

Lake

Carol Anne Wien



The lake is blue black and deep. It is a glaciated finger lake, clawed out of rock when ice retracted across Nova Scotia in a northerly direction during the last ice age. The lake is narrow, a little over a mile long, and deep, 90 to 190 feet in places according to local lore, off the charts in others. I love to swim here, with a sense of incalculable depth below, the open sky above—an illusion of a double infinity. I swim on the cusp of air and water, expansive vista across time and space.

There is a road along the eastern side of the lake, picturesque for the view, wooded hills rising gently behind it. Acadian forest of birch and aspen, pine and hemlock, and the ubiquitous Nova Scotia weed maple. The shoreline is rocky, marked by lady's slippers and pink wild rhododendron in June, wild iris in the shallows in July. The northern tip of the lake has recently been developed into a dozen lots of several acres, each with its massive suburban house and dock with waterslide or trampoline. At the narrow southern end of the lake, there is a public beach with trucked-in sand, a parking lot, and lifeguards. Adjacent to the artificial beach, along the southwest shore, is a string of year-round homes, modified from earlier cottages. The terrain is convoluted stony hardpan, the little houses shoe-horned into odd flat spots or lightly wooded ridges.

After the houses, the road ends at the boat club. The boat club trains kayakers and canoeists. Day after day, April to November, twenty or thirty boats skim the water like dragonflies. Their coach sits in an aluminum motorboat on a swivel chair, one hand on the tiller, and holds an umbrella over his head if it rains. From the boat club to the distant northern tip of the lake along the western shore is pristine wilderness, five minutes from home. This is where I swim, following the long stretch of wilderness park, staying within the littoral zone, less than a hundred feet from shore.

I have been swimming here for twenty-six years. In the early years I was also a runner. When I was told that I could no longer run due to injuries, I shifted my five-mile jog into the lake, put some distance, perhaps a mile, into my swim. While I could still run, my children and I would swim to the big pine with a long branch that hung over the water. Someone had knotted a rope over it. We could stand six feet up on shore, and someone in the water would swing the rope up. The jumper would catch it, leap and wrap the legs around the knot in one motion, fly out over the water, and drop into the deep. It required daring and good timing, a mother's judgment about when children could safely try it. That tree fell in a storm eighteen years ago, the memory of kids and mother swinging into the water held now in the sweeping, weathered roots that wrap bare rock like driftwood.

Tremolo

The lake has a loon. I hear it first in late April, its haunting call filling the sky as it flies inland from the ocean to its freshwater feeding grounds. It calls again in the evening, when it returns to the ocean. Each year, when I first hear its long yearning cry overhead, pleasure and excitement rise. Swimming season is about to begin.

Last year I bought a wetsuit to extend the swimming season. In Nova Scotia, April is still a winter month, and May to July a rainy season. Rain, and more rain, low dark cloud cover, five to six days at a time without sun. The occasional warm sunny day with bright sparkling water is like meeting a long lost loved one. On May 10 it is very warm, but I have never gone in the lake so early in the year. I am far from young. Once I decide to swim, I walk in steadily without pauses. In the shallows, the water temperature is just short of numbing to the feet and hands. When the cold water sluices through the wetsuit, shocking every crevice and expanse of skin, I wonder if this is dangerous, whether I could have a heart attack. But I have no chest pain, my heart feels fine. I walk in further, the cold banging against my chest, shoulders, and neck. I head out and do thirty strokes of front crawl, like my body is cleaving ice, turn over for a bit of back stroke. Explosive cold: the back of my head feels searing pain as though it might separate and fall off. I have an old darkroom thermometer to check the temperature: it is 60F/15C.

The limits of swimming become the limits of what my body can endure, absorb. A little too long in cold water and bursitis starts up in a shoulder. There are years when the sharp pain of tendonitis at the tip of either elbow weakens the muscles in the forearm. Then I must adapt my stroke to let that arm pretend to swim, without strength, and ask the other limbs to do the work. Slower, but I can still be out there. Two years recovering from a whiplash injury and several more with repetitive strain injuries meant I swam legs only, using a flutter board, for several summers.

