

Forever Underneath - Michael Blake

It's not the humidity, it's the heat. Keep your furnaces and hell-hinges and Adelaide in December.

You wish to know true, suffocating, dehydrating lip-chapping cookery?

Go to the establishment formerly known as the Tattersall's™ Hobart Aquatic Centre¹ in winter. Wear trousers and a cardigan, because the external temperature is hovering between twelve and nothing degrees celcius. Stroll in like an executive, dressed like this – a manner you thought sensible – and you will know warmth, writ large and profound and equatorially cloying, if the equator was dependent on trench-warfare quantities of chlorine to stay clean. You will struggle through the conversation with the girls at the front desk without fainting, then run into a guy you went to highschool with² as you pass the lifeguard station. He is jovial, and apparently unaffected by the appalling heat.

He will ask you what you are doing here, and it is here that our stories diverge.

You might say: Oh, there was a deal on membership so I've joined the gym, or Just going to drop in for some laps, or I'm going to try and break my record on the waterslide, or I have to fight a twelve-year-old with a pool noodle, or any number of things, sensible or otherwise.

I say: 'I am here to write.'

He gives me the Look this deserves.³ I explain further – the Hobart City Council and the Tasmanian Writers Centre thought it would be a good idea to offer residencies to the young writers of the city, to get us out and writing in the common and not-so spaces of the city, and I applied to come to The Pool. His Look, which had softened throughout the explanation, reverts stonily when I reveal that I chose to come here specifically.

'But why?'

I point across the lap pool.

'Initially, to write about *them*.'

¹ Now just The Hobart Aquatic Centre because apparently they wanted to keep the T at the start of the acronym, hereafter referred to as 'The Pool'

²The coincidence is unremarkable, this being Tasmania – you also knew one of the girls at the front desk in a roundabout friends-of-friends kind of way, and will later, at the dive pool, see a girl you propositioned one time (and were politely rebuffed by) in a taxi on Sandy Bay Road.

³ It's like the look you'd give someone when they inform you they've taken up folk-dancing, or MMA for Seniors. Grave, questioning, with an underlying note of concern for their long-term mental health.

He turns to look at the group I have indicated.

About eight self-consciously muscular young men stand at the bottom of the bleachers in various states of undress or budgie-smugglery, conversing in front-row-concert yells and hoots of masculine laughter. Most of them have long green bags that say AUSTRALIA in large yellow lettering down the side. They hold masks and snorkels and flippers and small bats which look like an obese boomerang that has suffered an unspeakable industrial accident. There is an indefinable something about them – a slight edge to their ease, a studied carelessness – that gently shoves the words *Private School* to your forebrain, which then feels guilty and judgemental. They are, and presumably always will be, The Underwater Hockey Boys.

‘Those guys? The hockey guys?’

‘My housemate is one of them. It’s an interesting sport – people haven’t heard of it. Good thing to write about.’

He is silent for a moment.

‘I say, those guys – gosh. Those guys are a lively set of chaps, and Underwater Hockey is certainly a sport worth attending to.’⁴

I imply defend the chaps in question (or the ones I know, at least), and we discuss other things one could write about at the pool, as well as the fact that he is hoping to purchase a third house before the end of the year, and the recent holiday which is responsible for my current state of sullen jetlag. I mention the punishing temperature, although not above a thousand times. Eventually he is called away to the yellow booth that sits – like the world’s most humid office cubicle – in the middle of The Pool⁵, and I amble over to the Boys.

The ones I know greet me briefly and then enquire as to why I am here, on a Tuesday night, when I could be watching football, or playing Dota, or drinking at the pub, or perpetrating arson, or, you know, doing *anything* else. I trot out my reasoning and receive variations on the Look from almost all of them. I’m sure there’s something in that.

These boys – or young men, or whatever – are mostly very good at what they do, and they take it as seriously as a heart attack when required, but there’s also a vibe of

⁴ This is not, word-for-word, exactly what he said. In fact, this is nothing like what he said, but I don’t believe he really meant what he did say (which could be construed, in the wrong light, as unkind), so I have invented something else to serve my own ends because I do what I want. #yolo, etc.

