

By the Water
September 2019

I lived by the ocean for a good part of my life, as a child and as a teenager. In my teens, I escaped from the conflict within me, and that which surrounded me, by stealing out of the house, over the dunes covered in sea-grass, over the hot sand, into the salty ocean, the water warmed by low tide, frigid in high tide. I loved low tide. Pushing outward to deeper water, I could see to the bottom, clear but for tiny crabs. No frightening denizens at my feet. The ocean at high tide was powerful, black, opaque. Whatever skittered past my legs remained a mystery, and one that brought a chill to my blood.

I avoided swimming underwater. The salt burned my eyes. Instead, I side-stroked, or swam like a frog. I lay on my back, my body moving like a rippling veil, hearing the furnace-roar of the ocean whenever my ears dipped below the surface. Sometimes I dared to close my eyes and drift. Drift. Drift. Away from tension, my face toward the blazing southern summer sun.

In my 16th summer, I begged for a surfboard and was given one. A Hobie, the finest. I could barely tuck it under my short, skinny arm, but I masked the awkwardness by running with the board. The Chesapeake Bay afforded little wave action, so until I could finally drive south with friends to North Carolina's ocean shore, I learned to surf behind the wake of a boat. On weekdays, when the boat sat on its trailer, I resorted to paddling, catching the little waves, riding them parallel to the shore. I lay on the board and let it drift. Once, I dozed, my body rocked in a gentle, lulling manner that I had not experienced as a little girl. When I awoke, the shore was distant; the ships riding the channel into Hampton Roads were huge. I tried to paddle straight toward the shore, but the current kept me frozen in the channel. Paddling parallel to the shore got me nowhere. Panic created a wad in my throat, and I sat up, too frightened to fear that a shark might barrel toward me. I was a teenager who played with the notion of suicide. But in that moment, I wanted only to fall on the dry sand and weep with relief.

A small outboard appeared, its hull slamming on the hard surface of the water. "I bet you need a lift," yelled the sun-browned boy with long blond hair. "I do," I cried out. He threw me a water-ski tow line, and as if I were bait, he trolled me back to shore. I screamed, "Thank You!" over the roar of his boat's throttle as he returned to deeper water. We spoke no other words, but I have remembered him all these years. And I have remembered my ocean at its worst.

My mother attempted to teach me how to swim when I was four years old. The venue was a crystal-clear pool at a Florida hotel. Palm trees and sunbathers surrounded the pool, which featured a shallow kiddie end. Mother held me in her arms, bobbed with me, and dunked us both for only a few seconds. I came up howling and digging my fingernails into her arms. A mother with extremely little patience for toddlers, she soon dumped me in my father's arms. The Naval officer who commanded a submarine of brave sailors, he eventually swung me one-two-three into the center of the pool and bade me swim or else. A kindly woman—to this day I picture her as the actress Mary Martin—rescued me and said some bad words in my father's direction.

When I was seven, my father's orders sent us to Charleston, South Carolina, and when I think of the beachfront hovel we lived in, I have two distinct memories: that from our front door, the

ocean looked higher than the house and that I had stomach aches ever day. I believe these memories are related.

Water trauma notwithstanding, I fell in love with the gentler side of the oceans and bays that always seemed to be our neighbors. I became fascinated with tidal pools, with the ocean's flotsam and jetsam that washed up on the sand. I read about sea creatures that skimmed the water's surface and those that carried their own natural flashlights fathoms below. I was at my calmest during walks through the live oaks growing just up from the beach and strolling in the beach's moonlight on a date, explaining to the young plebe from Kansas that the sparkle in the waves was phosphorescence. I taught myself to slalom ski and surf, to drive a boat. Never ask me, though, to put my head underwater. And the ocean only remains beautiful if I don't have to acknowledge that skeletons sway in the murky blackness and that bottomless holes that suck water into hell exist.

Several weekends ago, John and I drove north, past Pinedale, Wyoming, to a campsite on the Green River. The river formed a rushing oxbow around the site, but John assured me it would rise no further. I had loved this river for many years, since I taught A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s novel *The Big Sky* to my high schoolers. Finally seeing the beautiful, wide, green-water ribbon, as it cut through vast sage meadows, was a dream realized. After we set up camp, and our oldest son, who lives and works in Pinedale, joined us for dinner, we took our two Labradors for an evening stroll and game of fetch on a hill above the river. I tarried, snapping picture after picture of the Green River, *my* river. Suddenly, my son and husband were yelling the name of our younger dog. Distress in their voices, I ran toward them. A thrown stick had bounced erratically and into the turbulent water. Robbie stopped our older dog, but Chauncey launched himself into the river.

Somehow, the river did not catch him. Somehow, in spite of my mind flashing images of my dog being swept down, swept under, lost. In spite of the story I had already conjured of how we searched all night. In spite of my screaming. Somehow, his gangly legs possessed the power necessary to maneuver him into a cut in the river, toward a bank that provided grassy purchase. Somehow this surging, boiling, massive, dangerous river possessed benevolence.

That night, just before darkness fell, I walked down to the river. It seemed calmer, as if it tired in the evenings from its river responsibilities. I thanked it. That night, I fell asleep to the sound of the Green River, not unlike that of the wind in the pine trees. Not unlike the sound of the waves of the bay at night.

Is it possible to harbor equal amounts of love and fear toward an entity? Perhaps only in Nature, where that which is calm and that which rages collide.