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Life in Water

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LIFE IN WATER

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

By
Peter Carey
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LIFE IN WATER

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life in water

Peter Carey

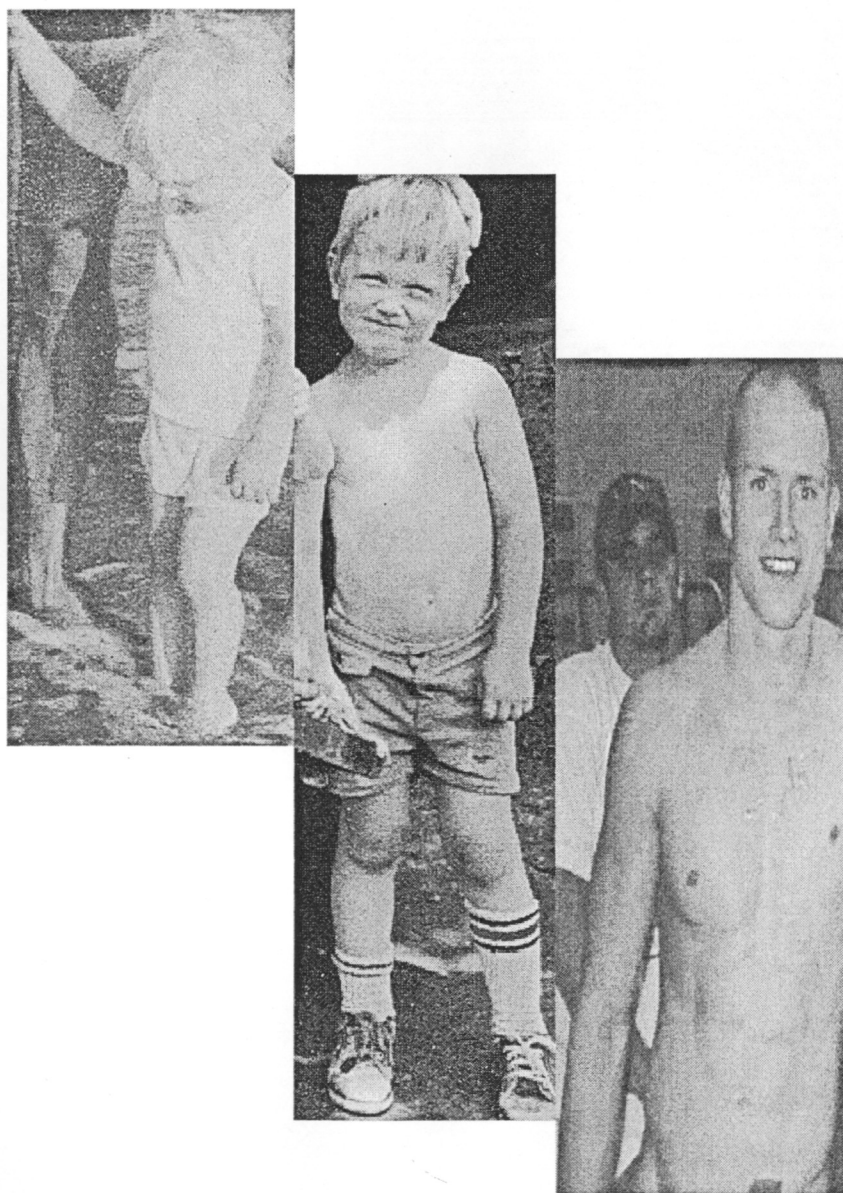


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windows

Bens grandmother has a green tank on wheels. She moves and it moves and sometimes she puts on the mask. So she can breathe Ben says. She looks like a robot when she uses the mask. With the same sounds. When you swim freestyle you make a window with your arm so you can breathe. Coach Dave says bend your elbows. Coach Dave says keep your face in the water. You can't breathe in the water. I tried. Last week Ben asked at school to do hail Marys for his grandmother. He said sister Mary Andrew my grandmother doesn't breathe good and can we petition our holy mother to help her breathe? She said yes child. She calls everybody child. Even the kids in the eighth grade. She has veins. Very cose, very cose and dark blue. That's what the eighth graders say that and because shes a nun. Bens grandparents house smells old. The green couch smells bad. When you breath it smells bad. Ben says okay let's go to the tracks. Okay.

I have a knife from yellowstones park. My dad gave me and my brother both one when he got back. He said careful now don't cut yourself! but I did anyway in five minutes. A red cut with wet and red slices. I want to be a doctor because cuts don't gross me. Me and Ben get up off that green smelly couch and go out the back door and down past by Dale Vickers house and across the street and into the back lot.

Big old trees with wet looking bark. At school Mrs. Hermes said they were decijewuss and that sounded like someone chewing gum or like when you mush food: decijewuss. I don't really say aint that much but sometimes when I'm around Ben I talk in a different way but think the same. He says aint. He also cusses.

Ben there's a snake. Ben picked it up by the tail quick and swung it into a tree like a rope. There was a red circle around the tree when Ben dropped the snake. Cut him up Ben said. I'll incize him good, I said. I was pretending to be a doctor but he didn't know. Don't incize him cut open his belly Ben said. I cut from his throat down to the end of his tail. He had stringy guts like cut up first place and second place ribbons blue and slick red. It aint a he, I said. There's the snake babies there. Damn then I feel bad, he said and he kicked some leaves over on top of the snake. Its head peeked out between the leaves and Ben said cmon I got some pennies for the tracks. I looked back and that peeky snake head looked back and we went on and cut through by the sink hole.

The sinkhole looks like when you dig a hole in the sand at the beach and all the time new sand is sliding in the hole. Except the sinkhole is muddy and with broken sticks. A little cold water creek ends there. Jim Adkins says thats the reason for the sink. All the water. But I don't know, Jim lies sometimes but so does everybody even me. Cold water is about the awfulest thing to swim in. Coach Dave says hey! keep movin and youll get warm. Coach Dave says hey that water aint cold!

There's not even enough sun yet in May to make warm water. It takes a word that sounds like photo-sin-the-suss and not just to keep movin around. Coach Dave is a good coach but un-scientific, not even to know the basics about water. I've been swimming two years since I was six which makes me almost professional. Sometimes we play around the sinkhole, but my mom says watch out! and you boys keep careful or youll sink in that sinkhole! Jim says there's caves under the sinkhole where the creek ends but I'm suspicious of that.

There's a little fence goes round the sinkhole front. The ground is all crunchy and grey and you can't help but break sticks when you walk up to the fence. One time on the fencepost was a birds nest. I was with Jim Adkins and he said look at them robins eggs. The mom bird was off somewhere pecking worms probably.

I climbed the post and peeked over onto the eggs like blue candy and good. I poked one just real easy and a little crack split open and leaked. And the little not borned bird spilled like glue does. And later that week I dreamed that I was swimming slow through a pool filled with what leaks of bird eggs and I just kept on swimming facedown hard and saying in my head breathe breathe. I am and feel sorry for the birds.

That was last year and the first time I got beat by Jay Dunn in the freestyle. He was faster and after I went to the lockerroom and cried and cussed in my head. Because of the unfairness. He can just barely beat me but he's taller for now. Sometimes when its just me I'll say God whenre you gonna grow me up so I can start winning again. Make it quick and I'll stop sucking my thumb. But God doesn't listen for now either because of the bird egg which I already confessed that three times or because of some other sinning I don't know why.

There on the tracks we threw the limestoned rocks and watched them chip off the red brown metal tracks. I took forty-six steps on the rail before stepping off. I looked for the wind that knocked me off. A dark big cloud was washing in like dark muddy water. Ben put his hands in his pockets and turned away like he does when he knows he's in trouble. I reckon my grandmas gonna die, he said. A rabbit pawed a crabapple in brown sticks. I kicked a rock at it. No she aint.

In just a few minutes the rain dumped dark cold drops and the tree leaves went greener. I said Ben cmon now before we get all besaturated which means wet. Bens face was wet and he had a runny nose. I said Ben quick gimme those pennies and I ran back up to put them on the rail and I saw a pack of smokes. On the shiny plasic were big red letters that sounded like win-stun. A couple of cigarettes were laying out and broke and brown tobacco like dirt was spilled and wet. I yelled hey Ben there's some smokes up here look! but he yelled back real loud leave em there goddammit! and then he ran on.

