

## THE LOST ART OF SINKING

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The Lost Art  
of Sinking  
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Penned in the Margins

LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS  
Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB  
[www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk](http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk)

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

ISBN  
978-1-908058-29-4

2nd edition

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their generous friendship, brilliant advice and patient reading of this book at its various madcap stages: Toby Smart, Nicholas Royle, Kate Murray-Browne, Helen Jukes, Laura Joyce, Tom Houlton, Dulcie Few, Michael Fake, Kieran Devaney, Tom Chivers and Tom Bunstead. My parents, Jane and Ian Booth, have supported me in myriad ways, for which I am immensely grateful. I would also like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their sponsorship during the time that this work was written.



*for Michael Fake*



# The Lost Art of Sinking



I

*De-oxygenation*



I suppose you could call it a talent. A gift, perhaps. Except that I had to work at it. It didn't come straight away. The first time I tried it, I was thirteen years-old. I'd cut my teeth on mother grief, so I wanted it more than any of the others. We all filed into the hall together, the girls of 2B, in our burgundy skirts and uncooperative cardigans, pumps scuffing against the parquet. The secret crackled silently along the line of us. As we moved into place, we flickered our eyes towards one another, already aware of a slight shortness of breath: the effect of anticipation. Once the whole school was assembled, Mr Tweedle, perched on the stage above us, began his monologue: "Today's thought comes from Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi." His voice rose and fell away, with a mystic's cadence. "The great Persian poet and theologian. This is what he says to us: 'Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself'."

As Mr Tweedle expounded the history of the Sultanate of Rum and the Seljuq dynasty, we girls of 2B covertly scrutinised one another, to check that no one was starting before time. We all made a show of breathing as normally as possible – shoulders back, chests forward – and some of us furrowed our brows in a way that suggested a zero-tolerance approach to cheating. When the organ started up, the pages of hymn books rustled towards 'Blessed Assurance'. It was time: the game was afoot. Whilst seeming to sing, we began to make our breath as quick

and shallow as possible. I imagine we must have looked like tiny dogs, our heads bobbing as we panted between each word. We kept this up until the very last verse, at which point each of us held our breath for as long as possible. The boys around us knew that something strange was going on — we created a soft shushing sound, whipped up by the collective hyperventilation — but couldn't be sure quite what. Miss Briscoe stood at the side, anxiously surveying the line of us. Three of her girls had gone down in the previous week; she couldn't understand it. She'd given us all a long talk on the importance of a substantial breakfast.

But Leanne Hrymoc had got to us first. At a sleepover the weekend before, she had introduced the decision-makers of 2B to the Fainting Game. I wasn't included, but I got to hear about it soon enough.

"My cousin taught me. She's 16 and she's shagging that policeman," Leanne had said to the others. "It makes you go all russy. You feel like you're falling into a dream."

"Oh, I've heard of it. The *Dying Game*," Laura Murgatroyd had cut in. "I heard some girl in Barnsley killed herself doing it."

"Yeah, my sister calls it Indian Headrush," Anna McAvoy added. "You can *totally* die from it."

They had all agreed. We would secretly play the Fainting Game every day in assembly the following week. The winner

would be the girl who passed out the most times. Or, in the case of a tie, whoever passed out in the most dramatic way. If anyone died, they scored an automatic win. If more than one person died, the winner was the girl who died in the coolest way. No starving, no faking: it had to be real.

So I stood in line, my eyes beginning to glaze with the effort of concentration. I didn't really know what I was doing, back then. I dragged the air through my mouth in desperate, covert rushes; I could feel it roughing up the back of my throat. And as the hymn reached the final verse I gulped in everything I could. I quickly scanned along the line, searching for the girls who might be teetering. Laura, at my right-hand side, looked perfectly serene: eyes closed, mouth sealed. But she hadn't gone down yet either. Anna was looking more likely; her cheeks were flushed and her right hand had begun to flutter. I closed my eyes for extra disorientation. I tried to force my weight forwards, into the balls of my feet, to encourage disequilibrium. I let my head fall back slightly. And then I think it *almost* happened: the darkness behind my eyes began to swim into a kind of green. I tried to sink into it, to let my brain soften. But I was still a novice. My thoughts refused to blur. I could feel my brain ticking with concentration, all nerves and electricity. I could still follow the words of the hymnal; I could call to mind my lessons for that morning. And then I heard a scuffle down the line to my

left. I opened my eyes, and let go of my breath. A clearing had formed around Anna, who was curled on her side on the hall floor, with one arm around her head. Second time this week. She had fallen, audaciously, into the lead.

After school that day, I went back to Laura's house. The Murgatroyds lived in an enormous blackened vicarage in the bottom of the valley, next to the church. It was the sort of house we used to tell stories about when we were younger; everyone was a little bit scared of it. But I used to visit whenever I could. Really old people lived on the upper two floors, looked after by Laura's mother. I suppose it was some sort of small private care home, but it seemed like a far more mysterious and macabre arrangement back then. As we sat in Laura's bedroom, the calls of an old woman sired in, again and again, even when we turned the music up. Sometimes the woman screamed for a full five seconds. From Laura's bedroom window, I could see the old headstones in the churchyard, haphazard and laced with lichen. I rested my head against the glass as Laura practised her dance moves.

