

Sarah McLachlan *Surfacing*



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Netzwerk / Arista

# Undertow: A Valentine to My Father

Inspired by Sarah McLachlan's album  
*Surfacing*

Gavin Lakin

*The winter here's cold, and bitter  
It's chilled us to the bone  
We haven't seen the sun for weeks  
Too long, too far from home  
I feel just like I'm sinking  
And I claw for solid ground  
I'm pulled down by the undertow  
I never thought I could feel so low  
Oh darkness, I feel like letting go...*

With unparalleled vindictiveness, El Niño chose Valentine's Day 1998 to undermine the foundation of what had been our family's treasured beach house. Our sixty-feet of bluff, dotted with pampas grass and ice plant—over which we'd immersed ourselves in years of picturesque sunsets and the thunderous pulse of the crashing waves—had mostly plummeted into the tidal tempest some one-hundred-fifty feet below, taking our haven out to sea.

What remained dangled perilously over the cliff above Agate Beach: cedar wood ripped from its frame, toppled towers of chimney bricks, open air where once was a roof, electric wiring resembling Medusa's snakelike hair along the soggy wood floors, a lone wood burning stove, deck remnants jutting out like pirates' planks leading toward Hawaii, and the cement foundation with rebar twisted and uprooted like iron weeds.

242 Roundhouse Creek had been so much more than a physical structure; it was twenty-four years of memories and reverie—forever unmatched to this day—that had abruptly perished. Under a rainy, silver sky, that February interloper, *undertow*, had initiated a series of events that for much of my life since has subjugated the best part of me.

*And sweet, sweet surrender  
Is all that I have to give*

It became evident quite quickly that it was much too late to lift, relocate, nor rebuild the house. The Humboldt County community gathered. Friends and strangers arrived to offer both emotional support and physical strength. A flurry of activity ensued as pickup trucks filled the driveway, dollies rolled out appliances, electricians and the gas company ensured our safety, and growers from pot country arrived to offer (and provide) their services. Local news stations covered the story. Someone brought pastries and coffee. Neighbors also in peril offered empathy as they wrestled with how best to save their homes. Enveloping us was that tried and true togetherness brought on during times of catastrophe; a theme for which currently, we are becoming too familiar as climate change doles out its revenge on those who would deny, and those who have not done enough.

Meanwhile, below on the beach, colossal chunks of concrete had found a new plot of land. Other dangerous, weighty shards of our past ceded to nature and plunged onto the sandy shore, refusing the call to sea. Engineers, who had years ago guaranteed us a bluff with one-hundred years of worry-free erosion, arrived to insist we take immediate action. Already, looky-loos were scavenging below, even as more houses threatened to somersault down the cliff's face. We literally had no time to come to terms with the devastating and inescapable decision to demolish our precious getaway gem.

Just prior to the demolition team's arrival, stunned, with troubled soul and shadowed self, I ambled inside the gutted skeleton. Where had our gold-colored couch been taken, and how many novels had I read encased in its pillows? By the rectangular, flattened cement scarred with reddish coloring and faded impressions of bricks, how many cups of cocoa had I sipped? Glancing overhead, feeling the ardent raindrops, where was the roof from where we perched ourselves with hot brandy, admiring the thrill of August's meteor showers?

*You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie  
You're in the arms of the angel  
May you find some comfort here*

In the northwest corner with undeniably the best panoramic view, thousands of meals had been eaten at the hauled-off table where we'd glimpsed the migrating humpback whales and their calves, warmed ourselves with clam chowder, feasted on fresh king crab, fish stew, smoky omelets, and washed it all down with bottles of delectable California wines. In that sunset-laden site, an announcement of my first niece's birth was made.

Within the walls there had been ruthless games of Hearts and Spades, agates returned in bags and added to collections having been found at six a.m. with flashlights, balsa wood gliders built then tossed off the cliff's edge. Here, friends gathered, bands practiced, dogs frolicked. In the master bedroom, I remembered a woman from long ago and how we couldn't help but fall in love in such an environment. But I lost her too.

I stood adjacent to where once had been a wall spotlighting a painting created by a neighbor. She depicted our garden filled with hydrangeas. But this place had become void of warmth, as its semi-intact sections of the original frameup gazed at me, lifeless. There was nothing left for me to see.

*From where I can't return  
Where every step I took in faith betrayed me  
And led me from my home*

Traditionally, recurring dreams involve the dreamer trying to work through a personal issue. One of my most enduring recurring dreams involves my valiant effort to reach the top of a house. Though the abode's configuration might change, the idea remains: Find a way to its elusive pinnacle. I stumble through dim corridors and climb spiral staircases. Trap doors collapse and engulf me. Voices of ghosts line the wallpaper, while basements beckon me. *Uh, why would I descend?* Welcome to the Hall of Mirrors at the amusement park. No matter the circuitous route, I resign myself to resignation. *What could this possibly signify?* When and if I ever reach the apex, will I have a Number 1 Hit or novels published? Will true love stop playing hide and seek with my heart, permitting me to settle down with *her* and no longer face the incessant ribbing from friends and family? Should I get a real estate license?

