

## Vide

**L'appel du vide** (“the call of the void”) is a French expression used to describe the temptation some feel to jump from a high precipice. A French man who I once met in Italy likened the sentiment to a siren’s song. He said some claim that a fear of heights is not a fear of falling, but rather the fear that one might suddenly be compelled to throw themselves over the edge. It seems then that people fear not the height, but *l’appel du vide* itself—what the void might call out of them.

If I lift my elbow as high as my earlobe, I can cover the boat and everyone in it with my left thumb and block them from view. If my wrist lies parallel with this rock ledge, I know it is level with the spans of gulls rising on thermals in the distance, and the surface of the ocean some sixty feet below. If from here I can see that the horizon is an oval, then it never was a line.

Below, our boat leans into a loose tongue of waves, towards the grotto and away again. The surface of the ocean is dented aluminum. When I grimace I can see through my lids into a sky that looks hazy with rain. My toes are blue from clenching the ledge, this open mouth’s philtrum—its cupid’s bow, its bones volcanic. It’s been a dozen minutes and the captains have abandoned their rudders, barnacled and trailing rust. The low boats jostle in wait. If I’m the first to try this jump in two months, as they say, if I am the first woman in

six... *“If you can’t do it climb back down already!”* my man shouts into the sky, because I’ve dragged us both this far from home and we have this game of riling each other up when it matters. It’s an old game, and not a nice one, and I only know when we’re playing when no one else is playing with us. I know he’s been working hard at kinder persuasions this summer we’ve been abroad following a caravan of farm work across olive groves, but right I can’t see any real difference with the nettles biting my ankles.

I learned about snorkel breaths the year my dad sent us out along the edge of the Atlantic reef where he’d learned to walk. We kept our eyes on the sharp urchins because I’ve dragged us both this far from home and we have this game of riling each other up when it matters. It’s an old game, and not a nice one, and I only know when we’re playing when no one else is playing with us. I know he’s been working hard at kinder persuasions this summer we’ve been abroad following a caravan of farm work across olive groves, but right I can’t see any real difference with the nettles biting my ankles.

Marching in fish net light. Then I looked up home and we have this game of riling each other up when it matters. It’s an old game, and not a nice one, and I only know when we’re playing when no one else is playing with us. I know he’s been working hard at kinder persuasions this summer we’ve been abroad following a caravan of farm work across olive groves, but right I can’t see any real difference with the nettles biting my ankles.

My exact size. I stiffened when her forehead hit mine for a fraction of a second before she flicked away, shuddering, as if to make us both forget. My hair folded in her wake. *“That shark is a Nurse!”* said my father’s face above the water *“she doesn’t bite!”* But I wasn’t thinking teeth—just that up close, her eyes didn’t turn in their sockets.

I know that for seven weeks we’ve been sleeping upright on night trains, working cracked fields for one bed and two meals a day, in the earth together like a weighted machine. From here I can see Naples spewing garbage and smoking in the wind. A hot breeze peels a swallow from my throat. I know that in ten days we plan to haul brown boxes across the same threshold and I don’t think I can get out of it any more.

The leathered men below start to jeer in Italian. They lift sets of fingers to signal their bets. The chains wound in their chest hair are blinding. To them I am bar soap, Girl American. And from up here I’m starching accordingly, typifying them individually, trying to throw my limbs from this rock.

Later, after the hurricanes, dad smuggled my sister and I out onto the beaches lined with red flags, SWIMMING PROHIBITED. We sprinted out in thin one-pieces, scrambling into water intent on emptying itself. He taught us to yell *“Granddaddy—over!”* or *“Little Uncle—under!”* depending on the shape of a swell before it broke. The goal was to lay perpendicular inside a barrel just before the whitecap split. We learned when to roll ourselves into those cavities and when pull free, and the brackish Atlantic shot us evenly, like harpoons.

After four summers we’d all been pummeled by the surf, but no one had felt a catch at the beach-break. That line between rock and wave where the water pulls and falls at the same time. At the end of a long day indoors, we were angry with my father in the way children can be when they recognize a woman who isn’t their mother but who may try to be soon. The rain broke and we ran across the dunes when the sky was flat and closing. I dared my sister to get in, and then swam hard ahead of her until the waves around my shoulders were matte like those tapping the sky. I felt the sandbar and stood up, feeling accomplished, and then the water in front of me kept rising.

