of my father had sent me from a sandy Pacific rim, an officious but threatened grasp from a mysterious origin. It was Japanese most likely, and with an inherent curse plotting its course, as I was to find out before too long.

Perhaps, I thought in my desperate and measurable musings, the weight was my final Sunday morning meal of thickened oatmeal and thicker bread my mother had *presto*-ed up as she always did. What an engineering marvel she was, magician of sorts, magician of eyes and hands, magician of soft touches and surety. The way she could appease my hun-

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ger tantrums sent me into the language of my grandfather who always demanded two new words a day in my vocabulary, and thus with them coming the internal rhymes, the rhythms, the sweet, melodious mouth of the Irish alliteration, the *Ps* and *Rs* rolling off my tongue more of music than of taste when thinking of my mother: *provender of provisions, party purveyor, oh so casual caterer, oh Mother's mother of mercy* the way she fed her brood. Blue of her eyes struck me ever from its depth.

Quickly a slant of sunlight was near me, a bright sword in the murky depths, and with it a threat at my mouth and tightening my throat. Soon I realized I would have to breathe, gasp for air, but there was no breathing down here, no gill replacement, and no hope of oxygen. The wonder of the sun's ray, now suddenly and without apparent reason a single blade of the sword of light, was thin as a prism shake-off; a dim reflection of all hope, all possibility, all promise. My throat, and that huge sense of air unknown feet above me, (yards, miles, acres, oh cubit sound from a dim reading) called again, demanding to be paired and known, demanding obeisance to the simplest pleasure.

If I shut my eyes, I wondered, would all go away? Oh, I had done all this before, retreating from obvious though transcendental terrors. My mother, I was sure, would be the saddest, and that was terror of similar sorts, immeasurable, handless, without a grasp to its inherent structure. She would kneel and send off her thanks for the short time she had me, these few measureless years now promising an end. She had broached and birthed me and sang the soft lullabies now lurking for a tune at the back of my head, her hand immediately known in its fervor at my brow, the parting caress I would carry past eternity. Then, quite irreverently, her soul ravaged to pieces, she would wail the way she had heard her own father wail, for her interminable brothers at loss, those brothers who had come from the horrors of France in 1918, bringing their endless baggage with them; the rotted lungs with the ever-hacking sound of them from enemy gas bags, the night horrors in the crowded bedrooms of their return, the ineffable demand for drink of any sort becoming a handle for such baggage, their nights worse than frontline French terrors, or soon they thought.

I wondered, in my waning moments of water, where my sister Patricia was, who moments before was standing in that golden sunlight at the bank of The Pit, the salt water basin on the Saugus-Revere line where planes with pontoons now and then scurried across the water, coming back down or running at the wind for take-off; where flounder gathered and fed some families a good portion of the year in those Depression times, where crabs brought their waiting and steamed deliciousness getting ready for a two-wheeled cart every neighborhood for miles around would know. "Crabbies! Crabbies! On'y a nickel! On'y a nickel! Get yer crabbies, on'y a nickel!" Oh, would that crabman be here now, seeing my plight, knowing what was building at a boy's mouth, the pressure borne of water at my lips.

The taste of steamed crab filled my mouth.

Patricia, it turned out, had run off down the Saugus-Linden tracks

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when I went under. Not a swimmer like our father or me, she ran up the tracks to see the *new suit* coming toward her. The scream had ripped from her throat.

It was the Revere crowd who had leaped in, four or five of them I was told, big guys, football players on a Sunday's cavorting, who plucked me from the depths.

"Hey, kid," they yelled, "you gave us a damned scare, you know that!" They had passed me hand to hand to hand to the warm shore where I found myself on the golden sand, sun's heat running into the sand and through my fingers, soft earth, warm earth, safe earth, haven earth, golden earth, oh old Roscommon rescued from the fire. It flowed through my fingers like mid-earth America in the green belt of the west. I could feel corn tassels from an August feast accompanying lobsters redder than Mars and clams cleaned by a night of feeding on oatmeal. The same grain I fed on every morning, it seemed.

"Hey, kid," one of them said a bit later in his beach dialect, "damned sand's warm, ain't it? Axe me, I know. I been there like that." Like an older brother he had spoken, or a confederate.

Realizations pounded at me sly as hammers. I measured barriers, edges. The bracelet from my father's friend was gone. The threat at my mouth and throat was gone. The single file of sunlight, the slanted sword of it, the saber thrust, was also gone. It lay everywhere now. It fell on me sure as a cocoon or comforter or cape, sure as mother's cuddle. I sensed the weight of water was also gone, that push I suddenly knew I had suddenly lost. It had evaporated in the glorious, global, encompassing sunshine. Golden goose, good gander, god's grace, gentle gatherer, grappler's guerdon, this sunny lad laying on the golden sand, soaking it all up, all of life, all of promise, all of future, the sun aching into him. Oh, what glories come unto me in my seventh year.

Then, from nowhere and everywhere, god-like, one powerful hand grabbed me by the neck, and another by the crotch of the oversized swimming trunks, and I was airborne, fully, surely airborne. Like some clumsy craft at take-off I was out over the once-threatening waters of The Pit. A fledgling fired outright from the nest I was, spinning my arms and legs as mere propellers, hitting the once-threatening salt water of The Pit with a splash. The salt was at my mouth again.

But I moved.

In mere moments those same powerful hands were at me, prodding, suggesting, supporting.

The guys from Revere, the football players, told me later. Patricia told me later. My father told me later. All the stories gibed. All ring yet as true, and most memorable, the golden heat known yet in my fingers, along the length of me, the splash of sun waves, the interminable basking I know always when the sun comes over the horizon, mounts and surpasses any hill, the mere act of salvation and discovery.

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Beside The Pit that day the gentleman had stripped the coat from the only suit he had ever owned, pulled off his shirt and undershirt, his old shoes and socks, rolled up the legs of his new pants, heaved me into the water, and jumped in after me. "In you go, son!" they all said he yelled. He made me swim again, that man who once near drowned in Lake Managua with the Marines, native arrows borne by his body, his blood let, wanting home so badly it burned his throat even twelve years later.

I have never been afraid of the water since that day. What was uppermost in his mind, he said after I had been saved, was that he wanted to make sure I would not forever carry the fear of water with me, as water is everywhere and makes up just about everything about us, right down to our blood and bones, the harbor of our souls.

A few years later, stature coming in slow degrees, I pulled a companion and teammate from our own Lily Pond. He sat gasping at the shore, measuring. I know he felt the shafts of sunlight. I saw the intrusion of that knowledge. I tried to get him to go back into the water. He wouldn't. To this day, more than 70 years later, I have not seen him near the water, not even at Nahant Beach or Fisherman's Beach in Swampscott where we summered for years, that threat still ripe in him.

I had had the brute immersion, the blessing of the appointed waters, and the font again at a small crossroad in life, gifted by the one man in the world who would be my water master forevermore.

My rescued companion and teammate never got to that part of it.