

**Prose and poetry contents**

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Deakin University

*Wendy James*

***Diving (about swimming and writing)***

**Swim** 1 *v.i.* float on or at surface of liquid... 2 Progress at or below surface of water by working legs, arms, tail, webbed feet, fins, flippers, wings, body, etc... 3 traverse or accomplish...cause to progress...

**Write** 1 *v.i.* form or mark symbols representing words esp. with with pen or pencil or typewriter on paper or parchment or other surface...

**Surface** 1 *n.* the outside of a material body, ...the limits that terminate a solid, the upper boundary of soil, water, etc., outward aspect of material or immaterial thing, what is apprehended of something on casual view or consideration... (1)

Surface connects the acts of writing and swimming. When I swim, the tranquil surface of the water shatters, I send ripple upon ripple outwards; when I write, the paper - blank, pure, still - fragments into particles of meaning.

**Immersion** *n.* immersing or being immersed; baptism by plunging whole person in water; absorption...; disappearance of celestial body behind another or in its shadow...

Immersion connects the acts of writing and swimming - I, the swimmer, the writer, am below the surface of the water, the surface of the page. It is here, immersed, absorbed, that I labour - legs, arms, mind, imagination - it is here that *I* become *not-I*, here that I disappear.

**Fear** *n.* 1 painful emotion caused by impending danger or evil, state of alarm... 2 dread and reverence...

Fear connects the acts of writing and swimming. I fear the depths, fear drowning; or fear that perhaps there is only surface, no possibility of immersion and nothing beyond.

The voice I summon up wants to crack, to whisper, to trail back into silence. "I'm sorry to have nothing more than this to say," it wants to apologise. "I shouldn't be taking up your time. I've never fought in a war, or even in a schoolyard free-for-all. I've never tried to see who could piss farthest up the barn wall. I've never been to a whorehouse. All the important, formative experiences have passed me by. I was raped once. I've borne two children. Milk trickling out of my breasts, blood trickling from between my legs. You don't want to hear about it." (2)

I fear the others who have plunged in before me - will they pull me down - have my pockets been filled with stones? I fear the depths, the unknown. Will I emerge? Will I emerge gasping and spluttering, bleary-eyed; or will I learn to hold my breath, to close my eyes? Will I one day emerge smoothly, triumphantly, buoyant, unblinking, into the sun?

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*I do laps at the olympic pool, swim in the centre lane, the one for medium swimmers. The fast swimmers - mostly men in their lunch hour - have the outside lane. They belt up the pool, tumble-turn and hurtle the length back, arm over arm over arm, churning the water, overtaking one another without pausing. In the lane to my right, the slow lane, elderly women in rubber caps, pregnant women with pony-tails, breaststroke slowly, glide - as graceful and gracious as swans on a river.*

*Sometimes it seems that she is afraid of everything, this child. There are the expected childhood fears - the dark, deep water; barking dogs, thunderstorms, spiders, the screeching suck of the emptying bath. But there are other fears, unpredictable and incomprehensible and more often than not slap-inducing: bearded men, clowns, the sticking-out teeth of her kindergarten teacher, moths, billowing curtains. **Scared of her own shadow**, sighs her mother as Amanda wails and trembles, begs to be held, clambers onto her bony lap, claws, clings. Some nights she wakes screaming, demented, inconsolable. **What is it? What? For Christ's sake, what is it?** and her father shakes her screamless, breathless, then sits on the side of the bed shushing her, stroking her hair as she sobs her way into another, gentler dream.*

*Once when she is about five and staying with her grandparents - a quiet, gentle, country couple - Amanda comes running out of the toilet mid-pee, her pants around her ankles, her face ashen, eyes bulging. **Is there a spider? Oh Lord, not a snake? Harold!** and her pop rushes off armed with a bread knife and then shuffles back, bewildered. Nothing there. How to explain to the concerned and kindly pair the sudden strangeness of that so-familiarly tiled room, or the enormity of the silence that seemed to empty into her. How to explain to them her sudden certainty that when she opened the door there would be strangers in the kitchen, drinking tea from odd shaped cups, speaking a foreign language. And that they wouldn't see her and wouldn't hear her when she stood beside them screaming for her nanny.*

*She is slow to learn to swim, Amanda. Nearly eight and her younger sisters are dolphining up and down the olympic pool at the public baths while she's still splashing in the toddler pool wearing floaties. Her mother, charmed with her two water-babies, is exasperated by this child who is afraid of getting water up her nose, in her eyes, her ears; who is terrified of drowning, though she can't really know what it means, but imagines a dark, silent place, depthless and empty. She learns eventually - kicking, breathing, paddling, overarm - and gets her twenty-five metre certificate. **A good neat stroke**, the instructor tells her mother; **but not a patch on yer littlies. Naturals.** Her father teaches the two little girls to dive, but Amanda's afraid that her goggles will fill with water; that her neck will snap; so he shows her how to safety jump instead. While her sisters hurl themselves into the deep end, somersault and backflip off one another's shoulders, swim underwater till their lungs must be ready to burst, Amanda steps carefully in at the middle, one hand delicately outstretched, the other pinching her nostrils, trying hard to outwit the water.*

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**Art** *n.* 1 skill, esp human skill as opposed to nature;...  
 skilful execution as an object in itself... 2 thing in  
 which skill may be exercised...

