

## ***Whale, dolphin, human***

My skin is a wetsuit. In the cold waters of the River Derwent, I swim through late winter and into spring in nothing but bathers. In the water, I am just another aquatic creature, akin to whale and dolphin who must also rise to breathe.

Today the sea is calm and luminous, milky Prussian Blue. Other days it's the green invitation of Phthalo Blue.

I rarely miss a day. It's a gift to my 75-year-old self, twenty years from now, all this swimming. I see the older women come down to the beach through the frosty months, through days when there is snow on the mountain but the sky is cloudless and the sun is warm away from the wind.

One woman with white hair puts out a plastic chair and lays her towel over it. She swims in bathers and a cap emerging, some twenty minutes later, radiant as a sea goddess. Two other women slowly breaststroke, half a kilometre and back, chatting and laughing though the sea is probably eleven degrees.

When I do it myself, brave the cold, brave it almost every day, I walk in up to my waist. I trail my hands in the water. My brain says 'You've got to be joking'. It suggests every reason not to do this crazy thing. But then I go in.

At first, when I began this ritual, electricity shot up my arms. My breath see-sawed. There is no putting my head under. No freestyle. The air is too cold for wet hair and the water so cold it burns the skin of my face.

I kick on my back. I breaststroke with care. I surrender my limbs and become swaying kelp. This is another sort of dance with the elements and I must learn the steps.

After ten minutes or so, something strange starts to happen. The shock has departed. The sea has become soft. I can sense it against the outer layer of dermis, but my organs are not cold. My body feels enlivened, as if this elixir of chilled sea and sky is a balancing tonic, a healing forcefield of mysterious potential.

The cold has taught me a certain fearlessness. I procrastinate less. I need less. I am more grateful. I live more simply.

Sometimes the beach is closed because the sewerage plant upstream has another spill. My parents ate fish from this enormous river, but no one has done that for years now. Too many heavy metals.

Our twenty-first century bodies are soft, but we are hard on this planet. All we discard, all we pour onto the land, flows into the sea. Comfort is killing us. Disconnection too.

I am an ocean swimmer, a coast dweller. My home is just seventy centimetres above the sea.

Everything is less certain.

*Heather Rose*