



VINTAGE

THE UNKNOWN
KNOWNS
JEFFREY ROTTER

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Acknowledgments
Copyright

About the Book

Jim Rath's wife has grown tired of his hobbies: his immaculately maintained comics collection, his creepy underwater experiments, and his dreams of building a museum based on the Aquatic Ape theory of human evolution. On the night that she leaves him, Jim thinks he has spotted an emissary from a lost aquatic race called the Nautikons.

In truth the man is Les Diaz, a low-level agent of the Department of Homeland Security who has been mentally unstable since his wife's drowning. The department has relegated him to an underfunded project, inspecting hotel swimming pools and water slides for terrorist vulnerabilities, a mission Diaz embraces with fervour. When he realises that he's being tailed by Jim Rath, his intelligence instincts are awakened. Agent Diaz feels certain that Jim Rath is a domestic terrorist.

The Unknown Knowns is the story of two delusional and quixotic men who stalk one another toward a bloody showdown – a spectacularly moronic act of terrorism at an ageing water park. With its frequent evocations of Donald Rumsfeld's language and posturing, it is also a Swiftian expose of the hypocrisy and incompetence of the Homeland Security apparatus. It is fresh, original and very, very funny.

About the Author

Jeffrey Rotter holds an MFA from Hunter College, where he studied under Peter Carey, Colson Whitehead and Colum McCann. He lives in Brooklyn. The *Unknown Knowns* is his first novel.

For Margaret and Felix

THE UNKNOWN KNOWNS

A Novel

JEFFREY ROTTER



Jonathan Cape
London

“There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don’t know.”

—Donald Rumsfeld, February 12, 2002

ONE

THE OBVIOUS WAY to describe water is with adjectives. People like to say water is murky or dappled or turbulent or calm. They call it brackish, crystalline, emerald, white. Deep, shallow, filmy, or unfathomable. But all those adjectives don't even come close to describing water like it really is. They just float across the surface, like dead leaves or algae.

You could also try describing water with action verbs. You could say it rushes, or pours, or drips. You could also say it seeps, for instance. Water can boil or it can freeze or it can steam. But it doesn't matter how many verbs you throw at the water; they don't stick either. Trying to describe water by what it does is kind of like telling a story by throwing a book at your wife.

Another way people sometimes describe water is in context. I'll give you an example: a man walks by making water noises. His tube socks are drenched and they're going *squish, squish, squish*. With every step he takes: *squish, squish*. But when you ask the guy if he wants a dry pair—you have the socks right there in your hand; you even offer them to him—he shakes his head no. And that's when you hear it: you hear the fluid slosh inside his skull like milk in a coconut.

Here's another example of describing water in context. A little kid is pulled out of a swimming pool. His skin is red and raw. He's crying without making a sound. Something bad has been done to the water.

Or here's an even better example of water in context: two women go over a waterfall in a big bucket. The water is so

crazy all around them that no one can hear them screaming, not even the women themselves. An ambulance backs up to the edge of the water. The lights are insistent, swirling. They paint the mountain red, and to look at them makes you feel like you don't have enough pockets to put your hands in.

There are probably other examples that I'm sure you could come up with. But here's the one I keep coming back to, the one that's relevant to my present circumstance. A guy jumps into a swimming pool, pointing his toes to mitigate the splash. Water knifes up inside his swim trunks, it pinches his nipples. He blows bubbles through his nose to prevent the water from entering his skull. The water floods his thinning hair and his body hangs limp in the pool light. The body hangs limp while the guy thinks about water.

That guy is me. I am the guy in the water thinking about water.

TWO

MORE CONTEXT. MY name is Jim Rath. I was born in Columbia, South Carolina, where I grew to my current, completely uninspiring height of five foot six. Five years ago, for reasons that were obscure at the time, even to me, I moved to Colorado Springs. I am currently age thirty-eight, though that number seems to be changing rapidly and time hasn't been especially friendly to me. I'm hairy-armed and cowering, a guy you'd expect to see squatting by a campfire just a few weeks before the beginning of history. People say I have a high forehead, but I know what that means. I'm losing my hair. No great loss; I was never all that handsome or brave anyway. And my balding caveman looks never matter much when I am standing underwater.

