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SKIMMING

LIKE SWIMMING OR RIDING A BICYCLE, skimming—in the U.S. skipping, in parts of Ireland skiffing—a stone is a skill that, once learned, is never forgotten. Somehow, selecting the best size and shape of stone, knowing how to grip it, understanding the angle and thrust needed for a successful throw, seems to get laid down in the deep fabric of the nerves and muscles. From there it can be recalled, word perfect, even after years of desuetude. It's as if the knowledge beds into the flesh and sleeps there unnoticed, as ready to awaken when it's summoned as it is to resume its slumbers. I suspect a decade would have passed, maybe close to two, between skimming stones that morning on a remote beach on the west coast of Scotland and the last time I'd cast stones across water in this way. Yet the skill came back to me as readily as if it had been only yesterday that I'd called it into action.

Some places invite skimming more than others. On sandy beaches, stones are often so scarce that the possibility rarely presents itself. On some shingle beaches the stones, though plentiful, are either the wrong size or, if they do fit the grip, the wrong shape—rotund as eggs instead of flat as discs. Sometimes the waves are too choppy to provide a smooth enough surface. Boats, swimmers, and people fishing can create obstacles whose presence issues a prohibition, whether on the grounds of safety, courtesy, or self-consciousness. But sometimes conditions are perfect—the sea glassy calm, no one in sight, and a beach strewn with an abundant supply of flat, rounded stones that fit the hand so snugly and skitter across the water so well that they seem to have been designed precisely for this purpose. The Scottish beach I walked to recently provided all of these ideal conditions.

Why skim? The most obvious answer, and I think the right one, is simply that it's fun. The urge to skim stones is similar in kind to the desire to kick a ball or swing on a swing. It's one of those uncomplicated physical activities that beckon to us with the promise of immediate satisfaction. Walking along a quiet beach where there are many good stones and no waves to speak of, I'd find it hard not to skim; it seems an entirely natural thing to do,

no more needing of an explanation than beachcombing. Like kicking a ball or swinging, it requires no great skill. Anyone can learn to do it and when they do, it is its own small reward—an intrinsically pleasing activity that achieves nothing more than the admirable goal of passing time agreeably.

As well as simply being fun, part of the appeal of skimming lies in its appearance of doing the impossible. A thrown stone sinks in water immediately. So, to witness one skating across the surface, displaying an unlikely buoyancy as it takes a series of bouncing jumps, seems like the defiance of a natural law. Of course it isn't really. The stone will sink eventually, as soon as the momentum of the skim peters out and there's nothing left to power the continuance of that linked series of little leaps that slice across the surface like a flotilla of miniature miracles. But for the duration of its improbably graceful progress, it's as if the iron imperative of sinking has been suspended.

In addition to the lure of performing a kind of alchemy and making a stone glide across the surface instead of being swallowed by the water, transmuting the lead of its dense grounded heaviness into the gold of flight, there's the compelling nudge of an intrinsic, low-key competitiveness. Every skim competes with the one before and beckons for another try as the thrower attempts to best the number of jumps the skimmed stone takes and the distance that it travels from the shore. For reasons that I don't think I could easily explain, getting a stone to bounce seven times is far more satisfying than only achieving three bounces. Likewise a twenty meter throw is far more rewarding than one that covers only half that distance. Could it be that such skills are a vestigial echo of the hunting prowess that allowed our species to flourish? Perhaps when we perform them well it stirs some ancient sense of aboriginal satisfaction. Certainly the pleasure of skimming seems to tap into something deeper than the activity itself can easily account for.

When I first saw my father skimming, I was entranced. My picture of that moment is of a little boy—seven at most—watching spellbound as stone after stone was made to dance across the water. Suspended in the slicing line of temporary incisions that perforated the surface, their spinning momentum let them clip the water and continue on. They commanded the gaze to follow their trajectories, as unlikely on first encounter as seeing someone walking on the water. The skite and splash of each stone as it made its journey from my father's hand to the moment when it sank acted like punctuation marks written on the blank page of the sea. They gave the impression that between them, not yet visible, there was the thread of some narrative

whose sentences the skimming stones would pull out and quickly arrange into sense. I watched as carefully as I attended to the unfolding of a story and, thinking about it now, I can see a definite consonance between my father as stone-skimmer and my father as the storyteller who lulled me to sleep at bedtime with impromptu made-up tales that skittered their unlikely plotlines across the still waters of my tired child's mind every night before sinking with me into the dream-laced deep. I'm not sure why, but the fact that no story ever did emerge to join the dots of dad's skimmed stones left more of a tantalizing sense of something imminent, just beneath the surface, still to come, rather than disappointment that the sea's blank page remained inscrutable, marked only by the ripples the stones left in their wake.

