

***Swimming Towards Light –
Looking Back on Adolescent Depression
and the Strategies that Worked***

1 Bedroom

Inside this cave
it is nearly always
black; sometimes

chinks of light
face the entrance
but the warmth
never penetrates

the walls
are my companions
and the constant *tick tick*
of drops from above –

on the floor
I lie like a child,
curled into myself
like a question mark.

2 Counsellor

You've lost your way
but you'll find it again,
you will come through;
no matter how dense
and black the forest becomes
you *will* find a way.

Believe me.

You will be a better person,
you will be stronger,
no-one will ever hurt you again.

Believe me.

Believe me.

3 Disbelief

Where is the protruding bone,
the insidious lump,
the shadow on the film?

There is no pain,
but more an absence,
a stasis,
a paralysis –

like being trapped
under tarpaulin,
or dragged down by lead,
by kelp
into the sea's
dark undercurrents

this malaise,
this blackness that only I
can see,
can feel.

4 Wellmeaning but Unhelpful Advice

Come on, man, snap out of it.
There's nothing wrong with you.

5 Another Combination

And so we try another mix and match
from the grab-bag of medication,
a lucky dip of pills –
Lithium, Prozac,
Zoloft, Efexor
and for a while
I'm brought back
to ordinary pleasures:
an early morning surf,
on the mobile to a friend,
hanging out at the mall
for a while
my thoughts slow,
sleep returns
in sweet increments,
and the *anti-urge*
that *mutilator of souls*¹

dies down in me
for a while.

6 Swimming Towards Light

This morning the park is alive
with yellow tumbling of sun,
Asians practising their tai chi and yoga,
Greek men mulling
over the manoeuvres of their chess pieces,
and white-flannelled cricketers
skimming the oval with their yelling.
It is Saturday morning and the breeze
riffles my hair as I walk with my parents
beneath the cool canopy of Moreton Bay figs
away from the hospital.
There are other walkers, smiling
and pumping their arms,
some carrying green eco-bags
and others holding hands and laughing.
Here is the mainstream brimming with life
and I am in it,
somehow swimming my way back
through the darkness,
a diver lifting towards light.

7 Walking Meditation

*because sometimes
walking
is all you know²*

Five o'clock
on this pewter morning,
I take the winding track
through the thickets of tea-tree and acacia,
in the distance the constant susurrus
of the high sea tormented by wind.
Not even the grasping vines
and clawing branches,
or the honeyeaters and finches
with their needle-calls piercing
the brittle skin of dawn
disturb my walking –
here, nothing else matters
but the sound of my own breathing,
and my footsteps
taking me onwards.

8 Ten Things I've Learnt About It

Feeling has nothing to do with it.

There is only blackness.

It visits unannounced.

Alcohol is false therapy.

It feeds on self-loathing.

Character weakness doesn't come into it.

Suicide does.

It isolates its prey.

No one is immune.

I never wanted it.

9 A Friend in Need

That's good, she said,
that you are writing,
bringing all those fears
and anxieties to the surface,
giving them form,
exposing them on paper
for the frauds that they are.

10 Hatbox: in Case of Emergency

Inside is a battered Hornby train engine,
a certificate from my fifth class teacher,
a photo of my mum and dad
and a letter from my best friend.

There is a poem by Coleridge,
my first high school report and class photo,
a book of paper aeroplanes
and an album by Joni Mitchell.

There is a packet of Smarties
and a tattered birthday card,

on it a list:
My life has value,
My parents love me,
I WILL feel better tomorrow.

11 White-faced Heron

I have been walking alone again
on the mudflats of the estuary

where I have seen the white-faced heron
standing in the shadows of the acacia.

I know its skilful eye,
its steely plumage –

it can teach me about patience,
about stillness

about ordinary
contentment

about being at one
with myself each morning,

each morning being
beneath the kindly sun.

12 Celestial Brilliance

I wish I could show you
when you are lonely or in darkness

the Astonishing Light
of your own Being³

I stood out in the open paddock,
the whole universe of stars
wheeling above me,
each one giving out
its celestial brilliance,
its pin-point of laser
so yellow and so sharp,
and in the east the moon
like the brightest lemon rind

against the deepest charcoal-blue –
and for some reason unexplained
I let go my earth-bound sullenness,
my times sullied by pain,
and spinning around in that paddock
beneath the swinging dome
I felt strangely part of it,
I ceased to feel so alone.

13 Credo

And so, it comes down to this:
to the talking,
to the listening,
to the acceptance,
to the medication,
to the learning,
to the walking,
to the vigilance,
to the gratitude,
to the immersion –
yes, the immersion
in nature,
in *life*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1 The author gratefully acknowledges Peter Bakowski for lines taken from his poem, *St Kilda Blues*, Melbourne, 1989, published in *Days That We Couldn't Rehearse* (Hale & Iremonger, 2002).

2 The author gratefully acknowledges Graywolf Press for lines taken from Jane Keynon's poem, *Having It Out With Melancholy*, published in *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press, 1996).

3 These lines are taken from the work of the Persian Sufi poet and mystic, Hafiz (1320-1389).