**Athlete** *n.* competitor or skilled performer in physical  
 exercises.

**Skill** *n.* expertness, practised ability, facility in an action...

To swim well, to write well, requires skill. To swim well, to maintain control, to build strength I practice - it's repetitive, even boring. Slog, work. To write well, is to write, to read, to write again. A never-ending process. Thus I learn techniques, forms, structures - I discover a rhythm, the rhythm propels me. I find a stroke, a voice. I find a method of execution that is mine alone and inexplicable. I will remake the world my own way, give life to my own subterranean vision. Only then can I attempt to touch the sublime, to reach Olympus, to take

pleasure as the gods who created the books take  
 pleasure and give pleasure, endlessly... The human gods  
 who don't know what they've done; what their visions,  
 their words do to us. (3)

\*\*\*\*

After twenty laps, one kilometre, I stop for a breather. It's taken me twenty-five minutes - a little slower than yesterday - but still not bad. There's a school group in a roped off area of the pool. Three lanes. They queue up behind the blocks and dive, one at a time. **One. Two. Three.** *One girl, plump and awkward, obviously nervous, slips and flops heavily, belly first, into the water. There are sniggers, claps. The teacher sighs and motions with her head. Out. Do it again.* *The next girl - tall, brown, confident - stands waiting. One. She bends down, feet together, head neatly tucked, long fingers just tipping the edge of the block. Two. She straightens a little, arms out, tense, poised. Three. She dives - her body arcing fluidly - and enters the water with hardly a sound, barely a ripple. The teacher smiles, someone whistles. Good girl. Well done. Keep going.*

*The lunch hour swimmers finish, and the fast lane empties. There are two others in my lane now, and we are all moderately paced, orderly, polite. You go first. Sure? Thanks. I push off from the side, flippers on, wielding a kickboard like some kind of shield. The schoolkids are practising a life-saving drill. They safety-jump into the water fully clothed, swim to a drowning person and pull them back to the side, heave them out, resuscitate. One, two, three, breath. There's a lot of splashing and spluttering laughter. My goggle lenses are blue and have fogged up so that that everything - grass, trees, sky - takes on a weird, wavering, underwater look.*

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**Confident.** 1 *a.* trusting, fully assured; bold, impudent.

How to maintain such confidence? I am neither bold nor impudent. Perhaps I am too polite for confidence. What have I learnt? What am I saying? Have I been authorised? Who am I?

Every woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into loss of language, ground and language slipping out from under her... (4)

Who am I?

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*The first Christmas holidays after they move to Collaroy her mother enrolls Amanda in a learn-to-surf-with-a-pro class. Every morning for a week she walks slowly to the beach. It is a long, grey, dreary week, not even the peeling-nosed instructor's cheery patter can lighten it. **Bit more wax, eh, girls. Don't wanna be slidin' about out there.** It's a dreary beach, too, no real surf and always mounds of weed pile rotting and stinking, alive with flies. Amanda talks to no one, makes no friends, does as she's told. She runs into the water with the too-big board bumping against her bony hips, paddles out past the breakers, catches the first wave in, ignoring the champ's **Up, Mandy, up. Now. Now!** her breast cleaved to the board. On the last day, coming in light and fast on a big smoothmoving wave, she forgets about sharks and blue bottles and kneels, squats as she's seen the other kids doing, then tentatively, arms outstretched, grasping, grappling and she's up bent-kneed and balancing, hair flying, heart pounding, on a wave, on a curl and smiling as the champ good on yer girly's from the beach. She's up there light and fast for maybe five seconds before she thinks about dumpers and drowning and then she's prone again, nose to the wax, eyes closed hard and clinging, clinging.*

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**Purpose** *n.* 1 object to be attained, thing intended...

2 Intention to act; resolution; determination.

**Value** *1 n.* worth, desirability, utility, qualities on which these depend.

So I swim, I write - but what's the good of it, anyway? Is it useful? Would I be better off tending the ill, concentrating on hot dinners for happy children?

What am I writing for?

**Writing:** a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen. (5)

Who am I writing for?

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life  
heightened and its deepest mystery probed? (6)

What is it worth?

A table a chair - we know what use they are. A writer -  
is he useful? (7)

What is it worth?

