

ON CLEVELAND BAY

Further out, as in all great provenances of life, where detail is subject to repetition and common order, the outline of the ocean is clear, the mass of agitation is calm; the immensity of its law and duration is defined by a far boundary which we are powerless to amend. Here, having walked to its nearer edge, the approximate border which it seeks in constantly repeated endeavour to overreach, we are constrained to recognise its mobility, its shifting surface, its instability, in gleaming contrast to the firm shore on which we stand. Assuming its surface were able to support our weight, letting us step out upon it, how agile we would need to be, striving to keep our balance while its mirroring surface moved beneath our feet. Stepping still further out, we would need to take account of changes in its bulk, to raise our feet, to clear the elevated volumes that swell and move across its face. Being creatures of the land, and hence accustomed to moving on fixed and frictive surfaces, we would find it strange and would need to train ourselves in preserving an easy, upright poise on shifting and unstable sheens. But, further still, beyond the agitation at the fringe, our power to keep ourselves erect and walk would be augmented by increasing calmness over depth, except of course if storm or wind should work an increase of the normal swell. If this should be the case, it surely would be wise to train ourselves on calmer days, to step across or leap across the smaller swells, allowing for their height and speed, and for their tendency to perturbation as they glide. We should of course keep watch for gaps, and take advantage to step through these, especially in those cases where gliding walls present themselves with heights above our waists. In general, we would need to take account of flow, to smartly run and leap like steeple-chasers on a moving field, where hurdles too were moving in across that field. A counterflow would mean a step or leap as hurdles glided in towards our toes; a flow towards our aim, say toward the island across the flood, might mean a menace to our heels, as fluent ridges flowed upon us from behind. The optimum, of course, would be a flow that let us simply stand, balancing, while travelling and taking in the natural vista on the way. Ourselves, alone, standing far out upon this unfamiliar element, should make for us a kind of ecstasy; ourselves surrounded by crowds of fluent living shapes, emerging, swelling up upon a fluent plain, and then subsiding in constant interplay with countless others of their kind, on and on, so far as sight could reach or land at some particular angle Intervene. And underneath our feet, we of course would sense, and sometimes see, suspended or finning in easy, natural mode, the shadowed, uncertain shapes of creatures whose ancestors were close to ours in warm and primal seas, in which our lives began. Some of these may show up through the sheen, or nudge our feet, and hence our balance. If this should prove to be the case, it would be wise to take a stick or, say, a vaulting-pole, to push the creatures down, or deal obstreperous beasts a whack; while, at other times, the pole might prove of use to vault across the higher swells, or balance with, when running along the length of longer crests and ridges. The pole also might mount a parasol, to shield us from the sun. And much, much more might be remarked. But let us simply say, that the prospect of such a walk, as of all our dealings with the elements, and the contemplation of the heights and distances our race has put behind, engenders faith, and that it is in faith that enterprise begins.