The Continuous Yearning of Walter Rush

by David Cotrone

Every morning when he wakes, he lies in bed and waits for one of his toes to twitch or spasm; the moment he feels one of them thrust forward, he gains courage to test his legs. He grimaces either way: one more day of walking, one more day until loss, one more trip to the sea. He says swimming in the ocean is as good a treatment as any for MS. *It has to do with routine*, he tried explaining to his wife, Martha. *But the water's so cold*, she worried. *It's part of the routine*, he said.

He knows salt water is useful when treating shallow cuts and flesh wounds, and that a high enough salt concentration provides buoyancy. In fact, he had once read about a woman who treated her skin disease by traveling to the Mediterranean twice year in order to float in the Dead Sea. Because of its salt content, it is impossible to sink there; everything floats; nothing can drown. But it is so thick with saline and brine, so packed tight with buoyant material, that within it, nothing can live.

Still, Walter imagines this woman. He imagines the warm water lapping against her splotchy flesh. He imagines her hair wrapped up in a bun, her arms extended and her legs reclined straight out, her on her back, the sun beating upon her eyelids, so that from within her head she does not see the black of her closed eyes, but instead the color of rust. He imagines her feeling of weightlessness, of restoration, of salt.

“What will you do when the winter comes?” Martha asked. “Huh? You thought of that?”

Though she did not share her speculation with Walter, she predicted he would lose control of his legs within the next few years. Already he had woken up with a tingling sensation in his shins, a

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harsh burn that could last for hours. Other times his vision would waiver or his speech would skip and stutter — effects of degradation.

Martha consulted doctors as she could, over the phone, when Walter was out. She explained to them that she could not force her husband to follow their prescriptive exercises, as he was one to have faith in the phrase, *Let's see how things fall*. Supposedly, he was open to peaks and valleys in the line of his life, but when he talked of e*ndurance*, *perseverance*, and *will* it seemed like his aim was to comfort his wife, not to believe his own words. And then Martha would quote her husband directly, expecting to make the doctors laugh: *Besides, it's not like those quacks have a cure*.

“A wetsuit,” Walter said. “I'll wear a wetsuit.”

If he swam often enough, after a while (a few days, a few months, years?) he would barely create a splash as he churned the water with his arms; the sea would come to overlook the impression of his body; something so small, his own anatomy, would sink into whatever it is that succeeds oblivion, any ailments or malfunctions minute and forgotten. For Walter, this was healing.

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Walter is not delusional; he does not think his swimming along the coast of Yardarm would be the same as floating in the sublime waters of the Dead Sea. But there would be similarities: The way his crooked toes would peek through the oceans' surfaces when he floated on his back, when he turned over on his front, sprawling his arms and splaying his legs, taking a deep breath and dropping his head into the water, the small waves caressing his nose and forehead, his limbs dangling, drawing his head up for air, lowering it back down. *Survival float*. Walter does not know this term, yet it is the position he assumes. *Dead-man's float*. Walter does not know these names. When he takes up the position, it is out of instinct, impulse, and inclination — a found object — something visceral.

When Walter lowers his head into Yardarm's ocean, the cool water shocks his eyelids, not into opening, but into closing, as he squeezes

them together to ward off the initial cold. This shock of chilly water makes his stomach tighten, his fists clench, his jaw clamp shut. He is afraid that if his legs go numb he will not be able to warm them, that his nerves will call it quits. But then he wonders if he should allow his legs to deaden in the water, to prepare for his years ahead, to get used to the feeling. Here, he is concerned with survival. But in another hemisphere, in another body of water, in the same sprawling position, he would float with hopes of mending.

But what if he did not mend? What if the warmth of the distant water enveloped him, but did not allow repair? The water would soothe his body and the sun would cause the water around him to glisten with gentle heat. But there he would drift, dead-man floating in a dead sea.

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When Walter was eleven years old, his grandfather, Warren, fell in his bathtub. He had just finished running the shower spout, turning the water from tepid to warm, adjusting the shower head so that the water would spray over him smoothly, drizzling his chest, trickling down the back of his neck. He stood for a moment with his head bowed, as he took in the solace of the balmy room, the steam and the vapor of the warm water. Then he felt his footing slip, his arms shooting out, one hand clutching at the vinyl curtain, the other trying to get a handle on the wall. He grunted and gasped as if he was punched in the gut. Finally, his head jerked upward, and he knew he was falling. From downstairs, his wife heard a noise that was not a crash, but the crack and thud of a solid collision.

Lying in a hospital bed, Warren could not help but see himself through his grandson's eyes, his grandson who was now visiting him. He could not help but think he was nothing but frail, breakable, *damaged*. His hands had once been so steady, able to work with needle-nose pliers, cables, and wire strippers for hours, at peace with the subtle craftsmanship of electricity. Now they trembled, quaked with the weight of a tool or a piece of wire. At first a simple sign of aging, Warren now saw the tremors as his body's way of trying to steady itself, trying to moor itself to the ground. Or maybe

it was a signal to rest, his body telling him, *I was already steady, now I am tipping*, tipping to a point past control and direction, tipping not toward the ground, but away from it, falling from a ledge.

"Well," Warren said to his grandson, "maybe next time."

Walter did not know what to make of his grandfather's statement. He was alone in his grandfather's hospital room, a single balloon embossed with the phrase *Get Well* hovering close to the ceiling, his parents elsewhere, in line for lunch at the cafeteria. At the window, the curtains were drawn only a little, making the shadows on the floor give the impression that the sun had spilled, like a bottle of juice that drops, accidentally, from a refrigerator shelf to the tile below. And here was his grandfather's strange remark, or statement, or perhaps request. *Well, maybe next time*.

Walter stood at his grandfather's bedside with his mouth neither open nor closed. He did not know whether to laugh or to nod in agreement. He looked from the balloon to his grandfather, the messages they carried. Both had used the same word, *Well*, but both, he thought, intended different meanings. Where one wished recovery and health the other was filled with regret and yearning or humor; who was he to say?

A few months after Warren was released from the hospital, he returned to work. His assignment was to repair the Yardarm Opera House's electrical system, the audio equipment defunct, in need of renovation. After inspecting the building's blueprints and layout, Warren had found access to the building's rooftop. A few days later, he jumped, falling this time without a curtain to clutch at, a wall to hold onto, falling faster now, the air fanning around his waist, the sound in his ear that of a vacuum, the sound of a car moving fast with the windows down, falling, still falling.

After hearing the news, Walter thought of that day in the hospital room, the phrase that struck him as unusual and odd. Without knowing what he might have been looking for, he thought of what he saw in his grandfather's eyes. In hindsight, he decided they were empty. All he saw was his grandfather's nose and mouth, a phrase

that hung like an echo frozen in air: *Well, maybe next time*. And there, on the floor, shadows that looked like broken puddles, while a balloon hovered in the corner, out of reach and overhead.

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Drifting on his stomach, close to Yardarm's coast, Walter is afraid to move his legs. He does not know what he would feel, or worse, if his senses would already be obliterated and lost. Instead, he imagines himself a continent away, paddling up to the floating woman, the one who visited the Dead Sea each year. There, he would think of asking her if the treatment was working, if her disease was allayed, if her skin was smooth. He would think of asking if she had seen anything dart beneath her feet, or if it was true that nothing could exist there amidst the healing salt. He would think of asking her how long she could hold a position, if floating made it easier to stay still. But the question that would plague him the most was what she saw when her eyes were closed, if it was really something like rust.