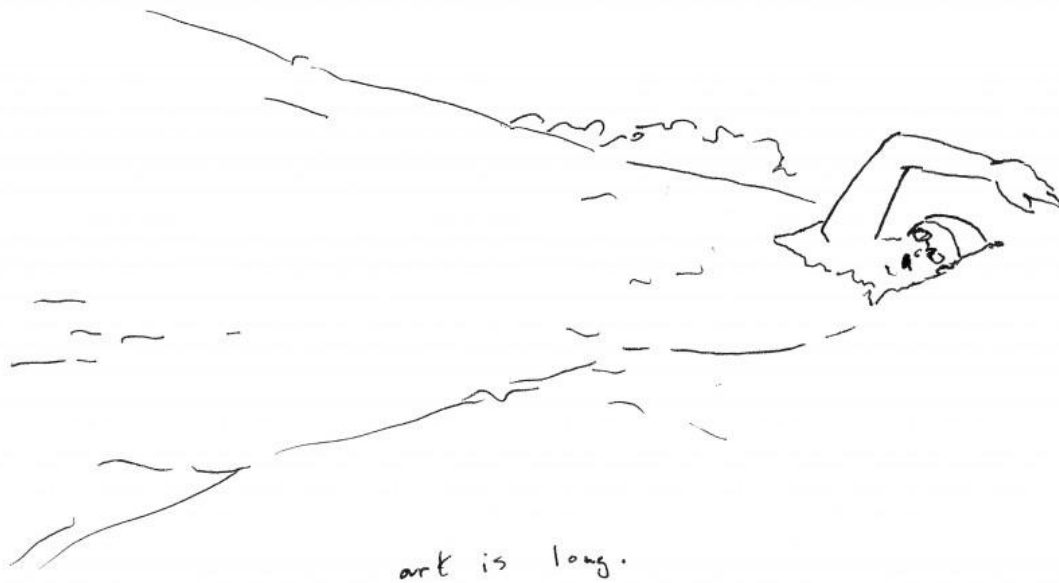




THE SWIMMER

By Andrew Forbes
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life is short



RICK TAYLOR SWIMS. He strokes evenly, rhythmically, breathes smoothly. We are perhaps ten minutes into a swim that will take him an hour and twenty-three minutes. I am in a kayak over his right shoulder “spotting”, which means, so far as I can tell, safeguarding the bag of water bottles and Gatorade stashed between my knees, and being alert for signs of distress. The mid-morning sun is hot and the lake, here on the northwestern side of Birch Island, is calm. It occurs to me only once or twice that, should I identify those signs of distress, there really isn’t much I’ll be able to do about it. Haul him onto my kayak, tipping us both? Luckily (luckily?) it’s a drought year, and the water level of Sand Lake is down, my experience tells

me, anywhere from 12 to 18 inches. Most of the places he'll be swimming today, he won't be far from a spot where he can simply stand up.

His wife, Dale, who waits back at the dock, told me that Rick, with his earplugs in and his head dipping beneath the water, will not hear me if I call. "You have to splash him with your paddle if you need his attention," she said. But periodically he will break his rhythm and poke his head above the surface of the lake to tell me something that has occurred to him.

"'In the Summertime'" by Mungo Jerry," he says. "Know it? That's what I'm singing." Then he dips back below, and in another moment he pops up again. "Good song." The island is on our right and we are circumnavigating it in a clockwise fashion. To our left lie a few small islands and beyond, like mirage, the open lake.

Rick is 59 years old and in marvellous shape. He is a writer and a teacher and he is, without exaggeration, the reason I still wake up unreasonably early and stay up late into the night to write stories and essays and pieces like this one that very few people, if any, will actually read.

He has to his name two books of fiction and a lovely hybrid of memoir/rumination on mortality/how-to book (specifically, how to be a house husband)/surfing chronicle entitled *House Inside the Waves*. He is also at work on a new book, to be called *Water and Desire*, exploring the "erotic, dangerous, relaxing, philosophical, religious and obsessive" aspects of swimming. As part of the process of writing this one, he has been all over the world, swimming in bodies of water with some aspect of literary significance or other. He has, at the time of our swim, only just returned from northern Michigan, having followed Hemingway's ghost there to swim in Walloon Lake, not far from the tip of the Upper Peninsula. Walloon was the Hemingway family's getaway spot when the writer was a boy, and it helped forge his love of the outdoors. Rick has also taken an unauthorized dip in the pool at Papa's Key West house. He is, it's safe to say, committed to this project.

