

cold. I didn't mind it so much. The ocean on my eyes crowded all other things from my mind. I hadn't seen the Atlantic in well over a year. While my friends talked around me, I gave myself over to the sea that stretched out before me. Heaven, heaven.

This time last year, I dreamt that I saw my father's body pulled from Curtis Bay, a foul, fetid patch of water in South Baltimore. He was face down, but I could see his hair, and he was wearing one of my work shirts, winter-weight linen, coarse and brown like burlap. I woke from this dream alone in my bed, pinned down by the pounding of grief and loss. I was stricken with sadness to leave him alone in that brackish pool. I couldn't pull him to shore. He was dead, and there was nothing for me to do. I could only move forward. This time last year I was waiting for September. For the fourteenth anniversary of his death, the one that meant I'd been alive longer without a father than with. Now the fifteenth looms. (It was unexpected. I went to bed a child and woke up to death.)

I watched a friend dive headlong into a wave. For a moment she was flawless, a fluid tuck of black hair and sun-browned shoulders. She arched into a breaker. Disappeared. My heart pounded out each moment she was gone, and I realized I'd stopped breathing. So much can happen. So much can happen in the span of two moments. A familiar numbness began to climb my calves, reaching for my stomach and lungs. It was cold, and the sky was getting darker.

But then she plunged forth, salt water streaming from her face and shoulders and chest. She was laughing, decrying the cold through bluing lips and chattering teeth. Though the water still held her from the waist down, she'd returned from the waves, bearing laughter and breath. I relaxed and felt the numbness retreat.

I waded out towards her, passed her, trudged along until I could barely touch bottom. I rose and fell with the sea. Though it was chilly, I was sweating, and I realized that my sweat and the sea water were indistinguishable. I looked down and found that my body was gone. From the shoulders down, I belonged to the murky waters of the Atlantic.

I accepted this. And I accept uncertainty, at least for now. I know that I share the water with a shark at any given moment. But staying on the beach is not an option. I can't stand the feel of hot sand on my feet. I can't stand to sit at the side and watch the waves rise and fall. I'm drawn to this place: I'm drawn to this water. I give myself over. The ocean is my mother. I stretch out and wait. ✧

The Middle-Aged Man and the Sea

Larry O'Connor

We are on a winding road along the Pacific Coast of Mexico for what seems like forever. M. and I are never more than a few miles from the sea, but it's spare country; our views are confined to roadside pines and the occasional tourist tree, a fat, red, foreign-looking variety with bark that peels. Rest, M. says, it's going to be a big day. I catch a glimpse of the water around a bend. The sea is not the roiling, windswept black water of the north. Or the smooth turquoise of a tropical lagoon. It is lapis blue, with white caps, the color of lakes at home, and I shudder with terror.

M. convinced me it would be all right when I reluctantly agreed to go on this trip. We are to meet teachers at the local marine institute and join them on their morning run to ancient fishing grounds. For centuries these people have lived and worked in the same way. Gringos, M. tells me, have never seen such a thing.

The fishermen at the water's edge don't look like any teachers I have ever seen. Men with hands like those in a Siqueros mural lift crates and tools into a boat, a long flat affair with no cabin and an outboard motor. Their feet, too, are huge and quick. They dash about barefoot, pivoting, twisting, making soft little leaps. The beach is filthy, and there are no palapas for sunbathers, only rows of empty crosspieces used for drying the day's catch. A battered colorless lifejacket is left on the sand for me. My feet are sinking into the wet sand.

Across the blur of brown humanity, I see M.; she is already on board the small boat, which is moving up and down in the waves. So beautiful in her white shorts and nautical top. Yet she may as well be a million miles away. Put it on, she motions. No one else is wearing a lifejacket, I stammer. A man pushes the lifejacket into my chest and scrambles ahead of me. I put it on.

Water doesn't exactly revolt me. I shower every day. I like the rain. Even my garden plants sense me coming. But miles and miles, wave upon wave, of deep water is another thing. I get weak in the knees just looking at the open sea. I throw up. I'm a hydrophobe.

Reformed drunks know what I'm talking about. They treat their fear through confession—I am John, and I am an alcoholic. My father had a different idea. "Face your fears, boy," he said. "Sink or swim." Those who have survived near-misses with death say at the moment of decision—

the firing mechanism of a pistol misfires, a bolt of lightning hits—they remember every detail: the smell of the air, the quality of the light on a leaf. Arm hairs and skin pores turn into millions of tiny receptors. Fear is the cattle prod of memory. Before an encounter with water over my head I am crackling of feelings. Fear is a cattle prod of memory. It can be a great mobilizer. Or it can make you crazy.

