

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 1999, Issue 18

1999

Article 9

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NIGHT SWIMMING

Brian Shawver

There is something childish about swimming in a cold lake at night. I don't mean to say that it is or should be limited to children (in fact, they probably shouldn't be allowed to do it at all), but only that when I waded into a lake at night I feel as though I am eight years old. I feel this way even though I should reasonably associate night-swimming with mature acts, such as skinny-dipping with girlfriends as a teenager, or floating on inner tubes with my college buddies at the Lake of the Ozarks, sipping cocktails in plastic cups. As a boy I visited my uncle's place on Lake Lottawanna several times a summer, and so I've gone night-swimming more as a boy than as a man, but you would think the recent memories would have the stronger association. As I said, this is not the case. If my life were compared with the life of the Earth, night-swimming would be some skeletal creature from the Cezozoic, whose memory remains mostly in fossils, though a few of the prehistoric beasts are said to still swim in exotic seas.

Here I am now, though, night-swimming and married. I stagger across a rocky, narrow shore – from the cabin steps to the water, there is no sand, there are not even pebbles. Because of the sharp stones, and because I am trying to mitigate my nakedness, my posture is ridiculous; with my arms held out and my legs jerking and twitching, I suppose I look like some giant crane stepping across hot coals. She treads water about twenty yards out, and I can hear her giggle at me. My nakedness feels like a rash, it stings and itches. My awkward stance, the way I hunch and shrug my shoulders and hold my hands in front of my privates, comes from habit, from naked night-swimming with people from whom my body needed shielding. We should hide nothing from each other now, but hiding is an instinct and a necessity, and even if we have fifty years together I still don't see how I will ever rid myself of it.

The slimy floor of a lake is always unexpected, always disconcerting. Two steps into the water, the rocks have disappeared, and my feet sink into something soft and I glide forward. It is cold, surprisingly cold, and my skin responds immediately by tightening and raising its bumps, but I'm so eager to

hide myself I plunge in up to my neck. I don't want to swim right away – my muscles could cramp – and the muddy floor soothes the soles of my feet. The longer I stand there the more I sink. The mud plunges upward between my toes, like a sea monster swallowing me slowly. As a boy I had moments where that seemed undeniably true, that the thickness below me was some primordial organism, that my feet clawed into its vast and silty tongue. Now, as then, I almost wish it were something so tangible as a monster, something that has a presence, a face, a mouth, and not something, like the mud, that is so passive and inescapable. It is too soft now, disgustingly soft. I imagine that I am standing in a pile of diarrhea. One at a time I lift my feet and kick them in the water, shaking off the mud. But when I place them back down the mud swallows them again, and now I worry about running into a fish, touching the slimy shank of a perch or catfish. I know they won't hurt me – again, I've always known this – and they probably scattered like detonated bottle rockets the moment I entered, but I worry about them still. I wonder if, with my next step, I will put my bare foot on a dead fish. Although it is a realization I have had dozens of times, it always surprises me: I realize that the water is their home, that this is where they pee and poop, and vomit and give birth. I am engulfed by liquid that has been expelled by fish, and when I start swimming I will surely swallow some of it. This is what concerned me as a boy, this is what concerns me still. Nothing I have learned or experienced since boyhood has helped alleviate this basic worry.

I think now about the ethnographers and anthropologists who swim in piranha-infested rivers; on top of all these concerns, they must also swim with the fear that a razor-toothed fish will bite their pecker off. Perhaps they don't deal with all these fears – worrying about your pecker probably subsumes the others. I pretend I am a foreign correspondent, trying to gain the trust of Amazon Indians by participating in a bathing ritual. I pretend that I can't worry about swimming in fish refuse because I am more concerned about my defenseless member, and about the fate of the noble natives I am defending against a heartless corporation. Instead of staying focused on this pretending, however, I drift and remember something about my Uncle Carl. Whenever I was around and someone asked if he wanted a drink of water, he would emphatically refuse. "No, no, never. I never drink water. You know why?" Here he would look at me conspiratorially and deadpan, "Fish *pee* in it. That's why. I just eat ice." Through my giggles, I would remind him that ice is just frozen water, that there's fish pee in ice, too. He would look startled, I would laugh some more, he would wink at me. As far as I was concerned, we could never have this conversation enough times. I suppose he must have gotten tired of it, but he always humored me. He was right, though, fish do pee in this stuff. I can't get it out of my head, I can't pretend to be anyone else.

"Come on," she calls. "Come and get me. Come and hold your *wife*."

