

The Lost Art of Breathing

Jordan Borgman

SEVERAL YEARS ago, I quit my job in New York and moved to the U.S. Virgin Islands because I had seen in an ad on Craigslist that an ice cream shop and café in St. Thomas was hiring, and this sounded to me like the happiest place in the world. This is not the sort of decision that happy people make. As it turned out, I moved to St. Croix, not St. Thomas, and I worked in a cocktail lounge and then on a boat bringing tourists to snorkel around the coral reef and I never once served anyone a single scoop of ice cream.

I had no business working on a boat. Despite growing up in Maine, I had no nautical experience and was at least half a foot shorter than my new coworkers, with all the muscle tone of a maypole ribbon. By contrast, they were all lean, sinewy strips of jerky cured by sun and salt and forming lanky Cs as they leaned on the helm or reached for a line. They wore polarized sunglasses, without which the sun on the waves could blind you, and so on those rare moments when the glasses came off they resembled startled raccoons, the area around their eyes disconcertingly bright. While it is true that you need sunglasses for the sun, you also look much cooler with them, and part of your job when working on a tourist boat in the Caribbean is to always look very, very cool.

One of the many things at which I failed to look very, very cool was raising the sail, a canvas leviathan of just under two tons. Even with its Rube Goldberg series of pulleys and winches, a two-ton sail is still quite heavy, and so the only way I could manage to budge it was to jump up as far as I could and grasp onto the line like an inept koala, using my body weight to raise the sail a couple of inches before reaching the ground and repeating the whole carnival again. None of my coworkers ever offered to help me, and I never asked. One of the mates, a man who had so devotedly spent his life on the water that he could instantly name the precise direction and knot speed of the wind at any given moment, and who considered beer a sufficiently hearty breakfast, would instead take up a chant. “Death before dishonor!” he’d shout, motioning for the tourists to join him. “Death before dishonor!”

“Death before dishonor!” tourists from the boat would yell at me in the days that followed, whenever they caught sight of me on the boardwalk, and I would glow in response. I was devoted to this particular coworker, whom alcoholism had aged by twenty years, and who on our days off would teach me to sail on his sprightly little twelve-foot monohull, a boat that I daydreamed about buying and skippering all the way up to Maine. “Death before dishonor!” he and those strangers would chant, as I dangled from the mast like an ill-conceived flag, feeling

like finally I was known.

I HAD COME to the island and the job on a boat at a time when I, in the course of rambling into ordinary young adulthood, had had the sort of usual awful things happen to me that kept me floating in the passive voice. All that I wanted—all that was wanted by me—was a few years of not doing, especially when so many others seemed keen to take up the charge. Let anyone who wanted to do, do; I wanted a golden afternoon and numbness.

Even in the midst of my lackadaisical opting out, I found myself craving intense solitude and intimate companionship to equal, extreme, and completely unpredictable degrees. Since solitude was easier to come by than intimacy, I spent a lot of time on St. Croix alone and trying to get into low-grade trouble. St. Croix rewards those with a high drive for pursuing beauty and low standards for physical safety, and so I would do things like skid towards the south shore when I happened to look up while driving at night and realize that the sky held a new moon. I’d strip on the deserted beach and dodge sea turtle nests to skinny-dip with bioluminescent plankton, praying that no one and nothing came to the beach or from the depths.

By day, as I led visitors on snorkeling tours around the island’s coral reef and became a better swimmer—and was finally able to raise the goddamn sail—I was slowly initiated into the sport of freediving. “Freediving,” as compared to scuba diving, is liberated of cost, equipment, and reasonable hazard management. Whereas scuba encases the diver in what is essentially an exoskeleton and artificial lung, freedivers rely on the air in their lungs and their blood, entering the water with nothing more than mask, fins, rash guard, and a cheerful acceptance of suicidal risk.