Lake swimming is about control of the body, the balance between discipline and relaxation, when to push and when to understand the body can do no more. But there is no attempt to control the environment, to alter it, or develop it. There is no work in that sense, only in the sense of reading the body, reading the place, and accommodating. The body wants to move. It wants to go. It loves its own best functioning. But there is no sense of trying to get it to improve, to do more—an elusive idea at my age. Improvement, getting better, is an ideology of youth, a containment of hope for the future.

Exhale

Wind is the hardest of all natural elements to cope with while swimming. As I walk down the gravel lane to the boathouse, size up the chop on the water, I make estimations of whether this particular swell, chop, and ruffle is swimmable or not, and by how much it will reduce my distance. A brisk wind cuts the swim in half. A ferocious wind cuts it in a quarter. The workout, however, is stunning. A swim on a windy surface requires two stances simultaneously. On the one hand, I must be totally relaxed and move with the water to retain energy for moving ahead ever so slightly, and on the other hand, I must at every moment be totally alert to the difficulties of breathing. Two things are necessary while water breaks over my head, smashes my face, or knocks against my skull. One is the right decision about when to breathe in, and the other is a capacity to instantaneously turn any in-breath into an expulsion of water. Even so, I am occasionally hit by a jolt of water against the back of my throat, or inhale water up my nose searing the sinus passages far into the forehead. That requires a pause, upright, to tread water, sputter, recover. But the water roiling and spinning, the wind pluming it into sapphire glinted with silver, the incredible energy, and my capacity to match it by staying afloat, invigorates.

On a wild day of wind and rain, I swim in a stiff, difficult chop close to shore, no one around, when suddenly I feel a sharp bump on my left calf, as if I have hit a stick blown about in the water. But wood floats and no stick comes up to the surface. Something has bumped me with a blunt but aggressive butt. Has it caught the fierce energy of the storm, been disturbed in its habitat, and reacted vigorously to something it read as intrusive? That fish chose one sharp count of letting me know it was there.

Iris of an Eye

As the water gradually warms in June, I swim farther each day, pulled by the silk of cool water on skin, intrigued by the curving trail of bubbles following the stroke of my arm. Sunlight funnels the water so that bands of light appear to converge far below me. The underwater looks like the giant iris of an eye into which I look and look. That bottomless eye could pull me through into infinity. Still, I rest on the surface.

When I swim I am not conscious of any effort required to hold myself up: it feels as comfortable as lying in bed. If I want to rest, I lie on my back, arms outstretched, my nose just out of the water. Other animals do this too, I have sometimes seen a black nose just above the surface. Or I can flutter kick on my back, raise my head to look around, and plop along viewing the sights. Like an otter. I don't swim fast—if I go out with my daughter, she has twice the speed—but when I settle into a proficient front crawl, it feels fast. Eyes close to the water surface, the shoreline vista changes with each stroke like a slow-moving 3-D movie. Every thirty to forty strokes I switch front crawl to breast stroke to backstroke, throwing in a bit of side stroke once in awhile for the contrasting stretch. I am amused that turned one way, side stroke is smooth and efficient; turned the other, it is weak and choppy, like writing with the wrong hand. The wrong side takes practise, discipline, but never quite matches. I am reminded that weakness always accompanies strength.

The richly variegated fringe of shoreline—pine, birch, balsam fir—passes by as I move and eventually I reach the first island at the edge of the cove. Across the cove at the far end are the water lilies, clustered near another huge old tree that toppled into the water after another storm. The first island is a tiny rocky outcrop, with one lone scrubby pine tree on it, blueberry bushes around its base. This little island is much loved, and visited, by canoeists or couples or kids exploring with golden retrievers. It is a focal point on this side of the lake.

For twelve summers I swam to this island with a dear friend. She had been on a swim team and had excellent technique, a gorgeous stroke as she swept through the water, long and efficient, wrists cocked. To swim with a friend changes the focus. We are two in this place and share the beauty, the pleasure of the water on our skin, and our motion through it. This sharing constructs an intimacy that renders self-disclosure easy: there is much talk of the gritty, daily problems of raising families, the small stuff that grates and challenges. Sometimes we would sit on the island in the sun, find a few sun-warmed blueberries, talk children and books. At such times, attention turns away from the lake to life situations and the lake becomes background. But the lake is compelling, and a swim with a friend, a sort of aquatic walk, is an oscillation between social life and the experience of place. The lake holds us, we are suspended in it, and our gratitude for it expands to colour our individual dispositions when we return home.