Our Italian host and Captain is gesturing expressively and repeating the English necessary to those who deal in tourists. *“Hey!”* he calls, *“Andiamo!”* again. The sun is printing a ring into my forehead. I know could plant myself here indefinitely if I could just stop swaying. I know I could tumble forward, eyes closed, but they say if I hit flat-footed I’ll split both insteps. If I don’t tuck my chin, the neck will snap. If I look down into the water, the eyes might burst on contact. Our attractive French companion is at my man’s shoulder, shading his nose against the lycra not encasing me: *“Let’s go!”* A gull circles and cries.

I lean into the void, down the grotto’s throat, past the sea and spackled shoulders and this man announcing that he knows more than I’ve let him, that soon his books will lean their backs hard against mine. I clench the muscles that bind my eyes to my face and the small ones encasing my toes. In swimming we would call this a pencil jump—a long one.

As the wave hit it pulled me from the bar and further under. I laced fingers around the back of my neck like dad showed us when we were small. I felt the sand in my gums and opened my eyes to the water revolving. It felt like entering a vacuum, but more familiar, like day-dreaming in class, or dozing in the heat.

The bat at our feet will look hammerheaded, about a handsbreadth from ears to toes. It will fall out of the expansion twittering inside Campbell and the man beside me will look up into the concrete cells and guano will darken and stink up the sand. We’ll be on the brink of something I’m not ready for. The sun will sit low as the bats prepare to leave for mosquitoes and the night. I’ll have spent the previous month pushing heavy furniture in slow circles around the low adobe house that the last man and I had shared and all the rooms will feel sharp-edged and out of order. I’ll have packed away our photos of the ocean. At night I’ll lay on the cool kitchen tiles in watery, digital light and stare up into the ceiling cracks. I’ll try to rustle something new from myself, something to merit a new body. But there will be nowhere to walk under the natural drought and the unblinking sky, and I’ll find that it is hard to become submerged in the desert. So I’ll eat a hotdog beside a man in a baseball cap and drive with him to watch a colony of bats let go from a dry bridge at sunset. I won’t really know, then, that this is a date.

We’ll move toward the banks, careful not to brush against one another. He’ll have jeans on, despite the heat. Here and there in the wash, spined branches brought by old water and wound with trash will sit piled like the skeletons of old waves. Beads of sweat will catch on the man’s cotton neckline. We’ll read the signs of old water lines stacking up the banks where silence will fit us more easily and I’ll regret wearing a dress.

Quickly then, the sun halves itself along a ridge line. Light drains from the top of the sky and a sound like a glass rim being rubbed signals a smudge developing below the expansion beams the bridge. The shards that billow out from under it will spool themselves into an eddy between columns, gaining speed as we make disgusted noises with our breath. At first, only a ribbon will dart away like a black leak in the structure. Then long loops will pull out from beneath and catch into the sky as if tracing a current on the surface of a much higher river pulling westward, with us at its very bottom. Against the light we’ll be able to see individual wings among them. Bats smaller and more numerous than any coordinated school of herring I’ve seen hiding together in the shape of their maker. I’ll be reminded then about a bit from Jamaica Kincaid that I still haven’t read yet, as she quotes Charles Kingsley in the opening lines of *“Wingless”*: *“You would have been very cold sitting there on a September night without the least bit of clothes on your back, but Tom was a water baby, and therefore felt cold no more than a fish.”* And for long minutes, the stream of bats will spread out and still will not separate from the bridge. It will lean slowly north and then south again, making waves imperceptibly, treading so far we’ll lose sight of its beginning. And we’ll both sway imperceptibly, treading so far we’ll lose sight of its beginning. And we’ll point to a trail where the shyest will be dusting out last, groggy and uncoordinated. We’ll stare after them a while, stalling, until all that’s left to do is climb out.

Unless a person has drowned, the scalp surfaces first. But somewhere above me there’s a commotion. *“Hey!”* says our captain as he claps my cold back. Our French companion wrinkles. *“Good form—You go through the seabed? Your man here was concerned.”* His referent holds my elbow.

*“Well you got me this time,”* he says.

In the air I tilt forward and cannot right myself. So slow I nearly open my eyes to see where I’ve traveled. Then the water zips me into a column and my intestines bristle back. I stay there a while, fastened, as the light around me dims.

Next, my hands snaked out as from under a pulled rug as the wave spit me onto the shore. Foam lapped as I coughed and sour water came out of my mouth. There was a swath of weed in my hair and a sizzling behind my nose. My sister yelled that it was too rough, she was going in to tell. when we came in dripping my father was cooking dinner. He thought we wanted attention—we did. So when I couldn’t explain how I had finally breathed water, I said I felt cold and went to bed.

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