The boat is rocking in the waves. A big hand pushes my back and another jerks my arm and I'm in the stern. The water is not blue but black, like coal. We are leaving shore. Dazed and breathless, I stand until a powerful little man pulls me down to avoid being pummeled by a wave. Soaked to the skin and gripping the seat beneath me, I am the toxic cargo, a gringo in an obsolete lifejacket, scared to death in three and a half feet of water.

I feel laughing eyes on me, but as the spray lifts I look up instead to the gray eyes of an old man. The old man is dressed in rags, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the boat, gazing at me. We hit another wave and water drenches us all. I tuck myself into a ball to protect against the next one.

I am nine years old and hugging my knees, sitting on a wide flat stone before a river. For the previous three weeks that summer, we ten boys in the swim class had made good progress. We could open our eyes underwater, bob, do the dead man's float. Today would be the big test. Before us lay a patch of deep water, a foot or two over our heads. One by one the boys swam across, slapping the water like disabled seahorses. They had all passed me by, jumped ahead, did their first swim, and squealed as they reached the other side.

I had never liked the lessons. I was doing it for Mother. She didn't swim. A Depression baby from a large working-class family, Mother married young and was a martyr for her children. What she didn't have we would have. My instincts clashed with hers. When a family photographer took the first picture of my sister, brother, and me, I stubbornly resisted looking in the direction I was told. People make up their own minds, I believed. But everyone should learn to swim, I told myself. What was wrong with me?

I grew up with a dream that I was being sucked down into ooze. Not deep water but bottomless mud. The most obvious Freudian interpretation is that the mud symbolized a sexual coming of age. Sex equals change equals death. But such views were worlds away from me when I was a boy. Night after night I woke up in a cold sweat, shivering in fright.

The patch of water was no longer than the size of an average man, but it didn't matter; I wouldn't budge. One counselor looked at me in disgust, another gave me a little push. "C'mon! C'mon!" the boys jeered from the other side of the sliver of deep water. I couldn't move. Finally, I

gathered my towel, and without saying a word or shedding a tear, got on my bike and rode away.

Looking up is out of the question. I've found that if I sit hunched forward, my head in my lap, that I can stop the gorge of vomit from rising in my throat, keep the trembling to a minimum.

The man who rescued me from the wave is sitting on the lap of the boatman, and at turns they whisper like lovers, then laugh and laugh. The old man has gone to sleep, resting against the stocky leg of a big-headed man, the captain, it seems.

It is not the open sea, a thin man who turns out to be a scientist explains, but a bay, so the waves are rarely high. He places a small eyepiece in my hand, a temperature gauge that is used to find the most likely channel for the choicest fish to swim in. Now we're traveling to that place. Relax, he says, patting the gray humpback of my lifejacket, how do you say it? Take it easy.

I was on the road when I met M., the woman who would be my wife. In my single days, my travels took me to mountain trails, to the blazing sun of the Mojave, to Alaskan glaciers. M. and I met at a conference where the only water was in the fountain of our hotel lobby. It wasn't until after we were married that she came to know the extent of my fear. I quoted Spalding Gray to her, that I preferred hysterical misery to a common unhappiness. I joked that I was so afraid of water that as a boy I didn't even have wet dreams. M., an avid swimmer, wasn't laughing.

The painted wood of the gunwale seems to give way under the pressure of my handgrip. The sound of huge scissorbirds is everywhere. Loud, snapping, and insistent, unyielding in their pathetic aggression, the black mangy sea birds sense a meal, would bite a fisherman's hand for a scrap of catfish.

Two fingers are missing from the old man's hand, I notice, as he pulls his rags even tighter about his bony frame. The wind spray, squawking birds, and limitless depth of the sea sicken me as the old man rests, his body swaying to the rhythm of the boat.

I'd never met my Cousin Bruce, but he was a good swimmer. But that didn't stop him from drowning before I was born. He was on board a freighter, and somehow he lost his balance and fell. His body was never found. I don't know if it was because of Bruce—in my family we never talk of such things—but Mother, her sister and brothers, their children, and their children's children are terrified of deep water, cannot swim a single stroke.

