

Firepool

Hedley Twidle

The time which has just gone by and in which I haven't written a word has been so important for me because I have stopped being ashamed of my body in the swimming pools.

—Franz Kafka, *Diaries*

BY NOW THE SANDSTONE and granite have absorbed the summer. At night you can feel the mountain radiating heat back out of itself. I wake each day and my mind starts working: how can I skive out of the morning's writing routine? How can I get to the water?

I began marking up a map of municipal pools. They stretch from Sea Point to Atlantis, from Khayelitsha to Trafalgar. In Google Earth, they look like mirrors set into the city. Then the tidal pools that retain small helpings of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans; the mountain reservoirs stained the color of rooibos, making even the palest limbs go golden brown. Hoping that this liquid geometry will take me out of habitual patterns, and away from all the antagonism. To slip into the water and let it all slough off. To slow down time a little, to dip under the surface of the days.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Park at the quarry and walk up the Pipe Track to avoid traffic. So quiet on the path. Pockets, rivulets of stillness running close by the high summer torrent, though the smell of burning clutch still comes through the trees. We run over the intersection at the top of Kloof Nek and down into the Glen, the sound of the beach filtering up the valley. It is 5:00 p.m. but still hot. Kids rush out of the waves; older sisters look on. Mothers dish out picnics in the shade of palms and gazebos. Long, long queues for the minibuses—half a kilometer long. Looking at them made me vicariously annoyed at those who must be pushing in—but I didn't see any sign of it. A T-shirt says: DON'T TEXT HIM.

Caprice, the Grand, the Tuscan Café—they are all closed down and boarded up on the busiest day of the year. Raised sundecks and rim

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flow pools on the first floors of the luxury hotels—the Club Med equivalent of a ha-ha lawn, no views spoiled. Traffic at a standstill coming into town: patriarchs with wraparound shades and grim-set jaws, a family day out ending in this long, hot queue. What were you thinking?

The lifeguard at the tidal pool tells me she has been doing “help-outs” all day, and there has been one case of “dry drowning,” but the kid will probably be OK. I feel bad even talking to her, thinking that I must be distracting from the task of monitoring the scene.

“No, it’s OK—I’m checking as we speak.”

Picked our way over the dangerous rocks to the tidal pool, in which people were doing square dances. I lowered myself in and came up with pieces of seaweed in my hair, the soft and delicate kind that can probably be eaten.

Next was Maiden’s Cove, one of the only swimming spots on the Atlantic zoned “Colored” (i.e., mixed race) by the Separate Amenities Act. Next to Maiden’s is Bachelor’s—tumble of rocks once known for cruising and violations of apartheid’s Immorality Act. Between them is the remnant of a dividing line erected by the authorities. Rusting fence posts stretch into the sea, trying to separate Maidens from Bachelors.

“What you doing, bru? You can’t get to Clifton that way.”

There was a group of young guys smoking a joint behind one of the big granite eggs.

“I’m trying to find Bachelors’ Cove, one of the few places for inter-racial gay cruising. Back in the bad old days, you know.”

It just came out, natural as you like, before I caught myself—as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. It flummoxed them totally, I think; they couldn’t really make a joke about it, though they did try. A group of bros, black, white, and brown. Thus I hope to have contributed in my small way to a transformed society.

SILVERMINE

New life striking out after the fires last year. Around the reservoir are blackened tree frames, but then reeds, grasses, lilies, flowers all through this high valley. The tented camp where we stayed on the walking residency has been abandoned; it will not be rebuilt. But the natural repair and renovation is ahead of schedule.

Those mysterious fires that I only ever saw online, even though they were burning in the very same city. My cousin, an aerial photographer,

was posting immense, Turner-like compositions of helicopters tackling across a canvas of yellow-gray smoke. A visiting speaker compared the media aesthetic of wildfires and shack fires in the city, the disproportionate amount of attention and sympathy given to the former. All true, of course, but how can one not be fascinated by a forest burning?