It was after hours in the hotel pool at a Colorado Springs Hilton. The month was August but the water felt more like March or April. I descended, eyes closed behind my scuba mask, until I felt the grout and the grit of the tile floor against the balls of my feet. The pockets of my Jams were lined with lead fishing weights to keep me from floating away. I drew down the intake of the snorkel so it would barely breach the water. My presence would be difficult if not impossible to detect from above. Then I opened my eyes and described what I saw through the lens of my diving mask, writing everything down in a waterproof notepad.

My goal was a thorough understanding of water. But not on a chemical level. Not in any way that you could test. That wasn't of any interest to me. I had more consequential interests. I wanted to know why the water is always calling

to us, what it wants to tell us. Where do we belong in relation to it? I asked. What is the water hiding down there? I was in the pool to ask the hard probing questions that no one else would ask. Because I figured out some time ago that the truest and most singular way to know the water is by getting right in it. By reaching in with bare hands and pulling out a couple of its slippery monsters.

For six months in 2006 I spent every free night I had at the Colorado Springs Hilton hotel, standing for hours at a time on the swimming-pool floor, my head totally submerged, just gazing into the water. I was fortunate enough at that juncture in my life to have a lot of free nights, so I was at the Hilton about six or seven times a week. At first all I saw looking into the water was water. But as time passed and my senses got more acute, I started to see other stuff. Crazy stuff. Edifying stuff.

There is—and this sentence is the threshold of plausibility that I will ask you to cross if you dare to read the rest of my story—a lost civilization in the water.

I'll say that again, and invert the sentence, so you can get used to the idea: in the water there's a lost civilization.

And what I've seen over the past twelve months has me totally convinced that it's been down there for thousands and thousands of years just waiting for us to discover it. I have a name for it, which I made up myself, but it fits. Nautika.

Though I arrived at this discovery almost a year ago, and all kinds of negative circumstances have intervened since then, my eyes still ache with the marvels I beheld down there in the Hilton pool and in hotel pools across the state of Colorado. I've been diagnosed with a chlorine condition, and I still take drops. But I'd trade both my eyes to see it all again. I'd trade my wife (again). I'd trade my happiness (again). And (again) I'd trade my freedom. Again, again. Even though the ankle bracelet doesn't fit like they said. You don't "get used to it like a new pair of dress shoes."

I was standing on the bottom of the Hilton pool. I looked up to see the surface rippling overhead, responding to the whims of the central cooling unit like a kind of weather. Up through the varying strata of water I studied the domed roof of the hotel solarium, its brown steel ribbing and frosted glass expanding against the moonlight like the room itself was taking a deep breath.

We're in the habit of calling it the surface of the water, but couldn't it just as easily be the boundary of the air? Because it all depends on your perspective, where you're coming from. And either you cross the air-water boundary in the spirit of humanity and good faith or else maybe you should just stay in your lawn chair with your beer and tell your wife how pretty the ocean is.

I consulted my watch. It was a Helvner, waterproof and pressure-resistant to a depth of five hundred meters. Only three thousand of these babies are made each year by special appointment of the Saudi navy. You won't believe what they retail for. I'm lucky to have a generous uncle with connections in the Mideast naval community and cash to burn. Of course I don't have the Helvner anymore. That was one of the first things I had to sacrifice.

I made a note of the time in my waterproof notebook: 10:49 p.m. Then I focused my eyes on a light burning at the far end of the pool. I thought simple thoughts; I thought about hydrogen bonding and refraction, basic properties of water. And slowly, so slowly it seemed to happen in reverse, I entered the semiamphibious state of advanced consciousness known to the Nautikons as *ooeee*. This is not the place to divulge the secrets of *ooeee*, but suffice it to say it's a regimen of circular inner breathing designed to stimulate the latent man-gills. And in my case I also use a snorkel.