\*\*\*\*

*A woman in a zipped-up speedo, neatly capped and securely goggled, makes her way to the middle lane. I've only got half a dozen lengths to go and the fast lane's still empty so I slip beneath the bobbing rope mid-lap. I drum my fingers on the soft foam of the kickboard. I like the look of them, these fingers - thin, dark - crooked so purposefully at the top of the board. Slish. Slish. Slish. The flippers make each kick powerful and I slide as satinswift and comfortable as some aquatic mammal through the chlorine clear water.*

*One summer Amanda's grandparents come for a week's holiday. Her mother packs a picnic lunch on the Saturday and they all tramp across the golf course to the Basin, where the water's as calm and dark as a river. Her grandfather potters about the rock pools searching for crabs, and even her droughtcountry grandmother splashes happily in the salty shallows. Her sisters race out to a rock that juts strangely where the water seems suddenly blacker, deeper; **Come on Mandy!**, while Amanda, plastered with sunscreen, hat clamped to her head, lies reading a novel. **Go on, Love. Put that book away. Go have a swim with your sisters.** The little girls clamber up onto the rock, wave, shout, pose, then swoop like two thin rainbows into the water. When one sister starts screaming that the other hasn't surfaced, Mandy's the first one in, hat and all.*

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**Transcendent** 4 *a.* ...existing apart from, not subject to limitations of, the material universe.

**Immanent** *a.* indwelling, inherent; permanently pervading the universe.

In swimming, in writing, there is a brief moment of transcendence, a moment of freedom, of limitlessness. I dive: My feet leave the ground, I am unburdened, unshackled, I soar. I feel that I could reach... could touch... Yet contained *within* this moment is my knowledge of the coming immersion/submergence; my acceptance that I am ultimately and inescapably subject to the forces of gravity .

You can fly - you can fly higher than you thought possible  
- but you can never get off the page. (8)

Still...

From time immemorial rumour has  
it or better still the notion is abroad

that there exists a way out. Those  
 who no longer believe so are not  
 immune from believing so again. (9)

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Forty. She peels off her flippers, drags herself up, out. Schoolgirls are drying out, lolling on towels, buying sweets at the kiosk. Amanda pulls off her goggles and heads towards the changerooms, then pauses a moment, looking back up the pool, wondering. She walks quickly, then - walks faster than she can swim - up to the diving end of the pool. A plump girl, lying on the warm cement, looks up briefly from a lollipop as she rushes past. Amanda steps up onto the number one block, the fast-lane block, and looks down. The water is deep here and such a dark blue that the lines of the tiles at the bottom are obscured, indefinite. She puts her goggles on, straightens them over her eyes, then snaps them off again, lets them fall. **One.** *She takes a breath and bends down, feet together, head neatly tucked, fingers just tipping the edge of the block.* **Two.** *She straightens a little, arms out, tense, poised.* **Three.** *She dives - her body arcing fluidly - and enters the water with hardly a sound, barely a ripple. A tall girl, watching from the side, smiles. Someone whistles. Good girl. Well done. Keep going.*

*Wendy James has had stories published in various journals and anthologies. She is currently working on her doctorate - a novel set in fin de siecle Melbourne - at Deakin University.*

## Notes

1. All definitions are from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1985. Return to article
2. Nancy Mairs, "Carnal Acts" from *minding the body*, edited by Patricia Foster, p.280. Return to article
3. Helene Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, p.13. Return to article
4. Helene Cixous, quoted in Nancy Mairs, *op. cit.*, p.280. Return to article
5. Helene Cixous, *op. cit.*, p.3. Return to article
6. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, p.73. Return to article
7. Michel Tournier, "to Write Standing up", *The Midnight Love Feast*, p.114. Return to article
8. Annie Dillard, *ibid.* Return to article
9. Samuel Beckett. *The Lost Ones*. pp.17-18. Return to article

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**TEXT**

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## *M.T.C. Cronin and Alison Daniel*

### *Three Poems*

*M.T.C. Cronin*

#### Book

Over time,  
the edges of this book have curled,  
lips travelled to the corners of its pages  
through fingertips and moisture  
of glands has entered the weave of its paper  
in rivers that run from unformed words  
to formed, from one sea and one  
ink to the place where  
narrative split its heart into tributaries  
of desire, ooh and aah boats sailing like  
words like sailing on the white water missing  
the banks and sailing, without  
moving, into the escaping  
distance.

*M.T.C. Cronin*

#### Motes

language has come here  
like something  
awfully light  
and like strategy  
with its ball  
and chain

the said  
the anchor  
both let down and drawn up  
both remaining  
and moving on  
travelling within the stop  
and stopping  
at silence  
so to travel

weightless at birth  
it soon knows gravity  
and avoidance  
scandal with every word  
and that peace

that comes  
with estrangement  
from the self

each and each and each  
other and other  
and the other  
this imaginary community  
that exists in I  
and is there  
if we say it

*Alison Daniel*

#### Salty Stars

the smell of your sweat is the same  
as washing your name in the sand  
i sprinkle on the altar of trashy gods  
with dark blue faces. i've seen their  
resolute celebration in pillow books  
from india and nepal. the courtesans  
wear lots of make-up and sometimes  
enter drug induced trances that  
intensify all senses into a sublime  
etiquette when undressing for sex  
and i wonder if they lick the salty  
star of armpits which is what i'd  
like to do to you when we're naked.

*M.T.C. Cronin is a poet of national standing whose collections include Everything Holy and the world beyond the fig.*

*Alison Daniel is a Tasmanian writer whose work has been widely published in literary journals including Poetrix, Hobo, SideWalk, Southerly, Famous Reporter.*

#### **Letters and Debate**

Letter from Steve Evans Vol 5 No 1

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