When I caught up with him he was standing near that tree he killed the snake on and he was holding the snake. The snakeguts and blood was on his hands and his face was wet and his eyes were red and he just stood there looking down on the snake in his hand. He was coughing little coughs and between coughs it was like he might have been praying our fathers. I aint cryin he said when he was done. I know you aint I told him. But were gettin all besaturated out here aint we? He mustve not been listening because he was digging a hole with his hands and gettin them all muddy and wet. He dug a quick hole while I was standing there and the rain was like little dots splashing all over. I was thinkin back on that blue robins egg and where was it buried. Ben laid the snake gentle in the hole and covered it up and said I'll see you tomorrow and we ran to each our houses.

When I got home nobody was there and I changed myself into some dry clothes and laid on the couch. The rain was sliding down the windows in waves and little thunders hummed like maybe the breath of God. Our cat Trixie jumped up and curled with me and purred and breathed until I fell asleep. When Ben's grandmother died he didn't miss school. After school out on the playground by the slide Ben said she didn't mean for herself to die. I said I know. But I was thinking that we bend elbows to make windows and breathe. I was thinking that without windows we could not breathe.

fog

Yesterday father Macdonald swung an incenser which is a glittery smokeball on a chain. Creamy smoke and a creamy smells filled the church smelling good unto God. In the early mornings at swim practice the fog and leftover night like smoke sits on the water and we hide to skip yards. That's what I thought when father Macdonald swung the incenser, hiding us in smoke. That and my nose itched. Wrinkle.

Last night I had a dream. I was on the roof outside my window and it was dark but except for a few stars like bright jacks in the sky. And in front of me was God on fire, or he was the fire, I couldn't tell exactly. I felt the heat of the fire on my shinbones and face, and on my face hot firelight. All around God was smoke, and I was so thirsty that when I tried to say hello nothing came out, and when I tried to say hello God no sounds came out. Now I am in school.

We are churched three times a week which is too much so that we get lazy, and no one sings and no one prays and the whole thing is like a radio turned down. Even the organ and the gonging bell make sounds like a radio turned down, which is like swimming. Everyone yells but the sounds are turned down. Everyone on the deck of the pool yells but the water turns their yelling down. All you can hear is water. The sound of moving water. Like *whoosh!*

When Jenny saw me painting my plastic cross she threw a fit and told me I was wrong. She said why do you mess up that Jesus-on-the-Cross like that? I was whiteouting the Jesus, painting a swimsuit instead of the rags. I don't know. Then you should be shamed of yourself, she said, and walked back to her desk.

To be shamed of yourself. That is to say to yourself I am ugly, and the ugly are the shamed and the hiders, and I know that Jenny and some think I am shamed or should be. Sister Mary Rita walked in. I am in school.

This now is the place in the Bible when Jesus walks on the water, and Peter tries but sinks. Peter: that's my name. I tried once ten times at the pool and sunk every time, which makes us alike in more than our names. Even if you tiptoe you sink, always, which makes Jesus the son of God, that he can walk on water when the rest of us swim. When I was done Jesus looked like a swimmer but nailed up and tired. Peter: That's my name.

At recess Ben tore his pants so that everyone laughed. And I felt sick for him with his pants torn in the behind, so that he sat the rest of the day afraid to get up. We get told to pray for the poor people and the unfirm or the sick. And the lost, who are hiding from God, but not for Ben, who sat nailed in his desk for the rest of the day because his pants were torn in the behind. I know how he wanted to hide in smoke because everyone in class or most of the people made him feel shamed of himself and sick unto himself.

John cant remember the times tables. During the test today he said pssst what is seven times eleven and I showed him with my fingers. 7—7. Because of Johns mom and her wanting for him to make good grades he must always carry a full heavy bookbag. But John doesn't care much. After school John and me walked home. We have cubscouts on Tuesdays, which is today, 1988.

It is still hot because the summer is not all the way through even though school is started. But we only live down the street from the school. Down the street on both sides are trees older than my mom and dad and the even the street. One time a turtle got ran over. Like a whistle blowing it cracked, and with the same high sound. Like *Kyrie!* And the truck didn't even stop, but we went to look and John even cried that time, which was strange because he's tough and with big hands. It was too late to doctor, the turtle being dead, being expired. We passed by that place there and down at the end of the hill was the house.

Cubscouts is fine but boring. I would instead be swimming, but on Tuesdays I cant do both, and don't choose for myself either, which would be swimming. John's house has strange smells not like ours but smelling like a church. On a pink couch that has stains like dark coke stains and dark food stains John's sister Lucy sits.

She is sixteen and handy-capped because she is meeker in spirit, or because she will inherit the earth, which she should because of the fact she was borned in that way, not knowing much but picture books and baby toys, and not talking much but making low sounds that made me feel shamed unto death, or that I was guilty for tenthousand sins because I can talk and do times tables and because I can swim. She sat on the pink couch with the brown food stains and brown coke stains and looked at me like always, and always not knowing who I am, or why I am here, like some church statues where the artist or someone forgets to paint the eyes, and all there is is white.

They showed up. We had a meeting when everyone turned up, and John's mom discussed us with plans for a camping trip. And it being such a nice day we met outside and played tag football, but I am no good and it is unsafe besides, because bigger boys do tackles instead of tags. And it being such a pretty day John's dad walked Lucy to sit in a chair where she could be in the sun and watch us and some boys stared. And Lucy, not knowing much but baby books and low sounds, couldn't be shamed, but John was shamed instead of her and ugly in place of her, which would be John swimming her race, seeing that she couldn't swim for herself, and seeing that she would be beaten.

When Billy said what he said, making John shamed with what he said, John didn't say anything but picked up a rock and hit him with the sharp edge. And when Billy fell John didn't stop, but kept going until his dad threw him off, and John cried like all his bones had been broke, and even in his heart.

And as no one was watching me I walked home across the street under the old trees that remembered me before I knowed even myself, when I was a baby and before. And I turned back and looked across the street into John's yard and the people still standing there. And John still crying and Lucy still sitting. Sitting still and looking out like she does, looking at nothing and everything both at once. And like fishnets and fire smoke the proudness of myself and my abilities hurt me and slowed me to where I couldn't breathe, and to where the asthma filled me with smoke, and I cried.

Today the rosary is like glassbits on fishline. We do laps in tens and then rest on a glory be. Today in honor of Mary we walk round the school in a big long lane of us, doing the rosary laps and marching like Jericho, and in the boring times of it I know my prayers like a swimstroke, like something I do all the time and unto forever. Like walking on water. Like *whoosh!*

sabachthani!

Then upon a time ago I was underwater. I looked up. Through skycolored water wet
bubbleshines rose. Wrinklewater. I looked up. The wrinkleformed people past the surface.
It was my dad. He pulled me out. I was four and swimming. He told me that story. Now it
rises in tides of sleep. Me then: I am eighteen and waking.

My eyes opened. He spoke into his pillow: get the alarm. I cant see. Then turn on the
goddamn light. I found the switch and flooded the room. The alarm piled under towels,
redshine digit: 5 15. Get up. I'm not going. Get up. I'm up I'm up alright I'm up. A dull
moon hungover outside. Low paste bubblemoon. We went downstairs. On the couch was
Stephen's dad. The dog licked pizza from a box. Another man I didn't know was asleep on
the floor. Palehead: who is that. Shhh I don't know. I got some water, careful not to chink
the glasses. We left for practice. Warming air outside. Dark birds and birdsong flutes.

Halfway through warmup the sun rises. The warmsun water waves bronze then
bright. Here bodies swimshine like strong miracles. Here maybe we are born in the
swimming dawn: to drink the waterlight. To suck the blinking luster. The youngest kick
and whine for bodies bent to make waves. Stephen's dad is a watersunk man. I heard him
last night between sleep and dreams. His drownsound voice pulled under.