It is in this altered state of awareness that I receive certain "reports" from the annals of Nautika. They come to me like radio waves but thicker, with colors and bodily

sensations attached. I have visions, smeared and echoey, but visions nonetheless. I get the narrative and absorb the granules of sociological detail that are critical to my knowledge of our lost aquatic ancestry.

Yes, our lost aquatic ancestry. You think I can't smell your suspicion? Oh, I can smell it, all right—the fruited stench of unbelief, even through the supposedly impenetrable membrane of the page. You have your reservations. The scrutiny in the eyebrow area? I'm painfully familiar with it. Jilly did that too, the director at the Center for Gender and Power. She was afraid of my ideas. So was my wife. You think I'm crazy too.

Jim is a damaged person, you think. His reason has been cracked by emotional pressures exerted from his social milieu and from his inner makeup dating back to a codependent childhood with a single mom. That's probably what you're thinking, or words to that effect. You're figuring this guy's life went sour so his mind retreated somewhere less stressful. Maybe he has a chemical deficiency or a surplus, or both. Maybe his wife contributed to this imbalance through negligence. It happens.

Believe me, I understand your doubts. I'd have them too if I weren't me. But I am me, as evidenced by my being held accountable for actions widely perceived as mine. And besides, if you think this is hard to swallow, just wait; the curve of credibility doesn't get any gentler from here on out.

There are questions that demand answers. Sure there are. Why was a guy named Jim Rath spending hour upon precious hour in a hotel pool in a city called Colorado Springs? What motivated him? I wouldn't blame anyone for thinking my behavior was out there, or even antisocial. I wouldn't even blame you for concluding, circumstantially, that I did all those terrible things they say I did. My wife talked to CNN. So did some regular lady from my hometown who I'd never met, about intubation, paralysis, how I'd never understand what that felt like. They all say I'll be

judged. And they're right: I am being judged. But believe it or not, Jim Rath's motives were pure, and his heart, the private heart imprisoned within his public heart, it is fully innocent.

I'm a curator by training, with enough credits for a master's and three years of on-the-job experience building exhibits at the Colorado Springs Center for Gender and Power. I've always sought truth in dioramas, in glass-walled habitats and pinprick galaxies. At the Center for Gender and Power, I tried to inject each of my costumed scenes with something more than theater. I wanted them to pulse and sweat and live, to seize the viewer by the collar and say, I am the world!

If you don't believe me, you should have seen my *Twelve Scenes from the Life of Margaret Sanger*. I gave the mother of modern birth control more than period costume—I gave her a period, complete with a meticulously reproduced menstrual rag. Jilly the director wasn't impressed, and maybe this episode led indirectly to my dismissal a week later, but I'm the kind of guy who says you have to immerse yourself in it—or what's the point?

What many people fail to realize is that curating isn't just about arranging stuffed penguins around a Plexiglas ice floe or turning Styrofoam balls of varying diameters into a solar system. It's also about research and meditation, and it's about thought experiments. A museum is a world that you can see every inch of in an afternoon; so that world has to be real and simple and true from the minute you walk through the turnstile to the minute you reenter the blinding sunshine of the disordered general world with the little metal pin still clipped to your lapel.

In the summer of 2006 I was planning a new museum. My own museum. It had to do with water, so I wanted to learn everything I could about water from the inside out. The museum I had in mind was going to be based on the Aquatic Ape Theory of Evolution expounded by the noted visionary

and scholar Elaine Morgan. If you're not familiar with it, look it up right now. It's all completely well founded and empirically documented. David Attenborough did a special on PBS. This isn't fringe science I'm talking about, not by any stretch, no matter what the pith-helmeted old Richard Leakey cabal tries to tell you.

Every middle-schooler knows about the Fossil Gap. The missing footage in the filmstrip of human evolution, the bit that would explain how we came down from the trees and stood upright on the savanna to take a look around, and how we grew noses with downward-pointing nostrils and used them to look down on each other. If we could only fill in that gap, we'd understand ourselves. But there aren't any fossils to tell us that part of our story. Why would millions of years' worth of fossils suddenly disappear from the Olduvai Gorge? Because we're digging in the wrong place. We'd need frogmen to find those missing fossils. Elaine Morgan tells us that during the Fossil Gap humankind went aquatic, took a three-million-year sabbatical in the sea. And it was underwater where we made the leap from fuzzy little golems to self-knowing humans with posture and tools.