One year I swam further, a little more each day, until I could see another tiny island. The second island is twice as far. It feels like a long way. Hardscrabble rock with lean, scruffy bushes. It is not a place I have seen anyone else go. But when the sun is shining in the west late in the afternoon, the rocks and shrubs are backlit with silver light, the water spangled black and silver between island and shore. A quality of energy, the vibration of life, touches me. My feet grazing the rocky bottom, I stand for a few moments to look. I look to hold the beauty, the feeling, in my mind through the long winter months of heavy traffic, heavy briefcase, the long springs of relentless coastal rain. Then I kick off into the back half of the swim. As I turn my head to the side to breathe, and my arm comes up in an arc over my head, the water drops fall in a glistening gold fan. Every breath is glorious.

One day during the back half of a swim, returning from the second island, the loon surfaces beside me, scarcely twenty feet away. It looks at me, the head turned so its eye faces me directly. I do not move. My head must look very small resting on the water. The loon is surprisingly large, compared to my head, its eye ancient and cold. The coldness of its eye strikes me because we associate its calls with such emotion. But the emotion is ours, the haunting call a trigger for our own griefs, our own desires for union. The loon's glance is so much an otherness, reminding me of difference. It slides under water and is gone.

A gray, rainy, cold August day with a gentle roil to the water surface. No one around. I swim for the feeling of vibrancy in the body, enjoying the pattern of rain drops on the moving surface. I am out half a mile when first aware of a dark shape above me, wheeling. I look up to see the unmistakable white head of a bald eagle. It circles slowly around me and I recognize it is checking me out. I splash vigorously to show it my impressive size. I realize with its acute eyesight that it saw me long before I was aware of it, could have attacked me without my knowing it was there, if it had recognized me as prey. It seems to me it is curious. It lopes off towards shore, flying low into the trees, and just as it reaches shore, another eagle comes out and circles around me too. I am heading back now, a bit spooked, and can just about hear the first one saying to its mate, "Get a look at this."

Wax and Honey

I lie in the sun to dry after swimming. There is a drop of water hanging on the side of my leg. It collects light as a basket holds eggs. It casts a shadow on my leg. How can a water drop, which is transparent, cast a shadow? A solid shadow. The drop itself is much lighter than the wet skin around it. In that sense it is holding the light.

At a certain time of day, close to noon, I swim past a certain tree with an open canopy, like an umbrella, over the water. Light bounces off facets of

the riffled water surface and is mirrored on the trunk, the limbs, the leaves themselves. A thousand coins of sun shimmering on the thousand leaves of the tree, light thrown from below upwards and dancing. Movement of shimmering, evanescent, quiet beauty.

Each summer I relish the moment the water lilies bloom. The first bloom visible on the water from a distance draws me like a beacon. I swim up to the cluster of pads resting close to shore, in and around the cove of the fallen tree. I dive under to study the stems. It is a long way down, perhaps ten to twelve feet. The stems wind up through dark water like golden harp strings. When I swim among their golden stems, I run my fingers over them. There is a very short amount of play or stretch to each stem at the surface, the leaf or bud moving no more than two to six inches when lifted out of the water.

One summer I play a lot with the water lilies, exploring them. How do they grow upwards through so much darkness? What is it like at the bottom? I dive down for a look up. It is dark looking up from the bottom, like a blurry night sky. It is like looking through a dark tunnel towards a tiny silvery disc of moon. When I think of the light absorbed in a drop of water on my leg, enormous quantities of light must be absorbed by a body of water like the lake.

The blossoms fan open and float in soft exuberance under the light of the sky. They are chrysanthemum-like, multiple delicate white petals open and trusting on the water. Held inside each is a golden cup of waxy honey fragrance. The quintessence of summer warmth, they are so quiet, yet full of music, moving on the water surface. The blossoms and leaf pads are on separate stems, the underside edge of the pads reflecting in the water as a deeper blue. Above, tiny brilliant turquoise damsel flies hover, twinned and mating, like miniature jewelled helicopters. As if summer will never end.