⁵ The Pool as in the building, obviously. Not the actual pool. Let’s not get silly.

tongue-in-cheekness about it all, a feeling that they're still able to reconcile the fundamental ridiculousness of their sport – of all sport – with their love and dedication to it. Which is not something that can be said for, say, a lot of other sports, professional or otherwise. Like, Lionel Messi defies rational explanation, but he defies rational explanation in a realm where well-conditioned grown men regularly spend full minutes thrashing on the turf in the clutches of injuries that turn out to be – more often than not – extant only in the mind of said thrasher.⁶ It's odd to see, and kind of disarming (the Hockey Boys' attitude to hockey, that is. Not Arjen Robben rolling around looking pained). I like it.

'What size shoe are you?'

'Nine?'

My housemate nods and disappears. I continue taking notes about the heat and the septuagenarian in lane one who I've taken an intense interest in.⁷ Said housemate returns with a pair of flippers ('fins', for those in the know⁸), a snorkel-mask combo, and one of those tiny floppy hats-with-ear-covers you see water-polo players wear. He throws the bundle at my feet.

'You got speedos?'

'Do I look like I own speedos?'

I should mention that this is the first time I've set foot in a public pool in at least six years, which probably explains the whole heat issue, as well as the shock at the septuagenarian's endurance⁹, and the overall feelings of dislocation and confused regression – the bulk of my pool-time went down when I was at school. Earlier when my housemate bent down to pick up a bag from the floor I flinched, fully expecting him to backhand me in the nuggets. He didn't.

⁶ This is not a dig against soccer in particular – it's just a glaring example of the ludicrousness allowed in some sports that have been eclipsed by the spectre of themselves – see also: boxing weigh-ins; cycling's parent-in-denial stance on doping; golf salaries; LeBron James. And for the record, I love all of these things, soccer in particular.

⁷ When I say 'interest' I mean I've been watching him closely for about twenty minutes so I can record the exact moment when he a) sinks slowly to the bottom of the pool and dies or b) reveals himself to be a cyborg built so people can measure their strokes against it, like a metronome. These are the only foreseeable outcomes.

⁸ This may be lies. I felt disinclined to double-check for fear of being practised upon.

⁹ I'm pretty sure this wasn't a thing in 2009.

He tosses a pair of lurid green speedos with TASMANIA across the butt onto the pile.

‘You need to spit in your mask. Do you know how to clean your mask?’

I know how to clean my mask. Though I am still dressed and it will probably be redundant by the time I am changed, I spit desultorily in the mask.

‘I hope that’s not your idea of cleaning your mask.’

He strolls off, massaging his pectoral muscles and muttering about exhaustion sets. I spit again – weakly, petulant – in the mask (rookie error – one has to wait to build up a decent salival mass or you end up producing this white pasty stuff, useless to man or beast), then go get changed. Speedos are not super comfortable. I imagine they’re less-so for the guy I’ve borrowed them from, who is bigger than me.

There is a lot to be said for sporting apparel when it comes to feeling prepared. There’s a calming sort of quality to strapping on your pads and helmet, or tucking your fireproof underwear into your other fireproof underwear and then putting on your fireproof suit and boots and balaclava and helmet and six-point harness (man, how has motorsport not killed me yet), or even just folding your socks over the top of your shinpads.

The apparel required for underwater hockey (which is very similar to that of underwater rugby, which is what I am apparently about to watch), lacks sadly in this department.

For starters, you’re basically naked. Which is not something I have a problem with, ordinarily, but ‘naked’ and ‘rugby’ aren’t really words I enjoy seeing in the same sentence (although now I see them that close, I’m kind of okay with it).