All three mammalian subclasses—the monotremes, the marsupials, and the placentals—have sent what they call volunteers back into the water, where they gradually reevolved into aquatic species. Long ago some rodent went swimming and turned into a beaver. A horse got wet and gave us the hippo. A bear went scuba diving—and *hello!*—look who's a walrus.

Then there's Steller's sea cow, the bovine of the deep that was hunted to extinction in the 1700s. A *sea cow*. A *cow* of the sea. Here's how I see that happening on the white retractable screen of my genetic imagination. Picture a single cow: she's sick of macho bulls, sick of horseflies, sick of bedding down every night in her own excrement. So one afternoon she takes a look at the ocean and says to herself: "Well, that's an option."

This would be on the Kamchatka peninsula. At sunset. The tundra burns red and the cormorants cry for their supper. She walks to the edge of the paddock and across a stretch of dark sand to contemplate the vast Bering Sea. It's starting to appeal to her. No flies, no bulls, clean, maternal.

She dips one hoof in the surf and feels a weird sensation course up her shank. It's the spark of natural selection, and it gives her chills, right down to the udders. Two hooves in the water and she stops to practice holding her breath. Next she's up to her knees in the green froth. The sun tosses its last honeyed arc across the water and the fire enters her intelligence. She takes a few more steps, lowing to herself. The shore is steeper here, and with each step the sea claims more and more and more of her hairy hide. The forelegs wither into flippers. Her back legs fuse together to form a broad paddle. As the fur falls away, her body goes sleek and green. She arches her back and with a flick of her tail plunges into the briny cold Bering. Her skull telescopes into her shoulders; her belly balloons; and her big cow eyes grow even bigger, astonished at becoming the next new thing on earth.

The same thing happened with people.

My museum was going to do for the aquatic ape what the natural history museum in New York City did for Steller's sea cow.

I don't want to get bogged down in theory or bore you with all the evidence, but it's my conviction that this lost aquatic civilization was destroyed in a volcanic eruption some 3,500 years ago. (More on this later.) The Museum of the Aquatic Ape would lay out the grand design and social history of our former seafaring cousins in a sequence of dioramas. The sculpted figurines would be built to scale with poignant details and fins and real emotions on the faces to register what we've lost. This, I thought, was the only way to get people to listen. Show them the drama. Convince them

that it was real and felt and endured and forgotten. That's the power of a museum.

You couldn't strictly classify this as Science. It's more poetic than that. I saw it like a mental dovetailing of Margaret Atwood, Hélène Cixous, and—I don't know—Stan Lee, maybe. That should give you a feel for the density of gravitas I had in mind for this place. And despite what my wife said, it had nothing to do with Aquaman. The Museum was social critique, a protest; it was a counterweight to the blatantly masculinized Savanna Theory of human evolution; Louis Leakey would fume when he came through the high revolving door; it was the truth. But I don't want to go into all that right now. My wife's name is Jean.

Sorry for the long-winded explanation, but that's why I was spending all those hours underwater in a Hilton pool. I was designing a museum about water, so I had to immerse myself in it. And things were moving along at a good clip. They were. But then Jean smart-bombed the sacred bonds of our marriage, and then the Nautikon arrived on the scene, and the Feds got involved and—well, everything went to hell.

Yes, to hell. Which is where I am now, doing all this remembering. Every story gets told from somewhere, and my somewhere is here on the deck of the *Endurance*, my houseboat and my holding cell. But it hardly matters where I am. Wherever I go now—hell, the federal penitentiary, a secret prison in the Balkans—I'm in Nautika, even with the security cuff strapped to my ankle. They can't rendition you from your dreams. Even right now as I sit in my deck chair rubbing my foot to get the feeling back in my toes, I see it. Before me lies the chalkboard bay scribbled with whitecaps. Gusts of sleet wipe it clean, but not before I read the word that's being spelled out there for me: NAUTIKA.