My picture of myself as a little boy watching my father skimming puts us in Rathmullan, a village in Donegal on the shores of Lough Swilly, on Ireland's beautiful northwest coast. We holidayed there for two weeks every summer for years, enjoying the contrast that this seaside haven offered to the workaday urban world of the town near Belfast where we lived. But memories of so long ago are suspect. Remembering bears little resemblance to the process by which a kinesthetic skill like skimming is inscribed upon the flesh and held there, pitch perfect, for years. My picture of my childhood self standing on that Donegal beach enraptured by his father's skimming can't boast anything like the degree of exactitude that the recall of the action itself possesses. Such images are vulnerable to a whole series of glitches in the genetics of their remembering. It's easy to confuse similar times and places—maybe that first witnessing of skimming happened not in Rathmullan but in Dunfanaghy, another Donegal seaside village where we stayed. Perhaps I was ten not seven. As we look back on them, the years have a tendency to merge and blur, rather than each maintaining the strict integrity of its twelve-month duration. And it's hard—perhaps impossible—to ensure that the past is preserved intact, brought back exactly as it was, rather than being overwritten with what happened later, or angled according to the imperatives of the present. I suspect most memories approximate more closely to palimpsests than the original manuscripts we too often take them for.

Watching my father skimming and learning how to skim myself—through that mix of imitation and instruction by which so much passes from one generation to the next—these are memories from half-a-century ago. What made me think of them again was one of those occasions when the present places its steps into old footprints, reawakening them as it presses down the weight of its occurrence and leaves its own tread amidst what's already there. Nearly all the paths we follow are densely marked with the

spoor of the generations before us. We add our own tracks, which will in turn be covered by whoever walks here next. Skimming stones on that deserted Scottish beach, about the same age as I remember my father being in Rathmullan when I learnt the skill from him, I'm being watched by my daughter. Like me all those years ago, she's intrigued at the way a stone can be made to do what seems impossible and is eager to learn for herself how to conjure its strange skipping progress across the water.

Together we search through the shingle for possible skimmers, selecting and discarding until we have a small heap of close-to-perfect stones. We stand side-by-side at the water's edge and throw, refining each attempt according to the success or failure of the one before. She alternates between observer and practitioner, between listening to advice on how to do it, watching how it's done, and attempting it herself. Gradually the blueprint is transferred, so that what became my knowledge all those years ago becomes her knowledge too. And as this happens an old truth of teaching reasserts itself—namely that the teacher also learns from what they do, so that my own skimming improved as I showed her how it's done.

Thinking about the invisible transference of what's written into my nerves and muscles to what's written into my daughter's, I wonder about the history of this process of transmission. How did it begin? Someone, somewhere must have been the world's first skimmer—an individual who discovered it independently of watching any precursor. I wonder if there was a single point of beginning, one innovative stone-thrower, a singular moment of ignition, which sparked our knowledge—a *fons et origo* from which all subsequent skimming was derived. It's just as likely, though, to have been a skill discovered independently, at different times and in different places, by a whole range of different hands. But whether there was just one point of genesis or a cluster of pioneers, each sparking their own lineages of learning, the skill spread through the human tribe like rings of water moving outwards from a stone's point of impact when it's dropped into a pool. There are expressions for skimming in almost every language—their different intonations stand testament to how the skill's ripple effect has been caught and further transmitted through a score of different vocabularies. It's interesting how often the words chosen to describe a stone's jumping over water are frog-related. In languages as diverse as Bengali and Bulgarian, in regions as far apart as southern India and Eastern Europe, skimming is referred to as “frog jumps,” “making frogs,” or just “frogs.” Ducks are another frequent point of reference—in Britain skimming is sometimes referred to as “ducks and drakes,” in Polish as “letting the ducks out.” The Hungarian for skim-

ming means making a stone waddle like a duck. The words we use are like little linguistic stones aping the skimming that they name as they spin their meanings from one mind to another.

I imagine some Paleolithic hunter throwing stones at ducks or geese swimming on a glassy-surfaced lake. One stone happens to catch the water at just the right angle to buoy it along a series of leaps before it sinks. Intrigued, the hunter tries again, works on the skill and slowly masters it. Or perhaps it was discovered by children playing or by someone beachcombing who idly tossed a few stones into the sea and one of them happened not to sink immediately. Whatever its ultimate historical point—or points—of beginning, I know I learned skimming from my father in the same way that he learnt it from his. I know I taught my daughter. Based on such modest tracings back from the current endpoints of skimming's family tree, it's easy to imagine something of this skill's bloodline as it stretches back through the generations. But beyond this single thread of transmission, of which only a fragment is visible, there must be a vast capillary network of daunting complexity, a maze of multiple interconnections. Skimming's ancestry soon sees the roots of any simple family tree vanish into the mists of uncertainty as supposition and guesswork render its links increasingly tentative. In the absence of an exhaustive genealogy, knowing with certainty only a minuscule segment of its bloodline, I picture skimming as an ancient filament that's wired through the labyrinth of human being like an intricate spider's web, stretching back as far as some distant ancestor's densely-haired strong arm. Or—who knows?—perhaps this skill predates the dawning of our species and has its origins in a thrower who was closer to an ape than a human.

