

Contemporary Writers' Forum, 8 November 2006

Exercise: Carter Revard read the first five lines of his poem "Getting Across," and the workshop participants were asked to complete it. The poet read out and commented on the participants' versions before presenting his published ending to the poem. Which version(s) do *you* like best?

GETTING ACROSS

Hanging

out under the bridge
by fingertips and a toe
between ledge and girder, high
over deep water and thinking,
I can't swim...

...

I can't swim

Is this not

what I have been doing
all of the time
hanging in midair
again and again
holding on

...

I can't swim

I am going to lose myself
in the water
The water is coming nearer
I feel nothing
except a gentle freshness
diving smoothly into it
driven away
by the stream of life
in the end

...

I can't swim

Grandma's wings sheltering
her past
cover my mind but

not my back
Her birds despise me
for hiding on earth
haunted
by our ancestors' spirits
They wanted me to fly
but I can't swim.

...

I can't swim

Still there is a
butterfly within me that will fly...
that makes me soar
not only above the deep dark below
but above not only girder and span
but beyond into sky
and beyond...
The music is in me.
I am in the music.

...

I can't swim

Locked, strained digits
Struggle to hold on.
Fear of fall is distant
and strange. My heart
thunders at the thrilling
thought of venturing farther.
Many firm places to grab
And hold sit so close
I could whisper to them
"I'm on my way."
I hope they're inviting.

...

I can't swim

but wait –
Who said I wanted to swim?
So I just close my eyes
And imagine my body
Relaxing over there
At the other side
And while my imagination
Is stimulating my motivation
My muscles stretch

And do the rest
And the land is almost near

...

I can't swim

Moving

my thoughts to the other
side, pulling me forward
drawing my mind over
to safety and forgetting
I can't swim

...

I can't swim

Facing down swirling blackness
and feeling earth's attraction
and the water's pull.
Knowing there's up, and birds
and heaven – weightlessness.
Can I make matter move?
Body and soul suspended –
above and below.
One mighty jerk of conscious
effort and...
I fall – saved!

...

I can't swim

I pause, shrug, then
give myself to motion
That swings me to the
other side.

...

I can't swim

My hope fails
Almost
But then
I take that
leap of faith
and make it
to the other side
At last

...

I can't swim

With drowning not being an option
I summon all my strength
Crawling back up, escaping the abyss

...

I can't swim

If only I could fly
I guess I will have to walk over the water
Just like Jesus Christ

...

I can't swim

And Coyote, my brother,
 in mid air
 smiled

...

I can't swim

it is just water!

...

I can't swim

I wish
I had paid attention
to the swimming teacher

Carter Revard's complete poem:

GETTING ACROSS

Hanging

 out under the bridge
 by fingertips and a toe
 between ledge and girder, high
 over deep water and thinking,
 I can't swim,

unreachable by the older boys
who've made it across, he watches
the steelblue flashing of wings
and chestnut bellies of barnswallows
shooting and swirling around him,
below him,
a two-foot gar's black shadow
in the greenbrown water, and before
he has weakened lets
the toe slip gently and swings
down like a pendulum, hand over
hand along the girder to where
the others perch
on the concrete ledge,
has kicked up his right leg onto
the ledge and is
pulled to its safety, can look back
now at the swallow's easy
curve upwards, its
flutter and settling
gently into the cup
of feather-lined mud there nestling
on the shining girder's side
where he has passed his death.