

JULIE MARIE WADE

/NOW/

a slanted crown

/Oceanic/

Once upon a time, the swim teacher said, “Stand where the water comes to your lips and no higher.” The other kids clustered near the wall, but because I was taller, I had to keep walking down the lane stripe toward the deeper end. No, this is not a fairy tale, though perhaps a primer for my future katabasis. I tried to squat down, but the teacher caught on. “Keep walking, Wade,” he drilled. “Shallow is relative.” No, this isn’t a parable either, though we were meant to learn something about limits, about when precisely we slipped out of our depths. “If you ever get tired of swimming, tread water. If you ever get tired of treading, let your limbs dangle limp in jellyfish pose.” Cue that oceanic feeling—self-important or stranded, it’s hard to say which. “Open water has only three outcomes: someone saves you, something eats you, or you drown.”

/Greater Emergencies/

Now I check the watermark to see if I’m still drowning—or worse, if I’m counterfeiting good cheer. When I broke my walking bones, I had to shower with my leg in a Hefty bag. Three months. No submersion. Angie cleaned my wound, which was jagged as a Fox anchor’s smile. I wasn’t afraid of hospitals then, though I sent the ambulance on ahead in case of greater emergencies. *I can breathe just fine, and I’m not bleeding*, I said. It wasn’t prescience or even kindness. I preferred to ride in the car. Later, I taught from a wheelchair, which was easier to steer than crutches. My students didn’t get my *Ironside* jokes, and I worried about seeming frail. At night, I did tricep lifts all the way up the stairs. You see, the end was always in sight then, fixed as a calendar square. “Healing is waiting,” the doctor said. Three months. No standing, no putting pressure on. Every day I wrote a note to myself: *X days till the cast comes off*.

/Blue Looks Good on You/

Every day Joe Biden writes to me just to say “Hello” and “Can you spare a dollar?” Joe, don’t you know all my spare dollars go to Feeding America? Sometimes he asks if I can split a donation with another blue voter. Joe, isn’t it enough to know you have my ballot in your pocket? Joe, it turns out you’re my jellyfish pose. And no, I don’t want to win dinner for two unless I can trade your place at the table for Barack Obama and a time machine. Remember that recess chant, which must alternate with the hokey-pokey in Dante’s *Purgatorio*: *Hi, My name is Joe, I’ve got a wife, three kids, and I work in a button factory. One day my boss came to me and said, Hey Joe, are you busy? I said no. He said turn this button with your left hand.* My hand is tired, Joe, always pumping Purell into unread palms. Don’t make it worse by asking: “Why such a long face, Girlie, when blue looks so good on you?”

/Holy, Holey, Holy/

The pillowcases arrive, and they’re long and blue as the Sancta Camisa. Who buys pillowcases during a pandemic? I guess we do. I don’t know what’s practical and what’s frivolous anymore. *Why is Mary’s tunic blue?* I once asked the art history teacher. “Well, it isn’t really. Artists just paint it that way.” Still, I pressed her: *But why blue and not some other color?* “Well, because blue is holy.” When I’m blue, I don’t feel holy, though maybe, on closer inspection, I do: *holey*, with an extra “e,” like riddled or faulty—holey as a doily, porous as lace. Anything could seep through. I’m no coaster. I’ll leave a ring on the table slick with my feelings for sure. These pillowcases are pleasantly soft with a Lacoste alligator in the corner—small nod to Florida. Angie says, “What kind of giant pillows are people sleeping on these days?” We shimmy ours into the holes, then fold the excess fabric. Outside lightning pulses behind the clouds, reminds me of reading late as a child. I hid my flashlight in my pillowcase so no one was the wiser.

/The Secular Prayer/

I aspire to be wiser. Serenity I can sometimes muster, though usually with the aid of a CBD gummy. And courage—that’s debatable. How do you live an “out life” when you’re largely confined inside? I know I want to be a better ally, but sometimes I confuse self-flagellation with fortitude. Not full Dimmesdale, not anymore, but when your first role models are repressed white men, you tend to internalize the message that denying yourself is a valid way of helping others. When quarantine began,

I thought about the root—*40 days* of isolation, *40 days* confined on a ship or wandering in the wilderness. *40 days* of the Lenten season, which is when the pandemic struck. In childhood, I learned what I gave up proved my devotion. But you can't just "give up" white privilege or racial bias. They won't slough off, no matter your vigilance. In childhood, being good meant sitting still, folding hands. Now I see how no resistance is passive. Wisdom may leave words unused, not stones unturned. *Activism required.*

/Say That to My Face/

Our lexicons teem with leftovers now. Watch how the unused words cluster near the wall, albeit masked and gloved. *Mix e³ mingle* are lucky to have each other because all must keep at least an ampersand's length between them. Is anyone concerned about *mileage*? Have supermarkets stopped selling *Go-Gurt* for good? Remember: hyphens are the new hand-holding, just as umlauts are the new kiss. Lucky to be you, *Naïve*, at least for a little while. *Tackle boxes* will henceforth be known as *appropriate distance receptacles*, and *Gone fishing* will no longer serve as metaphor. By contrast, the word no one misses is *miss*. Not the archaic honorific, but the simple stamp of longing: *I miss pub crawls and casinos*. Or: *I miss the climbing wall at REI, cookouts in the alley behind my apartment building*. Right now someone is missing the white paper arrow yanked free from the bright red machine. *Take a number, get in line. Come over here and say that to my face*. We even miss her, the woman with the bullhorn on the tennis court, spouting her unpopular opinions.