We do hypoxic sets for breath control. We do hypoxic sets at seasons end, for breath control. No breath swimming. When you hold your breath feel chestwrung like wet shirts: flamewrung the oxygen fizzles and drips. Sometimes it feels warm. Dizzy and flamedrunk. At the extremes you piss yourself. When you get tired the curve degrades. Hacking hipthrusts forward. Kick. At the highpoint makes a cresting wave. Only the best keep stroke. I die quicker than I should. Mental. Or I throw up.

But time is fastforwarding in the water. But more than that. A nonzero number never nothing: an infinity of strokes. An axle. An axiom. Torque. A paceclock. The pace we hold. Who was that guy on the floor, I asked. I don't know, he said, and pushed off. At seasons end the practices are shorter. We only spike our heartrates. We rest. His dad is drowned or thrashdrowning. He wakes and warms to main sets. Then or before or later he dies.

After workout we flush loose lactic. Backstroke the sky wrought tinfoil on fire. I stare at it until sparkbubbles pop and fleckshine the rim. Sun like partial God or Himself total. Last night his dad hackbawled in secret. Thats what I heard halfasleep. Sound of slopping gravewater. Wet ashes. The streaming ticktock tears: throatfulls of runnyhot wax. Wet ashes. A husk. Dead birdshell eyes. Insane. Thing is I don't know. That was a good practice, I said. My stroke is on. What about the meet he said. Should be good. Don't be a headcase. I wont. I think I wont. No I wont. But confidence is chaste water unwaved. Flatwater all seasons. Then or before or later. Proud winners and their unthought psalms: *Aleph!*

We pulled up to his house. Inside the paleskin stranger was gone. His dad was watching cartoons. A glass of palewatery scotch sat next to a family photo. He was whistling: hey boys how was practice lemme get you guys some breakfast. Pancakes? He felt my shoulder, massaging it. Palehand unshook. Knuckleswell. Youre hungry, right? If youre offering. I am. He smiled. Strong breath of teeth. Wet ashes. The dogs tail wagged against my legs. I'm gonna go upstairs to change, I said.

In Stephens room halfread books flung all over. Portable Neitzsche. A desk and wadded paper. His poems and pictures. A sketch of a thin man with a gun aimed at nothing. Thin black titling. Careful glyphs. *Zarathustra!* I changed. Kitchensmells rose. Stephen was petting the dog and drinking milk. Bacon popped and his dad turned away for sips. I could see him, though. Grabbing at the throat. Bringing it to kiss thickmouthed and smooth. Already a mask of sweating wax. Whatta you boys have planned for today? Sweating waxmouth. Stephen said don't know dad. Need any money? No.

After breakfast we watched television. Got any chew? Upstairs I said. I went to get it. When I turned the hall his dad just out of the shower. Nakedframe stood and steam smoked from his formless shoulders. He was jamming on a gold ring. He looked at me and said Oh, ha ha... damn thing wont go on. Damn thing wont fit. He put on a black robe. What are you looking at?

Downstairs a talkshow: on the big television the halfglad goblins. A harpy priestess holds a microphone like a trident, pitchforking language. I aint no fag one says. Then what was you doin with Billy-Jack said another. I aint no fag. *I aint no damn fag!* Christ change this. Incredible shit Stephen said. His dad came down the stairs dressed in sharp clothes. Where are you going dad? To the track. The dog was licking my foot with a wetrough tongue. When will you be back? Don't know, he said, and left. Does he win? I said. A lot of times yes.

Then he said I'm about ready for a nap. Wake me up in a few hours and we'll call Dunn. He went upstairs and left me on the couch. I flipped the channels and turned it off. I thought about swimming. I thought about nothing. I sat at the foot of a dewsoaked hill. I looked up. The wet slope and dewsmells slowburning in sunrise. I looked for tenthousand days. At the hilltop where proud fathers wait. At the dewburning bottom where wanting sons shout *sabachthani!*

When I woke it was noon and silent. Through the windows the sliced light striped bars of shade. Pecking dustswirls in the lighted parts. The fan spun. A big clock ticked. I stretched. The angled noonlight struck the mantle and pictures like framewhite fire. I went upstairs. He was at his desk sketching.

I called Dunn, he said. What are you drawing? He'll be here soon. Where was he this morning? Asleep. What are you drawing? Nothing. I bent over and looked. Two men grappling. One tentimes redrawn and blurred with erasure. He wadded and pitched the paper to the floor. He sharpened the pencil, jamming it into the hole. The electric motorhum gnawed the blunt point. The doorbell rang. That's him, he said, and we went downstairs.

Hey missed you this morning, I said. Too damn early. You guys are nuts for getting up so goddamn early. I was thinking we should go to the quarry Dunn said. Grab a few or twelve of your old mans beers. Sure. Stephen packed them in ice. It was two when we left. Outside the day was windy and bent trees worshipped. Damn a good wind, Dunn said, getting into the car.

Twenty minutes down the interstate the tornout quarry hides. The rock there is clefted and cleaved to high cliffs and a rainwater pool. At its base a deck of limestone. Turn off at milemarker thirtythree I said. Shit I know where, Dunn said. He swerved onto the emergency lane. The trucks like wheeling comets and their ribboning tails of wind. *Christ watchout!* Tufts of purple wildflowers roiled. We sprinted through the grass and up the slope and over the rustbarbed fence to hike a mile then it was. Bald walls and the cracklined cliffsbrim.

We walked around the cliffs and down. On hot flatrock the sun gathered. Light from the cloudfull sky blued the clear water. We unshirted and kicked off our shoes. The wind in hard gusts. Dunns brown hair was wild when he crackedopen the beercan. This here boys is fine stuff, he said, and drank. This here is college finest. A toast to college goddammit. Women. Then we all drank. The sun burned sunnybrown backs and we skipped rocks on the flatblue water.

Hows your old man Dunn said skipping a rock seven skips. Bad drunker than normal Stephen said. I threw a rock and watched it arc and plunk. What about this meet coming up Dunn said. Yep. As hard as you been training you oughtta be fast. Yep. I looked up to the olympic cliffs whose timetouched walls stood stark. If his head doesnt explode, Stephen said. Christ give it a rest. Well then Dunn said: time to die whos up? I'm up I said. Yep. We barefooted the faintrocky trail that sloped up to cliffsedge.

I peeked over the rim: skycolorred water unsoft the blueskin crust. Fear sparked my livewire. Softspined. I jumped. The wet landscape washed down and hardwater broke. I swam out. On the cliff their sunblurred bodies merged. Dunn disappeared then running he jumped flailbodied like a new bird.

He landed feet away, the sunblessed head shot out. Ha shit I caught the jetstream, he said, smiling. Hey homo jump he yelled Christ come on. Stephen was standing at the edge and staring. Show some balls Dunn yelled some sack you scared bastard. Stephen looked at us and looked down. Pebbles and rockchips fell soft to softsounding echoes. From his faraway mouthshout *ecce como goddammit!* and he jumped. I winced at the tilt of his painbent body. The waterbroke smack and we swam to him, curled coughing and redchested but afloat. You okay? Pulse of his wincing eyes. His unvoiced mouth made wordshapes. When his wind returned he said shit that hurt. Dunn laughed said least you didn't sackburn.

On the flatrock we finished the warming beer. I sat and traced the cliffed edges all the way around. The crackjagged rockrim where roots clawed the cliffwall like tanbone fingers of a hundred hands. Dunn saw me. Them rootsll pull down the whole goddamn place, he said. In a million years maybe. But still. Who was that guy this morning? I asked. Stephen said a drinking friend probably: I don't know him. Then Dunn: *hot damn* and ran behind a rock. He came back with a turtle in a darkgreen shell. Peek out you little turd, he said, stroking and pulling its tail. After a moment its head crept out from dark undershell. Dunn pet its neck and head with a finger. Me and the turtles, he said. The turtle eyes opened wide when it screamed and bit his hand. He dropped and cussed it. The turtle landed on its back, kickflailing softly. Stephen tipped it over and it scampered off. The shell was cracked. Well damn Dunn said, sucking the cut. Lets go, I said. The darkcut sky divided on a line of clouds. We walked out. A cluster of blackbirds perched on the cliffs edge. When Stephen threw a rock they exploded. Dunn threw an empty can into a ditch, and there was silence but for clapping leaves.