Psychologist Carl Jung would identify that *house* represents foundation. One haunts my dream state. Another nosedived over a cliff.

*"After clearing the land, planting the orchard, building the house and barn, and surviving the Great Depression, our father died suddenly one winter night when we were small, leaving us to learn about loss before we even knew its name."*

-Virginia Wolff

I became a member of the Loss Club by virtue of my father's untimely death when I was an infant. Handsome, brilliant, a scientist, mathematician, and enthusiast of poet Robert Burns, my father left me his intelligent and soulful imprint and DNA. But more tangibly, in the aftermath, I was left holding a crutch; one I could lean on whenever I needed to feel "special" or "unlike others." Neighbors looked after me. My elementary school principal asked my mother if he could sponsor me for the father and son evening. Girls in summer camp, junior high and high school talked to me, sensing in me the vacuity of a young man without a clue. I learned to shave by watching the men on TV ads. Sex? *What on earth was it?*

When I encountered kindred spirits with similar stories of loss, more often than not our lives intertwined seamlessly. One young woman I met at college responded to my narrative with such reverence, I believe it defined our intimacy and galvanized us with a romantic depth I'd not yet experienced. But I lost her too; she didn't like the way I chewed my food, and by the way: the entire time we were together, she was in love with another man back in her home town.

*Can you look out the window  
Without your shadow getting in the way  
Oh, you're so beautiful with an edge and a charm  
But so careful when I'm in your arms*

When I had to put down my sweet, big-hearted Golden Lab, I sobbed so brutally, the vet and his team left the procedure room uttering simply that I could take all the time I needed. *Where were those tears coming from?* I pet her ears of felt, breathed in her fur, grasped her neck like it was tethering me to some kind of lifeline, and held her for a long enough amount of time that eventually the doctor returned and encouraged me to take the first steps: stand up, breathe in, and say goodbye to her one last time, then walk out the door and don't look back.

Over a year later, I put down my Black Lab mix, my buddy of nearly sixteen years. When his body fell silent, I'd been better prepared. Still, I cried like the thirteen-year-old who discovered his light brown Labrador along Coldwater Canyon, prone, cars passing by, the world uncaring. *Why was I effusively shedding tears for dogs whereas rarely did I display such emotion for people?*

I took the therapy route. He kept pushing me. Stop dancing around what matters here. My father. Yes, you loved your dogs. But those tears were not only about them. Sure, you claim to have loved women, but why has every relationship crashed and burned, whether by her, you, or mutual agreement? You say "crutch," I wonder if this isn't about the absolute need to face your father, say what you have needed to say, and allowing yourself to finally let go? I would argue that once that work has been done, your heart will be truly open to love, your music will soar, the novels will sell.

I did what I usually would do in similar situations; I bailed. I cited the expense. Yep, seeing a professional at the cost of paying out-of-pocket was a convenient excuse. Sounded a bit to me like leaning back against the crutch.

*The road is long  
The memory slides  
To the whole of my undoing put aside  
I put away  
I push it back to get through each day  
And all I feel is black and white  
And I'm wound up small and tight  
And I don't know who I am*

Stubborn to the very end, my calling, eighty-eight keys of infinite sonority, with only twelve notes at hand, prevailed. In my room, I'd do my own catharsis, hold the invoice thank you very much. Hey, I've written over 450 songs. How familiar are you with my name? From all corners, be it L.A., S.F., N.Y. and Nashville, I channeled Peter Gabriel's song "Don't Give Up" from his 1986 Grammy-winning album *So*. His music video with Kate Bush is the very definition of inner fortitude with an undertow of bittersweet.

That would be me.

However, his acclaimed album gets set aside in lieu of the singer-songwriter who got me through not only the Grunge garbage-filled 1990s, but the precise three-year span of losing my dogs, and the true precipitating event, a beloved house cartwheeling over a cliff.

Somewhere in there, I lost myself.

Sarah McLachlan, Canadian singer-songwriter, founder of Lilith, carried me like the angel she wrote of. Her soprano, exotic persona, purveyor of love for all humanity, with lyrics that are broad strokes from a palette of mixed oils, and a discography featuring hit songs as well as themes as varied as her hair color, gave me the simple gift of solace.