For seconds, the ratio between how ridiculous said apparel makes you look and the badassery it allows you to perpetrate is non-complimentary. *Par example*: Wingsuits look deeply stupid, but they get you closer to human flight than you’re going to get without Breitling sponsorship and a team of aeronautical engineers (or just shitloads of psychotropic agents). The ratio is positive. *Example deux*: American football gear. Sure, you look like two toothpicks stuffed into a pear, but while wearing it a linebacker hitting you mid-body is just a cause for mild concern, as opposed to a thing that turns you into a collection of small meaty gibs. Again, positive. I feel like all this gear is going to do is a) stop someone from

ripping my ear off (which I'll accept is a good thing¹⁰) and b) assist me in getting to the bottom of the pool quicker, the better to inadvertently drown myself (less good).

I clean my mask properly, put my fins on, and slide into the water.

Underwater rugby is played in a five-metre deep dive pool. There are two goals, and each team fields (or waters, I guess) six players at a time. The goals are metal baskets that bring a primary-school garbage bin to mind. They're about a foot across the mouth, and they sit on the bottom at each end of the pool (the pool we're playing in has a sort of chamfered bottom, so the goals sit about three metres in from the actual edge of the pool, which gives players the option to ice-hockey their way around the back of the goals). The ball itself looks like you'd imagine a bludger from Harry Potter, except it's red. It's about six inches across, and filled with seawater, so will it sink if left untended. Under water, it can be thrown with accuracy and speed up to distances of, say, two metres. Beyond that things are a lot more susceptible to the vagaries of current and spin, as well as the possibility of terrifying men with eight-packs lunging into view and intercepting it.¹¹ The aim of the game is to get the ball into the opposition goal. There are no boundaries, other than the surface of the water. It's a full-contact affair, and if someone has the ball you can do pretty much whatever you like in order to get it off them (once they've released the ball you have to stop trying to kill them, though). Beyond all this, the only other things I saw penalised were pulling someone's fin off (poor form) and grabbing the goal basket. It's also considered bad manners to kick someone in the face, but it appears to exist in a bit of a grey area, rules-wise.

While the goals are being set up, I flipper around, getting my snorkel comfortable¹² and examining the competitors for the night. They're mostly male (there is one girl, an Italian who got involved through uni), and they're mostly in the kind of shape you have to be in if you're going to be taken seriously in any aquatic sport.¹³ They all look capable, and I find myself looking forward to seeing a game I don't understand played well by keen amateurs.

¹⁰ Apparently the ear-covers are actually to stop your eardrum rupturing if you get hit on the ear while under water. Who knew.

¹¹ This happens anyway, but the likelihood of it occurring increases exponentially in relation to the length of the pass.

¹² Inasmuch as that's even possible. After an hour using one there's the inescapable feeling that someone has been kicking you in the teeth every time you blinked. God only knows how horses put up with it.

¹³ Which is to say, somewhere on the spectrum betwixt 'tidy rig' and 'unfeasibly shredded'. More on this later.

It is with shock and dismay, then, that I respond when I surface and find my housemate waving me over to the side of the pool, where – in the shadow of the high boards – another four guys in navy-blue caps are yelling ‘DARK TEAM, DAAARK TEEAAAAM, BLAKEY DARRRK TEEAAAAM.’

I swim over and attempt to explain just how unprepared and incapable I am of staying under the water for longer than ten seconds, let alone doing so with any sort of aim in mind, but it’s kind of hard to hear myself over the yelling, and they’re not listening anyway. I look across the pool. Light Team look like they know what they’re doing.¹⁴ My housemate appears beside me like some sort of ginger otter.

‘You know the rules, right? Vaguely?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Also I saw you duck-diving earlier. I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it. Oh, and when you’re under the water, put an arm out in front of you, you’ll go faster.’

Then he yells one last DARK TEEAAAAM and launches himself backward off the wall like a breaching whale. The rest of the team follows suit, except for one, who’s obviously been designated Blake-Herder.

‘What are you waiting for, Blakey? Get the fuck after them, you’re on attack.’

I kick off the wall and dive.

