

TERRANCE COX

All Wet

(for Jocelyn Fraser)

All wet I, mostly, was
a swim-team adolescence,
of zillion practice laps
nowhere, not quite
ever fast enough

All wet, first off, because
of Lake Placid motel
pool's deep end, where
blithely, age eight,
non-swimmer, I jump

Surprised, but without
struggle, I touch bottom,
calmly wait for rescue

Fuss & Red Cross lessons
follow: jellyfish float,
dogpaddle & sidestroke—
kid stuff I was good at—

that, building of new Y
with indoor pool, becomes
signing on for frantic lengths

All wet, half of then life
 from motel pool's deep
 placidity in six years
 to bronze medal
 Nova Scotia Outdoors, open
 hundred butterfly

three years more to plateau,
une piscine à Montréal
 pre-Olympic trials
 '68, for Mexico
 final heat, last place

All wet, no complaint about:
 chlorine eye-sting
 muscle ache & tyranny
 of stop-watch

I measure out a world
 in twenty-five yard
 lanes of turquoise tiles,
 of whip & dolphin kick
 flutterboard, flip turns,
 analysis of stroke
 clammy jock & Speedo,
 incipience of gills

All wet, halcyon seasons
 as Sea Lions swim team
 breast-stroke & butterfly
 record-holder, first to beat
 minute for hundred freestyle—

longtime held-out prize was
 US dollar bill—
 pissed off hotshot
 Massena, New York kid
 whose father's dollar I got

All wet almost for decade,
raising head to breathe
une piscine à Montréal

find myself half a pool-length
far too slow, way behind
left in lane-marked wake
of guy named Tommy Arusoo
(Pan-Am silver, gold at Commonwealth)

about, eighth of eight, to finish
realize that it was not
arrival, not in first place
even bronze, I swam for

never take another
competitive stroke

I sought while aquaeous
light-bathed stasis
careless deep peace
full fathom under water
like at Lake Placid once—
calmly never drown

When I broke the minute
for a hundred freestyle—
good strong pull, no kick,
fifty-eight/five, best ever—

world record hundred free
was fifty-flat point
something something seconds—
not for yards but metres

Entire summers pass
nowadays & I'll not swim
maybe once, of a heat-wave

into friendly backyard's pool
off diving rock at cottage

hunker, plunge, & conjure
ghosts of stroke mechanics

go to no great lengths
chasing long-lost
liquid state of being