*Surfacing* had critics issuing praise and rants. Descriptions included ". . . a knack for intelligent, emotionally forthright lyrics," "monumental banality," it demonstrated her "tremendous growth as a songwriter and musician," "rigid in her introspection," "lushly atmospheric" or it had a lack of "compelling craftsmanship and textural daring." Hey, critics, the proof was in the "Poor Man's Pudding": in the United States, the album earned RIAA's platinum rating eight times over.

"Last Dance," which won the 1997 Best Pop Instrumental Performance Grammy, is a carousel-sounding piano waltz, with what I infer as overtones to endings, farewells, loss and even death. I feel the slightest sense of closure with my father, though I know I never will have that in my lifetime.

"Full of Grace" urges me to call upon "all of the strength and all of the courage come and lift me from this place" and to "claw for solid ground." I know I can love you much better than this. *Amen*.

"Black and White" could be my middle name. I'd taken Joni Mitchell's advice far too long, you know, the thing about *both sides now*. Yet these two sides are notoriously ready with the word "but" as a response to someone's feelings, defensiveness, opinions. I can't claim that this song specifically turned me around; it did contribute to my "and" approach to

conflict and building mysteries. Ideas are not restricted by two perspectives, *and* there is room for many more.

"Angel" can be about distraction, which can be a beneficial way to get through a trauma. It has for me on numerous occasions. Can anyone say *Planet of the Apes Marathon*? She needs "...some distraction, oh, beautiful release, memories seep from my veins" and she wishes to be "empty and weightless" then "maybe I'll find some peace tonight." Secretly we all crave distraction, some with more access than others. But, true angels don't flitter in the clouds and wear wings; they sacrifice, they put others first, they say please and thank you. Angels still exist, though their numbers are dwindling as we appear to be *too* distracted by technology.

"Witness" is a passionate expression of Sarah's views on the state of humanity:

*Will we burn in heaven  
Like we do down here  
Will the change come while we're waiting  
Everyone is waiting*

This one didn't do much to cheer me up.

"Do What You Have to Do" hits home with this particular lyric:

*And I have the sense to recognize that  
I don't know how to let you go  
Every moment marked with apparitions of your soul*

Let. You. Go.

Possible: Yes, it can be done. Therapy. Time. Other drastic measures I would never condone. Lobotomy. Distractions...daily.

Impossible: No, it can't be done. The Limbic System in our brains (memory). Our amygdala (lizard or reptilian brain, which is highly emotional, i.e. fight or flight). Songs that you associate with the other person and you ain't throwing away the CD! Everyone we encounter inhabits our lives for a reason, forming Carole King's tapestry, no matter whether you want the threads or not.

"Adia" is about best friends unable to resolve their differences. I found it refreshing as very few popular charting songs are about friendships. As for many of us, we wonder how we come to be born into the families we have. Lives are inherently bound to be screwed up, because that's what happens when humans interact. But Sarah reminds us that things start off pretty cool:

*If you'd only let yourself believe that we are born innocent...It's easy, we all falter . . . but does it matter?*

"Sweet Surrender" has Sarah commenting that "you strip away the ugliness that surrounds me." I miss this aspect most when you have formed a special bond together. You bring your best self. You face your shit. Is this like letting go? But, how could it be "sweet?" I hear the voice of a therapist from long ago.

"I Love You." Damn original title, Sarah. A plaintive ode to love. I would have placed this track lower in the batting order.

"Building a Mystery" tapped into the vampire and zombie culture building up at the time. (By now, I thought we'd be done with those walking dead. Apparently, we are entertained by the undead living it up. Yet, what of *Buffy*? Sarah's songs appear on the show's soundtrack. Make up your mind, people!) On my first listen, I remember hearing a cool woman singing the "F" word. I mean, on the opening track? *And* selling millions of records? Lilith was an empire, kicking ass; female performers were showing they could whip any Grunge dudes. The actual mystery Sarah McLachlan was building was no surprise to me: It *is* a world propagated with "beautiful fucked-up men."

I'm one of them.

*Let me surround you*  
*My sea to your shore*  
*Let me be the calm you seek*

I wake up some mornings and wonder how my life would have turned out had my father lived to be an old man. Would his presence, modeling love with my mother all those years, prodded me to marry, have a family, and dump the pie-in-the-sky music dream? Would his passion for space and engineering fueled a similar ardor in me, one that would have allowed me to pursue his field with its stability and notoriety, or something else without dealing with coke heads and egomaniacal label heads?

I have absolutely no memories of Henry. Not the sound of his voice. The way he walked into a room. How he roughoused with my older brother. The texture of his briefcase. What he liked to eat. If he *ever* fed me. The kisses he planted on my mother's cheek. The equations he worked on in his notebooks. In plastic storage containers, only stories, photographs, ephemera, and various personal items are what remain.

I believe my father I never knew would be proud of his youngest son he barely knew.

He's always there—just below the surface.