The light team are surging across the pool about two metres below the surface, the ball clutched to the chest of the lead swimmer. Three dark-teamers are swimming to meet them, but before a tackle can land the ball-carrier dives sharply and to the right, drawing two defenders with him before releasing a pass, above and behind him, which his teammate snatches, juking back to the left, where he’s wrapped in a tackle by one of ours, who strips the ball but can’t keep it for himself, and it spills, sinking toward the bottom. Both teams dart downward, and it’s only when I’m halfway to the bottom that I realise a few things, the first of which is that my ears need to be equalised, and the next of which is that I’ve now been under the water for what feels like a long time and therefore don’t really want to expend any air or effort unnecessarily and even if I wanted to I don’t think I could and the third thing is that I need to get to the surface real fast. Which I do, kicking like a madman and doing those little involuntary gulp-stops you do when you’re semi-panicking

¹⁴ As though I’m any judge.

under water, before breaking the surface and blasting the water from my snorkel about forty feet in the air, such is my relief. I breathe heavily for a moment – long enough for a teammate to surface, shake his head at me, and dive again – then take a deep breath and go below myself, just in time to see a couple of dark team players exchange passes, manhandle the defender off the basket (literally off the basket – standard defensive strategy is to sort of lie backwards over it, covering it with your torso while you flail at the attacker with all available limbs), and triumphantly dunk the ball. Through no fault of my own, we are now winning. DARK TEAM, DARK TEEEEAAAAAAM, etc.

For the next forty minutes,¹⁵ things continue along these same lines: Dive, follow ball, begin drowning, panic-surface, snatch a few breaths of the sweet nectarous chlorine-laced air of The Pool, repeat. I do manage to touch the ball, on both attack and defense, and at one point I stop a goal by snaking my way in behind someone who had obviously dismissed me – not unreasonably – as a total non-threat, and stealing it from under his arm. I then hand the ball immediately to a more capable team-mate who presumably goes and does something great with it – I’m already on my way upward, trailing bubbles and a tangible fear of death.

The odd thing, though, is that it’s fun. It’s terrifying and extraordinarily difficult and I am so, so bad at it,¹⁶ but I find myself having a hoot. My own physical limitations aside, it’s amazing to play a sport in a truly three-dimensional space, and the medium also lends everything – be it a roll or a pass or an entire passage of play – a grace and purity of movement that is far harder to come by when you’re also dealing with the pesky limits of gravity and ground. Sure, there’s a cost – it’s impossible to watch unless you’re prepared to get wet or have a really good camera setup, and it makes your ears hurt and there will be times when you cough up a goal just because the other girl had three seconds more air in her than you did, and you get scraped and kicked and guys who look like they were chiselled

¹⁵ Proper games are thirty minutes – two halves of fifteen – but we take little breaks between goals, without which I probably would have died.

¹⁶ Example thereof: At one point one of my team-mates has put in a Herculean effort down one of the wings to get himself into a position where he can cross the ball to me (they having decided that I must score before anyone else is allowed to score any more goals, not realising just how unlikely this is), which he does, hoofing a perfectly-weighted pass into my path, with an optimism that shows just how wildly he has underestimated my ineptitude. I am forced to watch both the ball and his hopes sink beneath me after a quick mental calculation informs me that I can either swim down, catch the ball and get it into the basket, at which point I will expire, or abandon any hopes of glory and make it to the surface alive. He informs me later that I should have just gone for the goal and dealt with the oxygen issue once I was done. *Mors ante ignominiam.*

from marble in ancient Greece keep taking the ball off you, but weighed against all this are the moments when someone curls and rolls like a seal to avoid a pair of tackles, or swoops under a scrumming mass to retrieve a dropped ball and then sprints away to score, and the weightless anticipation of watching and picking your moment to dive and finally, the slow-growing knowledge – the eventual glorious certainty – that this is how we would move all the time, if only we could.

Dark Team won, for the record.

