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The Touch of Water



MAR 14 • BY WILLIAM THOMPSON

It was his right foot, at first. He noticed it at the top of the stairs—the cold touch of water.

He swore.

He hated wet socks.

He looked down, but nothing was there—no water, no wet sock. He wriggled his toes experimentally. They felt clammy. He reached down to touch his woolen sock. Dry.

He decided to ignore it—for now. He shoved on his backyard shoes and went noisily outside. Carrying a bag of garbage in one hand and a bag of recycling in the other, he tramped out to the trash cans in the alley. The October air was cool but heavy, the scent of damp and decay on the air. He took a slow breath as he paused in the alley, looking up at the pine that rose into the pale sky.

Back in the house, he checked his sock again. His toes still felt wet, but his sock was dry. He wondered but tried to forget it.

All day, he swore his sock was wet. He checked, repeatedly and obsessively, but every time it was the same. His sock was dry. It was irritating. He tried not to speak sharply to his children.

He managed to forget about it after the kids were in bed. He poured a scotch and drank it at the kitchen counter, counting down his sips, feeling his body relax into the glow of the whiskey.

The next morning, he felt his foot dip into something wet as he sat at the edge of the bed. He swore, then looked down. Nothing. The carpet was dry. Again, he tried to ignore it.

He dressed, then called to the kids as he strode into the kitchen. Sleepy objections came from both rooms. He set about making coffee and lunches.

The coffee helped, but now he could feel that his foot was definitely wet. He stripped off the socks he had pulled on earlier and went barefoot. His foot felt slippery, but when he dragged it experimentally across the floor, it didn't slip. He stood by the stove, stirring oatmeal, standing on his one dry foot, trying to ignore the wet feeling that clung to the other.

He made a game out of it. While the kids ate breakfast, he hopped around the kitchen on his dry foot as he packed lunches into brown bags, getting a laugh from the oldest and a reluctant smile from the youngest.

It worsened as the day drew on. By the time he was walking up the sidewalk to the house, he could feel squelching in his shoe. He called hello as he unlocked and pushed open the door, and hung his coat on a hanger. He removed his shoe—nothing. A normal, brown shoe, a smear of mud along the outside of the heel. The inside was dry, of course. He looked at his sock. Dry, as well.

He learned to ignore the feeling as the days passed. He made dinner, got the kids to bed, talked with his ex-wife on the phone. All the while, the wading feeling grew. At the end of the first week, he could feel both feet splashing through water, like walking at the edge of a lake. He could hear it—the water. It sloshed around his ankles, his calves, then his knees. The water he moved through was resistant, like water in the real world. Only this wasn't real; it was just a feeling—a strange feeling, but all in his head. He couldn't ignore it, but he learned to isolate that part of his experience—to box it up and put it away.

He took to wearing cargo shorts, even though it was nearly November. He stood, one morning, staring out at the world, a skiff of snow concealing the detritus of autumn. If he stood still like this, he could ignore the water rising above his knees.

His children thought it was funny—that he wore shorts in winter.

“I’m pretending I’m at the beach,” he would say, kicking at the water he could feel on his legs.

They shrieked and wiped pretend water from their faces. They pretended to splash him back. Soon, they were swimming through the house, calling to whales and chasing away sharks.

At night, he dreamt of water, of every body of water he had ever visited.

He dreamt of the beach, as a boy, digging in the sand and watching the waves fill the trenches, dissolving the walls and towers of imaginary cities.

He walked the sand with a woman, hands clasped closely as they stepped over stones along the breaking water.

He ran through tide-pools, sea anemones brushing his calves.

He stood on a cliff overlooking the North Atlantic, the sea air biting his cheeks and cutting through his coat.

And he sat on another beach with small children, helping them build the civilizations of childhood, while the lake-water lapped a few feet away.

After Christmas, he wondered what he would do once he fully submerged. The water was up to his waist, now. Water was becoming his world, his waking and dreaming world. The holidays helped him to forget, but once the kids were back to school and the term under way, he had to work harder and harder to ignore it.

He laughed about it to himself, sometimes, as he splashed along through his slowly drowning world, while he walked to and from the train, the snow pelting his face and clinging to his woolen hat and coat. He wondered that no one at the University noticed. No one looked at him oddly; no one heard the liquid slosh as he walked the halls or lectured in his classes. Two weeks into the term, he took to standing still as

he taught—he couldn't stand the sound of the water that moved about him and threatened, as much as there was now, to drown out his voice.

He made a chart, keeping track of the rising water, now reaching his solar plexus. By the end of January, he thought he would have another six weeks, at most. By mid-March, the water, if it kept rising the way it had, would reach his face.

He assumed he would then just drown, drown in water that no one else could see or feel or hear. It might take a long time. He knew he would resist. He thought it might be a good thing to send the kids with their mom when it began to happen. He didn't want them to watch him drowning.

But he would drown—at least he thought so. How else could this end? He supposed it might not end that way, but how could he know? Maybe he wouldn't drown; maybe he would change. What if the water rose past his face and he began to slowly transform into something else—a sea creature, living in his private world of water, while the rest of the world went on as it did, as it always would.

He might see the world through a haze of blue, hearing the muffled sounds of the outside coming to him through the density of water. Perhaps he would change into something cold and slippery, or perhaps into a creature of myth. He thought, when the time came, he should place himself near a body of water, a lake, or a river, or the sea. So, when the water finally enclosed his face, he could slip into his new element, glide down into the depths, and begin the new life that awaited him there.

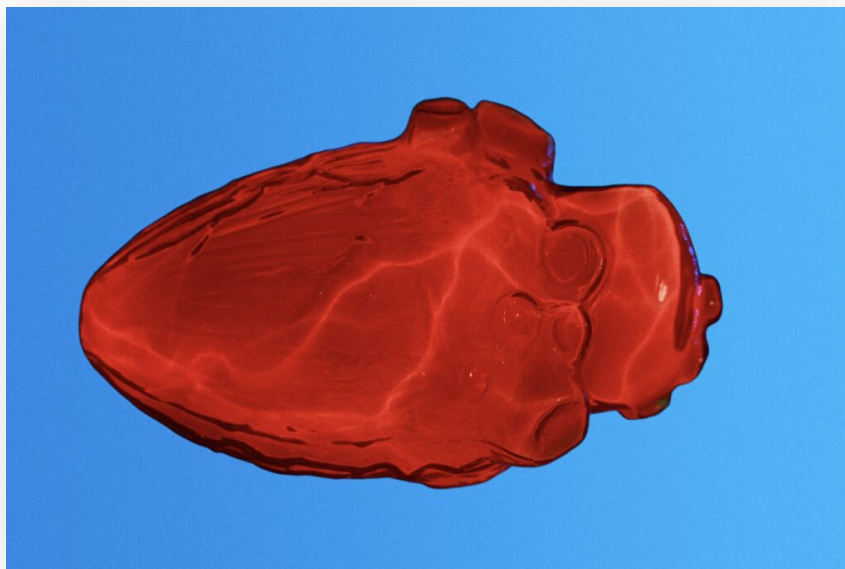


BY WILLIAM THOMPSON

William Thompson is an associate professor at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada, where he teaches a range of courses in children's and young adult literature and science fiction. His essays and stories have appeared in *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Zone 3*, *COG Magazine*, and *Firewords*. He is totally blind, considers coffee a food group, and he loves to walk and read, usually at the same time.

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POETRY



Nuestra Lengua Nativa

BY W.Z. TURNER

I told you, "no es importante"
I laid your head on my chest
told you, "escucha"
escucha la lengua de mi corazón