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Tap

Alexis F. Ancona

Cedarville University, alexisfaithancona@cedarville.edu

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Tap

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Description (Optional)

An exploration of water imagery in my formative years: framed by my experience getting a spinal tap.

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Originally from Durham, Maine, Alexis Ancona is a senior studying English at Cedarville University. She hopes to pursue graduate work in Medieval and Renaissance Studies with a focus in Arthurian Literature. Her nonfiction work can also be found in the Winter 2016 issue of *Riding Light Magazine*.

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TAP

NONFICTION BY ALEXIS ANCONA

“Lie on your side please.”

It’s always hard to be comfortable with a clamp around your neck. When I was eleven, I went to Dr. Nadeau’s office for the first time—he’s a chiropractor. He snapshotted my spine with his radioactive machine, looking for discrepancies. He found one. The cervical vertebrae were extended. Basically, my neck was supposed to look like , but it instead looked like . Maybe that’s why I’d lie awake for hours, moaning about my headaches and stiff cervical vertebrae. The soft glow from my light-up globe chased the demons and spiders away, but it did nothing for the pain inside. How irritating.

PROSE

33

“Now curl up into a cannonball position.”

I love swimming. In the water I could be anything I wanted—Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, thirty-pounds lighter, maybe even weightless (nothingness). I can’t remember a time before I knew how to swim, though to be fair, I can’t remember much at all. While other kids struggled to keep their heads afloat as they tread water and sang “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” in swimming lessons at the YWCA, I went straight on to singing the ABC’s. I’d always look for the approving smile from Dennis the swim instructor with his beard and weirdly short red shorts. If I knew who David Hasselhoff was, I might’ve compared Dennis to him. The quintessential YWCA experience was always cannonball contests. I soon learned that the key to a high splash was expanding the area that hit the water. I made myself as wide as possible. My chubby thighs slapped against the water—a thunder crack in my ears. The cells in my nostrils screamed and died—a difference in salinity will do that. I pretended it didn’t hurt because it wasn’t important. The heavily-chlorinated water erupted into the air. Cheers. I had won.

This time was a little different—no water and the goal was to be as small as possible. Grinding my teeth so that my left lateral incisor, which protrudes behind the rest of my teeth, made my tongue bleed.

“This is just the anesthetics. You’re going to feel a little pinch.”

Numbing cold raced through my limbs. I was only in the water for maybe five seconds, but the cold penetrated cloth, skin, muscle, bone. Maybe it was the shock of it that made it so bad. Disorientation as my inner ear struggled to find up. I remember hearing one time (on Discovery Channel or Sesame Street or something) that crabs put little stones in their little ear-holes to keep them grounded. Take the pebbles away and they’re incapable of keeping themselves upright, grounded. I think I could use some pebbles sometimes.

CEDARVILLE
REVIEW

I honestly don’t remember falling into that mountain stream along the Kancamangus Highway. We have before and after shots but nothing to fill the gap. Pretty typical.

34 Before: Evan (my brother who wanted my mom to put me up for adoption) is crouching next to me as I lay flat, reaching pale fingers out to the lifeblood of the mountain. “It’s so pure that you can drink it!” my dad assured me.

After: me standing there in my mom’s oversized Mary Kay sweater, pumpkin hair plastered to my large forehead. Smiling. I wouldn’t be warm for the rest of the afternoon.

If only anesthetics were that effective.

“I’m going to need you to hold extremely still.”

I once dated a guy for three and a half years. I was thirteen and a half when we started going out; he was seventeen—three and a half years older than me. (In retrospect, I understand my parents’ frustrations.) An age-gap like that meant half-years made all the difference. This guy—Rob (real name: Ridgely), was a member of the Sea Cadets. Kind of a junior varsity Navy. He planned to participate in ROTC and spend his entire life in the military. And I planned to marry him.

Anyway. I went to one of his Sea Cadet events. I stood there watching as he stood there staring. He was at attention—immovable, focused, robotic...empty. The crowd watched as their CO addressed these pretend military members. I was in the front of the crowd straight across from Ridgely. I wanted to laugh. I felt nervous and proud. Those eyes did nothing. They were hardly even staring: merely existing, without purpose.

I wished I had that discipline. I didn't want to move. I did well for the most part. Silent tears, the cold bar of the bed gripped firmly in my hand. Just an occasional involuntary tremor disturbed the three and a half inch needle between my lumbar vertebrae. Half-inches certainly made a difference.

"It looks like the flow of the spinal fluid is pretty slow so we'll need to leave the needle in a little longer."

There's this scene in the 2002 *Count of Monte Cristo* where Abbe Faria tells Edmond that speed is key. They crouch in their cold prison cell next to dripping water. The droplets are erratic and unpredictably fast. Edmond is supposed to be faster. Abbe Faria, despite his age, easily swipes his hand in and out—no water to be seen. Edmond is not so skilled.

I used to set my bathtub faucet so that it dripped like Edmond Dantes' prison cell. I'd slice the air with my hands, hoping their smallness would work to my advantage. I felt fast, but the water was smarter, knowing exactly when to drip.

I wish my cerebral spinal fluid knew just as much as my leaky faucet. If I reached my hand behind my back, I probably could have beaten the drip.

"I'm sorry; I can't give you anesthetics while the tap is in place. We're almost done, though. Hold on."

I once almost drowned while taking a lifeguard entrance test. I don't know if that qualifies as irony, but. The procedure of the test was simple. Two minutes to swim one hundred feet, dive twelve, rescue the drowning brick, hold it at your chest above water, and return using only your legs. The

execution should have been equally as simple—I used to play games like this as a child—except the brick would be a rock named Bob. I made one crucial mistake: I panicked. I’ve learned panicking causes hyperventilation—also called overbreathing. I overbreathed—my blood with low levels of carbon dioxide—my head sinking lower into the water. I should have let go of the brick—everyone was telling me to. But my carpals and phalanges were locked. I was holding on.

Fluid—fresh water filled my lungs. That familiar burning salinity lulled me into apathy.

Finally, the brick dropped.

“We’re finished.”

CEDARVILLE
REVIEW

36

The tears on my cheeks had dried in stiff salty lines—the drool also left its enzyme-rich white residue. The needle was no longer invading my lumbar sack—I knew because I felt it removed. As it was pulled out, it felt kind of like the time I had to pull my big toenail out of its roots. It had become a part of my physiology—a dead thing removed.