

## The Lifeguard

I'm scanning the pool thinking about Jesse James  
as the lappers lug up and back, their wake riding over

the lane ropes, spilling into the wet deck grates  
where all that excess energy runs, returning

to the balance tank, a dark reservoir beneath us  
rumbling through my toes and feet. I like to stand

on the lid as the swimmers dive in unaware  
of that churning well, their force seeping back

to another pool, unseen, unheard, only felt.

\*

And in that movie there's Jesse James  
drawing nearer to the end, stepping onto thin ice  
in a heavy cloak, mumbling to Charlie about death.

He sweeps the floor with a black, gloved hand  
staring into the other side, shooting at the ice,  
begging it breaks—a man fabled, vile, resigned.

But the water doesn't take him, death won't come,  
his wounds refuse to heal, while a cold-water fish  
returns his gaze from the freezing river below.

\*

Sometimes my lifeguard mind wanders back to the time I took up swimming, that  
straightforward thing done daily while I came off my medication. Where is my depression now?  
In some dormant place I govern? Every stroke brings a swell of relief that allows me to take  
another. That swells rolls on and spills away so I return to the pool again, wiser for knowing  
what good living does, knowing my illness remains.

\*

And there's Jesse James in that famous scene  
laying down his guns, standing on the chair before  
the picture frame that so urgently needs dusting.

He brushes the portrait of a shadowy horse  
as Bob takes rickety aim, Jesse facing the glass,  
waiting patiently, watching the reflection.

His head slugs forward, smashing the pane,  
and into a new frontier, where the animal  
that his spirit fed will forever be fed to him.

\*

So I'm on that lid, scanning a pool coursing  
with our goals and grief, with the hopes and crimes

that move us, charging the haul that whips  
an unlit tail in the chamber, repaying our volume

in secret. Neighbour, there's another world.  
Stand here, wait a moment. But they exit flushed

and panting, from all they've spent or loaned,  
passing by me guarding this life, and after

I ask them: *how did you go?*