

Studying the Cold





The four of us gather on Brighton Beach looking out at the light on the surface of the water we are about to enter. It is early November. We stand in a line, parallel to the shore; our eyes on the horizon. We had been swimming all summer and fall but the water temperature was starting to diminish, now in the low 60s. I mumble something about how the temperature of the water used to take my breath away but no longer. Now I yearn for the intensity of the feeling of the cold. Not changing her focus from the horizon line, L says, from the corner of her mouth, that she studies the cold as it works its way up her extremities. After laying out our towels and unfurling each item of clothing carefully for our return, we enter the water with intention, not rushing but letting the body absorb the beginning of the experience. The first strokes are a little surprising but then your skin starts to sparkle. Your mind races at first with the intensity of the experience, your lungs and heart quicken, the white light, the sharp sensation of the cold in the air, the lapping waves, the view of Coney Island in one direction and Breezy Point in the other. We start to lose each other. T, L, and P are all much faster seasoned cold-water swimmers. They have been swimming all their lives and they are showing me the ropes. I get into a rhythm, keeping an eye on the lead swimmer's buoy. I start to relax and absorb the way the water supports and restrains me. I look up occasionally to chart my course toward the jetties. The jetties all have names—Atlas, Genes, Shark, Chair, Turtle, Jesus, Rocks, Long Jetty, Shark, Aquarium, Wonder Wheel, Stillwell, Pier, and Parachute. I

sometimes veer out to sea toward Sandy Hook. I correct my trajectory and head back toward the shoreline, sometimes overcorrecting and feeling the rocks of the jetty or the sand on the tops of my feet and thighs. The mind starts to numb and thoughts disappear. It's just your jewel-covered body in the swell that playfully jostles your limbs. I turn around when I get to the long jetty and head back with the current if the tides haven't turned. There's a sweet spot where your body feels like a diamond-crusted blade and your mind is laying on the surface of the water and you never want to leave this state. It is the sparkly edge just before you are forced to leave the water when the cold causes your brain to completely dissipate. The transition back to the windy beach is awkward and annoying. We force our numb and clawed fingers to clumsily open waist bands and socks and boots.

We met at a local coffee shop. Like me, he had teenagers. He was distracted by his phone. I thought maybe he was communicating with his kids but learned he was texting with his next date. He had lined up a few dates for that afternoon. I was one of them. After a scripted conversation, I walked him to the subway to meet his next date and friend hugged him goodbye.

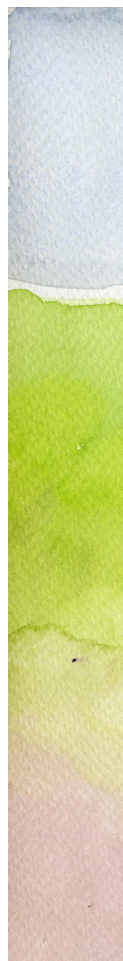
I went to the beach alone on this day. I had missed my friends. It was okay. I was cautiously happy to be there and entered the water confidently now. The reflected light on the water was almost





blinding. This time of year, I measured my swims in minutes instead of distance. Up until mid-October I was swimming 45 minutes to an hour. In November, the swims were measured in minutes, all around 30 minutes. This day, the water was in the 50s, and I pushed my swim to 35 minutes. I left the water reluctantly, changed quickly, felt the shakes overtake my body, ran to my car, and blasted the heat. The cold blood recirculating in my body felt like a dam opening up in my body. I had trouble seeing. I thought about going to the ER. Was I having a heart attack? My vision came back and by the time I was home my shaking body had almost normalized although a neighbor told me my lips still lacked color. I learned later that I had experienced what is called the afterdrop. When swimming in cold water, blood flow is reduced in the extremities to retain core heat and protect the organs. When the swimmer starts to warm up, the cold blood from the extremities quickly flows back into the warmer core and causes the organs to suddenly decrease in temperature feeling like an organ drop. P explained what it was and said wryly that I will learn to love the sensation.

T was wearing a boot after foot surgery and had traveled from Queens by subway. He was very enthusiastic. He was an actor and excited by my biological father's roles in B films and soap operas of the 1960s and 70s. My father had played doctors, priests, and monsters. He walked me home and wrote to me frequently with fervor. I reluctantly answered with half his enthusiasm and then the messages petered out.