THREE

BUT I'M GETTING way ahead of myself. Slow it down, Jim. Deep breaths. Let's go all the way back to the Hilton. To me, standing on the floor of the pool, looking into the water.

In the amphibious state of *ooeee*, time does not pass with its usual rigor. The Helvner told me that it was after midnight (12:06). Meaning that I'd been under for more than an hour (1:17). I made a note of this and surfaced. My hair felt brittle and my eyes ached from the chlorine. I gathered my things and slipped under cover of darkness to my waiting Corolla.

The drive home from the hotel that night was an exercise in mounting dread. Inside our suburban Colorado Springs town house, my wife waited for me—or maybe she didn't. I was already beginning to suspect that she wanted out of our marriage. This suspicion would be borne out, and painfully so, on the night when she actually left me. Jean disapproved of my ambitions, the research in the pool, the museum; the mere mention of them plunged her into a sullen silence. She married me on the supposition that I would be a balanced helpmeet, that I would pull my weight. Oh, sure, she knew I was whimsical, a little flighty even. But she was drawn to my boyishness, my comics collection, the scale models that I'd had shipped out from my mother's attic in South Carolina.

The first year we were together I was still holding down the gallery job at the Center for Gender and Power. And even when Jilly asked me to clear out my desk, I handled the disgrace like an emotionally mature person. This was

October 2004, when I was still reeling from my *Margaret Sanger* coup. I'd pushed the conventions of sociopolitical diorama design to the brink of acceptance. (Or maybe a millimeter beyond that brink, if you ask Jilly.) Anyway, I got fired. Jean had just accepted my proposal of marriage that spring, and I didn't want any bad blood in the professional sphere of my life to hemorrhage into the personal one. So I put on a brave face.

"I'm just going to dust myself off," I remember telling Jean the night I was laid off. This was after three years at the Center, so there was a lot of dusting to be done. The silica of shame was thick on the knees of my downfall.

"That's the spirit," she'd said. And it was.

The next morning I made a few calls and got a job with a literacy group that paid well and allowed me to travel. If you've never seen a bookmobile, it's a vehicle stocked with books that are doled out free of charge to underserved schoolchildren. Mine was a Chevy van decorated with a huge bespectacled worm. For months I rose diligently at 6:00 a.m. every school day to make my rounds of the local libraries. I sat Indian-style on the primary-colored carpets to read Clifford en español.

A couple months later Jean and I were married, and I moved into her place. She owned a town house in the kind of complex where everyone wants to have dinner parties all the time and no one takes your designated parking space. I'll never forget the night after our wedding, when I backed the Corolla up to the town house door. I was so excited I accidentally popped the hood and then the gas cap before finally finding the ejector lever for the trunk. The car was packed with my meager possessions, most of which were tied up in garbage bags and pillowcases.

I didn't get out of the car right away; this was a moment to savor. I remember thinking that if I savored it long enough Jean might rush outside to help me carry in my stuff. But she didn't, and after fifteen minutes the car

started getting cold, so I gave up waiting. I had to knead my backside to get the blood flowing again. I'd expected this to be a big moment, but instead my leg fell asleep.

"That all you brought?" Jean said. I was standing at the threshold of married life with only a microwave oven in my arms. She was wearing a terry bathrobe and a big stocking cap. I wanted to kiss her, but the oven would have gotten in the way.

"There's more stuff in the trunk."

She gave a weird smile and stepped aside to let me through. I set the microwave on the kitchen bar and turned around to face my new bride. I still don't know where she got the costume, but there she was—big, physically edifying Jean—wearing a leotard adorned with a stylized gold eagle. On her head she wore a golden tiara, and on her hip a golden lariat. On her wrists she flashed a pair of silver cuffs.

"*Diana Prince?*" I whispered.