As with pretty much any sport with the word “free” in it, freediving comes with a staggeringly high mortality rate. You only take to a sport like freediving if you are not entirely fazed by the idea of not making it back up to the surface again. To freedive is to know someone who has died freediving. The least dangerous, if still lethal, species of freediving is one driven by pragmatism—mostly spearfishermen and nature enthusiasts who wish to stalk fish without the bubbles and bulk of scuba. Then there are those maniacs who are drawn to the sheer athleticism, the depths of pressure and the limits of air, the slender, dark tunnels that the current careens you through in so many eternal seconds, before you come up to the surface, gasping, exhilarated, the water and adrenaline sharpening your vision, filling you with the drug-like thrill and disbelief of having survived. Those divers going for depth and dis-

tance wear weighted belts, thin masks that more readily equalize, and long fins that ripple like eels in the water. You shave off seconds to reach one more meter down, one more moment of air, before you bound to the surface like a lost dog seeking home.

I loved freediving for the risk and the beauty of the coral and for the pure, exhilarating loneliness of it. I could not stand to be hurt by another person, but against the vast, inhuman force of the ocean I was thrillingly vulnerable. No matter how strong a swimmer I was, no matter how much I oversaturated my blood with oxygen, I would always be nothing against the lack of air in my blood, against unexpected rip tides or rogue waves or the crushing force of pressure. It’s just nature. Nothing personal.

CORAL IS rare in the type of love it inspires and the type of love it allows. People see coral reefs for the first time in their lives and return looking as though they have just stumbled upon a new center of gravity. Reefs are beautiful and alien, with colors and patterns that simply do not exist on the terrestrial plane, and everything operates by a divergent physics. Light moves differently through salt water, magnification and perspective are altered, sound is flattened and expanded, and as you are diving down from the seeming weightlessness of the surface, the entire world becomes determined by pressure. There are creatures in the coral that you did not dream existed.

The reef kills and protects with total disinterest. Animals hide in it to escape or lie in predatory wait. Reefs keep the water inside them placid and the islands comparatively protected from hurricanes and tsunamis, and for every reef there is a concentric outer ring of sunken boats. There are stories of how people would escape slavery and indentured servitude and make for atolls like Anegada, where the locals lured slave and sugar ships to dash themselves upon the reef and then led the survivors through the coral labyrinth to freedom. In these places, where the land is a blink of sand atop the reef, if there is no coral then there is no island.

People dive into the strange forest of the coral reef, where there is no up and down but only pressure, and when they return to the surface they come up talking about Eden. They do this because the reef is odd and beautiful and because to talk about coral is to talk about loss. Go to any reef and someone will tell you how much more lush and exuberant it was last year, two years ago, ten years ago, twenty, and that this, the most riotous thing you have ever seen, is bleached, pale, and mostly dead. The terrible part is that they are not lying. This wonder that you are seeing is mostly a skeleton.

As far as I can tell, with my limited census, everyone who works on a boat wants at some level to be a pirate. This is usually expressed in a particular type of gruffness and a longing for a peculiar sort of freedom. Yet I have never in my life found a faster way of making a grown man cry than to talk about how the coral is dying. My coworkers would watch documentaries, read statistics, and tell each other what they had learned in low, choked

voices. We would stand on the swaying deck of the boat and look at the magnificent, bleached reef around us and be unable to imagine a world where this reef was not, in some undeniable way, at the center of it.

My favorite part of the job was the time when I was underwater, leading groups snorkeling around the coral reef, me swimming beneath them and pulling a ring for nervous swimmers, performing somersaults and tricks for the kids, and pointing out especially luminous fish, morays, reef sharks.

We would tell the tourists not to touch the coral, not only because human touch kills it, but because it will bite back: it is deceptively sharp, prone to lodging in the skin and inviting infection. Most listened, but some would reach out, wondering, entranced. We would beg the visitors not to wear coral-poisoning sunscreen as we pulled out boxes of non-toxic bottles, and most listened, but some turned away and continued rubbing cream into their children’s cheeks. What can you do.

Coral invites obsession but denies intimacy. By definition, you can only spend short periods with the coral; eventually, you have to get out of the water. You can devote yourself to learning about it, but it will always remain essentially mysterious and alien. You can’t take it with you. That fervent desire to understand mixed with a recognition of essential separateness: I wonder if people are so drawn to coral because they love it the way they wish they could love other people.

