

# The Undertow

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I keep going back in the ocean  
to throw another child up on the jetty  
and I can't swim, but I can't stop myself.  
Everything I do is in response  
to my father's death.

Grief and guilt are my buoyancy.

In 1991, he died of a heroin overdose  
in an America that didn't  
care about him.  
I am angry.  
I stay angry  
even when I am laughing.

My dad came to me for prayer.  
Admitted to slipping back.  
Tugged my hand toward the floor.  
We kneeled like children  
in a prayer book.  
Elbows on the cushion  
of a blue sofa.

He thought my faith  
had power. Thought my  
God had answers. So after his death,  
I set out to prove that we  
are not powerless.

I parented my children under  
the weight of this grief.  
Taught kids to read.  
Wrote until my vision blurred.  
Danced like I was trying  
to get rid of something.

I am tired. I stay tired.  
But not one day will go by  
without me trying  
to swim in an ocean that has tried  
to drown me many times.

The first time, I was five.  
My father was getting high  
under the boards.  
I strolled off in a red bikini, with a teal  
pail full of seashells and sand.  
I walked out too far.  
Waves twisted me like seaweed.  
The ocean was ready  
to receive me like coral.

A lifeguard reached his hand down,  
yanked me up by my braids,  
and flipped me into a boat  
with such force he bruised my back.  
It is one of the greatest acts of love  
I have ever known.

He did not love me,  
but I think he loved  
life, and maybe he loved  
children or humanity.  
It didn't matter  
that I was brown.  
That is how I want  
America to love me.  
That is how I wanted  
America to love my father.

Whenever I get angry at white  
America, I think of that lifeguard,  
his pink lips over mine,  
breathing breath into my lungs,  
pale hands compressing  
my chest. My ribs cracking  
till I spit out an African  
knifefish flapping without fins.

Now every day I grab  
a brown child,  
I realize we are both afraid  
of the same water,  
but I must pretend  
I know what I am doing,  
and sometimes after a long day  
of throwing child after child  
up on the jetty,

I want to stop moving.  
Let the ocean have me

with one hand up.  
Eyes wide open.

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