

The Swimming Pool

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Normally I like to walk to the pool. It's less than two miles through the woods, mostly, and I like seeing the sky snared by tree branches overhead while feeling hard pavement under my feet. But the weather these past two weeks of September has been rainy, and though now the clouds have parted and the day has turned sunny and bright, at nine o'clock this morning, through the fog, I couldn't see the blue bridge outside my window, and the weather report said showers, so I drove.

I like swimming in the rain. I also prefer to swim in the morning, when it's cool and quiet. I get up at six or seven, spend a few hours at the computer, and then, when my brain starts to get blurry, I put my body to work. Even in August, at the height of the season, usually no one is at the pool before noon.

It's not that I don't like people; I do. But for me swimming has always been a private experience. When I swim, it's as if the water and I are having a private conversation, or engaging in that other type of intercourse, something not to be shared with spectators.

I park my car on the edge of the small paved road that leads to an enclave of well-to-do homes named for the stream that courses mainly underground* between them. Once upon a time the pool belonged to one of these homes, the biggest of them, a Hudson River gothic with carved stone gargoyles guarding its mansard roof. Twenty years ago the aging couple who owned it decided the upkeep was too much, so they cut a deal with the community, who formed a private pool club, which now accepts outsiders.

*Like Acheron, woeful river of the underworld.

There are no posted hours. A combination lock lets me in whenever I choose. I can swim at six in the morning, or at midnight. With my gear in a bag slung over my shoulder, I give the hasp a jerk, let the chain fall and let myself in.

It's an old-fashioned cement pool: no glittering blue ceramic tiles, no fancy mosaics or aqua bottom, just rough concrete poured sometime during Prohibition, with two holes and a streak of rust where there used to be a diving board. Though cordoned off by a chain-link fence topped with spools of barbed wire, you can barely see the fence, the ivy has grown so thick, as have the hedges and trees, including the mulberry tree swinging high overhead, a tree whose small hairy fruits plop in the water from June through July with a patter like rain: berries that, bleached by the chlorinated water, turn white as grubs. The earthworms that come out at night to drink the chlorinated water turn the same sickly white after they die and drown; they look like tapeworms at the bottom of the pool. I've seen all types of dead things in that water, from mice trapped in the filter baskets to a drowned raccoon floating with its mask facedown over the deep end. I don't mind. Dead things are part of life. I skim them out with the long-handled strainer and toss their corpses in the garbage pail. One must learn to live with the dead.

But I like anything natural that has to do with the water, that tries to turn the pool into a pond. Where I grew up, in Connecticut, I always swam in lakes and ponds. I swam with fish and snakes and snapping turtles; with algae, weeds, and silt; with the waste products of woodland creatures, of deer, birds, skunks, possum, ducks, and geese. Not once did I ever think of germs. I took it for granted that I was as foreign to the water as anything—more, that nothing dirtier than me had swum in it. And maybe it was this attitude that spared me, but I never got an ear or an eye or a throat infection. Never.

Once, a family of mallards took up residence in our pool, a mother and her six ducklings. Jorn, president of the pool club, said he'd have to get rid of them. Some members protested. Those ducks had every bit as much right to be there as we did, we said. Ours was not the majority view. For a few weeks we all swam together, the ducks and I—or we swam around each other, with them quacking up a storm. The local paper sent a photographer; the ducklings made page 1. Mothers brought their children to see. "Look!" they said, pointing through the chain links. But the lifeguard who had to scrape their droppings off the pavement complained. And then there was the health

inspector. Eventually the six ducklings disappeared one by one, snatched by hawks, or waddling off to be preyed upon by raccoons, cats, and dogs. When they were all gone, their mother flew away.

But just now there are no ducks or people. I'm alone. I look at the water. A beautiful pale green, like the glass infrared filters my papa used in his inventions. A tattered blanket of gray mist hangs over it. Late in the season, when few use the pool, the chlorine levels are kept low. The water tastes cool and sweet, like mint candy.

I get a chair from the shed and sit to untie my shoes. My swimsuit is already on. I yank off my shirt, climb out of and fold my pants, snap on my silicone bathing cap (necessary to keep the hair out of my eyes), take up my goggles, and walk to the shallow-end ladder.