Early in high school, one of my best friends was a guy named Dan.¹⁷ Dan had a sister, and they both had the unicornlike gift of being Only Children when they weren't. They were both pretty spoilt and had accordingly awesome vices, which meant that Dan and I were able to play Diablo 2 and Gran Turismo: Concept until two in the morning for an entire summer, while his sister drank Midori in her bedroom and watched terrible television. The best of times, the worst of times.

Anyway. Dan was – in addition to being a chronic abuser of videogames and pornography – a swimmer. And the adolescent swimmer (as embodied by him, and all the rest I knew, at least) is a very, very strange breed. These were the guys – the girls – who got up at five AM on school days and carpooled with their longsuffering parents to a pool where they could swim distances that beggar the imagination, before they got onto the buses that ordinary people would ride to work, and came to school. I always admired his work ethic, for all that I found it confusing. I understood that he was good (and he was good – he won comps and did records and all the shit you expect to recoup from such an investment), but he was also pretty vocal about the fact that he wasn't *great*, which I guess is the aim of such a program, to produce a fresh Hackett or Phelps or Magnussen,¹⁸ and I really struggled to understand why he would continue to continue such a violently demanding pursuit – why he would tear strips off himself, morning, evening and night – for a thing he didn't value or appreciate or want. He also played water polo, and ate like five meals a day because of all the swimming. You got the feeling he was only doing it because his mum wanted him to and because he'd always done it.

¹⁷ His name was actually Chris. But this could be a lie too. #rekt #yolo, that gif of the guy falling over with his face in his hands while his mates all hoot and cheer, etc.

¹⁸ Thorpe obviously excluded – you can't train your way to genetic perfection.

I am thinking of this while I sit in the bleachers and watch schoolchildren do ‘Squad’ – which is what he used to do – and which appears to consist of swimming a tremendous number of laps under the gaze of a coach and about eighty bored parents (what they all did before the advent of the iPad is anyone’s guess). I am watching and wondering whether any of these kids are going to be the next Missile, and at what point they realise it if they’re not. Because this is foreign to me – this was never something I did, whether that’s because of socioeconomic status or laziness or epidemic lack of interest I don’t know, but I don’t think I ever swam a lap in anger until I was about nineteen, and even then only because I got a bit drunk at lunchtime and someone challenged me to a race (which I lost, needless to say). My youthful pool-experiences generally centred around weekend visits with someone else’s parents, and I was never there for any reason beyond cannonballs and Calippos and packs of barbecue shapes rendered soggy by the constant ingress of damp hands. And to do this – to daily measure your length into those fifty metres of tile and tedium – requires a sort of application and drive that is frightening and confusing and incredible.

I still see Dan, sometimes. I work in the city, in a print shop, and when I go to Woolies to impulse-buy Samboys and expensive juices he’s there, normally in the produce section, stacking fruits. In the three years I’ve been going there I don’t think we’ve ever exchanged more than a nod. I have no idea why.

Hockey. We’re here to talk about hockey. I’m in the bleachers again. It’s two days before the Australian under-23 underwater hockey teams depart for the world championships in Spain¹⁹, and there’s about to be a Friday-night practice game between the U-23 boys (I guess technically they should be men, but there’s a definite ‘boys’ vibe about them, both literally and also on a less-tangible drunk-uni-student-yelling ‘booooooyyyyyyyyyys’ kind of level) and a unisex team of randoms led by the U-23 coach, containing a few current and former national players, as well as some elderly types (who’ve probably participated at Masters level and have lungs like zeppelins). I’m a guaranteed observer this time.

Having boned up in advance, I can tell you that underwater hockey was invented by some British dudes in the fifties to try and keep their dive club members interested in subaquatic activities through the cooler months, and was originally – hilariously – called

¹⁹ The U-23 boys will rampage their way to the grand final before suffering a shock loss to Turkey. The U-23 women come in fourth. Aussie Aussie Aussie, etc.