It is only when my mind drifts that I recognize the contamination of the water, but I am instinctively revolted by the mud. As it oozes about my feet, my face grimaces and my hands clench. The mud is comprised of all the pollution that has filtered down – fish feces, fish carcasses, fish afterbirth. I need to plunge

ahead. I could go back to the shore – the rocks would be better than this – but I'm naked and the moon is out, and she's already out far in the water, a little beyond the edge of the boat dock. Her head and shoulders bob in the wake of an invisible speedboat whose engine noises already fade. Then the wake hits me, and I take the opportunity to push off from the shelf of mud, and hover in the water. My head is low, since I am only treading, and I can now just see her head and nothing more, but from the way she pushes back her hair I would know that she is naked and expecting the presence of a lover even if I'd never seen her before.

In the open water, some of the worries disperse and others appear. It now seems ridiculous to worry about the urine of fish. Out here, I embrace the notion that I am indeed swimming in a mixture of foul fluids that is probably not as diluted as I would like to think. In addition to the fish refuse, the lake is comprised of gasoline and oil, human waste as well as animal, certainly a bit of toxic runoff, all manners of pollutants that I can't even imagine. I give myself up to this knowledge; the lake is cold and all cold things tend to feel pure, so to ponder what the water is made of does not make sense. Just swim in it, I say.

I dip my head under; as a child this was the tonic for cold water, your buddies would insist that it wasn't so bad once you got used to it, and that you just had to get your hair wet. I remember it as an effective thing. I remember that it stung for a bit, but that generally you could believe your buddies; once your hair was wet you somehow became warmer. Now my hair is wet, and I am still cold, painfully cold, and I feel cheated somehow. I feel that there should be someone whose fault this is, someone has betrayed me. But after a few moments of treading I am no longer thinking about the cold. I realize that I am comfortable, or perhaps slightly numb, and I know that afterwards I will remember the remedy from childhood as being absolutely effective. The lake makes me more confident about what I learned as a boy.

The wake is gone. The water is smoother now, but in the soft wind it is still choppy enough so that the reflection of the moon and the cabin lights are distorted. They appear on the water in hazy triplicate, the way they would look if I was very drunk, and their images are erased and replaced with each shift in the water. I swim through the reflections towards her.

Crickets chirp, of course, but I hardly notice them because they are expected, part of the natural order. I can hear the water climbing on and off the rocks in unambitious leaps. My hard breathing is also constant, like the crickets, and I notice it only when I tell myself to, and I realize that I must get it under control before I reach her, so that she will not think there is something wrong.

She dives under the water, trying, I think, to flirtatiously show off her backside, but she doesn't get enough arch on her body and instead she simply sinks below the surface.

This is not at all like night-swimming in a pool. As a boy I swam in Jeff Richey's pool shortly before my first trip to Uncle Carl's, and the first difference I noticed once I'd swam in both was the taste. The lake didn't taste any

worse than the chemically laced water of the Richeys' pool, but it tasted more substantial, as if I could spoil my appetite with it very quickly. My reaction to the lake also surprised me, the way it altered my standards of courage and cowardice. Mr. Richey kept their pool well-regulated and tidy, but there were always a few june bugs dying on the surface, and I would avoid entire quadrants of the pool if I thought I might touch one of them. But in the lake there were bugs everywhere, especially around the ladders (because of the dock lights), and you had to simply wade through them. I also knew that there were larger creatures below me and surrounding me, especially under the dock and in the reedy shallows, and as a boy I had been amazed to learn that they didn't frighten me. I would swim and walk in the reeds to look for frogs, leaving my older cousins to stare from the deep waters, warning that I would get a snakebite.

A large body of water, of course, contains more pressure per square inch than a smaller one. I've been told that at the surface of a lake I shouldn't be able to feel the difference, but I can. I feel the lake pushing hard against my skin, I feel my skin become denser. I do not feel that the lake pulls me under or pushes me out, but that it simply squeezes me tight.

She's being playful now. She splashes at me, but I'm not quite close enough for the splashing to reach me. She takes a mouthful of lake water and squirts it through the gap in her teeth. I don't feel like being playful, but I smile and cough out a laugh.

Swimming in a lake at night tends to make people playful. There is something about lakes in the daytime that disappoint. During the day, a lake such as this one is riddled with vacationers and the beautiful toys they have bought for their amusement, and the worry that one is not relishing the experience is constant. One worries that, having spent large sums on the property and the watercraft, and having rearranged schedules and ignored business responsibilities, one absolutely must enjoy oneself. The pressure is great.