"What's wrong with you?" Laura shouted at me, jerking her way through her bogle finale. Laura was always singing along to ragga tracks in her patchy West Yorkshire patois. She came to a breathless stop on the bed. "Is it your mum, Esther?" Laura asked, lying down beside me, taking my hand and

stroking it. "Are you thinking of your mum?" she asked again, with the salacious solicitude all the girls had adopted since my mother died. Suddenly, everyone had wanted to be my best friend, to lead me into the girls' loos to share claustrophobic confidences about my grief.

"I'm thinking about the game." I withdrew my hand. "I just want to know what it's like."

AnnaMcAvoy had spent a long time at break euphorically filling us non-swooners in on what we were missing. She saw things, she said, before she went down. Strange and beautiful shapes; and they were *that* beautiful, they were what *made* her go. They were shapes she recognised, but didn't recognise. Like things returning; like ghosts, or something. It was like falling into a different world, she said. Leanne Hrymoc had laughed and said she was touched. But I thought it sounded like the most wonderful thing and I hoarded that possibility inside myself.

"I just want to see it. I want to feel it, like Anna did."

Laura thought for a while. "You *really* want to get out of your head? Off your face?"

"I suppose. If that's what it is..." I said.

"You know, there are other ways to do it."

"Yeah?"

"Like what my brother and his mates do on a weekend. Like gak."

“Gak?”

“You know.” Laura bit her lip with excitement.

I think I half-knew I was being duped, but I didn't care that much. I was willing to try almost anything. Laura said she had some arrangements to make. She disappeared for a couple of minutes, and then she came back for me. I followed her down to the cellar, where enormous washing machines sat on top of one another and there were two industrial dryers, to manage the old people's laundry. Grey flannel bedding was hung out at one end of the room and there was an old stone wash-sink in the middle, without any taps. We were below ground level here and one oblong window showed us the line of the churchyard grass above our heads. I remember the subterranean cold and how it seemed to seep inwards and upwards through the walls and floor. I began to think laterally, to imagine directly outwards through the earth of the churchyard, towards my mother. And then an image flashed into my head: a coffin full of hair. It was that thing people always say about dead bodies and the hair keeping on growing; I thought of my mother cocooned in her own prodigious hair.

“Let's get on with it,” I said.

“So,” Laura said, “here it is. The *stuff*.” There were two thick, grainy lines of white powder poured out in parallel on the stone sink. It made me think of quicklime.

“So what do we do?”

“We get down like this.” Laura bent over towards the surface, so that her nose was hovering over the powder crystals. She nipped one nostril closed with her first finger and mimed hoovering down the line. “And then you suck it up like that. You first!” Laura stepped back, the magnanimous host.

“Ok.” I stepped up. I shut down one side of my nose and sniffed up as hard as I could. I could feel the powder filling up the bottom of my nostril cavity, like a liquid. And then I could feel a sharp sting, burning up my sinuses.

“Ow,” I squawked. “Ow, ow, ow.”

“Does it not feel ... good?” Laura asked.

“It feels ... like it’s burning.” I was having to move from one foot to the other now, and fanning my hands at either side of my nose. “Is it supposed to feel like this?”

Laura watched me for a few moments with a strange expression on her face. “To be honest, Ettie, I thought I’d try you on soap powder first. Just to see if you could handle it. It’s all chemicals, right?” She swept her fat line of Daz down the plughole. “I think I’ll give it a miss.”

“Oh god,” I said. “I can feel it at the back of my throat. It’s disgusting.”

“So, maybe we need to, maybe, wash it out?”

We ran up to the bathroom and Laura held my hair, while I splashed water into my nose and mouth. I gargled

again and again, spitting out soap clouds, but my tongue kept on lathering.

Later, when it started to get dark, Mrs Murgatroyd said that my Dad would be worrying, that I should be going home. So I wound my way back along the canal path. I knew my Dad would still be at work and that the house would be empty. So I slowed down, dawdling despite the cold. I lent against the canal wall; it was so enormous, the wall, stones like boulders, that it seemed to hold back the banked-up earth of the whole valley, which rose above it. I looked into the black water, rippling from the edge where a coot was bedding down. I stared up to the horizon, the top of the other side of the valley where the last line of light was cracking over the hills. If I stayed much longer, I knew the canal path would be pitch dark and I'd have to feel my way home along the wall. I suppose it was a sort of intuition. The coming dark made it seem possible. So I started practising my breathing. I shuddered the air through my body as violently as possible. My throat was even more raw now and I could follow the circles that the air was making through me by its sting. As the last light sank below the horizon, I locked my breath inside my body. Everything went dark. Tiny fluttering stars started to appear beyond my eyes. The ground began to swim. I could feel everything in my body swoop suddenly downwards. And I stumbled back, into the dark, against the

wall. I was only out for a moment, but it was a start.