For generations, botanists and foresters didn't understand the natural fire cycles of this biome, an environmental historian told us. Trained in the forestry and agricultural models of the Northern Hemisphere, they applied their knowledge to a part of the planet where it made no sense. Not understanding the "pyrodiversity" of the planet's Mediterranean-type climate regions, mainstream ecology and conservation were prone to "fire blindness."

"Which means that the wildland-urban interface doesn't burn as often as it should," he said, and so the fuel builds up for much bigger, more destructive blazes.

"When the kloofs here above us go up in flames, it's going to be enormous."

But then again, the whole idea of a "natural" fire cycle is elusive. Human intervention in "fire regimes" (I went and found his book, just for more of these specialized pyro terms) goes back thousands of years here. The Khoi herders set fires to generate new pasturage for their fat-tailed sheep; the flames could be left to burn since the Goringhaiqua followed a pattern with the seasons, moving from the peninsula inland and then back again.

With settlement and property ownership comes the idea of fire as something that must be intensely monitored, doused, feared. The colonists see the wisdom of torching the dry herbage and attempt to do controlled burns by digging ditches. But the specter of arson hangs over the growing settlement where slaves outnumber masters: fire as revolt, rebellion against the company. Under the Dutch, the "incalculable mischief" of unauthorized veld burning is punishable by hanging. Under the British, thatched roofs are forbidden following the "great fire" of November 1798, a conflagration rumored to have been started by runaway slaves, though the official inquiry finds the cause to be accidental. Fire has always been part of the city's secret history—"a persistent crackle at the edge of our lives."

I put the book down and slip into the water again. A. recalls the childhood game where you must dive to the bottom and come up holding a handful of mud. I try it, sinking below the layer warmed by the endless heat wave, down into the cold comfort, but can only stand

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a little. A different dimension threatens to open up: the shift from an ordinary Sunday of water-wings and picnics to the cold, dark blindness is too much, too sudden.

In the silt of the fresh water, you can swim and swim until it feels like the reservoir might be laced with the same irons, salts, and sediments as your body, that you might be drinking in a little of your own blood.

TRAFALGAR POOL, WOODSTOCK

“Are you sure you want to go in?” asks the ticket lady. “It’s very full.”

The undercurrent is: you will be the only white people in there. But there is one pinko-gray man tanning in a tiny Speedo: elderly, his back and arms absolutely ravaged by a lifetime of sun, but he still seems to be loving it.

A pool just on the edge of District Six’s empty slopes, an unusual, elongated shape, lovely and deep. A boy asks to borrow my goggles; they lend him a stylish, steampunk look, and soon he is squabbling over them with his friends.

“Come in brother, come in,” says a man already in the water as I perch on the edge. He tells me to come to Rylands Barbershop, his business of seven years since moving from Kolkata, and is pleased with my fragmentary Hindi, making me recite it for his friends.

“Aap ka naam kya hai?”

“Cape Town is relaxed, Cape Town is calm—India is too . . .” Here he makes a car-hooting gesture. “Too much.”

SEA POINT POOL

Sitting on a bench that looks over the water, through the railings and out to sea. People lean against the edge, gazing back in my direction. On the far side, some lane swimmers in caps and goggles are beginning to reassert themselves among the nonlinear bodies. I dive in and join it all, strike up aimless conversations, dive onward.

Bodies distributed in water. Why is it such an endlessly fascinating scene? People in their absolute presence, immediacy, unrepeatability, biomorphic idiosyncrasy—stubborn electrons in a particle field, each molecule a furnace of self, of selfhood. They can’t help but resolve themselves into scenes of compositional genius.

Today the majority are not wearing goggles or swim caps. They look more like themselves and less like the bullet-headed automatons on

the ocean side of the pool, gathering in numbers now, their protein-rich arms crashing like watermills, hauling themselves through the water and into the year. The summer holidays are ending and I sense that I may be witnessing the changing of the guard, the turning of the tide. The reassertion of goal-directed laps, the dwindling of watery aimlessness.