/Temporary, Always/

Everyone online is playing a game about unpopular opinions. What don't you like that most people do? *Hetero-sex. Cooing at babies*. I think these things but don't actually write them down. Instead: *Small plates*, which I really do hate, though it's hardly incendiary to admit. I just want to keep the peace, you know? Even when I think of something legitimately funny, I worry it might be mean, so as predicted, I'm a disaster at Cards Against Humanity. No one has ever told me I have a "wicked sense of humor." No one has ever called me a "loose cannon." Years ago, a classmate in an elevator said I was a "cheerful feminist," which perhaps she thought of as an oxymoron. When my students ask what an oxymoron is, I used to say *Sweet sorrow*. Now I say *Now. We've living in one*—the temporary always, the everlasting brief. The loudest silence of my life is our current zeitgeist. So I break it, lightly. I write: *Why aren't they all large plates? Doesn't everyone like leftovers?*

/Even My Prius Won't Save Me/

Chinet makes large, sturdy plates I used to pass out to my students for last-day-of-class cake. We had a party, and everyone read aloud from their poems. Lately, I can't stop thinking about waste, how hard it was to find biodegradable sporks, the power smoothies I sipped all term from single-use plastics. I drove 50 miles to campus in a hybrid car, but driving is still driving. I doubt the planet ever says, "Thank you for killing me just a little more slowly." I stopped using straws, but not before I built a house made of straws in which I'll live forever, rueful and eco-derelict. These days I teach on a tiny screen. The commute from my kitchen is 14 seconds, give or take, depending on feline traffic. Sometimes my Zoom room is a shelter and sometimes a padded cell. I've subtitled my class "Negative Capability as a Condition of Our Times." I'd say more about that, but my *meeting attendees are waiting!* I hope this means my meeting attendees are healing. I test the mic, then sing my biweekly song to the rows of black squares that bear their names.

/I'm Not a Robot/

Commence the daily song of disembodied voices. Every website I visit asks me to "Confirm humanity" before continuing: "Click on squares containing cross-walks, traffic lights, motorcycles." The iPhone flashes "No human detected" in my frame, but what about the lizard curled inside the frangipani blossom? Not every surface should be a mirror. Not every species ought to be my own. The back-up cam absolves itself of responsibility: "Check your surroundings!" More lizards, more frangipani blossoms. A cross-walk, a traffic light, a motorcycle. Later, the computer cautions, "Your battery is running low. You might want to plug in your PC." I plug in my PC. Across the screen strobes this enticement: COMING SOON TO YOUR MAILBOX. But when I click to view: "No packages are available for display."

/Annual Wellness Exam/

"Are you displaying any symptoms of coronavirus?" the nurse inquires, pointing to a laminated list while swiping my forehead at the same time. "No," I say. "I mean, I do have some tightness around my heart and shallowness of breath, but I think it's panic-related." Her protective visor presses on her bifocals, so she squints at me through the double glare. "Well, we can't spell pandemic without

panic, can we?" Am I supposed to laugh? Is it OK to laugh? I can't tell what's reasonable and what's in bad taste anymore. The new doctor asks if I feel safe at home. "It's about the only place I feel safe these days." And do I practice safe sex? "Yes. The lesbianism really helps with that." Her mask crinkles as she laughs. For days, nothing but wild horses in my chest. Now, at last, the galloping slows to a trot. My exhale becomes a guffaw.

/The Way My Mind Works/

When I think of guffaw, I think of the mockumentary *Waiting for Guffman*, which relaxes me when I watch it, and which of course is a riff on *Waiting for Godot*, which my mother always pronounced Gah-DOT, as in *connect the dots*. When I think of dots, I think of the impossible-to-chew but colorful candies that get stuck in your teeth: knock-off gumdrops, slightly more queer. I also think of ellipses and how everything in our lives is surrounded by them now: *To be continued [dot dot dot]*. At church, I was taught to think of life on earth as a straight-to-video release, Heaven as the glorious sequel. But didn't most sequels actually let us down? My fourth-grade teacher told our class she expected Jesus to return in the new millennium. The Seven Years of Tribulation would run circa 2001-2008, aka Era of Dubya. I was never a fan of apocalypse lit or cinematic eschatology *[dot dot dot]*. But now I fear we are living in the too-long, poorly-acted, over-budget sequel.

/Primer/

It's not *Night of the Living Dead* exactly, so let's not be zombies. Maybe cook something in a large pot with garlic and a bay leaf. Maybe call someone on the phone and tell them it's good to hear their voice. Give blood if you can, because the American Red Cross is desperate these days. Accept the donor t-shirt graciously, though there is little you want or need less. If you are free to release a full-throated scream without frightening your neighbors, I recommend it. Have an orgasm. Have two. They're good for you. Try barbecued jackfruit. Revisit the Cindy Crawford *Shape Your Body* workout video from 1992. Listen closely when personal trainer Radu says, "You have to take these little breaks so your sets can be really strong." It's not just about fitness. He's preparing us wisely for our present katabasis. Maybe we swim a little, tread a little, float a lot. Maybe we stop waiting for the happy ending and start healing in the interim instead.