I prefer not to jump in. I prefer to enter calmly, to remain in harmony with this peaceful morning and save the splashing for my swim. I don't like violence of any kind: violent movements, violent sounds, violent emotions. I hate movies where the plots are made of gunfire and explosions. I don't care for violent sports, for football or hockey or even basketball. I'm not drawn to bodies colliding any more than I am to highway accidents. I even disapprove of children who scream when they play. To the parents of such children I'm tempted to say, *Why do you let your child scream that way? Why must he or she play so violently? Why not teach him or her that pleasure need not be so loud?* I'm tempted, but of course I don't; I know better. Those parents would see me as a bitter man who hates children—or worse, a misanthrope intent on eliminating all forms of human pleasure. But discipline and pleasure are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they're linked. Without discipline there can be no deep or lasting pleasure. Maybe I feel this way because as a child I wasn't sufficiently disciplined, and now as an adult I'm forced to make up with grim determination for that which my parents failed to give me.

Anyway, I don't jump in the pool.

Another reason I don't jump: because when one jumps into a body of cold water, the body goes into shock; the heart beats wildly, partly in response to the shock, but also as a way of trying to maintain the body temperature by pumping blood to the extremities. One becomes breathless, which is no way to start a long swim. And I always swim a mile. That's 44 laps, or 88 lengths.

Non-swimmers ask me, *When you swim, don't you ever worry that you might have a heart attack?* Being almost 47, the thought has crossed

my mind. But it doesn't worry me. In fact I know no swimmers who think of heart attacks. On Labor Day weekend, my friend O, who just turned 70, swam across the Hudson River with me, a distance of well over a mile through treacherous currents and the wakes of big barges. A heart attack was the last thing on either of our minds. Swimmers don't think of *drowning*, they think about *swimming*. I think of the water and my body's attitude toward it, of my hand entering in front of me, of twisting my head just as the fingers break the surface, of thrusting, kicking, the next breath, and the next, and so on. Or I think of nothing to do with swimming, some problem in need of solving—that agent who has my manuscript: Why hasn't she read it yet? When will she read it? Why is she taking so long? That student whose work I critiqued too harshly last week: Did I break her spirit? Will she return to class? Of a heart—not my own heart, but my father-in-law's, which needs a new valve—and of my wife's decision to fly to Las Vegas and stay there through his recovery, which could take weeks. These are my thoughts when swimming laps. I drown *in them*.

But I try not to let my mind wander. If I do, I forget what lap I'm on, and then must think back to the last certain lap and start over. Those are the rules. I made them up and I can break them, I guess, but I don't. It's part of the discipline that unlocks pleasure. So I limit my thoughts, restrict them to subjects suggested by the numbers 1 through 88 . . .

I step down the ladder.

There's always that first shock of the toe tasting the water's coolness. People who aren't swimmers should know this: that unless kept at 89.6 degrees or warmer, all water feels cool to the touch. Even at 89°, if the air is warmer, the water feels relatively cold. And on a very hot day, with the sun beating down and our skin temperature reaching the 90s, that first touch of water can indeed be shocking. But once immersed and moving, the shock wears off; the water "heats up" and even starts to feel unpleasantly warm. For this reason I dislike swimming in indoor pools, where those in charge invariably keep the water temperature at a balmy 82 degrees at the behest of the old farts who constantly complain, whatever its temperature, that the water's too cold. These are not swimmers. These are people who get in the water and do nothing; they stand in the shallows jabbering, or do a languid backstroke, or do water aerobics—next to speed walking, the silliest exercise on earth. Or they do what they are pleased to call swimming. The strokes people come up

with! Had I not seen them with my naked eyes I'd deny their existence. Lame dog paddles and limp sidestrokes that barely get them to the other side of the pool—strokes that take back with one arm what they give with the other, that negate each other so the swimmer ends up swimming in place, or worse, backwards: I've *seen* it. I've seen people who look as though they're going to drown at any moment: in fact, what they do is closer to drowning than to swimming, and it's only by some miracle that they survive. Once I had the odd pleasure of watching an elderly woman spend close to an hour getting from one end of a small pool to the other, waving the water away in a gesture that seemed to say, with each stroke, *To hell with you*, while dragging her legs behind her like the corpse of a murder victim. I'd already finished my swim, and was mesmerized both by exhaustion and by the sight of this creature making her tortuous way across the pool, fascinated by whatever force it was that kept her afloat against the laws of physics, and by her perseverance, which never flagged, and which I felt could have kept her swimming like that forever, until doomsday. It was a strange mix of emotions. On the one hand I admired her: she was dogged and determined and exemplified the human imperative to push onward against overwhelming odds. On the other hand she disgusted me. She was an eyesore, a travesty, a disgrace. I resented having to share my pool with her. When I swim, if I must share a pool, let me share it with mermaids and dolphins, or their human equivalents, not with some waterlogged, wheezing old hag.