This scene brought out a strange Jekyll and Hyde ambivalence within me. Now I was joining the particles in their Brownian motion; now I was doing a bit of a lap. Here I am a bit annoyed with a group of kids blocking my way; here I am stopped in the middle of the pool and trying in turn to antagonize the goggle-wearing strivers. Just a little, stepping out of their way at the last minute. Easy to do, just a step to the right, a jump to the left, weaving in and out of the lines of the loom. They were the warp and I was the woof, or they were the woof and I was the warp. . . .

"Customers, attention," says the PA system. "Customers, attention, the pool will be closing at seven. Please vacate the water by 6:45 p.m. Have a good day further."

"Customers *nogal*," I say to A., who is reading Kafka's diaries under a shawl.

The whistles start blowing and we have to leave. The whistles of history, of human time. The pool starts becoming a calm sheet again, resuming its natural condition. But over there on the ocean side the rubber bullets are still hauling themselves through water, still counting, still insulated by the crash and the breath and the turn. Do they think they are immune, I wonder to myself, toweling off peevishly. The revelers have obeyed, but the law-abiding are above the law?

Really pushing it, these guys, staying until the very last. Then they get out and even then there is someone who stays and stays. I christen her The Renegade. Now she is the only person in the pool, has all that beauty, that whole calm sheet to herself. And still she flouts! Turn after turn she keeps going. Until eventually a lifeguard must signal to her individually at the shallow end.

"OK, well, now I know. Thanks for telling me."

She smiles, taking the scolding as if it's the first. Pulls on khaki shorts and walks out barefoot, toward (we are tailing her) an old BMW. Early forties maybe, slender and smiling, carefree, the costume soaking through the shorts: The Renegade. Into the old gun-metal gray Beemer, pulls confidently out into the summer traffic and is gone.

LONG STREET BATHS

The shutdown of the arts campus has robbed me of my most valued parking space in town—the injustice. Two protesters ask me very politely not to use the Wi-Fi as I sit on a bench outside; all lecturers, they say, have been told to stay away for this week. So I bite my lip and walk down along the hot rivers of traffic, across a busy intersection, through a doorway and into this little watery temple.

The baths are pleasantly dilapidated: a missing slat in the roof lets in a little air, makes a parallelogram of sun on the water. A fellow swimmer called Des gives me some advice on my stroke: my head is too far out of the water.

Despite the psychic importance of these chlorinated oases, my attempt to swim off the world's stupidity was never going to work. The South African tradition of mass beach going on 1 January has now generated a countertradition—a predictable backwash of vitriol online.

Soon after New Year's Day a post went viral, something about barbarians invading the beaches each New Year's Day. I could never bear to follow the details, and I refuse to reproduce them here. But for a number of weeks anyone entering public discourse was obliged to live within the parameters of consciousness set by a racist estate agent from Durban called Penny Sparrow. Even government spokespeople are weighing in, blaming the opposition.

The immense archive of the Internet is dredged. People post images of "wade-ins" during the Civil Rights struggle in America; the infamous photograph of a hotel manager throwing hydrochloric acid into a pool to scare demonstrators for integration. Protest picnics on segregated South African beaches, signs drawing lines in the sand, trying to parse the color spectrum of a creolized port city into different social functions, amenities, different ways of playing: as absurd as trying to fence water.

Ridiculous but murderous: petty apartheid assigned the calmest, most idyllic waters as "White." "Black" beaches often had dangerous currents and riptides, and those meant to use them had least access to public pools in the first place. Nonswimmers: a coded, racist term (I have learned, post Sparrow) for people of color in South Africa.

The idiocy, the public shaming, the clueless apologies, the whole overheated cycle. Everything you want to dive underwater and away from, and yet you dive right back in.

FIREPOOL

Walked through town ahead of the State of the Nation Address. Coils of barbed wire everywhere; water cannons waiting in alleys.

Like New Year's Day swimming, the address has also generated its own countertradition. The political opposition can and will interrupt the president during his speech with total impunity, an excruciating annual spectacle. But then again the president can get away with anything too: double impunity.

