



NOTES FROM THE DIVING BOARD

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The page is a yawning, swirling void into which I must jump.

Jump.

Jump.

Ok, now jump!

I remember thinking this as I stood on the edge of a high diving board as a child. The pool lay below me, and a terrible blank expanse of air between me and it. I felt like the connection between my body and my brain had been cut. My legs were two saplings, rooted to the board.

Jump.

Each time I write I must dive, jump through my fears and into the page, into the realm of chaotic ideas that inhabit it.

Fear can take many forms, but for me it expresses itself most of all as a tendency to avoid: to constantly stop and read (pretending to look for inspiration when really I am looking for escape) or to aimlessly surf the web without even the pretention of productivity. My fear can have different flavors depending on the type of writing, on time, on place, on my current mental moodscape, but it always comes back to one simple notion: I'm not good enough. That's it. I am afraid because I suspect that I am inadequate, that there is nothing I have to say which has not been said before, that no one will want to read what I have written.

Though I am lucky, or unlucky, enough to consider myself a writer, I worry that my soul is somehow different from those of the Great Masters. I torture myself with thoughts that they must have had hearts of ink and paper fiber, while mine is nothing but a lump of flesh. That their power and scope of imagination must have been like Hubble telescopes to my toy binoculars. That they were special, and I am not. *Oh, I find myself thinking, I am so ordinary, so dull. All of my ideas smell of mildew and mothballs.*

These thoughts can paralyze a writer, can make it all too easy to never write anything at all. Once, near the beginning of my work on this piece, I fell into an agonizing crisis. I wondered who I thought I was, what absolute gall I must have had to think I had something to say about fear and writing. I, who so clearly had not found any perfect escape from fear, who was even at that moment trapped within its jaws. I almost gave up then and there.

But I remembered the pride and satisfaction that I have found shepherding a piece of writing through its development: the beauty of watching ideas, images, and metaphors mature draft by draft. I remembered the passions and desires that had driven me to begin this piece in the first place. The rewards of getting past fear are enormous. The works that we create are infinitely richer than the pale images that float in our heads before we start.

And so...

I jump.

I dive.

I take that leap, terrifying and electrifying, into the page, never knowing exactly what I will find down there. Not the calm, sterile waters of a YMCA swimming pool, this is certain. Nor the ordered world of someone else's finished work. Here, I am in the wild, swirling waters of my own ideas—a vast ocean limited only by the distant boundaries of all that I have ever experienced, read, thought, intuited. Such wonder and relief to find myself here. The jump is never as bad as I imagine.

These waters are filled with floating memories, strange creatures, pearls of knowledge. Sometimes the water is clear, lucid; I move effortlessly through it. More often it is cloudy, everything swirls before my eyes with no more order than might be found inside a hurricane. How did the Great Masters navigate this chaos? Am I lacking some essential tool that they possessed? What if my ocean is too strange, too incomprehensible? What if these waters are dead zones from which nothing can be dredged but bits of plastic and bone? *I need air!* But to quit, to stop writing, is to acquiesce to the fear that I am not good enough. *Relax*, I must tell myself, *swim, surface, examine what you have brought up from the deep, and then take a deep breath and dive again.*