But nonswimmers are of no concern to me here, now. Here and now I don't have to worry about old hags or noisy children, or any or all of the unpleasant categories in between. Here and now it's just me and the water, my water, my liquid lover.

(It is as a jealous and possessive lover that I insult an old woman whose only crime against humanity is that of swimming ungracefully. But possessive lovers know neither guilt nor shame.)

I climb in. I put one leg down, then the other. Another mistake nonswimmers make: they think too much about getting in the water; they psych themselves out. They sit with their legs dangling and the hot sun baking their shoulders, convincing themselves that when they get hot enough they'll go in, but really they're just stalling, delaying the inevitable. When all bets are off, they plunge, scream, and splutter, crying, "Oh my God, it's *so cold!*" No way to get in the water.

A few weeks ago I encountered someone, a young woman, in this very predicament. Jamie, her name. She sat there dangling her feet, waiting for the hot sun to inspire her. I said to her, “Jamie, may I give you a piece of advice? When you contemplate an action you know you’re going to take, then *the thought process itself becomes a substitute for action, and is, therefore, self-defeating.*”

“Here is my advice,” I continued. “Climb into the shallow water and stand there. Take a deep breath, and then release it. Then take another deep breath, hold it for a moment, and then let it out in a big, long sigh, *Ahhhh*—as if you’re experiencing an extremely pleasant form of release, I won’t say which form; I’ll leave that to your imagination (Jamie is fourteen, and though I’m told that young people today are precocious in matters of sex, still, I was not about to enter *those* waters). “While letting out the sigh,” I went on, “don’t jump but let yourself glide, ever so gently, into the water, like so . . .” I demonstrated for her, then stood up again. “The point is to be as relaxed as possible, to not let your muscles tense up, to disarm that mechanism in your body that prepares it for a shock, that says, *Beware: danger!* and turns every cell into a soldier on full alert, ready for battle. You need to disarm that mechanism, what psychologists call the fight-or-flight instinct, to say to yourself, *This is nothing*, or better still, *This is so peaceful and lovely!* And go in with that attitude. Try it!”

Jamie tried it. She took two deep breaths and, sighing, let herself slip into the water. Afterwards I said, “Well?”

“It worked!” she said.

“There. See?”

I felt good about that. It’s not often that I talk to young people, and less often that they listen. At rare moments like this, I wish I had children.

Now it’s my turn. I wade in up to my belly, then put on and adjust my goggles. I take a deep breath, then another. Ahhhh! And I’m in.

As my ritual, I swim gently to the other side, not wetting my head yet, my strokes tentative, even a bit feeble. Then I swim back, still slowly, this time putting my face in the water. When I reach the other side, then and only then will I start swimming in earnest.

When I was five or six years old, my papa would take me and George, my brother, to a swimming hole at the edge of the town under a railway trestle where other fathers brought their children to fish and swim. My brother and

I would already have jumped into the muddy water, from which I'd look up and see my father, by then already in his 50s (our mother was his third and final wife), going in ever so slowly, rubbing handfuls of brown water over his skinny arms and his gray, shallow chest, making painful noises—like he was being tortured. Meanwhile, around me, other fathers dove and splashed.

I'd yell, "Jump, Papa, jump!"

Only he wouldn't; he couldn't, he said. He was *too old*. That was his excuse. Too old: those words tolled in my head like a cracked bell, like a death knell.

Please, Papa!

But it was no use; I could never get my father to jump. I think of that now, crossing back to the shallow end of the pool, and feel a sudden wave of sympathy for my papa (three years dead), who swam long before I did, doing his sidestroke/scissor kick well into his 80s, spouting like a porpoise with each stroke, making hardly a splash, he swam so peacefully. But he wouldn't jump. And now I, too, refuse to jump. How like Papa I've become!