I have never invested all that much in following the endless scandals that dog Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma. I'd rather think about the sex lives of sea anemones, or NASA's new images of the moons of Saturn, or the Brownian motion of bodies in water and the million other things that are happening all around us but which never get much attention on social media. But once again, out of the frying pan and into the fire pool:



A press photograph taken at the president's Nkandla homestead in KwaZulu-Natal. A tear-shaped pool out of which firemen are pumping water, which is then being hosed at great pressure—back into the water.

The story behind this picture is a complex and legally contested one. But what we see here is an official government attempt to convince the South African public that what looks like a swimming pool is in fact a "fire pool." That this "water reservoir" built with taxpayers' money is firstly and fundamentally a crucial installation for the fighting of conflagrations—conflagrations that could easily spread

through the Nkandla complex given its numerous thatched roofs (of which one sees a prominent example back left)—and only secondly a recreational facility with stepped amphitheater-like seating (on which we can see members of the press duly arranged). Or rather (the story shifted week by week, from spokesperson to spokesperson) that the two functions of said pool—firefighting and swimming—had been cleverly combined in a nifty money-saving gesture at a mere R 3.9 million.

In its legalistic literalness, the scene has a base-level absurdity—that much is clear. But then at a further remove, there is the in-built awareness of the absurdity: the minister of oolice who organized this press junket seems almost to relish the high-pressure ridiculousness of the performance he is staging, as if he is hosing the demand for due process right back on and into itself, flaunting the power to create an entirely circular argument via power hoses and enjoying it. And then (and this, I think, is why it captures something particular about the texture of experience here) extending the invitation for us to enjoy it too. This may sound fanciful—that there is some wry in-joke being perpetrated. But in the YouTube version, a police brigadier strides alongside the water, giving detailed descriptions of the pump mechanism. When it is finally turned on and the white plumes rise majestically into the sky, some orchestral music swells beneath the footage: *O Sole Mio!* I rewatched the clip several times until I could be sure.

The fire pool, in other words, has fireproofed itself. It has been pre-self-satirized, and so placed outside the realms of meaningful analysis. As if any attempt to explicate it would just become trapped in the same conceptual loop that these firemen are creating with their hoses, dousing a swimming pool with its own water, endlessly quenching a liquid fire.

OBSERVATORY POOL

Only six-rand entry and a real shallow end where all the kids hang out—you feel silly doing laps when it comes to turning around in this paddle pool. People are cannonballing in from every direction, doing a few furious strokes, then giving up.

Talk to the man who is monitoring pH levels and adding *suur* (sour) chemicals to the water. He says it must be backwashed several times a day in the high season. The pool as a site of constant labor and maintenance: something you don't often think about. He begins to complain

about corruption in the tender system for lifeguards in the Western Cape, but I drift away, needing to preserve my temporary oasis.

The pool as a site of nostalgia, of lying on the bricks, of chlorine and lemon barley squash: it's almost a trope in memoirs of white South African childhoods. My childhood pool was a savage place, full of war. I would make ships out of polystyrene trays and pipe cleaners, float them, then wrap a Checkers packet around a stick and light it. The plastic would catch alight and with my burning knobkerrie I would rain down fire on the ships, napalming the toy soldiers, the ants. *Zip . . . zip . . .* It was a sound like no other. So that eventually the whole pool would be covered in a toxic fug of burning plastic and polystyrene, and my mother would come home and wonder what to do about her son's pyromania.

Obs pool is now officially closed: the lifeguards only have to say it once and everyone swims to the edge and gets out. Our wet bodies leave shapes on the warm bricks for a minute, then we evaporate.

SAUNDERS ROCK

A week of unusually warm water on the Atlantic side—the whole seaboard has temporarily become a swimming pool. Hundreds of people linger and loll in water that they would normally run out of screaming.

Swimming with O. amid smoking, spray-backed rollers, big swell but breaking slowly enough for a bodysurfer. On and on it goes, diving down or under these immense and holy pulses of ocean, until I crawl out punch-drunk.

O. says the surfers were checking us with respect out there in the back line but I can't see that far. If all the boards start paddling out like a shoal, I know that a big set is on the way—that's my only way of telling. Always an edge of anxiety because I never really know what is coming.