When we got back it was seven thirty and the house was empty. Dunn cooked hamburgers and we ate on the porch. Coolblown winds mixed. Ive chosen my major, Stephen said. Again? said Dunn I thought you done chose. Changed my mind. To what. Philosophy. Aint no money in that, Dunn said, and spat. Aint no sense in that, I said. Money is worthless, he said. Dunn belched, a broadcast. It'll make you lame, I said. Hows that? Hamstrung. Headstrong. Hows that? Its ineluctable, Stephen said. Theres a tendollar word. The will to power. It's phony shit, I said.

I usually stroked his ideas with okays and wellmeant sures but he clifstood looking down at a waterless pool. The allowable jumps. I feared him limp with a broken neck. Me then: blind Hosea the hurtsome prophet. But I couldnt stop. May as well throw yourself off a cliff, I said. Hows that? Dunn threw a piece of meat to the dog. I winced when it licked the pavement. Thats just what I think, I said. True or untrue? he said. Either or, I said, chewing. You make no damn sense, either or both of you, Dunn said, and spat. Forget it, I said. Make your manhood shrink, Dunn said. Dunn youre an idiot.

The phone rang and Stephen went to answer it. Whats with the deep talk? Dunn said, chewing. Nothing. Let him study what he wants. I am a fool; I worry about him but I am a fool. Stephen came back with keys. That was some guy said dads too drunk to drive. You guys stay here if you want. I'm coming, I said. Me too. The dog barked at the wind and clouds like darkform bruises. We rode in silence and silently I watched the sky. A palette of oilshade clouds like Bacchus by Rubens: fat malformed and prodigal. The giddy powers. The waxing promontory. Face that hung ripe cherry cheekflesh. Gone to color of wet ashes. I tried silently to stop myself; organ of analysis, the roosting firedrake. Ineluctable outcome: proud fathers like broken kings castingoff their crowns shout *lama sabachthani!* to deaf sons us all.

We stopped at a sportsbar. Inside was his dad and the man from this morning, sitting close. Palehead. Son I could drive but. Smelltaste of teeth. I know, Stephen said. His dads face was soaked with sweat, wax features lessformed. Neon tubes forked false light. The man with his dad smoked. He was younger maybe thirty. Smoke coiled and rose like streaming ghosts. His hands were soft and girlish and pinknailed and white. He had thin pale lips. Boys want a drink hum? he said. Paleghost. Lets get you home, Stephen said. We steadied his dad and walked out, the man following.

Dunn take my car, Stephen said. A ride home? the man said. It's on the way. Please? Get in, Dunn said. Stephen drove his dad's car. Where. Just down three miles to the light. Then take a left. Dunn pulled out. It was getting dark, and the cool air dry. Packs of birds flew, darker than the darkening dusk. You boys swimmers? he said. Yes. Well, he said, I used to be quite an athlete in my day. Turn left here. There's my house he said. We pulled up. So how long has he been like that, he said. Like what? Hahaha well, he said, mmm like... that? He got out of the car. When we pulled out I saw the him wave a milkwhite hand and smile.

It rained. Flat taste of rain like wet rust. Dunn drove us back. Was that real? he said. What. A medley of birds swam lanes in the sky. In practice when it rains the watertop blurs, and we could be flying: we can breathe water. I don't believe it, he said. What. No I don't believe it either. I just don't. Don't tell him. He knows. I don't believe it. We pulled up to the house. Stephen was inside. His dad was on the couch. The waxpeeling face. The dog pawed my leg. Dunn and I stood in the foyer. Stephen said I'll get you help dad. Father said softwhispering son, son. He kissed him when they embraced. Water bled down the windows. In the soft light of the room they were distinct and holy, and we left them there.

dead heat

The suns muscle flexes light through tall windows: soft when it strikes the waves, when it soaks the moving arms. Makes him want to break stroke and float. Makes him want to float forever in flexing and ageless water. But he is a boy still, and has undefined raptures... Upperclass male health says look at this, boy: his strong arm is webbed with veins. Upperclass heart is a stronger knot. Upperclass swims away. His heart beats like wild hammers: he is nineteen. But practice is over: and class...

The buildings gathered like old men in old wicker desk chairs, dribbling ideas in failing health. But he did not do his Math: they skipped yesterday to rest for practice. The teacher, kind old and in wickering health, passes out the quiz. The thin symbols scattered: $f(x)$ dy/dx $e...$ locked in the rote and dead history of sitters: of Descartes, of Newton. He cannot muscle the symbols and ligatures: manhandle the ideas, not like some flexible goal that could be got. But at times he admires them, sigma and delta: pattern and change, and in at times he reckons it must be that Reimann was an athlete. It must be, who strangled wily graphs. But his talent... which is why he disliked it. The calculus, like some fearsome idea, like some stud rival would make a fool of him. He feared to be a whimpering dipshit or worse a womanish fag. His identity the first derivative of yards and will, the maximum phoenix, and he is solved in the quickening laps. But he finished the quiz: disqualified.

Though sometimes the literature was better. Sometimes in the mannish canon the old dead would rise up. He thought that Hemingway must have been such a man: hoss wisdom to have told it like that. Athlete made metaphors. With true sweatmade metaphors. With the sack of a trampled athlete. The old man and the mast of mannish hopes. The professor says write an essay on the symbols. What does the fish represent? What is the marlin? And the old man? And the great DiMaggio? His dry mouth wants water. Yesterday after practice he read shirtless on his bed. The white light through the big window made offset shadows. Like cracked glass veins from his elbow shattered. Symbols: did he know their private violence in secret: essay to keep them real?

Outside snow skiffed in white waves. He walked back. Wind cross a grate made whistling harpsounds. His roommate would be gone. The snow crunched and the wind scattered white snowdust. Practice in two hours. Tomorrow a meet: Friday. He would skip class on Friday. Disqualified: he failed the quiz, a skiff of regret, but the guilt failed quickly. His thoughts walked ahead like anxious footprints in snow. Practice in two hours: his limbs felt failed or failing or sick. He wanted to pack knees in snow, soothe raw boneswell. But he knew that in two hours his muscles and mind would burn like the friction of sticks. Make sweatsap milk for joints. When he got to his room he slept in his shoes.

He went weeks without dreams. When he slept his reflexing muscles would snap like stretched and cut cords. He woke from deep dreamless voids tired. When he woke his roommate was asleep. Light leaked at the shades edge. He looked at the clock and at his roommate. Get up. Wait fifteen minutes. He looked over the room. He ate two cookies from a box on the floor. In the refrigerator were a few beers and deli ham. He ate the ham. When he pulled the shade the bright snow hurt. His roommate swore. The stillness of the snowcovered buildings and trees... and they put on coats in silence, and it was silent in the hall but for the echoing door.

His roommate was small and talented. Gumchewing; you know goddammit today ought to be easy because... because, he said. It won't be, meet or no meet. Shit, he said, kicking snow. Will you beat Andrew, his roommate said. I don't know. Dont be a fag you sound like a goddamn fag youre supposed to say hellyes or fuckyes not I dont know. He's bigger. Youre smarter. That doesn't help. Youre right. Maybe I will. His roomamate said maybe you will.

At the pool tall windows fogged and male health stood. His coach was chalking the workout on the board. They eyed the board. As the hand wrote some uttered goddamns. His eyes closed and he thumbed knots and tight muscle around his knees: pulp. He laid his cheek to his knees and the leftover pain passed. His thoughts pitched forward in pitch: stressed and symbolic, unlocking dormant energies, waxing *workout workout workout workout*.

He knew it rote: the knowledge then balance then spiral then oblivion. In the warmup he felt fluids balm akimbo joints: bloodflushing. His thoughts would swim to the next set and beyond to sort the calculus of intervals and distances. He read with his hands the moving water, pitching them to its current, pitching his moving hands to its metaphor. Other were: he knew their times, his friends, and the better ones.