Cousin Bruce was the first of our family to work on the boats. Only the privileged in our town were chosen to work on the Great Lakes, and

Bruce was the best of our breed: a hockey player in the headlines, a handsome and gentle young man. He'd walk into a room and people in town whispered among themselves, looked his way. Everyone loved Bruce. Mother, his adoring aunt, most of all.

I've imagined Bruce's first thought after the fall was that he couldn't feel his feet in his boots. His arms moved rhythmically in wide circles, but his feet weren't cooperating. Numb from the fall and cold, his legs moved like an eagle's wings in an updraft. A perfect sweep but too slow to keep him suspended, and he began to sink. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get his legs to kick. Finally, exhausted from the struggle, he yielded, and with the force of the current, his arms and legs spread wide, Cousin Bruce floated like a slowly revolving starfish down the current and through the frigid water into the depths of the lake.

The boat we are approaching smells like a sewer. Five crew members climb aboard in a single movement and fan out along its side. Repulsed by the stink, I get up unsteadily and bump two fishermen with my life-jacket. They nearly lose their balance, go overboard. The boatman's friend points to the water over the side of the boat, makes pulling-like gestures, sticks his thick finger into my chest. "You, you will help us bring up the net." I am flabbergasted, and I shake my head no, you must be kidding. M. is at the front of the boat talking to the scientist, trying not to catch my eye. Surely, there has been some mistake, another man can take my place. But every man is at his station, preparing to bring up the net. Only the old man is lying down, fast asleep.

Twice a day for as long as people can remember the boats have been going out like this. One panga, or open work boat, is moored at the fishing grounds where the net is fixed. Before leaving each time, the fishermen, muttering prayers and crossing themselves, open the enormous trapdoor of the fishing net. It's as if it were St. Peter's Gate. Or foreskin, the boatman's friend says. He is holding his hand before him suggestively. Like pulling back foreskin.

The men in the stinking skiff close the net, hoping that since their last visit a bounty will appear. Gringo, the net needs to come up. Start hauling the net.

My father is a barrel-chested man who, when I was growing up, would stand in the waves of Lake Huron and play catch with me. I'd be in shallow water and throw a rubber ball to my father where the waves broke, thirty, forty feet away. I was nervous in water and my father, who had a loud, mean voice, which got louder and meaner when he felt neglected, only made me more nervous. So weekend after weekend

we played a silent game of catch in cold water until we got bored and stopped.

One weekend Father buried me up to my neck in sand. While others were swimming in the lake, I wanted to be in a hole in the earth. I liked the symmetry of it, being immersed if not in a Great Lake, then in its shoreline. My arms were at my side, where the sand had been packed in tight. Cool grains of sand pressed against me from my toes to the hollow of my throat.

My head sprouted like an asparagus—remote and exotic. Before me were bird tracks, windblown husks, dead pine needles. I was the boy with the brains and ambition. In years to come, valedictorian, the first boy in the family to go to college, be a journalist, a writer. Today I would be immersed in earth, land, surrounded in comfort. Never water, never into the dark blue. The land is everything. The land will set me free.

Suddenly, like a light switch thrown, I couldn't breathe. My arms couldn't move, my feet only dug in deeper. When Shelley drowned, the non-swimmer went "arms at his side, submissive through the waves." I sensed my chin digging even deeper into the sand.

I was losing consciousness when Baby Bruce, a little boy who was named after Cousin Bruce, suddenly appeared before me. Eskimos believe the spirit of the best of the dead live on in their namesakes, so they never name their young after another living soul. In this way, the line between the living and dead is never broken. "Bruce," I whispered, "Get someone to help." Bruce stared at me, and then I blacked out.

People too drunk to swim must have listened to Bruce and come to pull me out because the next thing I knew my father was standing above me—not touching me but watching me as I was lying motionless on a scratchy sofa, faking sleep.

On the fishing grounds the panga is remarkably still. Slowly, I rise to my feet and am surprised that I do not feel ill. Up and down the length of the boat, men are pulling up the net. There are no fish, only the biggest, heaviest net I have ever seen in my life. If this is fishing, then groundskeeping is baseball. Help, I could help, but I can't seem to lift my hands. It is as if I am underwater, falling, a dead weight.