The shores are crowded with tall wood houses built carefully on slopes, and the houses are pathetic in a way, since they are so obviously unnecessary. They do not fulfill the purpose of their race. The people to whom the houses give shelter do not need them; if the cabins and lodges slipped into the lake over the winter, there would be some grumbling and cursing and a good deal of paperwork, but the people are in no way dependent on the houses – they have other places to live. And so the houses only exist as a luxury, but they do not seem luxurious. At night the houses have a weak presence; they are represented only by the lights of their porches and patios, and many of these lights – the ones representing houses on the far side of the lake – can be mistaken for low stars.

In the daytime the boats cut through the water of the main lake, and are supposed to maintain low speed in the coves, where the houses are. The daytime air above the main lake is cloudy from engine smoke, and it seems as though this cloud is actually the noise the engines make, and its wisps reach us in the cove as an indication of the chaos that is going on out there. Water-skiers, cigarette boats, pontoons, jet-skis, inner tubers, sailboats, fishermen. The fish-

ermen are the most inexplicable; there is absolutely no chance of catching fish among the racket and churning activity. They are involved in an activity that has no hope of success. The skiers and boaters, at least, will get part of what they came for.

In the daytime there is much noise and much activity, all of it designed for pleasure, yet no one who is not drunk takes much pleasure. If you are a boat driver who is not drunk, you are worried about those who are, or you are worried about hitting a jet-skier. If you are a sailor, you are certain that one of the supersonic cigarette boats will cut too closely and tip you over with its wake. If you are a cigarette boat owner, you are concerned about the rising price of cocaine, or whether your wife will find out about the young woman who flaunts and squeals at the bow. If you are a jet-skier, you should be worried about injury, but instead you worry that people will think you are having fun, while you believe that jet-skiing is much too serious an adventure to take that lightly. If you stay in the cove, lounging on inner tubes or laying out on the dock, you are at first relaxed and then drowsy, and then you understand that this all seems very pleasurable, but in fact you are doing nothing more than laying around, which is what you did all night, and which you could do virtually anywhere on the planet.

Many lakes are this way. I have spoken just now about this lake we are in, Lake Chottabowa, a lake I never knew before yesterday, but of a kind that I am familiar with. Other lakes are different in manner and degree of chaos, of course. In Canada you can find lakes on which you may prance and sail and fish all you like without seeing another person. They have little in common with this one, but they too are serious places in the daytime. A quiet lake in the day no sooner lends itself to playfulness than a noisy one. On quiet lakes the air is too somber and majestic; the brilliance of nature shushes all exuberance. If you laugh, you feel like you are laughing at something that is very sad, you feel as though you have disrespected something.

But swimming in a lake – any lake – at night makes you playful. I think it all goes back to childhood here, this playfulness. You weren't supposed to be doing it (at least I wasn't), and so you are alive with the thrill of wrongdoing. Best of all, if you got caught, if the dock lights came on, or you heard angry and sleepy footsteps on the cement stairs, you could simply dive under the water. Of course, you could not hide there indefinitely, and once you surfaced there would be a reckoning, but while you were under the water you were as blissfully unconcerned about the future as an animal. The world of trouble did not seem to exist, nothing could touch you as a lake creature, and you stayed under for as long as you could.

This naturally progressed, in my case, to a different kind of naughtiness associated with nightswimming. Uncle Carl was a Baptist, but he was also extremely generous, and so in my late teens I could bring my girlfriend to his place for the weekends, with the understanding that we would have separate rooms. We never discussed this aspect of the girlfriend, but I think Carl would have assumed it went without saying that there would be no sexual contact. At

night the girlfriend and I would meet outside at the base of the cement stairs, and we would kiss for a bit but it seemed dangerous then, and we knew that in the water we could kiss all we wanted and feel secure. We would take off our clothes, recklessly, and slip into the water, muffle the urge to shriek at the cold. Our kisses would always be passionate at first, as if both of us were trying to suck warmth from the other's mouth and tongue, and then we would get used to the water and become gentle. She would eventually set her thighs upon my thighs, and I would hold both of us up with strong kicks. The hair of her crotch would feel like a water-plant against my stomach, and it was difficult to reconcile in my mind the warmth of her mouth with the cold of her body.