But I'm no gentle swimmer. I like to swim fast, very fast, fast as I can, zipping through the water like a torpedo. One last adjustment to my goggles and I'm off, counting, *three-four, three-four* with each stroke, exhaling on the *four*. Swimming is all about breathing, about knowing when to breathe, about moving just the right amount of air in and out of your lungs to give the blood in your muscles exactly what it needs, not a drop more or less. Even experienced swimmers know that with the slightest alteration of their stroke, they can become breathless, how easily they can be thrown off their timing, how when only a fraction out of sync, they find themselves gasping. On the other hand, once learned, the science of breathing becomes second nature: the body turns into a well-lubricated breathing machine. The arms attach themselves to the lungs like the rods that connect cylinder to wheels on a locomotive. I chug through the water . . .

I've always been attracted to water. I was born midway through February, an Aquarius, but I don't think that has anything to do with it. I think man's love for water is in his body, which is—what's the figure?—75 percent water? In *Ulysses* there is that beautiful passage where Bloom, returning from the tap where he has filled an iron kettle, broods on a question posed for him by the anonymous, omniscient narrator, namely: "What in water did Bloom, waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier returning to the range, admire?"

Its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level; its vastness in the ocean of Mercator's projection: its unplumbed profundity in the Sumdam trench of the Pacific exceeding 8,000 fathoms; the relentlessness of its waves and surface particles visiting in turn all points of its seaboard: the independence of its units: the variability of states of sea: its hydrostatic quiescence in calm: its hydrokinetic turgidity in neap and spring tides; its subsidence after devastation: its sterility in the circumpolar icecaps, arctic and antarctic . . .

The passage goes on for another full page. It's interesting to note that among the four Aristotelian elements (air earth fire water), only water can lay claim to any verb or adjective you toss at it (including *toss*). Water, which—according to Hesse—“flows to fill whatever form it finds,” that *rushes, rolls, folds, drips, spins, glides, bends, leaps, sprays, gushes*—that can be *wet, cold, cloudy, clear, blue, black, green, white, gray, hot, sticky, sharp, pellucid, translucent, limpid, soft, hard, muddy, murky, dense, thin, heavy, light, frozen, stiff, thrilling, cunning, playful*—but this is too easy. There's no shortage of watery nouns, either: *sea, lake, river, pond, estuary, delta, port, harbor, creek, marsh, drink, shower, rain, snow, slush, frost, hail, humidity, bucket, bath, toilet, sink, well, fountain . . .* What's not already watery in the world can almost always be made so: witness a *wet smirk* or a *watery glance*, a plot *soaked in sentiment, waves of sadness, a storm of controversy* or (my) *cloudy destiny*. Applied to air or rocks, *delight and terror* make no sense, but add water and you get a fountain, or a typhoon. Like a fool, water rushes in. Unlike one, it rushes out, too. Like James Bond, water always survives. In many ways it is the perfect contemporary hero: a fearless, hedonistic sensualist: the spy with [ice] water in his veins, Neptune with a license to kill. But water is both hero and heroine, the fair damsel—also the *femme fatale* who murders her paramours, who drowns them in their own reflections, then on to the next. Call *me* a fool, but even knowing this I can't seem to keep my arms from her. No love fills me like hers; there is no other body I'd rather touch, my flesh an excuse for hers. Water is my desire, my dream. I come from water, and given my druthers will go back to water. I'll die on the bottom of a lake somewhere, where the grass carp will feed off the algae that sprout from my skull sockets, where no one will find me but the *vodoni*, the Water Master, with his trident and green hair, when he returns in the Spring to tidy up his watery basement . . .