So I have decided to get my eyes lasered. Went to the ophthalmologist yesterday for a precheck to see if I am a suitable candidate. You put your chin on a little stirrup and have to answer questions:

"Text clearer in the red or the green? Red? Or green?"

"Red."

"And now?"

"Green."

And even when you're not sure, that's also fine—the doctor has expected it.

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"Better before or after?"

"Um . . ."

"Ja—pretty much the same, hey?"

The ability to answer with certainty about something, to have an opinion: the whole process was deeply satisfying.

Especially since as soon as I came out it was straight to a faculty meeting where everything slipped out of focus again. Should the university close down for another week due to student protests? If no, were we prepared to accept a heightened security presence? Given that this might escalate the situation, as had happened at other campuses? Given that private security companies inevitably go in for racial profiling? Given that they might have to manhandle students? Given that we may be going down the path of a secured academic space for good, that the decision to have men in body armor hanging around entrances and exits might be irreversible?

"It only takes one or two people to trigger the fire alarms in a building," the vice chancellor explains to those who accuse him of caving in too easily, "And, colleagues, we do need to honor fire evacuation protocol since we do know that arson is a constant threat."

The last swim before I will (in theory) see more clearly—after the operation I can't go near water for weeks. The only place for it is Saunders Rock, a cold and lovely octagon set into the granite boulders—the swimming hole I love best. The tide is not high so the water is a little pewter. But I jump in after receiving some advice about depth.

"Uncle can jump over here, where it's deeper. Does Uncle like the water? Not too cold for Uncle?"

I know exactly where to jump and I love cold water—it's a pleasure that can be embraced and cultivated. But I pretended not to know: giving the impression of hearing something for the first time, of being freshly astonished by the wisdom of youth, is very important in my line of work.

The old men from Athlone are here with their drums and guitars, singing toward the horizon: *As the river flows / Gently to the sea . . .* But I couldn't see Tommy. Gazebos are coming down, children gathered, sand sluiced off, cars loaded. Tommy the featherlight diver who really did teach me where to jump, the sixty-year-old with the body of a twenty-year-old, always with his cute grandson in tow. The king of Saunders Rock.

The divers launch off one-two-three as the swell comes in to cushion them. I think of all the times I've been here: the days drawn to a

close, the years opened, here where I don't feel too thin or too pale as I do on the beaches round the corner. And try for the hundredth time to recall those beautiful lines by Coetzee about reversing the political project of making some bodies undesirable to other bodies, about color washing off into a pool, or is it being immersed in a pool of color, if that is what it is, if I haven't invented it, because all I find when I search on Google is a different line, from Alex La Guma: "he slid into the pleasure without a thought like a stone into a pool."

NOTES. "the remnant of a dividing line": this account of Maiden's and Bachelor's comes from Mark Gevisser, *Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (London: Granta, 2014). "The night is cold and delicate": John Ashbery, "The Ecclesiast," *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002). "fire blindness": these paragraphs draw from Simon Pooley, *Burning Table Mountain: An Environmental History of Fire on the Cape Peninsula* (University of Cape Town Press, 2014). "a persistent crackle at the edge of our lives": Mike Nicol, *Sea-Mountain, Fire City* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001). "like a stone into a pool": Alex La Guma, *And a Threefold Cord* (London: Kliptown, 1988). The misremembered lines by J. M. Coetzee are in *Doubling the Point*: "I am one of many people in South Africa who have become detached from their ethnic roots, whether those roots were in Dutch South Africa or Indonesia or Britain or Greece or wherever, and have joined a pool of no recognizable ethnos whose language of exchange is English. These people are not, strictly speaking, English South Africans, since a large proportion of them—myself included—are not of British ancestry. They are merely South Africans (itself a mere name of convenience) whose native tongue, the tongue they have been born to, is English. And as the pool has no discernible ethnos, so one day I hope it will have no predominant color, as more "people of color" drift into it. A pool, I would hope, then, in which differences wash away.