

Postmodern Aerobics

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Postmodern Aerobics

These days, I'm living life flat-out, literally and figuratively. I say literally since I'm lying face up in a back float right now, and figuratively since I'm in the final stretch of my coursework for a degree in literature. I come to the pool, though, even with exam deadlines looming over my head, or perhaps be-cause of them, since I need to feel all the gravity fall away, experience even for just a moment the feeling of weightlessness.

From my vantage point in the pool, I can see the aerobics class hard at work in the plate-glass exercise room on the balcony above. The other side of that room is lined with mirrors, and many of the members watch themselves step, extend, and jiggle. I can hear the bass line of the retro disco music pounding down through the foundation, overpowering the strain of classical music wavering from the radio on the pool deck. I lay my head back in the water and think about how unhappy they look, their faces wrought in sweat, determination, and desperate amusement.

It occurs to me that they are engaged in a kind of postmodern aerobics. No excesses enter that stripped-down room with them; they bring to it only a [sharp](#) perception of their bodies,

fragmenting themselves into pecs, abs, and buns of steel. Constantly assessing themselves in terms of the minimal, they self-consciously measure the body fat on their upper arms and thighs with a small device that pinches their flesh between two levers. Even more painful to watch is the process that follows as they evaluate the units with [stern](#) faces, consulting each other in an almost robotic fashion. It seems they'll let nothing get in the way of sculpting the exterior, perfecting the outer package. "The stomach needs work," I will hear one of them say later in the locker room; she will not say "my stomach" or "my torso." Each one proceeds to talk about an element of her body as if it were something she has managed to separate from herself. And I've never once [heard](#) them mention the soul.

While members of the "Masters" competitive team may possess some or all of these qualities, "Sunset" swimmers do not think this way. We come to the pool in search of our souls, that part of ourselves that loves to be submerged and buoyed and enveloped by water.

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