Freshma...faggot. Whatever dipsh... Someone pissed, a pocket of warm water drifted and dispersed. Swim out and do that in another... someone pissed. Two wrestled. Chlorine kills it jacko... whatever. Fag... pissing... all up close for... and with his big feet he churned the water. Twenty five were piled four deep in the shallow. Coach stood up: allright and delivered the next set. Keep long, he says, think stroke. It was a mile more maybe; he would stroke the math so high and forget. His balanced body was perpetual: he kept in row with the others, aware of the windows and clock and texture of the water: the plunk plunk of arms and soft sounds.

When he breathed he framed a window. He saw betterfriend upperclass Andrew and his long frame stroke who always says *youre a hard worker but youll never or come get you some: boy* or once: *I own your mind*. He would think it over. In relaxed and measured strokes he knew that soon his smaller will would wax: that his identity would flex mature when *he come got you some: boy*.

Bad pH: too basic and unbalanced it begins to burn. Basic water and wetsweat make coarse chemicals: bleach. They raise hell. Christ coach... like bleachwater it is... Like piss... dumbass its the basic... whatever. Listen Up. someone muttered *watch he's is gonna kick the shit outta us*. Stokers six threes on four and six twos on two fortyfive. Someone muttered his mouth in the water *whatd I tell you the bastard*. Breastrokers in lanes one and two Pete Andrew lead. Travis you and the flyers lane three. Christ coach, his roommate said. Coach said Yes?

Patterns: he swam the sine in smooth periods. Andrew said watch the longstroke meece longos powerfuls. He counts: three hundreds make sixty underwater seconds, which is thirtypercents of his holding time, two minutes, thirty seconds and a radian. Arcing clockhand. Underwater his bloodfed lungs burned: spooling oxides undone. He would lead halfway, always in smooth sine at halfway. But always the upperclass frame swam to backhalf destiny, first longstroking then manifest.

Underwater and off walls his slipping will began to wail in the pool boiled to hellwater. Off walls underwater he chanced glances at Andrew. His stroke devolved: apish and gruntsyum. At intervals through fogged goggles he saw fogged forms and the clock count four three two one go. The claiming clock. His forking mind sparked wild threads. Pitch an essay on symbols: Santiago sharks broke mast marlin: Christ. Heels up when your hammerhurling hips wade wombwater: one more. In desperate nonsense he would buffer the flame, but it broke like a flood, clear and hot, when his throat was stripped like a wire...

At sets end he released: folded on a laneline, breathing basic taste and bilewater. Andrew says you got some of this: his strong arm is webbed with veins. He would to punch the sweatred face. Andrew says damn good set boy. Then bless me father.

In hot showers icepacks knees and other joints. Captain Hagan says *cope wedge goddammit!* and passes dip. It goes around and spilled specks swirl: take it cool in the mouth, blackswab. They spat blackwhite bubbles, their mouths gone to milkpaint from the water. His thalamus waxed in guarded weal, wheeling in private the woundup rapture. General announce: Andrew says *I dont give a good goddamn about these tomorrow fuckers* as dark dip threads chinward. Murmurs in the steam: fags... pansy sallyfaggots. One said couldnt hold your water barfboy saw you hacking. He laughed spat giddy darkbrown streams and said goto hellhackfuck. He slopped the melting bag on his numb knee. They breathed tilesweat and steam, and one by one filed out.

He stayed there, rubbing the kneecapped ice. He bit a hole and drank from the bag the raw cold water. The showerstreams hit like warmfocused rain. Darkblue webbing veins like webbing streams pulsed and he felt the soulsong rise in webbing steamcoils of water. Valid and soulaffirming, his swimming mind found the old words: I sing the body electric. He dried and dressed and went to eat.

They were at a large table. The dishes and dirty napkins and food lay in threehigh stacks and piles and they were still eating. One said hey theres good shower jackoff jerkoff why didn't you come with us? I had to stretch, he said. Someone stabbed a potato and held it up waving. Getchy one of these here goddamn taters. Meats all burnt to goddamn hell. Gravy good though. He went through line, piling his plate with the steaming food and the tornoff shreds of meat for his.

At the table Captain Hagan spat in a cup: coach has it down to the breaststroke. He put his feet on the table and spat in the cup: no pressure though. In the room groups of two and three sat eating. He wondered at the landstuck lives: were they unraptured and different, alone and melancholy. He tried to imagine the unteamed life, the nomadic pockets of pale health. Small math of ones and twos, and thankful for his own sums. Twenty at his table and loud: *olympics eightyeight Biondi like a goddamn stud in the hundred. Dumbass it was Dalby thirtythree o three in the two...* Hagan spat: this is the undefeated year. Bring the noise.

Outside the night spiked dark and cold. They walked under steel streetlamps: the lamplight and shadows and steelcolored snow crunched as they walked, six of them, to the dorm. My goddamn shoulders broke. They give us too much hell, Colin said, in fake treble: *Sally faggot freshman sack up. Sally smallsack freshman stand up.* They dont give you half the hell because you buy into all that team shit. He felt anger warmrolling over his face. You buy into all that bullshit. You shut your goddamn mouth. Travis said hey both you shuttup: damn this weather. Tiny flakes fell in smooth spirals. He would to punch that fagwhite face, Colin: wrestle and spike the weakwhite ghost. The brick box of the dorm lay ahead, wall of windows, rest and heat.

Back in the room Travis said yawning: eight now lets sleep at ten, then stretched on his bed: you know Colin that fullride fucker doesn't deserve it: what did you sign for? I didn't. Why? They had Andrew. So then youre not on scholarship. No. You will be next year. I know. After a moment he heard the sleepsounds of his roommate, softsnoring lipsmack. He sat to write an essay on symbols but they slipped untouched into the night. His thoughts slipped and fell forward: the meet at first undefined then clear and forward to the hyperknown moment where focused a thousand lamps. He looked at his paper, the one sentence: Athlete Hemingway dies undefeated: suicide. He went to sleep.

When the sun broke the morning light burned his eyes. Open, he closed them quickly and felt a quick pulse wake along the webs. He threw a pillow at his roommate. You going to class? How much time? Thirty minutes. No then. He looked outside: students crammed and sidewalking, apple cheeked with slung books, full clouds of hot breath. Trees trembled in glasscoats and crystal. The salt scut and snow grit paths. Faraway buildings brickred and clear. Full sharpblue sky. Fine day, he said. Mmmph. Wakeup you licksmacking slob. Mmmph. Lets get breakfast. Hambagel... His roommate sat up and stared, eyes halfclosed: Women I dreamed of beautiful Texan women. You did. Full brown women. No rodeo women out here. Mexicali blackhaired women. Forget it. Bluejeans women. Madcow women. Mmmph.

They piled ham on bagels. His roommate said chewing are you nervous. Yes no its more my knees. They hurt. Just the one and not too much I think. He felt and rubbed the meeting of bones and latched muscle, the fistsized kneecap. Think youll win? his roommate said. I dont know I think so. You think too much. He rubbed his knee, thinking. I cant not think. Whatever goes on up there slows you. I know. Then dont think. I cant. He feared it would be: thoughts to frame wild festivals of fortune, where palmreaders and seers hashed a thousand outcomes. A hyperconscious awareness of self. A fixation on time. The body tired. The body dying. A thousand sounds like *whoosh*: the dead heat.

Warmups at twelve: two hours till, what do you wanna do: nothing, yep, read, good. He sat back and thumbed through *L'Homme qui rit* by Hugo. He finished it last week, unsure of the ending. The man who laughs. The scarfaced climbing clown who laughs. Hugo says to climb is the function of man, but the yellowpapered ending was a lie. He threw it on the floor. His roommate picked it up: lome kwee ritt. Its French. French women? No. Good? I dont know: he dies in the end. Depressing? Yes.

Boredom ticked in slow wickering minutes. How much time. You just asked. Forty minutes. His roommate put on headphones: jackhammered warsongs, metal, and stretched his legs. He watched the pliable joints, the finfeet curl, knockneed bowlegs bend, written in the movement: butterfly.