She would never let me put it in, even if we had done it before, because it hurt in the water. The girlfriend did not know this from experience, but she was certain it was true; she had heard from others. We could have done it on the dock, I suppose, or even in the soft bushes by the shore, but that seemed too risky. In the water, everything would disappear, our noises, our movements, even our fluids would sink down to join the waste of the fish.

We would kiss some more, until I became too horny to kiss without sex, and then we would separate and become playful. Barely mindful of our noise, we would spit water and tug one another below the surface. She would dunk me under or I would dunk her until we fell again into kisses. This went on for a long while, but Carl never came down. On the lake, noises are amplified, especially on one like Lottawanna, where the land rises high above the water and the whole thing is like a giant natural amphitheater. We tried to be very quiet, but young lovers, like drunks, are never as quiet as they think they are. Still, Carl never came. It would have been horrible if he had, worse than any trouble I'd found as a boy. This was trouble that spoke to the quality of my soul, my worth in the sight of the Lord; no boyhood trouble can compete with that. When our teeth could no longer be made to stop chattering, we climbed up the ladder onto the dock, and at these moments, though we were silent, I felt the most danger. I wouldn't let her dry off completely – she could do that in her room. We would put on clothes that stuck to our bodies, and I would send her up. I would wait ten minutes before following her, and then move with such cautious grace that it would take me another ten minutes to reach my room.

I don't know why my wife is playful, I don't know what past danger she associates with night-swimming. She doesn't remind me of any of the girlfriends. I reach her, and she lapses into coyness. When I reach out to touch her face she flashes a smile and dives into the water, reappearing behind me. I turn around to face her, trying to be playful too, but when I do not feel like being playful it is impossible for me to pretend; I would like to play along, but I can't think of anything to do. Eventually she extends her arms across my shoulders, and as her breasts touch my chest her arms push down, so that now I'm carrying the weight of her on my shoulder blades; her legs haven't yet figured out where to wrap themselves.

It is wet now, of course, but when it is dry there is something child-like about her hair. She colors it, but she does it very well; it is blond but not too

yellow, and I've never noticed that it is any darker at some places than at others. It is straight and soft as tinsel. She has the hair of a vain twelve-year old girl, a girl who is just noticing herself and gives her hair two-hundred brush strokes every night. Even now, when it is wet and we are naked and she must already feel confident that she is attractive to me, she removes her hand from my neck to arrange it quickly, laying it in a long rope over her shoulder, in a way that is exotically sexual, but the effect is lessened by the knowledge that she means for it to look that way.

I have brushed her hair before. There is a sort of desk in her room – and I suppose now it will be moved to our room – that sits before a large mirror that is surrounded by incandescent light bulbs. She sits at the desk for nearly a half hour every night before bed, stroking her hair and plucking her eyebrows, and in the morning I don't know how long she sits there, because she's already there when I wake up. One night I approached her at the desk, and massaged her temples, and then took the brush from her hand. She closed her eyes and hummed. I brushed her hair with languid strokes, and the brush never once snagged or skipped – it was like pulling a rake through sand. I had to be delicate, because the brush had hard wire teeth. She had other brushes laid out before her, and I assumed the one I held served some special purpose; perhaps she used it when she thought her hair was especially clumpy. In any case, I had to be careful not to touch her scalp. I closed my eyes and thought of running water, and my free hand rubbed her neck.

It was impossible not to imagine what would happen if I nicked her head with the hard wire teeth. She would yelp and slap at me; it is one of her quirks, that whenever injured, no matter how slightly, she instinctively slaps at the perpetrator. But I had my hand at the base of her neck, and so I imagined what would happen if instead of nicking her I simply held her down and gave a long stroke while pressing hard against her head. She couldn't slap, or wouldn't be able to; it would hurt very much. I imagined that I gave her another stroke, a vicious scrape from the top of her scalp to the base of her skull, and then I imagined I repeated this over and over across the back of her head. She would scream, and then cry – she could never seem to do both at the same time – and she would alternate between these two sounds until it all became too much, until with another hard brush across an already wounded area she simply melted into a queasy moan, crossing into the kind of pain that is deferential and impotent. She would stop trying to resist the immobile weight of my hand across her neck. I imagined that I continued brushing, although she was pleading with me to stop, and asking me why, over and over again, why are you doing this to me. I imagined that eventually, with enough hard strokes of the wire teeth, the skin would open, and that soon I would be streaking blood across her yellow hair. I imagined blood seeping through the soft fibers like sweat appearing on skin, and I imagined being surprised, but not too surprised, that the red blood did not merge with the yellow hair to create a silky orange (as I might have expected based on my grade-school color charts), but that instead the yellow hair dampened into a sad, muddy crimson.