Something is tickling my leg. I turn every few seconds, but I can't see anything wrong. It's a scrape at the top of my calf, the fleshy part. Is the boatman's friend playing a trick? No, he is at his station, pulling at the net. Sometimes it's a rough scrape, almost a sting. I swing around quickly, but I notice nothing.

Suddenly I'm pulled backward with a yank. The boatman's friend holds the wet strap of the lifejacket to my face, while his free hand is pulling in the net. The strap was dangling against the back of my leg. Now

sit down, he motions abruptly, sit down and get out of the way. We have work to do.

Everybody's got a story. There are things you can't run away from, hide, distort. Summer always comes around. Meet you at the beach. Bring a towel, your fears. Tie a noose around your neck.

As a boy I couldn't even say it. I don't swim. I say it now. I don't swim. I've practiced the manner in which it's said, so it comes out like, I don't smoke, I don't take drugs, I don't speak Norwegian. Still, a stain of failure, of weakness, remains.

To fail water is to fail a great test. Annette Kellerman, an English swimmer at the turn of the twentieth century, said mastery of water shows how we meet the unknown. "I assume no adventurer or discoverer ever lived who could not swim," she said. Others said this unknown is not so mysterious. John Cowper Powys said a human being feels drawn backward, down a long series of avatars into the earlier planetary life of animals. To be immersed in water is to feel the succor of mother. Psychologists will tell you swimmers are characterized as having loving, nurturing mothers, distant cold fathers. To be separate, an individual on land, is a man's world. Water, a woman's world.

Once I rowed a boat into a lake and M. swam in deep water. She approached the boat and slipped off her water shoes and handed them to me one by one as if she were suspended in air. Soaked through and curved by the shape of her feet, the shoes lay on the floor of the boat. I was revolted and aroused in equal parts. I wanted to raise the shoes to my lips and drink the water, truly feel M., the swimmer. I imagined our bodies intertwined in water, moving freely. After a moment's pause, though, I shuddered and returned to my task, rowing the boat, regarding solemnly M.'s steady stroke as she headed to shore.

For years, I identified with Richard Kimball, the Fugitive. And Superman, the orphan boy, sent into space by his parents, leaders on a doomed planet, where all life vanished. I preferred the Fugitive, though, a man falsely accused, who was trying to find answers. It seemed to me that Superman was running away from his past by performing mighty tasks of goodwill. He was basically a loner, a loser. He just couldn't face the fact that he was alone, and he was so busy he never realized how lonely he really was.

As a young adult I was more like Superman, aimlessly running away—to islands. I liked the punishing self-loathing irony of it, a non-swimmer living for months on end with nothing but water all around. In Huahine, an outer Tahitian island, I'd lay on a branch overhanging a green cove. For

weeks I camped on an isolated shore, drinking cheap vodka, reading Russian novels, contemplating the ocean. Clear shallow water showed the thinnest of ripples, stretching for miles to the shore of a remote spit. But never did I even step into the warm water. Tahitians and travelers alike, those who would come down my way, skirted me as they would a crazy person, whispered and pointed as they passed.

Later, on another island, I stood in a field of string beans, hooking up irrigation pipes for a Tasmanian farmer. In Tasmania, the sea is always on the wind. Salt spray transforms sunsets into Turner landscapes, the air into elixir. Working in that field in the clothes I'd borrowed from John Waterworth, the farmer, I felt something deep inside me fill with light and understanding. It was not about home, or love, or friendship. I felt the presence of the sea all around me, and I was at peace.

Before returning to work for a time, I stopped—on Prince Edward Island to visit my oldest friend. I'd been away a year and collected various treasures—shells from Huahine, a pocket watch from my Tasmanian friend. I'd taken rolls and rolls of film. In a little bolsa I never let out of my sight, I kept my writings and drawings, the journals of my trip, and only these were not stolen from me. Everything that I'd collected in my far-away travels was lifted from a storage room of the island's only luxury hotel. Penniless, with no prospects, and only a sidebag of notes, poems, and drawings, I felt for the first time in my travels what it meant to be free.

Wherever you go, you bring yourself with you. I'm a middle-aged man now, but still I go back to those moments of clarity, the salt air in my breast on a farm in Tasmania. "Face your fears, boy. Sink or swim." Eventually, the Fugitive cleared himself, frustrated his pursuers. My search is hardly over. Mother's love isn't buried at the bottom of the sea where I can't go.