"Steve Trevor," said Jean—said Wonder Woman, my wife—with a wink. On the sofa between us lay a U.S. Army dress uniform, with a natty peaked cap and patent leather shoes. I wasted no time getting in costume. Then Jean lassoed me with the Lariat of Truth and dragged me into the bedroom. We made love in character once that night. And then we made love out of character, or rather in the character of ourselves, twice.

Nearly two years passed. There were more playful sex scenarios and there was plenty of emotional growth, though in retrospect probably not enough. But in those heady first months of marriage we were into each other to a degree that suggested longevity. As an evolutionary strategy, love works too well. We should know what it's really after, where it leads.

By the beginning of last year the first blush of romance had peeled away and the rough glue-smeared underlayer of misery had become plainly visible.

When I arrived home from the hotel that night, I could see the yellow curb stenciled with our condo number. I wish I could say this was a welcome sight, but frankly it filled me with apprehension. I parked, hauled up the hand brake, and listened to the engine tick as it cooled. To my freaked-out ears it sounded like some sort of urgent telegraph message. The message was telling me to restart the car and drive away. Do us all a favor, Jim: go. Disappear into some dull yellow obscurity where your ideas can't hurt anyone you love.

I walked to my doorstep and inserted the key in the town house door but waited a minute before turning it. I had good reason to hesitate. For many nights I'd come home to find Jean in a state of emotional nonpresence. What I mean is that she'd thrown up an invisible shield of isolation around herself. An empathy partition. You could walk all the way around it feeling for an opening or a loose panel, but there was no way in. She looked painfully pretty inside it, and completely unmarried.

At last I turned the key. The sound of the bolt scraping in its chamber had all the finality of a cocked rifle. The door swung open and I stepped across the brass jamb.

Jean sat on the couch, watching *Nova*. She didn't look up. It was as if I reflected a frequency of light that was beyond her perception, ultra-ultraviolet. I could see her splayed form molded by the glow of our single torch-style lamp. She looked like a person of import lying in state. She looked dead. She looked at the TV.

I closed the door softly. In these new condos there's no other way to close a door. You can't slam it no matter how hard you try, and I've tried, believe me. I hung my laser-pointer key chain on a hook, watching it bang softly against my wife's laser-pointer key chain. Banging and intertwining and deflecting. Like us.

Stepping in behind the couch, I spoke to the back of my wife's head, but she didn't turn to face me. So I circled the

sofa and spoke to the front of her head. She shifted to the left and groaned to let me know I was blocking the TV. At my back I could hear galaxies being born. The soundtrack was synthesizers and wind chimes. In front of me, my own galaxy was dying, in utter silence. This went on for several minutes, me moving from the front to the back of the couch, until I finally got the picture. She clicked off the remote, sat up, and knotted the sash of her bathrobe.

Our marital trouble boiled down to a difference of opinion. I contended that the world deserved a Museum of the Aquatic Ape, deserved to know the alternate truth of human ancestry. Jean contended that I needed to get a job. But I'd had jobs. I drove that bookmobile for a whole year before I hit the train. I challenge anyone to drive a commercial vehicle in a big red dog costume without incident. Besides, I wasn't the first guy to be propelled toward great things by failure (take Gandhi, for example, or Don Quixote). And I'm definitely not the first visionary-like personality with a disapproving spouse.

Her voice reached my ears like an incantation from beyond the grave, all echoey and slo-mo. I thought, naturally, of Doctor Strange, the shaman of Marvel Comics. How he sat lotus-style on that pentagram rug in his Manhattan town house, summoning genies with Sanskrit spells.

"Are you even listening?" This was Jean's voice, suddenly become clear, earthly. I realized that she'd been talking to me for some time. "I said your mother called." She inserted an ugly pause. *"Again."*

There was resentment on that front. Jean was convinced that I'm unrealistically attached to my mother. She called her Betty, after Betty Friedan, although her name is in fact Gerry. Gerry Rath, Ph.D. Jean made fun of her drawstring pants and her cropped hair, her ceramic vagina art.

I tried squeezing into the few available inches at the foot of the sofa. Jean's foot recoiled at the touch of my thigh and