I don't know where this imagining came from. When I opened my eyes I was still brushing – I hadn't nicked her once – and I stopped so suddenly she turned to me and asked what was wrong. Not letting her finish at the desk, I took her to bed, and we made love, but every time she cried out I stopped and looked her in the face, not so much to see if she was in pain but instead to see if I enjoyed the look I saw.

She doesn't like me to touch her hair when it's made up, but now it's okay, so I draw my fingers through the hair at the sides of her head, which is dark now from the water. This way that I envision cruelty is another childish thing. It is childish because it is a fantasy, something I would never do, and it is childish because I don't feel regret for imagining it, just as children are never embarrassed by their dreams. It is childish because there is a special aspect of cruelty that is the domain of childhood, a kind of cruelty that is perpetrated out of curiosity, out of a desire simply to do what one does not think one should do. There were times as a boy when I would bend back the fingers of my younger brother, who was developmentally disabled. He wasn't what I would call retarded, but he was slow and simple, and as a young child he smiled all the time, a goofy, vacant smile that made me impatient. Our mother would leave us alone in the car together as she ran errands and my brother would stare at me and smile, and I would yell at him to stop smiling, but he couldn't talk until he was five and so he didn't respond. To make him stop smiling I would pull his fingers back, and at first he always thought this was some kind of game, and he was glad to be touched, and he smiled bigger and made happy noises. And then it started to hurt, and I pushed back a bit more until he cried, and although the noise pierced and continued for long minutes, I was always satisfied.

I could never do such a thing now, and I could never physically hurt her; I can only imagine. These aren't things I tell her, of course. We've told each other almost everything now, a thousand small details but also the big things. When were you most embarrassed, when were you most afraid, what do you love most (our answers to this, of course, are now "You"). But still I don't tell her how sometimes I think about doing horrific things to her. One night several months ago I went out with old friends for a bachelor party, and I became stuporously drunk, and ended up at her apartment (the cab driver, I think, helped me up the stairs). She indulged me, and put me to bed, but instead of passing out I began confessing. In weepy tones I told her everything that was in my mind at that moment, all my fears. I don't remember what I said, but it must have been monumental; the next day she asked "Do you remember what you told me last night?" with an extremely serious look on her face, and I said "No," and right away I could tell that she was pleased to possess information so vital without me knowing she possessed it. I begged her to tell me what I'd said but she refused, and somehow she made me quit pestering her. I think about this almost every day, about how I'd momentarily forgotten to hide and now she was hiding what I had revealed.

Her skin is also bumpy with the chill of the water. My arms drop below the surface and I begin touching her everywhere, and I realize, somewhat unex-

pectedly, that they are all places I have touched before. Nothing is new about her, she seems to belong to some other time in my life. But there is nothing childish about her. She is no longer playful; she stares at me seriously before we kiss. She will probably let me put it in, even if it does hurt, and suddenly I am worried about the logistics of sex in deep, cold water.

There is nothing less childish than sex, although as a boy, beginning at about the age of eleven, I believe that's mostly what my friends and I talked about. These days, I know, children are having sex all over the place. Thirteen year old mothers are legion in our cities. My eleven-year old buddies and I wouldn't have had sex even if we could have. It belonged not only to a different time, but to a different me, an adult me that I never became, although, of course, I did become an adult and I did eventually do it. To the boy that I was sex was very much like night-swimming is to me now; it belongs somewhere else. Although I was sixteen before I even touched breasts, I imagine that if I'd had sex as a boy it would have felt very much like this swimming does now: awkward, frightening, a kind of treachery, although I don't know who I'm betraying.

Her legs find a place to wrap and we kiss sloppily, and it becomes clear that she certainly does intend on doing it in the water, discomfort be damned. I only have a few moments now. Sex will take everything away from night-swimming; frolicking with the girlfriends and guzzling with the college buddies could not overwhelm my childish associations with the night lakes, because they were childish things in themselves. But sex will do it; from here on, it will claim its sovereignty in night-swimming. I'm sure that the water is different once you've had sex in it – after that it will seem to exist for only one purpose, since it will contain only one memory. She is taking it away from me slowly, and now it is almost completely gone. My biggest fear comes upon me suddenly. It is the fear, and it is more like a realization, that this is only a beginning, that she will swallow me slowly like the mud. That this is only the first of many things she will take and hide from me, and that she will hide them so well I will never find them again.