2005

Questions of Swimming, 1935

Peter Davison
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(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 trudgen 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.