

Ode to Lifeguarding

By Rick Allen Wilson

When you're a lifeguard
and not a *straight* lifeguard,
you carry to the ocean
all you've internalized on land.

This is what I took with me:

Concern, doubt, fear.
Males, especially *straight* males —
especially *some* straight males *in groups* —
are not to be trusted.
Sorry, guys. You're not.

When you're me,
(and, also, some women #metoo)
one misstep and you
find yourself damaged;
regulations or laws
or, more likely,
illogical excuses push you
not just out of the military,
but, also, out of the paramilitary.

So you go into Rookie Year
revealing little as you train.
You are third in the race
on a morning run—
winning the respect of twenty-eight.
You're land animals, really,
in red O'Neill board shorts
taking a pack run along
the Great Mother Womb.
You laugh the laugh
of Whitman comrades;
slow motion sprint
like you're guesting on *Baywatch*;
sing a spontaneous soundtrack
like you're in *Chariots of Fire*.
Meanwhile, Prometheus sends a blessing,
dancing across the calm, morning life source,
like shimmering diamonds set to life.

In all you carry,
you fear the practice drills most:

Your arm linked over your partner,
your *pretend* struggling victim,
who still smells of alcohol
from last night's partying,
blabbering on and on
about how he almost got laid.
Again. Almost, again.
His chest and abs,
are so strong beneath your grasp,
your hip pressed firmly
into the small of his back.
You cross-chest carry him,
kicking, crawling with only one arm,
letting the waves help you home
as he continues the word-jumble
about almost getting laid.
And all you think is,

How clean and beautiful the water is this morning.

Later in the season, the weather has changed.
it is angry and threatening, boiling,
easy to see why the Greeks saw monsters beneath.

No one is allowed past their knees.
Still, a child is swept suddenly beyond the break.
His mother instinctively goes for him.
What she does not see behind her
is her other son — smaller, shorter, more vulnerable—
pummeled, taken under, gone.

You leap —
perfect jump,
three-quarters the way down the mountain of sand.
Grab the torp
(perfectly prepared, thank you, OCD)
sprinting sprinting sprinting
strap over shoulder
sprint sprint sprint
hit the water,
the angry, boiling water.

*Knees high knees high.
Toss the torp to the right and dive.
Too soon too soon.
The water is barely thigh-level.
A giant wave slams the torp,
jolting your neck and pulling you back.*

*Never mind never mind.
Porpoise. Arch high, dive below,
then up again above the army of waves.
Porpoise, porpoise, porpoise
and begin to crawl. 85%. 85. Hold some back. 85.
You'll need the extra 15%
when you get there.*

By the time you reach them,
all three are in trouble.
You push the torp to her.
She intuitively takes it.

You become the torp for her sons.
They're children. Their survival impulse is strong.
They jump from their mother and latch on to you,
trusting their story is not yet over.

Nothing has prepared you for this,
but you tell them to hold their breaths
and what you're about to do.
Using them as weights, you walk them
under the break. One slips in your grasp,
but you grab his wrist and keep walking
under the water.

As you emerge, hot damn, the system has worked:

Guards from neighboring beaches
are sprinting sprinting sprinting.
They funnel in to assist and are beyond impressed.

Minutes later, you like their stories better than the reality:

“Dude! You had to have seen it! I get there and my man
has both kids *and* the mother hanging on his back!”

I did not. I had her sons under my arms.

She was behind me with the torp.
But my heart loved their story better.
It might have been *the* moment I became one of them.

A few mornings later, the water is crystal-calm.
You and the pack are on a 500-yard swim beyond the jetties.

You're an older Rookie, but you have learned quickly:
Don't even try to lead the pack.
The female college swimmer will always win.
She will be back on land,
thumbing through *People* magazine,
four or five minutes
before the next of you emerges
breathless, nonchalant, feigning all that is casual.

You always thought you needed to be first,
but you learn a surprising lesson instead:

Stay in the middle.
You benefit from the wake of others, in the middle.
In the middle, you set the pace for those who behind.

When you're in the ocean, in the pack, in the middle,
arms reaching, straining toward gods you cannot see,
toward dreams not yet dreamed,
you are neither straight nor gay, Catholic nor Muslim.
You are dolphins, land creatures, trying to leave behind
all earthly illusion: politics, gender, religion, country.

You are trying to unlearn all you were ever taught
and go back to heaven from whence you came.
You are trying to evolve back to the sea.