

July 10, 2015

Oh hey there. Hello. Thanks for letting me into your mailbox. It took a while to get here and ... I'm a little thirsty. Could I maybe have a glass of water?

I've been thinking some about water lately. I grew up in the Pacific NW surrounded by water on all sides and - while I appreciate the minimalism of the desert and the lush thickets of the woods - I get a little antsy when I'm too far away from water for long. I live now on Lake Michigan ~~and~~, a lake so vast it can be mistaken for a sea, and on a recent camping trip we spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out the exact difference between the two. I thought it was an issue of salt water (sea) vs. fresh (lake) but of course nothing is ever that simple. Seas are salty and part of the larger borderless global ocean. Lakes are bodies of water enclosed by land... but some of those ~~lakes~~ are salty and called seas ~~anyway~~ (the Caspian Sea, the Dead Sea). And then of course there's the Sea of Galilee, which is freshwater and enclosed and thus clearly a lake, ~~it~~ and whose name may derive more than anything from the relative dearth of overseas travel options for the early Galileans.

And, OK, speaking of water, and the Mediterranean, have you been following the Greek debt crisis? Why so many water metaphors when one discusses global finance? Why is debt "underwater" rather than, say, "underground"? Why are assets "liquid"? Why ~~we~~ must we keep the economy "afloat" ... through, of course, a "bailout"?

I have so many questions - and thus far Google has been little help.

When I think of Greece, a place I have never been, I think of white sandy beaches and grilled octopus and crumbling marbles. I think of the whole ~~mess~~ chaotic gang of gods and goddesses utopian it up on Mount Olympus, and of Odysseus wandering his way home. And I think of the waves of migrants washing up daily on its shores. The ones who make it, that is. The ones who don't get swallowed up by the sea on their way from if not Galilee exactly, the more general vicinity. I read an article this morning that said that 15,000 people landed on Lesbos (!) in June alone. And I thought these are strange days indeed if Greece - underwater, unemployed, on the brink of hanging down the euro - offers a Syrian family a shot at if not happiness, exactly, then at least not-misery and not-death.

Migrants crossing seas in search of a better life - or, OK, in search of work - drive the engines of global capitalism (itself borderless, and everywhere, like the ocean). I read this somewhere recently, as well - think in the context of Puerto Rico, a place I have been, several times. Another island with white sandy beaches and grilled octopus, and its own migration problem, in reverse. Thousands of Puerto Ricans have left in the last decade for Florida, or New York, or Argentina, while the Puerto Rican economy itself sinks ever-further underwater even as the island itself is - oh the IRONY - in the middle of a drought.

In Greece they're rationing euros, but in San Juan - where the underwater debt is a paltry \$72 billion - they're rationing actual water. When I was there in May the neighborhoods were ~~on~~ on a rotation schedule - one day with water, one day without. Old San Juan, the heavily fortified neighborhood where the cruise ships dock, was exempt of course (and that's where I was staying) but in the rest of the city, every single time I went to the bathroom I had to stop and remember why the toilet wasn't flushing. Why there was just a sad little bottle of hand sanitizer sitting in a dry sink.

And this for some reason makes me think of Detroit - where the economy is so underwater that the city has cut its poorer citizens off from the otherwise abundant natural resource of the Great Lakes. Though of course the water continues to flow to the golf course and the football stadium, whose contributions to the civic engine of Detroit is ~~is~~ (like tourism) considered so essential that their delinquent water bills are excused.

And then of course there's California, whose drought is so thrashing as to barely be newsworthy, except for the other day when it came to light that Tom Selleck had been charged with stealing water from a Vandenberg Candy hydrant for years and trucking it to his ranch in the hills. Apparently (like tourists and football stadiums) austerity doesn't apply to Magnum PI!

Meanwhile, closer to home - though still far away - my father is also underwater. The trika of heart and lungs and kidneys all struggling for control of a system that has become unmanageable, tipping again and again into such instability the edema suffuses his body. Water seeps from his skin, bubbles under as blister, bloat his feet and legs to the point that it is likely that when he dies - which may be soon - he will essentially drown in his own fluids.

This is morbid. I know. I apologize. But what's the point of euphemism? I could say he is "ailing" or, in his words, "feeling puny." But really he's dying, in inexorable and weirdly mundane fashion, by the force of something as elemental as water.

From the moment I got the call in March - "Critical. Life support. Come now." - I've been underwater as well. That day I couldn't figure out how to use the internet, how to buy a plane ticket. I just stared dumbly at the screen, the white noise of surf flooding my ears. My friend had to come over and help me pack. ("OK: underwear! Put it in the bag. Next: socks!")

Four months later the roar has quieted to a dull pulse, just rhythmic waves lapping distractingly, hypnotically, at the shores of consciousness. They're barely audible, but nagging enough to keep me from working. I can barely remember to pay bills or answer email, let alone read a magazine article or - ha! - a book. Let alone write something.

But worst my father rides the side of chronic illness. Into the hospital for a week, out for 5 days. In for three days, out for a week. It's all so ~~messy~~ messy and graceless - the only thing certain is the ceaseless uncertainty.

It's all his fault of course. The moralizing is unavoidable. Like Greece or Puerto Rico - those lands of shiftless, sunsoaked, day-drinking layabouts who borrowed recklessly and are now being scolded to suffer the consequences - my father brought crisis upon himself. He smoked, drank, ate meat, scorned kale, undermining the security of his future body for the life-sustaining pleasures of the moment.

But does that mean he doesn't deserve to be thrown a life ring now? To keep from drowning? Google is no help in this matter either but hey, if you've got thoughts on any of this I would love to hear them.

Until then I remain your truly, from the deep end.

Matt B

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PS - If this was a digital letter, here is where I would slide in a link to the English Beat's "Draming" which, I AM NOT KIDDING, was the first thing to come up on Pandora when I sat down to write. But you're just gonna have to find it yourself. X