

AN ESSAY

Slake

*On a forgotten bottle in a parked car, an ocean
you cannot drink, and a rock that can boil water*

BY CHRIS WYATT · A TEN-MINUTE READ

I HAD BEEN AT MY DESK SINCE EARLY AND HAD NOT HAD A drink of water. I did not notice this as a fact. I noticed it as a mood: a general grievance, a mild dislike of the screen, the sense that the day was slightly too long and I was slightly too far behind it. Then I got in the car, and there was a bottle of water in the cup holder, the kind that has been riding around with you for a while, and I drank half of it before the engine turned over.

It was fantastic. I have had wine that cost more than the car payment and it was not fantastic. This was. And here is the strange part: it did not taste like anything. No aroma, no finish, no notes of anything. And yet for about eight seconds it was the best thing I had put in my mouth all year.

So the question is simple, and I am going to answer it immediately, because a question you sit on for six paragraphs is not a question, it is a hostage. Why does something that tastes like nothing feel like everything?

Because I was not tasting the water. I was tasting the thirst.

There is a name for this, which is always the first sign that a thing is real. In 1971 a French physiologist named Michel Cabanac published a short paper in *Science* with a title that sounds like a Sunday sermon, “Physiological Role of Pleasure,” and an experiment that sounds like a prank. People tasted sugar water and rated how pleasant it was. When they spat it out, the sweetness stayed pleasant. When they swallowed it, the sweetness eventually became unpleasant. Same sugar, same tongue. The cup was not the whole story. The person mattered.

Temperature supplied another example. Put a hand in warm water and ask how it feels. If the rest of you is cold, the warm water is lovely. If the rest of you is overheated, the same warm water is unpleasant, almost offensive. Cabanac called this dependence on bodily state alliesthesia, from the Greek for “changed sensation.” The pleasure was not simply a property of the stimulus. It depended on the relationship between the stimulus and what the body needed at that moment. A thermometer that had learned to smile.

Once you see it, you start noticing relatives, and the essay gets a little indelicate here. The pleasure of finally reaching a bathroom after the meeting that would not end belongs in this company. So does the pleasure of a nap on a Sunday afternoon when you have been up since five. Different needs, a familiar release. And the itch, which we will come back to, because it makes the point with almost nothing attached.

The name for that pleasure is relief, and relief is the most underrated pleasure we have.

Those eight seconds get stranger. You would think the first pleasure of drinking was the pleasure of water having arrived where it was needed and corrected the problem. But relief can begin before the water has corrected the blood chemistry. The alarm does not have to wait for the whole job to be finished.

In 2016 a team at the University of California, San Francisco watched thirst neurons in mice as the animals drank. The neurons began to quiet with the first lick, before drinking had corrected the blood's salt concentration. The brain was not just measuring the correction. It was anticipating it. Signals from drinking were enough to quiet the alarm, on credit, with the gut reporting back later. Follow-up work in 2019 showed how a signal from the gut reports the fluid's concentration and revises the forecast. A swallow is not the final receipt. Seawater, in this arrangement, is a bounced check.

These were measurements of thirst signals in mice, not of the pleasure I felt in the car. But an alarm that switches off on a forecast is an idea I recognize.

I run a payments company, so forgive me, but this is a settlement problem. The pleasure clears instantly; the funds arrive later. Your body is a bank that lets you spend the deposit before it lands. Satisfaction feels like an advance. The first sip is the best sip, and every one after it is worth a little less, until the glass is finished and you feel nothing at all, and then, a little later, you are the person who has to leave the movie. Economists call that curve diminishing marginal utility and draw it on a whiteboard. Your tongue draws it for free.

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I have run out of water on more hikes than I would like to admit, and most of them happened in the same place.

For years I lived in Marin, north of the Golden Gate, and the Headlands were the backyard. The usual start was the Tennessee Valley trailhead, at the end of a road that gives up in a gravel lot, and from there you could climb toward Coyote Ridge, to a bare spine with the Pacific on one side and the Bay on the other, and come home on the Coastal Trail, which climbs and drops along the cliffs between Tennessee Valley and Muir Beach. The hills are coyote brush and lupine, and the fog comes

over the ridge like something spilled. It looks cool and damp out there. It is not; the wind takes the water off you and the sun on the open ridges finishes the job. Every time I would look at the bottle in the lot and think, I can make it. I could not make it. This happened more than once, which tells you what kind of forecaster I am. My body can predict a drink in seconds. I could not predict a Saturday.

So there was always a stretch on the way back, the bottle empty for an hour, the mind gone small and stupid and turned entirely toward the one subject. And the joke, the thing that made it a joke every single time, was the view. The Pacific Ocean. The largest body of water on the planet, filling the entire western half of the world, glittering below the ridge, and I could not have a sip of it. Coleridge got there first: water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink. The chemistry is crueler than the poem. Disposing of seawater's salt requires more water than the drink supplies. It is a loan at a rate that kills you.