Each swim, from across the cove, I choose a blossom to view, swim close and tread water very carefully so as not to tangle the stems or pull the blossom under, and cup it underneath with one hand, the other working harder to keep me afloat, and lift the water lily to my nose. I inhale that gorgeous warm scent of summer, that fragrance of wax and honey, inhale it to the back of my skull, try to send it down my spine so it can help carry me through the long winter of work, the long absences from my husband. I teach at a university in Toronto, while my home and my husband are 1800 kilometres away in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Backlit

In my early years of swimming, I was once in love with another man, not my husband. I did not understand it. I loved my husband and children no less and had no intention of disturbing our family life in any way. Still there was this other energy, alive and terribly painful. I viewed it as something extra,

thrown over my soul, to teach me something. I could learn something from it, if I could figure out what. I carried this pained love with me to the cove of the water lilies, again and again, and let it go. I let it go and let it go until that love filled the space all around and reverberated like an organ and cello in a gothic church. In the midst of this letting go, I would have a strong sense of an attending presence that returned my awareness. A quality of energy in the blossoms, the moving water, the dancing light in the backlit trees on shore, the sun in the western sky late in the afternoon, the whole a unified field of energy and I a part of it, the sense of love moving back and forth, of utter openness, risk, gratitude. These were moments of sensing the pulsing energy, the vibration of life, of attunedness. My soul was open. Seared. I felt some presence of acknowledgement coming back to me.

Silk

Sometimes when I swim, my unexpected presence is a provocation to living beings that do not know me, nor I them. A provocation is something that obligates a response: it is right in front of you and demands it. The loon fled, the eagle told its mate to have a look, the fish butted. Some encounters are attacks.

On a warm, sunny Friday in July of 1985, many children and families are on the lawn and in the shallows at the boat club. I am swimming front crawl, about seven minutes down shore, when I sense something nibbling at my toe, cupping it gently, while I shake my foot to send it away. No, there it comes again, bumping the soles of my feet as I kick vigorously now, kicking “go away.” It insists. What is it in the water that won’t let me alone for my swim in the morning to the water lilies? Nervous, I turn onto my back to see this fuss around my feet, strongly kicking, tense. Yes, I can see something silvery there butting my feet, cannot see what it is. It darts between my legs, throws itself up between them, an arrow, darts so that the water spins apart in a V and I see a flash of silvery gray, think again, “What is it”? It grabs at the softest, smoothest flesh of my left inner thigh, right at the top, it couldn’t be closer, grabs with its Velcro mouth digging into my flesh in a cup, and pulls, sucks. But I lunge, grab it too with my left hand to pull it off my skin. Even as I grab, it releases its mouth and slips smooth as silk, a silver silk scarf sliding through my hand trying to hold it, and is gone.

I am but thirty feet from shore and am out on a rock like a shot. There is an elliptical bite mark, one and a half inches long and three-quarter’s wide, scrape marks and blood brought to the skin surface. I walk back to the boat club through the woods, tell the lifeguard. We realize it is not something to broadcast to children and mothers. I force myself to dive off the dock, to get into the water again: if you fall off a horse ... I can only stay in for ten seconds.

Five days later, the bite mark had a big bruise on one side, the top layer of skin torn on the other. I took photos. I made phone calls to biologists at the museum, the government department of the environment, the university. The consensus was that it was a young lamprey eel. These eels breed in freshwater streams, the larvae metamorphose after several years into adult form and make their way down to the ocean. But our lake has been cut off from the ocean by a dam at its northern end, and some eels are trapped in it. Could it just have been an angry catfish? They can be aggressive. But there were no fins, no eye, it was smooth as silk. My husband jokes that I attract all kinds.

Over a quarter of a century, three of us have been bitten in this way. It really does not hurt and the eel is adapted to attach to trout, not humans. All of us were close to shore. All bitten on the thigh or buttocks. What makes an eel attack the wrong prey, confuse a human with a trout? That's a difference that should be clear. Twenty years later, I can be swimming in a pool, feel something cupping my toe, still need to check it is but body memory.

Chrome

The forms of trees against the sky pass by me, eye to the side as I breathe, like a slow-motion movie and delight me. Tall pine, arched branches, spinning aspen leaves, white thread of birch stem, they clamour up and fringe the sky. I swim, day after day to the water lilies. One white blossom draws me across the water. A whole patch of flat green pads, just one blossom, moving in a soft smooth rhythm. The water is dark with a sheen like chrome or pewter. Underwater, small leaves accompany the golden stems circling upward. They look like gold coins falling. I move into that space, at home in the landscape.