Its time now. What: he took off the headphones. Time. Oh. They packed redmesh bags and left. Outside birds on stickwicker feet pecked food. He saw fog rise from a lost dogs tongue. Here boy, he said, and pet the freezing fur. No tags. Brown walnutsized eyes. He took a leg and felt the cracked pads. Skinbone. High harpsounding wheeze. We gotta go boy, we gotta go and they left it there. Minutes later he said Christ meet you there and ran back, afraid that the dogs death would be his. He cursed his mind and its shameful pact with unknown gods: the samaritan proves his merit. Thus they allow good swims. He found, cursed and lifted it, weak legs weakly clinging, and kicked open the door to a nearby building. Go. Its warmtongue lick. Go! Brown coffeecolored eyes. He stroked the wet fur: thankful eyes. The pattering feet clicked down the hall. He ran back to the pool.

It opened to heat and hallow space, to cave clearing where mountains can stand, the lockerroom door. They were stretching, some hooded and loose folding ankles and arms. Looselaughed joking and jibes while stretched lank limbs he joined them. In overhead stands parents filled. Eagerlooking for theirs. His own father frontrow and proud. Frontrow to see son eke his: make a shared something for both.

Then echoes of a tickering malebomb. The heldback nations on both sides between. Bluesoft water between. Teams on both sides. The pool like a reckoning judge. He sat on a towel to rub redmarks in loosening legs and arms. Obtuse motion for hips, the red roots rose bloodfull and ripe. Coach said long warmup get loose get in. Hagan watched the other side. Goddamn he said softspoken. What. What. It goes so quick. What does. This. The meet? Hagan laughed and spat in a drain.

They swam splitpool warmup. Them. On all sides he saw them off walls: the common health in loose difference of pitch. The common namelessness of brothering water: his stroke rising high the flexing watertop. Catchpullkick and *glide*. Catchpullkick and *glide* the waves and warm tidewater. He stopped to talk on walls. His roommate: Ready? Yes. Turnoff your mind. Fuckoff. Relax. I am relaxed. His roommate said no youre not.

After warmup they met in the lockerroom. Coach said kingly I know youre brokendown but we can win brokendown. This is the undefeated year. You are undefeated remember that. Undefeatable. Hagan stood and said *bring the noise you hardknock fuckers*. They marched out to murmuring warchants loud then louder in the sudden voices like torndown mountains and louder in the riot of stomping gods with raw redveined faces and Hagan yelling *bring it, bring it!*

And it started. And he watched and wondered could it never not. And if stopped would the stands empty in spilled spirit. And would he then be empty. And would he then be safe. But then he was proud. And then if stopped he would be unstoried. And then if stopped he would be unsacked. And then he watched and waited. But his race was last. And then it was close. And then it was closer. And then it was.

And coach told them we need this now do it. And they nodded. And he walked to his block and felt focus a thousandhot eyes and wondered could they never not burn. And he looked down his lane at the bluesoft water to the end where his teammates flapped and cawed like birds in the jaw of a roaring malehood. And they were called to the blocks and he wondered could the soft silence not last. And then he took his mark.

The water was cold. He thought to himself this tickleskin water is cold. He thought to himself we swing up and then down. Merry-go-forward. And the cheerful boys. How nice. And the sound. Like swimming in dry leaves. That is good...

but his mind snapped out of itself. And he woke to the noise and the knowledge of the dead heat. The close race. The hammerdead heart. And the suicide like a gunshot throat. He touched the wall and spit bile in a cupped hand. He looked up at his time. He looked up and saw Andrew: fist raised like a symbol. He staggered out and to his towel. His roommate said what happened? you get sick on that last lap? run out of sack? swallow water? die? He walked to his coach. You looked good till the end, he said. Then you looked like an old man crawling home. And he looked at his coach and said I did?

athletes anonymous

WATER

The water was still and the crickets were jiving their legs and the trees stood. Language. I listened to the cricket songs; they flailed their banjoed legs at the riverside when baby Moses floated by, when skullfaced Charon paddled his boat, when I, with a stick, stirred the water and named the moon, tonights coda. Tiresius. A fish flipped out then in: the water made a sucking sound and a ripple ebbed. Fish surface at full moons. I took a long sip of beer and wiped my mouth. Maybe the fish knew me for kin. I stood up and the dock wobbled. I thought that between my ears was a level and the bubble was true.

I am viceroy of the water. The dock is a buoyed throne. True. When I belched it echoed there and back from the stillness. Profanity. The air is warm and smooth and still. The athlete philosopher is a romantic symbol, is he not? He is the last noble savage of the mind. Platos quintessence. Pindars champ. False. In the worst dreams I am false. In stranger dreams I am a romantic symbol: one who flails. But I get ahead of myself. I am a fish. I am an athlete. I jumped off the dock and climbed the rottenwood stairs up toward the shack.

THEM

The trees were dense and there was a little path that wound up. As I neared the shack I could tell things were getting started: booze. Dunn was on the porch, smoking a camel and laughing, the cigarette saluting again and again. In his left hand was a bottle of beer. I watched the cigarette: the flaming cherry had black veins. It waxed and cooled with his breathing. It jut like a toothpicked heart. He said aw man smoke some dope with me tonight; I aint smoked yet and Watts will. He said getchy one of them beers. Like as not you havent had enough. And this is true; I took one and he is again smiling and smoking. In the warm air his bottle wept. Exhaling a puff of smoke, he lamented: the river is low, muddy, and shitty; no girls; nevermind, beer, ahhh.

Watts was sitting next to him. He told a joke. Watts was thin. His eyes were blue. He had an old brown pocketknife and a pile of whittled sticks. He was a student of engineering. He was a naturalist. He admired Dunn as proof of chaos physics. Dunn said Watts thats the lamest ass joke you ever told and while there aint no apparent paucity of brew... This here is Ockhams knife, Watts said, thrusting the blade night skyward.

HERE

I forget you don't know this place, and what time it is. We are on the river and it is nine thirty in August and I am twenty-one. We are on the porch that overlooks a shock of trees and the grassy cliff that leads down toward the dock. In the upper corner of the roof a yellow bulb burns and moths thrash in the light. Check the mothriot Dunn said. They think it's the moon said Watts. They fly at a constant angle with the moon. This bulb here is a bullshit moon. The moths cant tell. You lie said Dunn. Watch that grey guy there; see how he flies back and forth; each time thinking he's passed the moon; so he turns around and heads back to his referent. Shits driving him nuts. I read that in a magazine. Thats a bullshit kinda life. Shit then, said Dunn. He upped and cupped a moth there; jumped off the porch and released. Wind caught its papervein wings. Fly away you pissant moth, and it did. It dont any more, Ockham, Dunn said.

What were you doing down at the dock? asked Dunn. Pissing; we should fish. I saw fish. Full moon fish, said Watts. Out in schools. We aint got no poles said Dunn. In the closet, in there, said Watts. We aint got no bait said Dunn. Worms, said Watts. Huh said Dunn, and sipped. Lets fish, Watts said and went inside. Hows the UPS gig, I asked. It's alright but loud; I get headaches it's so damn loud. Dunn had quit swimming. True. He started smoking. He wears a brown suit and earmuffs. He moves brown packages all day. The planes will make him deaf and the work will make him bitter. The smoking will make wet ashes.

Watts came back with two tupperware bowls, three poles and a flashlight. He jumped off the porch and stripped a piece of bark from the tree and dug at its base. Worms have five hearts, he said, and tossed one up on the porch. Dunn picked it up and held it to the light. When he pinched it it halved and fell to the floor: living finger of mud. Watts finished packing the bowls with mud and worms. When it was all settled we took the old fiberglass poles with cheap reels and walked down the dark path toward the river. It was warm, humid, thick, and dark. We climbed down rottonwood steps onto the dock and the wide audience. The dock wobbled as we stood. Fastfoaming waves broke. That's one helluva moon, said Dunn, and looked up. His face was flourescent in moonlight. I took off my shirt. You been lifting, Dunn said. Yes.