Thinking of the first hand to release the first skimmed stone prompts me to wonder also about the last hand that will ever be thus employed. How many more generations will the skill of skimming pass through? Of course it's as impossible to identify the last skimmer as it would be to identify the first or to plot the where and when of such unconsciously epochal moments. But sometimes, looking at human history, looking at the present we've created, considering the damage we've inflicted on the land and sea and air around us, *Homo sapiens* seems not unlike a skimmed stone nearing the end of its momentum, a species that's petering out, victim of its own proliferation. I hope at least that my daughter will have the opportunity to pass on skimming to her children and they to theirs and the generation following. If wisdom could be passed on like skimming, wired as securely to the blood as the knowledge of how to choose and throw stones across water, perhaps the outlook for us would be better, but this hard-to-acquire accomplishment

seems even harder to communicate from one generation to another.

When I was a boy I liked to throw things, so—unsurprisingly—I took to skimming like a proverbial duck to water. It appealed on some visceral level that required no reflection. Doing it was unaccompanied by any thought beyond choosing the best stone, aiming the throw, counting the leaps, and assessing the distance covered so that the next skim could do better than the one before. Skimming offered mild satisfaction when it worked, mild frustration when it didn't. It was as uncomplicated, as unselfconscious an action as running or kicking a ball. But when I skimmed stones with my daughter across that Scottish bay, although the same visceral pleasure was there, it was overwritten by thoughts my boyhood self would never have entertained. They brought to skimming a more reflective turn of mind than the one that accompanied his happy-go-lucky chucking of stones across water.

I don't mean by this that I've adopted the kind of outlook that makes skimming into something serious, almost professional—more systematic, regulated, and competitive than the casual settings that, for me, have always characterized it. I know that world stone-skimming championships have been held annually since 1997 on Easdale, the smallest inhabited island of Scotland's Inner Hebrides. Competitors are judged in terms of the distance skimming takes a stone—the only stipulation being that it must bounce for a minimum of three times before sinking. A disused quarry offers a large pool of undisturbed water that's ideal for this event, as are the pieces of Easdale slate that were once taken from it. There's also a North American Stone Skipping Association (NASSA), which likewise holds competitive events, though their ranking is based on the number of skips a stone makes on the surface of the water rather than just the distance that it travels. According to *The Guinness Book of Records*, an astonishing 88 skips were achieved by a skimmed stone flung by one Kurt Steiner at Red Bridge in Allegheny National Forest. Such things spark slight, wry interest, but they were far from my thoughts as I sent stones skimming across that Scottish bay.

Neither do I mean—when I say this most recent skimming prompted a more reflective turn of mind—that I focused on the physics of the process, how a skimmed stone obeys the conservation of momentum principle, acting like a kind of flying saucer that generates enough lift to skitter across the surface, its angle and thrust pressing down on the water, the gyroscopic effect of its spin setting up enough rotational velocity to cut a channel of smooth transit between air and water, an invisible flight-path along which a stone rides, cushioned, until the moment when it sinks. I know that scientists have studied the process and provided detailed explanations, looked

at how changes of speed, angle, and rotation affect it, offered calculations and equations to explain how skimming happens and to show its obedience to mathematical and natural laws. But I'm not any more interested in the theoretical underpinnings than I am in the competitions or the records.

Skimming stones that day with my daughter I was struck by the way in which what we were doing bore with it a symbolic significance that pointed far beyond the simple process of casting stones across water in this way. Of course it's easy to dismiss skimming as something ineluctably shallow, a mere skittering over surfaces, an action that intrinsically lacks depth. But it can also tap into other resonances of metaphor and meaning beyond these usual tropes of superficiality. As I watched the flat stones my daughter and I skimmed across the water, it struck me that our lives are skimmed across the fabric of space-time. Each individual in essence follows the same trajectory, whatever individual variations we might embroider on its underlying theme. We find ourselves thrown across an unknown number of years and only notice our whereabouts when life has already skipped some way along its span. We skitter our way precariously across our moments of existence and then vanish, sinking beneath the water of being as surely as a skimmed stone sinks once the lift of its momentum has been spent. Looking at the way in which my and my daughter's stones clipped their way across the water's surface, I had a sense—a hope—of hers continuing far beyond the point at which mine will disappear, and her offspring's throws subsequently reaching out still further, beyond whatever lifespan she'll enjoy. We skim life on from one generation to the next. Our throws, contained within the channels of embrace, follow moves wired into us as indelibly as the carnal blueprints that tell us how to walk or cry. The shudder and spurt of seed, like shoals of skimmed stones in miniature, patter their trajectories across those secret inner seas whose tides sculpt and re-sculpt our flesh, our bodily forms arising from and vanishing into the waters of mortality that are streaked and pitted with our presence and our absence.