Schools of silver-gray conefish, too small to keep, are stuck in the mesh of the net. I tell myself their big eyes do not register anything. They are flesh and instinct, nothing more. Thousands of lidless eyes are the first living things to emerge from the murk of the ocean. I begin to breathe easily again, feel my hands at my sides. There is no telling how long the conefish have been there, snagged in the mesh.

I move toward the boatman's friend and ask if I can help. Pull the net by putting your fingers inside the mesh and you're asking for trouble, he shows me. Instead, gather the netting in a loose fist first and then pull back the whole ball with both hands. Slip a finger in the net and the weight shifts, you could lose the finger. "Como el," he says, jerking his thumb in the direction of the old man, and I begin to wonder if he is like me, another piece of unwanted cargo, a man not as old as I had thought but too careless to be trusted.

My back aches, a muscle in my upper thigh twinges, but all is quiet as we pull on the net, bringing it up inch by inch from the deep. We work like this for what seems a long time. Suddenly, the net stiffens and drops. It is all we can do to hold on under the weight of hundreds upon hundreds of jumping, thrashing fish. A ton, more than a ton, they say. In such numbers as I had never seen before, fish topple into the boat. Flesh slaps like a million hands on a million wet bodies. Our partner boat moves in closer, and the catch at the bell of the net gathers into a flopping, gleaming silver mountain. The boatman's friend smiles as if he will burst and even though I feel my shoulder lock, the bug-like flick of the lifejacket strap, and a sharp pain in my lower back, I let go the loudest "YAHOO!" I can muster. "YAHOO!" I scream again until I am as red as a lobster and the crew begins to wonder just what they have brought on board.

As a boy the only stories I was told were in Sunday school about fishermen in rags who stooped over their catches, never straying from the task. I'm thinking of these stories as I watch the old man rise and pick through the fish in the hold. He selects the silver ones with the rose spots and puts them in a cloth bolsa and tosses flat sunfish into the sea.

My arms are worn out, as if they are twice as long as normal, and a muscle in my lower back feels tight. I move carefully, while the boatman's friend is running his hand up the hairy leg of the boatman and laughing, pointing at me. Humpback gringo has brought us luck. Humpback gringo, the good luck charm. He pulls me close and rubs his sandpaper face into my cheek, my nose, my eyes. I'm wet with mucus and tobacco juice and seawater.

The Mexicans have stopped their work and are watching as their captain holds a blowfish. Flattened milky spines are stretched into one long supple muscle with a hole, sucking air. It grows enormous, a wide flat paddle of flesh, so thin that light reflects through it. The huge man throws the blowfish, whirling like an ameba, for the scissorsbirds to catch in their snapping beaks and shred into a bloody mess in the wink of an eye.

Next, the captain stands in the middle of the boat, straddling the mounds of squirming fish, and bites into the flesh of a raw one. I don't know if the fish were a particularly rare breed, or a sacrifice more easily made, but the man bites again and again into the living thing until blood spurts over his wet beard and dribbles down his face. Others do the same, up and down the boat, as the blood of the catch sprays into the air. I don't bite the flesh, but I, too, grab a fish and thrust it into my face. We throw the carcasses into the air and a battle rages again among the scavenger birds for the remains.

"Sushi," the leader cries, as clear as day. "Sushi."

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The boatman's friend and I are both leaning against the boat's wall, our legs elevated to escape the sting from the spine of the stray catfish that flop in the hold beneath us.

Suddenly, a little before we are due to pull into the harbor, the boatman cuts the engine. I hear a splash, and look up to see the old man floating on the surface of the water. Only his red neck and white hair are dry, while beneath him layers of threadbare cloth undulate in the dark water like the costume of a palace dancer.

At first he treads water, moving his arms and legs so much like a fish that for a moment I believe in mermaids, in white-bearded men who move through the water like gods. Before he begins his strokes toward shore, he glances in my direction. He is not wide-eyed like a fish, but at peace, contemplative. Then he turns and swims ever so slowly, kicking toward home. The bolsa full of fish that he will sell in his village he holds in one arm while he does the breaststroke with the other.

For a long moment the fishermen watch to be certain that the ancient swimmer is on his way. Then the motor is restarted, and we head toward shore.

Under the weight of the midday catch, the boat rides heavily in the water, a mere foot or so from the walls of the stern. I let my hand dip into the sea. The water feels cool like silk to the touch. ✧