Octopush, a name that was obviously deemed too badass for continued use (or official use, anyway), and eventually ditched. There are goals at each end – three-metre-wide traylike things which are ‘negatively buoyant’, according to Wikipedia – and six players a side. The aim is to use the earlier-mentioned bat-things to shuffle a leaden puck into your team’s tray, which sits right against the wall of the pool, and has a very slight slope leading up to the actual bit you’re trying to get the puck to. The playing area is twenty-two metres long, about a dozen wide, and two deep.

While the players are getting ready, I ask the U-23 coach to talk me through some rules – explain the game. Give me a feel for what it’s like playing. He pauses his close examination of his glove (‘Look at that mould in there. Growing well’).

‘You ever see six-year-olds playing soccer?’

I nod.

‘Pretty much that.’

Fair enough. By way of experiment I plan to watch the first bit of the game from the stands, to get an overall impression of it, and then enter the pool for some more up-close viewing.

The first part of this live-viewing experience is predictably unsatisfying, like watching a Champions League game from a low-flying aircraft. Things are happening, and there’s an appealing look of synchronous action – a flock of sparrows (or more aptly, a school of fish) comes to mind, particularly when the puck is loose – but it’s pretty hard to tell exactly what’s going on. It’s a bit closer to watching a bunch of crocodiles fighting: a lot of confused churning water and the suggestion of profound subaquatic struggle. It’s oddly hypnotic. I decide to get in, to try to make some more sense of it.

I get in. It makes a bit more sense. Underwater it is at least clearer, and that impression of a pack of undersea predators is increased – all communication is clicks and touch and the tapping of sticks on tiles. What’s striking is the speed, and that same elegance seen in the rugby, and the violence; both between players and self-inflicted (although here there’s almost more of an edge to it – whether that’s because these guys are playing at a higher level than the knockabout rugby or because they’re more beholden to the floor of the pool I don’t know). This is not to say they’re clubbing each other and themselves with their sticks, but there’s a necessary level of physicality when you have half a dozen people

trying to get at the three-inch square of the pool that contains the puck. As for the self-inflicted violence, it's more a case of it being strange to see a sport that demands so much of you environmentally – where such a high proportion of time and effort and will is expended just by being involved, let alone actually making the huge play or the last-ditch save. A pitch-length run in field sports might be called a lung-burster, but consider the sport in which that could be literal. Think about *that*.

There are bows that can be drawn, here.

There are short ones; like the fact that water sports are obviously really good for getting in shape (or you just notice it more because everyone's swanning around with no clothes on); or the fact that all sport is – at a deeply cynical base level – pointless and ludicrous and sometimes seems only to exist to sell Gatorade but is also, you know, valuable beyond imagining in terms of health (the mental, physical, spiritual slam-dunk trifecta) and teaching the importance of teamwork, self-reliance, *et al*, and that *particularly* ludicrous or little-known or insanely difficult sports can be the most helpful in reminding us of these things when we're feeling jaded or disillusioned by the latest stratospheric transfer fee or betting scandal or mic-captured sledge.

Then there are longer ones; like the parallels between underwater hockey's growth and desire for legitimacy compared to that of my own fine city as it struggles with the gift of not just being a world-class tourist destination, but a world-class tourist destination that more and more people actually *come to*, thanks not to our variable-quality tourism advertising or an overabundance of governmental foresight but to a random-flux generated billionaire blowing a considerable portion of his fortune on helping to make it one; or the similarities between the independence and willpower required for subaquatic sports and writing, and the overwhelming but occasionally-forgotten importance of having good teammates in both; or the one where you think about whether it's really a good idea to make kids mindlessly swim laps every other day and what they actually get out of it, but let's not.

Let's just float here, a few metres down, where the noise and rush of Pool and World are muted-distant non-concerns, and everything – from the drowning writer to the lithe-or-ripped international players and the ball and puck and the bubbles; everything – is suffused, blessed, somehow *imbued* with a thing ethereal and imperfect and temporary, a thing I

struggle to articulate but gladly sacrifice the air in my lungs to hold: a forgetting, a silence, a moment of grace in motion.