. . . *eleven-twelve, eleven-twelve, eleven-twelve*. The numbers roll through my head like waves; they swim alongside me like bright tropical fish, colored by synesthesia, the *eleven-twelve* fish striped black and mauve, the *thirteen-fourteen* fish brown and yellow, and so on. But there are other games to keep me from losing count. For numbers one through 88 I have mastered association. You give me a number, I'll spit back an association. Go on! Five: my age for my first trip to New York City with my father. I remember the Empire State Building lit up at night and ocean liners lined up at their berths, black hulls and massive red funnels. We stayed at the Hotel Paris on West 96th Street. There was a pool in the basement. I'm told I almost drowned there. There was no lifeguard on duty, and my papa wasn't paying attention (probably flirting with some woman). Thirteen: my turn to watch someone drown. We'd gone swimming at the town reservoir, my friend Chris and I, when these two boys in a fishing boat saw us—black boys who'd come probably from Danbury or Norwalk to fish. Seeing us swim, they decided to give it a try. It didn't dawn on them, apparently, that swimming was a learned skill. I watched as they flailed and cried for help; I thought they were joking, at first. Then one of the two boys went under and failed to reappear. By the time I got there, I was out of breath. I dove deep, but all I saw was darkness and bubbles, black bubbles. An hour later as Chris and I and the other boy watched, men in black scuba suits pulled the boy's body onto the embankment. The dead boy's face was a strange purple color, like an eggplant. Later at the police station the town medical examiner—nicknamed "Dr. Numbnuts" for his habit of prodding our testicles during routine examinations—pointed his prodding finger at me, said it was all my fault. You'll have to live with this for the rest of your life, he said. Nineteen: the first two digits of the century in which I was born and in which I have lived four-fifths of my life. Also the year I started college, art school—late since I took two years off to travel and earn money driving a furniture truck. That was the first year when, looking into the medicine-chest mirror of my dormitory bathroom, I concluded I was going bald (N.B. I still have all my hair). You will note that, for the purpose of the exercise, the associations need not be memorable or even noteworthy; in fact, the more trivial the better. Twenty-one: my first major hangover. For my birthday the day before, my dorm mates fixed me a batch of gin and tonics, and when the gin and tonics ran out, they switched to rum and cokes. I woke up with a henna-headed coed lying on the floor next to me and no

idea how she got there. I *crawled* to the bathroom and threw up. *Twenty-two, twenty-three . . . Twenty-four*: James Dean was my hero. I wanted to be just like him, to groan and writhe in Technicolor across a Cinemascope screen. I failed, (a) because I wasn't as good-looking, (b) or as good an actor, (c) and I lived to be . . . *Twenty-five . . . twenty-six . . . twenty-seven . . . twenty-eight . . .* Water flows through this life of mine, a stream of moments, an ocean of memories, a pool of dreams, thoughts, desires. I'm never as alive as I am here, now, swimming. The past doesn't stop me; I swim through it. Neither does the future bother me. My worries sink to the bottom of the pool where they don't touch me anymore. I forget that my papa is dead, that my mother and I argue, that my brother is far away and that when we see each other we are happy for a time but then we, too, fight, or revert to the nasty teasing we engaged in when we were younger, those relics of our unhappy childhoods. I forget the small betrayals of my body, the tinnitus that howls in my right ear night and day, a silver needle of sound threaded through my brain; the peptic ulcer that gnaws at my duodenum; a prostate the size of an orange that wakes me up 20 times to pee at night. I forget the Twin Towers, and the fact that it is now officially dangerous to utter the words *lovely day*. I forget that I have no career to speak of (unless you call pushing this pen around for no income a *career*), that my phone rarely rings, and that however much I crave company, I'm also bored to tears by most people, who for their part think I'm too intense. I forget that woman from Sweden, I won't tell you her name, the full-bosomed (some would say buxom; not me) blonde with whom I kept up a correspondence: long, intimate letters that for me were lovemaking and confession, with her my mistress and my priest. Then her letters stopped. There followed a postcard: *I'm sorry, Peter, but this cannot go on*. It couldn't. I learned later that she'd had a baby, that our "affair of letters" had been her last grasp at romance, and doomed from the start. I felt used. This feeling, too, water—the universal solvent—dissolves.

I even forget that time up in Montreal, alone up there following the death of my swimming coach by cancer, a close friend who never did approve of my glide, when I stood next to a sidewalk café, watching this woman—another blonde (why, when I've always preferred brunettes?) circle the rim of her white wine glass with the tip of her index finger, producing a noise which in pitch almost perfectly replicated my tinnitus—what the French call "teaching a glass to sing." I stood watching her, forgetting myself, unaware of any unsavory

or weird intention on my part, until a waiter, a strapping black fellow with dreadlocks down to his shoulders, called out to me.

Que faites-vous?

Excusez moi? Vous parlez avec moi? (My French was lousy; still is.)

Que faites-vous?

Oh, I said. *J'attend mon ami.* (I'm waiting for a friend: a lie; I'd never been more alone in my life.)

You wait for a friend? He spoke English now, with a roughness in his voice and a glare in his eyes. I felt like a private at boot camp being stared down by his drill sergeant.

Oui. J'attend mon ami.

I am having complaints of you.

Pardonnez-moi?