Then the lot at the end of Tennessee Valley Road, and the water waiting in the car, and a drink I remember, years later, better than most meals.

And now I live in Michigan, which is the other joke. I moved from the edge of an ocean I could not drink to a state surrounded by fresh water. The Great Lakes hold about a fifth of the world's fresh surface water, six quadrillion gallons, and Michigan touches four of the five. It still needs treating, but water is hardly scarce in the scenery. And the best drink I have had this year was a forgotten bottle in a parked car after a morning at my desk.

That is the thing I want to take from this. The scenery was not what made the water good. Coyote Ridge made me thirsty, and the water was standing there. The mundane version was not a lesser version. It was the same pleasure with the marketing removed. The desk had done what the ridge did, with a considerably worse view.

Here is the part I am less comfortable with.

A remarkable amount of comfort consists of making sure I never feel a deficit long enough to notice it. The thermostat holds the air at seventy so I am never quite cold and never quite warm. The pantry means I am never hungry, merely between snacks. The phone means I need never be bored, because boredom is a thirst of the mind and the phone is the bottle in the cup holder that never runs dry. And water itself has acquired an industry of reminders. There is the forty-ounce insulated tumbler. There are people who track their ounces the way I track receivables.

Sometimes we buy the gap back. The cold plunge, the fasting app, the nine-thousand-dollar tub on the patio: discomfort, reintroduced, at retail. We engineered it out of the house and purchased it again through the garage door.

I am not against the thermostat. I am not going to tell you to dehydrate on purpose; your kidneys have a union, and it is a strong one. But there is a trade I recognize in my own days. Comfort can prevent a need from becoming uncomfortable. Relief is the pleasure of that discomfort ending. You cannot have relief without something to relieve.

If I remove every small inconvenience before I can feel it, I also remove the chance to enjoy its ending. I do not need to arrange a hardship. Apparently I can produce enough of one by sitting at a desk and forgetting to drink.

While I was writing this, my wife Erin scratched my back, the spot between the shoulder blades that the human arm was apparently designed to keep from you, and it was, by the standards of this essay, a five-star event. Consider what she delivered: no water, no meal, no nap. An itch relieved. Researchers who made volunteers itch with a tropical plant found differences in the pleasure of scratching different parts of the body, with the back rating higher than the forearm. The same gesture can arrive differently depending on where it is needed.

And the one itch you cannot reach is the one whose relief arrives with a person attached. You can pay someone to scratch your back. It was better because it was Erin.

Water when you are thirsty. A bed when you are tired. A chair after the long walk. A bathroom after the long drive. A back scratched in the one place you cannot reach. These are ordinary things, and some of the pleasure in them is unavailable to a purchase made in advance. I can buy the water. I cannot buy the particular drink I had in that car.

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I went looking for the word, because a thing this old should have a word, and the word turned out to be doing more work than I expected.

To slake a thirst. We say it and never think about it. It comes from an Old English verb meaning to slacken, to loosen, to let something taut go soft, which is already exactly right: thirst is a tension and slaking is the release. But the same verb has a second life, and it is the one you will want.

Quicklime begins as limestone, ordinary rock, the stuff of cliffs and old cathedrals. Heating it in a kiln drives off carbon dioxide and leaves a more reactive material behind. The “quick” in quicklime is the old word for alive, the same quick as in “the quick and the dead,” and it earns the name. When quicklime and water react, the reaction releases enough heat to hiss and steam, sometimes enough to boil the water. What comes out the other side is slaked lime, used in mortar and whitewash. The rock has been slaked. And the word for what happened to the rock is the word for what happened to me in the car.

The kiln had changed what the water would meet. The plain thing mattered, but so did everything that had happened before it arrived. Something in the rock had become quick, and then the water came, and it hissed.

Which brings me to the question after the question, and the real reason I am writing this in September.

I am not looking forward to winter. Michigan does winter the way the Headlands do fog: thoroughly, without apology, and for longer than seems strictly necessary. Sometime in November the sky turns the color of a filing cabinet and stays that way until March. The car needs ten minutes before it will consent to be a car. And I have already started dreading it.

But Michigan has a pleasure that is harder to come by somewhere warm all year: the first warm day. Some Tuesday in late March the temperature reaches fifty-five degrees, and the entire state goes outside in shorts. Grown adults sit on their front steps with their faces tilted up like houseplants. Fifty-five degrees. In September, fifty-five degrees is a cold snap; people complain about it and go back for a jacket. Same number, opposite verdict. It reminds me of Cabanac's warm water. What came before changes what the warmth feels like.

Winter is the kiln. I did not choose the gray, and I do not have to like it. Somewhere in March there is a bottle of water sitting in a cup holder with my name on it, and I expect it to be fantastic. I do not need January to be worse to make that happen. The fifty-five degrees will meet a different man from the one complaining about them in September.

I had spent the morning in a kiln and had not noticed. The water was just water. I was the quick part. ♦

Sources

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