Water and Desire is, nominally, the reason he is here with me, swimming around the island whereupon sits my wife's family's cottage, about which I have spoken so reverently and in such idyllic terms in his presence for better

than a decade now. I think that when he conceived of this book he had in mind swims with writers who he knew personally. The scope has changed, I believe, and I don't expect him to write about the day we are spending together, though that hardly matters. What matters is that we have finally succeeded, after years of trying, in coordinating our schedules and organizing a visit here. He and Dale have come to Birch Island to see me and my now considerably larger family. He is swimming and I am nearby in a kayak. The wind is all but dead and the water is perfect. It's a hot Monday morning in August, getting hotter. Back at the cottage, halfway down the island, Dale is on the dock, camera ready, and my wife and three kids putter and play.

Moments pass with the only sound the metronome of Rick's strokes and the dig of my paddle. He pops up again, modifies into an easy breast stroke, and with his chin indicates a bay nearby. "That where we're going?"

"No," I say, "Up and around, through those narrows." I point further to the north. He sees where I am pointing and nods, plunges back into his effortless looking crawl.

So I am navigator, too. It's an interesting reversal, it seems to me, as for years Rick has been helping me to find my way.

I MET RICK when I took his workshop at Carleton University in the fall/winter 2001 semester. I don't now remember what was in the portfolio I submitted earlier that year (I'm certain it was terrible), but a phone call came in August telling me I'd gained entry into Richard Taylor's Fiction Workshop. It was the first workshop in which I'd ever participated, and with Rick's total lack of bluster or forced solemnity, it spoiled me for later ones.

In his class, students learn to be attuned at all moments, because Rick will call on anyone, and he will say anything to enliven discussion. He is a quick, lateral thinker; his ideas skitter like stones skipping off water. When I was in his Carleton workshop, just days after 9/11, he gauged the tension in the room, an English classroom on an upper floor of Dunton Tower, the highest building on campus, and acted to relieve it. "We're all just staring at those windows waiting for a fucking plane to come crashing through," he said, which shocked the hell out of us, but broke our silence, which I'm certain

was his goal.

I've seen him do similar since, in any one of a handful of ensuing workshops I've taken with him, run out of the back of Collected Works Bookstore in west end Ottawa. He will bring in his homemade cookies, or say something outlandish, or offer a story about swimming in the presence of sharks in Byron Bay, Australia. In all of it, his underlying message is: writing is too serious to be taken too seriously. And this, which he repeats like a mantra: READ, WRITE, PUSH.

It feels like ancient history to me now, but something happened to me back then in the darkening fall and early winter of 2001, something I hadn't then anticipated. I had gone into his workshop hoping to see if the vague idea I'd once harboured – of becoming a writer – was worth entertaining anymore, or if it was time to discard the fantasy altogether. I was scared and dumb and looking, in a way that I too often do, to be confronted with a big sign. I was wrongly viewing this workshop as a reckoning of some kind, a hinge, when in fact it was, as most things are, just another point in a long sequence of them. An education, if I could be made to see it that way. A shaping experience.

The fact that I kept at it thereafter tells you everything you need to know about Rick's class, and the several community workshops of his that I have taken since. He told me I was a writer. He encouraged me, and he introduced me to the work of writers, like Richard Ford, about which I had known nothing. I have watched him do likewise for dozens of other writers. And in the years since I have moved away from Eastern Ontario and out of his orbit, he has proven a constant in my life, offering further encouragement, being a champion of my work, a cheerleader, and a reassuring voice in my ear. He seems to know just when to surface, shooting off an email in my direction with an update, or suggesting a magazine or contest I should check out, or simply reminding me that he's there. He is a former teacher, yes, but something more, something not suggested by that phrase. Friend. Mentor. Inspiration.

AS HE STANDS on the cottage's deck applying sunscreen while I get my kayaking things, I have to resist a physical comparison, for I wouldn't fare

well. About equal to my 6'3" but appearing taller for the length of his limbs, there isn't an inch of fat on him. He has the physique of an athlete in his prime, coupled with the face, as he says, of Nick Nolte. Deep-lined and sculptural. Eyes sunken, wary and hungry. I have seen photos of him as a younger man, and not much has changed. This is the fringe benefit of a life lived in devotion to water, and in the worshipful practices of surfing and swimming.

Life is short, he has told me, and art is long. Life, one suspects, is longer for those who can achieve such a physical condition. It is in his limbs, his core. He does not happily sit still. One imagines the discipline involved in roping such a body to a life of writing. One pictures pacing, jittery knees, spastic explosions with arms shooting off above the head.