ONE OF my favorite diurnal haunts was a bay that was accessed by a hike just long enough to keep it mostly empty, despite its stunning reef. One day, alone as usual and hungry for adrenaline, I hiked down. I swam at the perimeter of the reef, looking for a gap into the open ocean—something that was insane to do alone. Reefs are tricky. Finding a way out doesn’t mean finding a way back in, and you can get trapped in the tug of the unreined sea. But the coral was beautiful, incredible, uproarious.

Abruptly, a sudden current grabbed me and hurled me into the coral. This is it, I thought, as the coral flew towards me. It will cut me into ribbons or impale me, and I will never be able to swim back inside the reef. I could not move from the current. And then, just as suddenly, a large wave came and lifted me over the coral, gently as a duckling, and deposited me in the still waters of the bay. There are some twists of physics that make incomprehensibly grand, ineffable forces seem so bright and close and human that you want to honor them as gods.

MANY PEOPLE who die freediving don’t die in the depths, but mere inches away from sunlight and air. The last of the oxygen leaves their bloodstream and they lose consciousness just before breaking the surface tension. This is called “shallow water blackout”—or, tellingly, “freediving blackout”—and in the wide infinity of the ocean it can feel like a misnomer, until you realize that the “shallow water” is

not the distance between the diver and the sea floor, but between the diver and life.

Although not impossible, it is fairly rare for new freedivers to accidentally drown themselves. Most of those who die are experienced, beautiful athletes who misjudge the gap between their breath and the surface by seconds. Often freedivers hyperventilate before jumping into the water, oversaturating their blood with oxygen and lowering carbon dioxide levels, allowing their body to drift into the danger zone of narrowing the gap between when the brain starts to panic and when the body loses its last gasp of air. Freediving is a sport that demands complete trust of one's body while ignoring all of its natural warning signals.

For all that I loved freediving, I was never particularly good at it. That I survived was not some will towards life but largely luck and incompetence. Tender mercies.

EVENTUALLY I LEFT the Caribbean, but I could not quite quit the coral. After a few left turns, I found myself in Timor-Leste, a blip of a half-island at the eastern tip of Indonesia. Timor-Leste, Timor Lorosa'e, Timor of the Rising Sun, that crocodile land. Timor has the most underwater diversity of any place on Earth, falling like a drop-let between migrations. Half-famished whales passed to the north of the island in winter, and in summertime blizzards of butterflies stopped traffic and left our cheeks glittering from the powder of their wings.

I lived in a house on the beach with two roommates, two dogs, a goat, a monkey, four boats, and the sea so close and so loud it sometimes disrupted conversation. The neighbors would come and cut coconuts from our trees, and in return we would have mangoes, pomelo, bushels of bananas scuttling with silver dollar spiders. When the fishermen pulled in their boats, we would run out barefoot on the beach and buy fish so fresh we could eat it raw, right there on the sand, cut into sashimi strips of flesh that changed color in our hands. When the rains came, the compound yard would flood into a lake deep enough for the neighborhood kids to paddle the sea kayaks around and around in circles.

I could spend entire afternoons in that bare, unfurnished room, my thin mattress on the floor underneath the mosquito net, listening to the rhythmic cacophony of waves outside and just staring at the palm leaf ceiling, knowing that this was the happiest I had ever been.

If I came home quickly enough after work, sprinted into a swimsuit, and told no one what I was doing, I occasionally had enough time before the sun set to drag out one of the sea kayaks and paddle some half a mile offshore, just beyond where the day's last fishermen moved slowly towards the beach. I would lodge the paddle in the boat, take a breath, and throw myself overboard and into panic. There might be crocodiles, sharks, whales, making me feel tiny by comparison; there was the fathomless, horizonless blue of the continental margin. The strange, twisting light in the water made it nearly impossible to tell which way was up or

down when there was little oxygen in my blood and no room for error. And even if I made it back up, I worried that the sea kayak could have drifted away beyond where I could find it. I did not know if I was strong enough to swim all the way back to shore.

Turning slowly in the current, I tried to suspend myself in the water and to feel no fear, slowing my heart rate to conserve my breath. Twenty seconds, thirty. Forty-five. A minute. More. I have never known such terror and such calm. At the last moment, I'd spread my arms and kick and break the surface and swim to the kayak, hauling myself in and panting like a shipwrecked dog. Then, if there was still enough gold on the waves, the sky still bloodied, I would jump into the water once more.□