Mid-November started to get more serious and exciting at the beach. I met P who came with large thermoses of hot water for foot and hand baths after the swim. She had layers of wool, large parkas, plastic bags inside her socks to increase post swim glide, hot tea in a thermos, sparkly eyes, and a contagious laugh. Once again, we would enter the water together but I would lose them between the swells and their speed. It didn't matter. I was buoyed by the sea and the large whale I would imagine swimming by my flank. I knew the sea could decide to silently submerge or support me. I had to relinquish control and become part of the sea's rhythm. We would emerge shaking, hands bent from the cold, eyes shining. P would stay on the beach telling stories, drinking her tea. I would head home, teeth chattering, mind numb.

He was dressed in a wrinkly pinned striped suit. He had long dreads and broken glasses due to a recent bike accident. He was smoking a cigarette and talking on the phone on the stoop next door to the bar as I walked up. He looked up at me with surprise. He was excited and nervous and needed to smoke a joint before we sat down. He showed me pictures on his phone of his artwork and his ex-girlfriends. His recent work involved large leaves and bugs. He would block off the positive space on the large leaf of a famous face and the bugs would eat the negative space leaving a portrait of Bob Marley or Marilyn Monroe, for instance. In between menthol cigarettes and joints, he talked about the exciting future we could have together. It was getting late, I wanted to go home but didn't want



him to come with me. I said he could walk me part of the way. We walked through the empty park. He pressed his body against mine at one point and I could smell the fragrant oil and wafts of Newport cigarettes and weed. He texted me frequently and passionately for the next few days. I told him it wasn't what I was looking for and then he sent me a picture of the back of my head that he had snapped as I turned away from him in the park looking like my head was on fire.

We kept swimming whenever we could. I would sometimes see P leaving for a swim on days I had to work. I felt like an addict wanting that experience again with desperation. December 17 was one of the last longer swims. 25 minutes. Water 50 degrees. The jeweled body and the mind numb. I wanted to stay in that space. Both so alive and so close to going to sleep in the body of the ocean. The water fills the negative spaces, breathe fills the lungs. Lungs fill the ribs. I fill bags with masks, chap sticks, and receipts.

I met W a few times. He was smart and interesting but distracted and tired. His parents had relocated to rural Maryland from Korea when he was five. His father had moved his family to America for a hospital position as a doctor because he was enamored of English literature. He would recite, often from memory, American and British poetry at the start of dinner each evening. W would take his backpack into the woods with a packed lunch and explore the forest on weekends.



The snow and the deeper cold made swimming less attractive in the winter months. I was left with my memories of relationships past like Frederick the Mouse in Leo Leoni's 1967 children's book. There was M, the man of many hobbies who had a box full of gold wedding bands stuffed under his couch. He would excitedly pull the box out to show you the treasures he found during his hours of metal detecting. He would offer me used clothing, shoes, and empty bags from his treasuring escapades. His collections of vessels, gold bands, winter coats, and boots all needed filling but the void of the interior was impossibly empty. Then there was R who had buried unwanted detritus from his past—old love letters, photo albums of deceased family members—in his basement when his sewer main had to be replaced. He put the word out about the hole in his basement to his synagogue and a young man, who had been born a woman, threw in clothing and mementos from his former life. And M, a psychologist, who told me after seeing an off Broadway production directed by one of his patients, that his last girlfriend had homicidal thoughts.

Back to the sea that surrounds and fills me with such care, confidence, and clarity. In winter, I travel to warmer waters near the equator. I wake each morning at 5 am to swim with the rising sun. Venus is strong in the southern sky guiding our floating hearts. The heart is nestled in between our lungs and is suspended with ligaments from the thoracic and cervical vertebrae. We swim in the darkness of dawn with the slight stings of jellyfish tentacles. We stay in the water until the full orb of the sun has risen above the



earth's edge. We swim again at midday with the bright sun and the chatter of the scarlet macaws and the intentions at the peak of day. The last swim is as the sun is starting to pass behind the other horizon line obscured by the palms and ceiba trees, bare except for the white flowers dropping heavily on the sand. The silhouette of the ceiba tree reveals the pregnant belly of the trunk storing water during the dry season.

The heart, embedded in the body, floating in the sea, looks for connection with Venus's pull. Floating like untethered starfish, the hair on our aging bodies reaching out for stability offers us some ballast. The salty sea gives the organs some rest from gravity. The heart has a magnetic field that spans to three feet on land, perhaps conducted even further in the water. Like schools of fish, our lateral lines help us swim in sync with each other. Our senses are activated; it is said that if the ear were any more sensitive, it could pick up the sound of the vibration of its own molecules. The rings of magnetic electricity and vibration create rippling orbs around the swimmers offering buoyancy and swell for our shy hearts.

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Brooklyn, 2023



