As temperatures rise and scandal rages in South Africa, swimming offers a psychic refuge

August 2 1914: Germany has declared war on Russia. Swimming in the afternoon.
FRANZ KAFKA, DIARIES

A while back I made a New Year’s resolution to do more swimming, in more places. I marked up a map of Cape Town’s municipal pools, tidal pools and mountain reservoirs. I was hoping that this liquid geometry would take me out of habitual patterns, away from the inferno of social media. To slip into the water and let it all slough off. But for the last few years, I have found myself swimming through a place where, like so many places, the political temperature has been steadily rising.

Earlier this month, South Africa’s parliament held a vote of no confidence in our president, Jacob Zuma, the eighth time such a motion has been proposed since 2014. One Monday I joined a march by civil society organisations and NGOs, squeezed somewhere between banners for Reclaim the City and Justice for Sex Workers. On Tuesday it was a rally of opposition parties, with crowds in primary colours bright as board-game counters: blue for the Democratic Alliance, red for the Economic Freedom Fighters, yellow for Congress of the People. Afterwards I went to the coast and ducked under the Atlantic rollers in a wetsuit that I have just bought. It’s the first I’ve ever owned, and it felt strange to be out there amid the steep, icy waves and still be warm like a seal.

President Zuma (who survived the secret ballot) is known for many scandals but one of the most entertaining involves the “firepool” that was built at his KwaZulu-Natal homestead. What is a firepool? Google it and you will find a photograph of a tear-shaped swimming pool from which firemen are pumping water, which is then being hosed at great pressure - back into the water. This photo is from a government press junket aimed at convincing the South African public that this “reservoir”, built with taxpayers’ money, is firstly and fundamentally a crucial installation for combating fires, and only secondly a recreational facility. Or rather (the story shifted week by week, from spokesperson to spokesperson) that the two functions of said pool – firefighting and swimming – had been cleverly combined in a nifty money-saving gesture at a mere R3.9m.

What a beautiful word, firepool: the open-mouthed beginning expressing disbelief or exasperation, then the cooler, more stoic pursing of the lips at the end. “Cellar door” is supposed to be the most alluring string of syllables in English, but what about repurposing the Zuma administration’s neologism? Running the flame and water together to evoke the vortex we are living in, the maelstrom of political and environmental flux, and how they are becoming, or have become, the same thing.

Swimming is a kind of psychic refuge. To go to a public pool and be a body among other bodies is a reminder that life goes on beyond the overheated narratives of the media. It’s not that you want to withdraw from current affairs, but sometimes you do wonder: do I have to live my life within the storylines that are offered in the news and the opinion pages? Are those the parameters of existence? Or can I dive under the skin of the real for a short while? Is there not a more secret, subterranean, more watery course through the world?

On the other hand, even the elemental touchstones of fire and water are now in politically induced disarray. At the side of our highways, signboards tell us that Cape Town’s dam levels are at 28 per cent (this is our rainy season). This time last year, they were near 55 per cent, and that was during a serious drought. A high-pressure weather system has been sitting off the land mass for months, driving the winter rain bands to the south, where they fall uselessly on the salty sea. Sometime next year, this metropolis of four million people, surrounded on three sides by ocean, might well run out of water.

At the same time, the annual wildfire season has become longer and more unpredictable. The whole region is drying, becoming more combustible due to climate change, the raised ambient air temperatures altering the very nature of flame. Firefighting helicopters (the papers report) will now only scoop up saltwater from the coast rather than dipping into the city’s freshwater reservoirs: the whole Atlantic now reimagined as a firepool. As the summer heat comes in, the south-easter blows the water bluer and bluer, colder and colder.

“Firepool: Experiences in an Abnormal World” by Hedley Twidle is published by Kwela Books