

Notes from underwater

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“Can you describe your pain?”

This is a question I was asked countless times in the hours and days following the accident. My pain is a river, I might have said, at once stationary and dynamic, in a constant state of flux, but never changing in any meaningful way — the kind of drone that’s impossible to ignore. I might have said this but didn’t. “It hurts a lot,” was the best I could offer. I remember the paramedic who took this answer as an affront to the dignity of his profession. “But there are so many words for pain,” he objected. “Pain can be sharp, hot, throbbing, shooting, gnawing, cramping ...” Clearly the man was well studied in the language of suffering. I took this to be a good omen.

My days in hospital were also a river, my time spent sloshing down some ragged channel, hours passing without meaningful distinction. I was served unseasoned food that seemed crafted to prepare the bedridden for dying. I swallowed Dilaudid at regular intervals; it blurred my thinking but didn’t do much for the pain. I took shots of something (I don’t know what) in my stomach. A rotating cast of student nurses took my vitals every few hours, informed me that my blood pressure was low every few hours, and then disappeared into the white noise of the corridors, into that liminal space where a half-naked older woman was endlessly begging for help, where the overhead speakers announced disasters in colour-coded language, where the nurses at the break station mumbled about their families and weekends and social lives. And through the tiny window next to my bed, I watched a patch of sky fading from a lighter grey to a darker one. Another river.

I shared the room with a man who learned, in his time, that his bone was intact but the cancer had spread. He left

while I was asleep and was replaced by a man who had been handcuffed to his bed. He was guarded by two police officers at all hours of the day, even though it seemed clear that his injury prevented him from walking. He never spoke, not to me, nor to the nurses, nor to the cops. When they finally escorted him from the room, I offered some generic pleasantry. “I hope you feel better soon.” Something along those lines. He didn’t respond but the cops admonished me. Apparently, this tepid display of kindness violated some unspoken rule. I didn’t tell the cops what I was thinking. The handcuffed man was replaced by an older fellow with a broken shoulder. When the news was delivered that the surgery might kill him, he seemed less concerned about his mortality than the ethnicity of the surgeon. He disappeared and was replaced with someone else. Another river.

I took detailed notes from the time I spent underwater. I transcribed bits and pieces of overheard conversations. I wrote descriptions of the room, the food, the window. I spent a thousand words on the man who wanted to share his email password over the phone but couldn’t remember the name of a particular punctuation mark; for some reason, it seemed meaningful that he said “procrastination mark” when he clearly meant “exclamation mark.” I wrote another few hundred words about the espresso I purchased on the first day I was mobile enough to wheel myself to the hospital cafeteria. It was scalding and bitter and perfect.

These observations seemed important at the time. But, ultimately, they meant nothing. Just like the sky means nothing and the pain meant nothing. There was a flow from moment to moment, but nothing that could be pinned down, nothing that could be held onto — this is the

nature of rivers. I took notes all the same, documented what I saw, found insight in the coincidences, looked for moments of beauty. This is what we do underwater.

I’m not in pain anymore. And my leg is strong again — for now, at least. And I don’t notice the current so much these days, although I know it is still there, carrying me along, sloshing down some ragged channel. You already know this, of course. None of us is dry. We pass moments, days, lifetimes, somehow unaware of the fluid filling our lungs. But it’s always there, if we care to look for it. If we care to look for it, we can all see the turbulence downstream.

This is what the pain did, what the grey sky did, what the Dilaudid did. It gave me the chance to sketch the shape of the river. This is what the river looks like. The waters are polluted and cold. The bed is lost in blackness. And the shores are far from reach — the bodies of everyone you’ve ever loved couldn’t close that distance.

Today, I listened to music in the kitchen, danced with my daughter, moved easily on that bone, now healed, now strong, reinforced with more steel pins than I care to count. And the coffee fell, drop by drop, from the disposable filter, down into the stained carafe below.

It was scalding and bitter and perfect.

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