

Ink for an Odd Cartography

poems

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Marking the Boundaries

My mind moves in more than one place,

In a country half-land, half-water.

— Theodore Roethke, “The Far Field”

Like a Sine Curve

So you know how the skin of whales
not all whales but some whales
maybe all whales
the skin of whales, the exoderm, if
that's a word, but you see my emphasis
contains an intricate pattern of tiny muscles
tiny like an eyelid muscle
the muscle that may cause a tic
and tic is the small movement I want you
to envision
an intricate pattern of tiny muscles that move independently
so maybe think of grass in wind
each blade bending one nanosecond
before the other
each whale skin muscle contracting before the other as the whale propels
itself through water
so you may be thinking ripple
but not as a fan unfolds, more
like a sine curve, which you would think of,
which naval researchers would think
of when they think about improving
the aerodynamical (or would it be
aquadynamical) structure
of their submarines, working the water
like a whale works the water
without thinking, its skin a series of muscular shudders driving water
along its flank, quickening

So you know how whale skin can do that?
I do that
I do that sometimes but not swimming
I know what you're thinking: the misappropriation of sine curves, but
focus
I am not whale skin
I am the water that moves with the muscle
You are the whale

Climbing Brian

This is not a love poem, though photos may prove
otherwise, not as an elm proves belligerence, but as a knot
of eels proves fear – dark bodies of water

If bodies can be mountains then Brian is a swell without rockface,
switchbacks overgrown with clover, trail markers faded
to mere suggestion

Required gear: compass, cornstarch, savory victuals for bait,
for slowing the ascent, for remembering the tongue
is a strong muscle

Tape the bruised toe but no shoes
The back of his bent knees are footholds
Footholds yield to soft pressure
Not everyone can climb Brian
Little dancers who know how to fall often do

There is a center, a contempt of gravity, a plumb-line-determined
nexus of nerves that would rather float than balance
Some swear by abdominals but the pelvis is better – light
for the hollow

Raised, it will hover and billow, shadow his back
not as a parachute shadows a fall, but as a storm
cloud shadows, distended above dark bodies of water, and arms
will forget there should be mass for the balancing

Strong muscles are good
Hands then knees then feet on shoulders
Higher than Brian is higher than a mountain, a body
All bodies are mostly water

No Swimming

We begin aquatic, gills barely formed
then gone before we breach surface, gasping
at that alien air. It's a blessing,
to scratch lightly at our necks, not knowing
a phantom respiration wants to drown,
to return to water and let the waves

resuscitate our throats and watch us wave
goodbye to bread and steak. It was a form
of wishing, when I, at three, almost drowned
in the neighbor's pool, yanked out and gasping,
kicking to stay under, somehow knowing
womb and death share the same sleep and blessing.

Panic also moonlights as a blessing
when we swim beyond the breakers, the waves
gravid and gently swelling. We know
a demon's beckoning takes many forms
and recognition sends us back, gasping
for shore, flailing, afraid not of drowning

but of our unfathomable urge to drown.
It isn't death we want, but rest, to bless
each limb with weightlessness, to gasp
at the loss of being's burden waving
in the current as it descends. Then form-
less in consciousness, our bodies knowing

nothing but suspension, we'd suspect nothing
exists for reasons other than to drown
out the world we were forced into. Forming
embryonic shapes in sleep like a blessed
infante with no realm claimed, no waving
to distant minions, a body grasps

its oceanic start – the final gasp
strikes the same cosmic chord as the first. “Know
this,” the body says, waking, waving
its arms as if remembering a drowned
doppelganger, “these bones, this skin, a blessing
of breath and a nervous foot tap don’t form

the end. I’m drowning in you, you’re forming
into a wave of air gasped by some god
who knows to bless each beginning, but won’t.”

Commitment

This church drowns, legs
kicking and churning eddies
at the altar, the sacristy filmed
with silt. I am not to mourn
here, my shoes ruined
with stickseed and blister
juice, my sorrow like milk-
weed forced from its pod.

The plane plummets, the car
crashes, the millet rusts
across the road. This side,
windrows are thinning
and wait to be baled
and the babies are impatient
underground, smacking
their fists at roots. Soil
shrivels in the autumn drought.

The Reverend Myrtle Tuttle
predicted gravel and a foul
moon. My love, one day
I will marry you, bend
to pick up blossoms
that drop from my crown.
I promise I will lose
the map of the cemetery,
a penciled circle marking
your collapsed mound.