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## Questions of Swimming, 1935

Peter Davison

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*Questions of Swimming, 1935\**

(For Robert Penn Warren)

PETER DAVISON

What was the nub of wonder? Was it  
the man, giant to my child-eyes, strapping  
a shiny black rubber bathing cap over the cap  
of his red hair, plugging his nostrils and ears,  
and lowering his lean body into the yellow  
lake in Colorado, down into the frightening  
water, to begin the steady trudge  
that took him, as long as my skipping patience  
could endure, steadily farther from sight  
as far as the far shore, a mile, and without  
pause, brought him back to me, bobbing  
far out in the water, then thrashing,  
then finally splashing, and gasping and rising,  
and then, again, human and near me, dripping and walking?

Wonder at the man, or at the task?  
What sort of way was it to spend  
an hour in thrashing straight across a lake  
and, turning, swimming straight back to the start?  
Where was he setting out for when he began, fresh?  
Where had he been to when he returned, winded?

Or take the style: laboring akimbo,  
a steady crawl across the sheet of water  
without a pause to whoop or whistle or blow,

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a style as awkward as inexorable,  
 in which the completion of the task seemed to count  
 more to the swimmer than not drowning.

The lake? A captive body  
 the dry climate had permitted  
 to rest between the knees.  
 Boulder had bulldozed to keep  
 the water from evaporating: a reservoir.  
 The man swam back and forth between its walls.

What of the rhythm of the exercise?  
 Not like a dog or deer that simply walks  
 on water, but a dactyl, a quantitative  
 excursus, a distribution of forces between  
 the limbs, these legs working like scissors,  
 these arms working like flails, these lungs  
 working like bellows, this mind working,  
 working on lessened oxygen, this body  
 moving against every interference to imitate  
 its forgotten grandfather, the fish.

*To the destructive element submit yourself,  
 and with the exertions of your hands and feet  
 make the deep, deep sea keep you up.*  
 Once kept up, where do we go from there?  
 To the headwaters, the spawning ground?  
 To the floating pyre, the fire ship?  
 To the other shore? Which is the other shore?  
 Could it be the place where a boy could watch  
 a man pull on the helmet of a bathing cap  
 and set out, swimming, for a farther shore?

**Peter Davison** is poetry editor for Atlantic and one of America's leading poets. His warm friendship with Warren dated from his boyhood.