

Learning to Swim

The jetty was a letter L written
into the murk, and when the “kingies” ran
it was a hook that dragged them in.
The red arrow of the navigation marker
was the talisman that lured us out
over our depth, before any
of us could really swim—algae
blooms swaddling, keeping us
afloat. The simple strokes
we learnt before the tautology
was understood—jets of water
from frantic hands and feet,
trauma of bow-waves
as a speedboat blasted past.
Show-offs relished impact, their
spectacular effects, skiers
letting go and furrowing into shore,
white beach littered with halves of bivalves,
flywheels of jellyfish that have lost their oomph,
the strandings of tide and heat. The murk
formed a coating that protected you
from being burnt when you emerged,
small cuts on your feet from razor shells,
and bull sharks that specialised
in striking river-swimmers, especially
those paddling towards a first certificate.

Lined up in our imaginary lanes, late '60s Speedos
grasping our skinny hips,
we struggled to the markers,
adults wading up to their waists,
clutching at us when the plimsoll line
began to shift, their legs wavering curves
and angles, their feet lost. A flurry

of mothering and fathering. Of sex
without epistemology. Bravura
of bodies and exposure. Early morning,
sea scouts sailing their pelicans, cutting
past us, catching the gentle but compelling
breeze into the sun.

The group
floundered like the injured offspring
of a leviathan, and the river fed us
ear, nose, and throat infections,
mixed its fluids with our fluids,
let us know the truths of drowning:
a lonely gasping, a flowing out, a passing
through all others who've swum there before,
who might reach out to hold you up,
or might let go, or just fail to see you pass;
where treading water becomes the step
up a stair that isn't there, and everything
gives way, and water is just air
that suffocates.

Lesson learnt.
Or is it? Forty years pass and the dive
from the L of the jetty brings you sweating
out of slip, dripping with the slurry
of the river. To struggle beneath the water
around the barnacle-encrusted pylons
merges the vivid and unresolved,
like opening your eyes to yellow light
and ochre shadows, cold places
where pylons obscure the light,
to find a brick dropped off the jetty's edge
for you to prove your worth, heavy
but drifting down, swinging down,
a pendulum through silt, contradictions

that bend all sense, as panic to hold
what can't be seen and to drag it upwards
to the surface, seeming heavier
than your own body.

Lesson learnt.

A foot up on the stage of proficiency.
To swim in a dry, wide country
surrounded by water. Your life
is inland now, where kids drown
in farm dams consistently: in the murk,
in the ochre water. The sheep come
down to drink, nudging at the corpses
long before the parents have discovered
you missing. Long after lessons
have been learnt.