I'm not sure why skimming—once so matter-of-fact and of the moment—became that day something more symbolic. As I stood with my daughter on the shore it felt almost sacramental, as if we were engaged in a ritual that points beyond its own simple form to something far less ordinary. Perhaps it was just an upshot of the heightened sense of life's brevity and end that comes with age. For whatever reason, the innate superficiality of skimming came into different focus and the stones took on new resonances of meaning. For all the sophistication of our knowledge and technology, fundamentally there remains a sense in which we don't know who we are, why we're

here, what we should do with our time, or what happens to us when it ends. Such imponderables, life's "big questions," glazed skimming with a reflective surface so that it became a kind of metaphysical mirror reflecting the essentials of our situation. In it I could see my life skittering briefly across the surface of existence, speeding its way over incomprehensible depths until the moment when it vanishes into them, joining on a hard-to-grasp seabed of extinction the billions of other life-stones whose spin is stilled, whose flight has ended. It is a bleak enough picture. But finding such a likeness embedded in something as straightforward as skimming is also strangely satisfying. It's as if its simple fluency has caught precisely, almost without trying, the likeness of a fleeting feature in a difficult piece of portraiture.

Where, at this moment, is the first stone that was ever skimmed? Does it still exist as an identifiable whole, or has it been so eroded over the millennia that all that remains is a disparate cloud, a dust of dispersed particles? Perhaps, buried in the soft encasing mud at the bottom of an African lake, it retains its form. I imagine some great cataclysm of the earth releasing it from there—a violent hatching from its protective chrysalis followed by such storms and currents that it's brought at last to some distant shore to be picked up and flung again by the hand that casts the last skimmed stone ever to be thrown by our species. Such an unlikely closing of the loop is of course pure fantasy. The probability of such a dotting of apocalyptic "i"s and "t"s must be so close to zero as to be indistinguishable from it. I was minded to imagine this grim fantasia of the future because of a much less unlikely scenario from the past. The Scottish bay where I taught my daughter how to skim is overlooked by the ruins of an Iron Age fort. That made me wonder if its occupants had ever skimmed stones as they walked along the same beach where we searched for our stones. If so—which is surely close to certain—might the tides over the years have shuffled and returned them, so that some of those same stones were heaped in the shingle and among those chosen by us to skim again that day?

I like the thought of skimming again a stone that had been skimmed centuries ago by an unknown figure standing where I stand today. The possibility seems to kindle a sense of tribal solidarity, a feeling of connection, continuity, and continuance forged by a common communion, our all taking part in a familiar human action that has remained essentially unchanged across all the changing generations. To hold in my hand a skimmer selected and thrown by a hand several thousand years ago turns an ordinary stone into a kind of talisman of the extraordinary. Under its impact I can feel my veins and arteries breaking out of their imprisonment in the individual cir-

cuitry of my body to entangle and connect with the blood that, for a moment, centuries ago, warmed this same stone that now sits in my palm. I would clutch such an artifact close, keep it with me, savor the mystery it's imbued with—a mystery in which all of us are implicated.

It seems odd that as my life draws to an end, as the skimmed stone of my being slows and falters, I'll remember the skill of how to skim a stone across water far better than I'll remember so many other things I value more. It will be securely stored in the vaults that flesh and blood provide. They will contain it, keep it safe, until they are themselves dissolved. Even if I become so feeble that I can no longer throw, even if I no longer remember my name or recognize my children, I've every confidence that my nerves and muscles will still have laid down in their repertoire, even if I can't perform it, every step and move of skimming. The script will still be there, written into the bones, readable even if I've become blind to books and faces. And I wonder when and where my own last skimmed stone will sink and if it might in time find its way into another skimmer's hand. It's comforting to picture that, as it is to imagine that, whatever travails may await me in the years ahead, there will be others elsewhere entirely unconcerned, idly skimming stones across water, counting the leaps, measuring the distance, trying again, deriving simple pleasure from this simple act that humans have played with for so many millennia.