THERE

The canoe was docked there, bayed by an old yellow rope. It was a big long dented metal thing. Is she seaworthy I asked. As hell said Watts. Arr said Dunn, and sipped. Watts yanked at the rope, curseyanked and undid the hard knots. Dunn carefully set the cooler sideways in the middle of the canoe. I took the back seat with Dunn in the middle by the cooler and Watts at the point. It was precarious. I shoved us off. We had two paddles, and Dunn and I of mixed strength so the going offset. He is weakening.

Watts you gotta tacklebox? I asked. Worms, sinkers, knife, bobbers, he said. For a while we paddled and drank. The river was flat and smooth and bound by mooncolored trees. Night language of water: the fantanimal words. I heard a clicksound ahead and looked up. I saw the back of Dunns head and smoke rising. The harsh camel. That's some tarified shit said Watts. Mmmm said Dunn, and flicked ash in the water. A bugflock swam dead. Dunn hand me a beer, I said.

Dunn how's the UPS treating you asked Watts. It's alright but damn powerful loud, all day. My ears ring. What are you making asked Watts. Eight bucks an hour. It's a pretty okay getup except for the noise. Why don't you transfer; join the team; walk on if you have to, I said. Shits not for me, he said. Besides, I don't swim. You did, I said. Yep, Dunn said, and flicked the cigarette.

Gentlemens, Dunn said, go fish. We laid our poles sideways in front of us. Watts passed out worms. I could see by the moonlight; the hook was silver. The worm was threadsliming in my hand; working and extending. I pinched it carefully and sewed it on the hook. So you're just gonna work at UPS then. I said. The worm shook when I pushed it. I might, said Dunn. And that would be alright? I asked. It might, said Dunn. Gimme two sinkers. They were grimy and grey. I wedged the line into the groove and bit. The foamy loamtaste, wharftaste. I sipped and cast out my line. It plopped twenty feet from the canoe. I got another beer from Dunn and watched the striped bobber.

WATER

Always the water widens me. Has and will since always. Swelling of Tigris. Allwater since I was a boy. Before maybe, when I was hooked in my mothers ocean. Then the question of Dunns life. My answers hurt him. Why did he leave the sport. Why did he quit the brothering water. The life in water. The wet history of ourselves. An infinity of strokes. Tenthousand miles. Painglorious life. It is the love of himself that he leaves.

He jerked: shitfire, he said, and reeled. Oh it's just a little guy. A bluegill twitched wildly in the moonlight. Hooked and hung from the end of the pole, wetslick scales shining like metal. Can't nobody eat this thing, he said. The fish looked at me with big polished glass eyes. Gimme that knife said Dunn. He gripped the fish and jerked the hook through the lip. All I could see was his back.

His arm worked back and forth. He hacksawed the head and tossed the body in the water. It floated past like a smear. Boys I'll catch our dinner with this here bait he said. He lifted his rod; dangling was the bluegill head; bright hook jammed through the deflated eye and the sharp point peeked out of the neck stump. He cast: the head and bobber plopped thirty feet out. My own pole was still. He handed me a beer cold and wet with fishgrime. I looked up: a dim team of stars. Always the water widens. Levee of language. Smooth and wanting. Wanting me on top of the mud to float with the living and the dead. Wanting me to empty myself in the streaming language.

But this is surreal. And things funnel down from the numinous to the known: from metaphysics to the cckkshhh of the next can. I sipped. Watts eyed his line. In an instant he jerked and reeled the groaning pole. The struggling fish rocked the canoe. Christjesus said Dunn. Whoa there Watts said and steadied his pole. Shit gar shouted Dunn excitedly. I put my hands on Dunn's shoulders, steadied myself, and stood. A twofoot gar thrashed the moonlight. It looked like a wingless dragon. In ragevexed violence it cracked like a whip. Watts held the it low against the side of the canoe. Dunn goddamming wailed with a paddlehammer. The wild gar hammered back.

After a few minutes it quit moving. Damn if that aint a wily sonofabitch, Dunn said. Watts poked the fish and it didn't move. He carefully lifted it into the boat. He pulled at the line to retrieve the hook but the line snapped. About chewed through he said. He picked the fish up with both hands like an offering. It was a heinous thing: sloped mouth nearly a beak and the sidesmashed eyes. I thought I saw its green jaws twitch.

I was watching my pole when the gar fell backward into Dunns lap. He shrieked and it fell to the floor of the canoe, alive. Dunn swore and stomped furiously. I tried to steady the boat. Watts was staring. Finally Dunn stopped, sat down, picked up the gar, and threw it in the river. There were puddles of garblood and water in the dented hull. I'll be goddamned, he said. There was a short silence and then he laughed. Bloodtaste of rust; when I sipped the beer I probed the cut with my tongue.

On the water were moments of warm wind and silence. Bittersweet ubiquity in warm requiems of wind, as if the end of a long life hung in the air, and we were participants in the wake. Homeless clouds; the cirrus wisps overhead. I sipped and said I'm about damn tired of fishing. Wait a while Dunn said. Then gimme a chaw, I said, and Dunn said sure enough and handed me the wadded pouch. The tobacco was black as the shore mud. Moist and charred and bittersweet.

The riversides thinned. The shores and thatched language thickreed. Brimbursting with hatcheries of sound. The moon shone on Dunns head and his hair was platinum. The tobacco briefly burned and settled into my cheek. We floated around a bend in the shore and I looked up and saw cliffside a ruddy oak bent over the water, branched in warm welcome. Lets stop here Dunn said. Ropeswing said Watts: I didn't think we paddled two miles. We ran up on the muddy shore. Ten feet back was a cliff and a wood ladder. A ski rope was tied to an outstretched branch; it swayed a little in the breeze; at its end was a makeshift handle.

LOTUS

The water was lapping up onto the shore and the soft waterclap sounds seemed eternal. I imagined them splashing the pangea, back before it broke into continents, when ancient things swam the earth that was not earth. The mudshone moonlight, silvery and soft. Man I could sit here for days, said Dunn. Let's have another one, I said, and Watts handed me a can greased with the sweat of the dead fish. Dunn? I said; he was staring at the water and after a moment said not now.

A warm breeze skitted past, spiked with summersmell, and the leaves glimmered like sheets of dark jade. A bird flew past. Watts yawned. Man I could sit here for days said Dunn. In a tree a bird peeked with a cockeyed head, its little twig feet clawing at the dark bark. I looked over and saw Dunn stuffing his glassy pipe. Smell this, he said, and held it to my face. The cusping bowl, rich with ripe incense. Brimming bowl of myrrh. Bowl of lotus. Wreath of stars: the zodiac drug. I took a sip, spat, and said gimme the rest of the chaw. Fine then, he said, and handed me the pouch.

Look, whispered Watts, and pointed: on a treestump not twenty feet away was a barn owl, face like a cleaved moon. Man I could stay here for days said Dunn. The mooncolored owl peeped and scratched with its hard talons and looked at us with greeked eyes. Hooked knifebeak. It stared jade eyes unblinking. Then it screamed and flew off into the night.

Whos up for the swing? Watts said. Me, I said; huh? no, said Dunn. He climbed the ladder up to a platform at the edge of the cliff. Swing me up the rope, he said. I did and then climbed up; shirtless and barefooted we stood at the edge; I could see Dunn relight the pipe. Watts jumped, I heard the branch groan, and he arced up and over the water, releasing at the highpoint. I caught the rope on its return and steadied myself on the edge.

Damn it feels good, he said, treading water. Dunn jump in here, he yelled. Huh, no, he said, flicking the lighter. The water was warm and still; race me to the middle, said Watts. Okay: me on my back and he thrashing forward. He stopped halfway; this is far enough. In the larger expanse of the river we were tiny, the water stretching to black infinity on both sides. How far are we from the dock? I asked; about a mile and half, he said; twenty bones says you can't swim back there. That's no kind of bet. Why? he said. Nevermind, we'll see, maybe. We swam back toward the shore and the twinkling of Dunns cigarette.

How's the water? He was sitting, smoking. Watts and I climbed out; guess we'll hafta sit till we dry, he said, grabbing a beer from the cooler. I sat down next to Dunn. He turned, his eyes scarlet and halfclosed, and said Man I could sit here for days. Man you're wrecked, I said. Swim back to the dock with me; Watts doubts; the water feels good. Hehehe. Man come on, I said; it'd be fun. Fun to what? he said. Swim. Huh, no man, not really, are you crazy? Are you?