I'm all of thirty-six. He's fifty-nine. A father of two girls, now grown, and soon to be a grandfather. I try to think of things I could do in a sustained manner for an hour and twenty-three minutes. There aren't many. But immersion, Rick has shown me, is what's needed. Total attention to the forces beneath the surface. To dip beneath the waves and resurface only for air, and continue that way until you get there.

WE CONTINUE AROUND the tip of Birch Island, past Saints Rest, the first cottage built on the island, better than a hundred years ago. Sand Lake is part of the Rideau Canal system which connects Ottawa and Kingston. Birch Island is a slab of granite and greenery that began life as a narrow peninsula, but became an island in the 1820s when Colonel By moved through, building a dam at Jones Falls that pushed the water level up enough to isolate it. It was in the hands of the Birch family (hence the name) who farmed the land on the near shore, and used it to graze cattle until it was purchased by developers and carved into lots in the late '60s. My wife's parents bought in soon thereafter, and built their own cabin which we still visit religiously from early summer through autumn. It's an idyllic place, a steady point of quiet in an increasingly cacophonous world; car-free, lush, kid friendly. I have done untold hours of reading there, and swimming, and paddling. Food tastes better on Birch Island. Sleep lasts longer. The sun feels kinder.

But that sun is damned hot as the morning wears on toward noon, and we

are in the full glare of it now as we near the Glovers' Marina. As part of the Rideau, Sand Lake is prone to heavy boat traffic during the height of summer, especially here, where boats must pass as they make their way between the locks at Jones Falls to the east, and Davis Lock, to the west. But we encounter no boats, and Rick continues smoothly, apparently easily, on his way. When we hit the far side of the island we run into the wind, kicked up by that intensifying sun, and the water is choppy. If it bothers Rick he doesn't let it show, while I must paddle harder to hold a straight line.

As I am wondering what he does to occupy his mind during such a swim, Rick pops up and says, "Seeing lots of fish now," and then ducks back below. Up again: "Bass." And then: "Sunfish." A few strokes later: "Snakes and turtles."

He is, even to my ignorant eye, a marvellous swimmer. Every component of his stroke is clean, pure. His arms are loose and yet rigid. His breathing occurs in a tiny addendum to his motion, not a special detour in the process, as it is for me. His hands are blades, and his feet beat as steady as a paddleboat's wheel. In watching him I appreciate the true efficiency of the human body in water, our second element. If Richard Taylor hadn't been a writer, might he have been a competitive swimmer? I don't think so. I don't think such a thing is in his personality. He used to participate in Masters Swimming meets, but stopped. Competition is beside the point for him, completely. He goes beneath the water to confront himself and the world itself, not other people in it. It's a solitary pursuit, a means of encountering, as he calls it, the "Big Mystery," and not of proving his physical prowess. It's sport as a means of expressing humanity's place within nature, not dominance over it.

Read, write, push, he'll tell me later, again. As true now as it was then. Stroke, stroke, breathe. Steadily on toward the goal. The far shore. Some days there are strong headwinds, other days the water lays out flat before you, flawless as a supine page.

We navigate the narrow passage at the western end of Birch Island, where a bridge used to stand, the water there shallow, sludgy and weedy. It is

choked with water lily and rushes. Just on the far side of that, where the lake begins to open up, an hour or so into the swim, he pauses. He leans back and looks at the sky, then asks for a bottle, which I uncap and hand to him. He drinks and rests, while I marvel at the strength required to tread water while drinking Gatorade and carrying on a conversation about Hemingway and swimming with Vicki Keith, about the measures required to sustain and safeguard and motivate a distance swimmer like Keith on a marathon swim (“She was puking in the water, just turning her head and puking, while she swam.”). It is quiet here, no wind, we are totally sheltered. Things move slowly along the shore and the cicadas’ trilling rises and subsides, rises and subsides.

And then he hands me back the bottle, rolls over onto his front, and starts in again. I cap the Gatorade, stash it between my knees, and begin paddling after him. Stroke, stroke, breathe. Smooth as a machine, Rick Taylor is swimming. His head back beneath the water, alone, he is there, lost to me and to the world, once more perfectly unreachable.

Andrew Forbes is the author of liner notes, short stories and countless music essays. His stories have been published in The Feathertale Review, Found Press Quarterly and PRISM International. He also writes about music at thisisourmusic.ca and iCrates.org. Nothing qualifies him to write about sports save for a lifetime of unhealthy obsession, careful consideration and gutpunch heartbreak. He lives in Peterborough, Ontario. Follow him on Twitter @ForbesAG.