

← Theatre Review: "Cymbeline" at Bard on the Beach

Prompt: A picture says... →

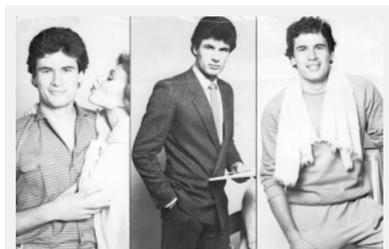
Jessamyn Hope's diving photos

Posted on July 21, 2014 by prismprose

In *PRISM 52:4*, Jessamyn Hope writes about her experiences as a diver in the personal essay "The Reverse." She was kind enough to share some photos related to the piece.

"My short memoir "The Reverse" takes place during a diving practice in 1988, when I finally let go of the notion that I could do anything. These pictures of me in my team swimsuit were taken by a fashion photographer shortly before that diving practice. If I were thirteen years old today, with the way we snap and share photos, there would be thousands of pictures of me in my team swimsuit, but these are all I have.

My whole childhood I had wanted to be an actress, and the photographer who used to shoot my uncle Tony's modeling pictures offered to take some headshots of me for free. My uncle Tony had died a few years earlier at the age of thirty-three of a highly aggressive form of lymphatic cancer, and she was doing this in his memory.



A comp card the photographer made of Tony.

My mom drove me from our house in the suburban West Island of Montreal to the photographer's studio, which was in a converted industrial building downtown. I had never been in such a building, and I rode the large service elevator filled with film equipment, and walked down the hallway, past the doors to all sorts of artists' studios, thinking this was the world I wanted to be a part of.

I was asked to bring a swimsuit for the shoot, so I brought the only one I had, the one for my diving team. I got in front of the large white backdrop, under all the beaming studio lights, and froze. I could not relax. In some of the pictures I'm wearing a jean skirt and sweater, some a button-down and jeans, some the diving swimsuit, and in almost all of them a most uncomfortable expression. Whatever confidence and blissful lack of self-consciousness I had when I first wanted to act, back when I was seven years old and was the twirling flower in Peter Pan's Neverland, wasn't all gone, but almost, and what was left was disappearing fast.

The photographer took enough pictures for there to be a few good ones, and a couple of weeks later my mother and I showed them to an agent or some other gatekeeper in the industry, a person I had learned about through a friend in drama school. This gatekeeper looked at the pictures and said I had a chance if I lost ten pounds. "Ten pounds!" my mom said to the agent. "No way! I'm not going to allow my daughter to lose a single pound!" This led to a huge fight between my mother and me. I yelled at her that I wished I had a different kind of mom, a more supportive stage mother, one that would do more than just drive me to auditions.

I didn't know at the time that my mom had cancer and was going to die soon. I had no idea that she'd been diagnosed with cancer the same year her brother Tony died and had been fighting it on and off throughout my childhood. When it came back for a third time that winter, and she could feel it eating at her spine, she didn't even tell my dad. She didn't want to go through all the treatments again for nothing. So she kept it to herself, while trying to pack into the little time she had left enough parenting to last me through my teens and beyond.

I never did become an actress. The self-consciousness I acquired in those tween years, which prevented me from performing for the camera that afternoon, never went away. It's all right. The thing that made me want to be an actress wasn't the audience or the snapping of a camera; it was the chance to pretend that I was Little Orphan Annie or Anne of Green Gables. More than anything I wanted to be a part of a great story, and now what I do as a writer is try to create those great stories. Today I'm so into the creation of stories that it's hard for me to imagine wanting to be anything but a writer. As it turns out, self-consciousness can be a wonderful asset to a writer, especially the memoirist.

To read my short memoir "The Reverse" check out [PRISM 52:4](#).

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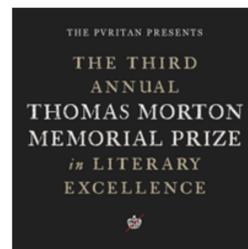
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