I've got the jones. I could sit here for days. And then what. Sit here for days, in nirvana, in semisoft utero. Vishnu sage of the darkling Jaffa. Renounce your physicals. Recite your orisons. Exist in the darkstar your of your mind. But the water feels good, I said. He didn't answer. I put my shoes in the canoe and said Watts, Dunn, later. They watched as I slid into the water and swam off into the enormous night.

STREAM

Arent we the mythlovers and psalmists: all strong Davids with slings and kings? And then what. The ineluctable: dethroned to general waste, to commonbody husks: fleshswelling traitors to be. Laughable myths and the silent psalter. Soundless requiem for a Fisher king. When his vermilion eyes cool I will tell him. You must change your life. But first the water: I feel it with dizzy hands. Dizzyfined hands to scull the path. Rotate on longbody axis: the seasickening kata. But it fades to ribboning streams of thought. But everything fades to ribboning streams of language.

We have a history of times and tokens. We have myths. We have dreams. We have psalms. We have seasons. To an athlete dying young: I watched you bring home the relay. You touched and your face was painglorious. I pulled you out and felt the engine of your hammering heart: the living phonic. And then what. Do we die and still dream? Are athletes taught vainglorious dreams? Are we put to a deeper sleep when we quit them?

The acids bloom like secret flowers. Under the skin in beds of ripe muscle. Ten minutes and I am passing a wide bend in the water. Look for the gar: deathshining of a bloated gem. Or will it be dull in death: rank tissue. Will it float this way, and will I breathe into its blackrank blood? Me then: the hooklipped fish. What hook snagged the strong flesh of his will?

I float on my back to rest. Dunn is not the first to quit. Last year two left the team. They disappeared, ghosts on campus. They come to meets, ghosts, and watch what they were. They talk of last year and eulogize themselves, these fresh dead. Welcome to your funeral, I want to say to them, but instead I say we could have used you in the relay. After the meet I will see them again. They lust for the ritual, thieves: booze with us and rob the ritual.

That year I met a ghost in the yard. We were celebrating the victory. He was crooked and lurched, plastic spined and bent over sick. Streams of tears and bile slid down his cheeks and chin. He looked up. In the dim light his face shone. You look like death, I said. His hands trembled and grabbed at the grass. It only took a fifty-five to win, I said, and his soul spilled into a puddle.

I rolled over and swam. Broken water splashes. The sound it makes. Strange sound. Like licking tongues. Iamb here now: pullstroke heartrest pause: the timetamer of snakes. Wet register of sound. Like *whoosh!* Breathing on fifths the phrygian rhythm. But the water does not end. I breathe and look forward, dark water and dark sky. The moon obscured. Then do I haunt this water, all water? Athlete obscure. Athlete anonymous?

When I reached the dock I pulled myself up onto its planks and sat. Mute breeze drifted. I stirred the glassy water with a stick. Did they ever leave? Is Dunn still there, lost in the lotus, soul akimbo? I lay back on the boards and stare. Here come clouds. Verbose winds. This year will be good. The team is stronger. And me: a captain. Fling the flag and marshal the young innocents. The young wild ones and their unshaped vigor. Show them the ritual. This year we will swim more miles and reach a newer knowledge of pain, the true language.

DELTA

I sat up and looked. Down the dark way: twinkling mouthcandle, the cigarette northstar. He flagged me with the smoking hand. When they docked he handed me a beer. What the hell took you guys so long? Lemme show you, said Watts. They hoisted the cooler up on the dock. Watts flipped the lid. In a bed of ice and beer were three catfish; one still warm. Cold blood and grimewater swished in the bottom. Would've made good time but for candyass here. Shit, said Watts, and Dunn laughed. I thought you'd sit on that shore all night. Good dope but wore off quick, he said. See you made it back alright. You shouldve come with me.

Watts and Dunn lifted the cooler and we walked back to the shack. We need a knife and pliers, said Dunn. He laid the fish on the edge of the porch and Watts got the tools. The grey moths swarmed the light; in the upper corner a spider crept. A moth was webbed there, flapping stuck wings. Dunn noticed: good place to set up shop if you're a spider, he said, and sipped. The little gossamer threads were silvery and soft, and they rippled like water when small breezes touched them. The spider crept on black jackknifed legs. We got closer to watch. The moth struggled and its wild wings tore. The dark bladed legs caged it. The web glimmered when the black head of the spider kissed. That ol boys a goner, said Dunn. Watts came back out. Here Dunn cut us up some dinner, he said. Sure enough, Dunn said. I'll go get wood, Watts said. We need a fire.

Dunn set the fish on a dry plank in the yard. I don't remember how to do this, I said. How many times have we done this before, he said. I don't feel like it, I said. Okay then I'll do it. He cut carefully around the head with the knife. Should've boiled them, he said; loosens up the skin. Hand me the pliers. He pinched hold of the skinflap and pulled. It's on there pretty damn tight, he said, and yanked. The skin shrieked. I think you should swim again. The dead muscles of the fish where white. What? Why?

I think you should swim again, I said, and held out the knife. He took it. Why did you quit? He worked the knife like a saw around the slickgray head. What? There's nothing in it, he said; I can make money. I got tired of it. He pulled gently. Head, spine and insides detached. I'm not like you, he said. Sure you are, I said; how can you say that? I'm not fast, he said. I stood: what the fuck does fast have anything to do with it. He shook his head. I'm not like you. What the hell does that mean? It means I got cut.

He was on to the next fish, yanking at the slick red skin. You never told me. Why the hell does it matter? It shouldn't. It doesn't. I'm sorry. Forget it. Watts was back with wood. I heard shouts, he said. Nothing, Dunn said, and smiled. He handed me a beer. I drank as the dizzy night folded and waxed like a failing heart. They built a fire and I sat in the grass. We sat next to it and they ate. They were talking and the sharp flames rose. Strange sound. Like licking tongues. I was sweating. Are you okay, Dunn said. I think I'll sleep now.

I stood on numbstuck knees. Trees shimmered and shrank in a roiling tide. Are you okay, Dunn said. Language. Just need some fresh air and sleep. I staggered to the dock and fell. The groaning planks and cackling waves. I looked over its edge. The dim reflection of myself in water, dim rippling mask. When the flamewater broke over my teeth I breathed wet fire. The hackwet sputters echoed in stillness: echoed whispering words that knew me for the whore of vainglorious dreams. A fly tiptoed on my finger. I am the fish. The moon hung like an old medal. I am the athlete. The acids leaked and all blooms broke in red through the swallowing dark. I looked up through the stinging at the blurred form of Dunn. Let me help you, he said, and wiped my face. I pushed him away. Let me help you, he said, lifting me. I need your help. It's okay now, he said. You'll be alright.

life in water

If you came this way in any season you would likely find water. If you came this way to rethink your stories you would likely find them unchanged. Written in the tile and tall windows; written on the hanging flags. Then perhaps you could believe them again. Perhaps you could breathe again. If you ever came here by hap or hope to chance your life in water.

I knelt at the edge. The white tile of a skeleton pool. Banners in a box and the chalkboard gone. A black recordboard and the white letters leaned. They will be the last. They will be beaten. The names and times erased with a crane. There is my name. That time. So fast then. I pulled at the bolts. They were stripping but loose; ancient black water spilled where they were. I put the bolts in my pocket and lifted the block. It was cracked underneath. The starting block that launched a million men.

I left a note on the window, unsure if he would ever read it: Coach, thanks for everything. Keep in touch. —Pete. I paused and then closed the heavy doors. The men with yellow hats stopped when I walked out. In their eyes they wondered but asked nothing. I nodded at them and they nodded back. Heavy white dust in the air. And the sound of cement.

Outside a yellow machine slept like a clockwork mantis. I opened the trunk and tied down the block. I looked back at the building and the doors and the dust. The concrete smoke and the filling of a pool. When I got in the car my wife hugged me. And then we set out for home.