My customers they complain. The ladies they say that you stare at them.

Moi?

Oui, vous: vous, vous, monsieur!

But I haven't done anything!

You stare and they think that you are strange and I think so too. Go away—*attendez* some other place.

Yes, all right, but—

Enough. Go now or I call an *agent*.

I walked to a nearby park and sat on a bench beside a man who read his latest poem to me. I couldn't tell if the poem was any good. While he read it to me, I thought to myself, *Fine . . . fine . . . fine . . .* Canada had been a mistake; I should have gone to Europe, to Italy, or France, to some little town with medieval towers of stone. I could have brought my writing or my paints. I should have gone somewhere with water, where I could swim; where no one would suspect me of anything. But it was too late, there was no turning back.

Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine . . .

Over these and other dead memories, my body swims back and forth, back and forth, a lawnmower mowing a watery lawn. . . . Did I mention that water is the fundamental precondition of all life? That everything from gold to vegetables derives from the Cosmic Juice? That the world as we know it has, according to at least one myth, sprung from a seed brought up from the bottom of the primordial ocean by the Earth Diver; that “water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places men reject and

so is like the Tao” (Lao-Tzu); that Plato’s water atoms are *icosahedra*, that is, shaped like garnets; that water is the Johnny Boy of liquids (“What are you rebelling against? “What’ve ya got?”), its molecules crooked, bent at 104° , which may explain why, as they say, water has memory: it holds memories in its crooks. *Sixty-three, sixty-four . . .*

A slate-blue cloud drifts over the pool. I hear the winding pule and realize it’s smoke from a gasoline engine. A lawnmower has started in the neighbor’s yard. I suck carbon monoxide, cough, gasp, and curse, my oaths packaged in bubbles. I see them floating up to the surface to explode as cartoon balloons, animating my animosity. When the smoke clears, I’ve reached length #66, as in “Get Your Kicks On,” as in Nelson Riddle’s keyboard-tickling piano theme, sure to preoccupy me now for at least the next two laps, my body no longer a locomotive, but a baby blue ’64 Corvette, plying a watery thoroughfare linking troubled lives and dramatic episodes, Martin Milner at the wheel.

And really, if you think about it, what I’ve been saying all along is that this pool is a sort of roadway (I think of John Cheever’s astonishing story *The Swimmer*, of Needy Merrill making his way across a trail of pools and cocktails linking memories and loss) . . .

Seventy-one, seventy-two . . .

On the antique oak music stand that serves as a copyholder, I keep a postcard sent to me a few years ago by a man I used to see as my therapist. The card shows a man diving off a column into a pool of green water, and comes from a fresco in the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum. And though he never said as much, I suspect that Fred sent the card to me for the following reasons: (a) because I’m a fan of Etruscan art, (b) because I’m an avid swimmer, and (c) because *Le Plongeur* (what the French call him) bears an uncanny resemblance to me. Anyway it’s how I like to picture myself, and how I often feel, here, alone at the swimming pool. As I churn through my final laps (*eighty-five, eighty-six . . .*) a heady sense of divinity washes over me, a sense that I might live eternally under God’s grace, like Adam before the expulsion, that He has chosen me, one of his left-handed creatures (of all people), to dwell forever in his Kingdom. All I have to do is swim, and keep swimming. Forever.

Eighty-seven . . . eighty-eight.

I stand, pull off my goggles, wipe away the soreness they have left on my face with a handful of water. As I climb the ladder, my legs quiver slightly. I feel a fresh tautness in my muscles, as if someone has turned a screw in there,

or jolted them with electricity. I peel off my bathing cap, stand under the shower nozzle, my feet planted in a ring of ivy. As the water sluices down my face, neck, and shoulders I feel lightheaded with a sense of accomplishment and relief. I've done my laps; I've waded through the underground stream of memory and association, I've mucked out its Augean stable, rinsed it out in the pool's mint-green water. The fog has lifted; the air is clear. The world looks fresher, gentler, clearer now. I'm not bothered by it. In fact, it seems a rather benign place, a decent place, even a kind place.

Sometimes, when I've done my laps, I let myself do something I seldom do: lie back in the water, dead-man's float, looking up at an impeccably blue sky, seeing it wreathed by tree branches. I imagine myself in a pool in the middle of an Amazonian rainforest—alone, alone, so terribly, so blissfully, so perfectly alone.