One year I wanted to swim further than the second island, a landscape even less known, further from human involvement. I went through an odd stage. I would swim to the second island, and when I looked a bit further ahead, there was a sharp gray rock just breaking the surface close to my route. I did not want to swim past it. I had a feeling of fear or blackness, something malevolent, around this gray rock. But all the rocks are gray, this one is no different. I want to swim further, but am afraid to. This is silly. I'm never afraid to swim further, what is going on? There is no rational reason for this fear. The water is the same. The rocks are the same. The shoreline woods the same. Yet it happens every time I approach that rock. I am afraid and do not swim past it. One day I force myself to swim past, willing myself to disregard my fear. Nothing happens.

I compare this fear to other emotions called up by swimming. There is satisfaction in the effort and discipline required to go for a distance swim. There is pleasure in the skills necessary to swim a distance in comfort, to handle weather conditions like wind, cold, heat. There is pleasure in the scenery, focal points of beauty like the cove of water lilies, and here suddenly with this

jagged rock—a dark feeling, a suggestion of difficulty, trouble. That dark place in the water becomes a premonition of difficult times, something I do not want to face or endure. Every life has its dark times, its suffering: Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* reminds us it is to be expected in order to complete living. My sister says that losing her child made her a much better person: her teenager was hit by a van while out for a jog at dusk. I can accept the notion that out of difficulty humans may create something good for the human spirit, but I would not choose the difficulty. Losing a child in the family was unbearable. Why do I project fear of darkness, difficulty, onto a rock? Why love onto the cove of the water lilies? How do we know what is useful in emotion and what is an abundance beyond usefulness? Both my love and my fear were excesses. I could give them to the lake and it held them, let them pass.

Memory, the Skin of Time

I have watched and loved the lake for twenty-six years as I swim. A good stretch of my time span, a moment of the lake's. I am a visitor here. In the 1970's and 1980's there were loon families on the lake. The last summer a pair of loons raised two chicks was 1988. Since then there has been one loon, no chicks. I have heard that loons mate for life, and imagine a lonely loon, waiting. And the loon is still there, year after year.

In the 1980's there were dozens of water lily blossoms, dozens of tiny turquoise damsel flies. This year I counted half a dozen buds unopened on the water, none in bloom. No turquoise damsel flies either. But there are a few water lily blossoms beside the wild iris, in a shallow, rocky area behind the first island.

I have not swum with my friend, chatting about books and children, since 1995 because in the spring of 1996 she was permanently injured in a car accident and lives life in a wheelchair. But we still chat, visit, and enjoy each other's presence.

Some people accept my swimming alone, and some look askance at me, want to correct me. Oh it's safer for me than going for a walk, I say. In high school I played intramural basketball. One game I was accidentally knocked into a brick wall close to the court, my knee damaged. When I was forty I was told I had advanced arthritis and that the knee needed to be replaced. Yet for two decades I was told I was too young—the replacements didn't last so long—and now, with the pain better managed, I think I will keep my own knee with its full range of motion as long as possible. The slightest misstep, a dip or rise in the pavement, can throw me onto cane or crutches for a week. Now the knee does not recover well from further injury, but eats itself in worry, reinjures itself when I turn over in bed. I dare injure it no further. On land I must think about every step. Swimming, I am free.

In her autobiography *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton wrote, “In our individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant.” A swim in the lake creates a jubilant day. Knowing a place means knowing the body, knowing the self in that place. Memory is encoded in the body: it holds the lightest and the darkest experience, like that water drop holding light, casting shadow.

Today the lake has a soft aspect, rare on this lake, and associated with the one or two really warm, calm days of high summer. The surface is like blue milk glass, its aspect serene. Moving through the warm surface feels like lying on a bed of silky cream. It is quiet. The sun is present, but veiled by thin, high cloud. The shoreline, then the first island, stand forth with double intensity. A damsel fly flits by, a zig zag of turquoise haunting the eye. Three water lilies sit quietly waiting, living. One is new. I cup its fragrance, full of light, honey and wax, gold and blue, of the tiny singing of damsel flies. The scent of a soul. I swim on towards the second island in a blue like the sky, the depths holding those treasures the lake reveals from time to time. If you listen, you can hear the sound of my stroke, the slight and rhythmic splash across the silent water, silver bubbles trailing my arm, silver wake of my kick just breaking the skin of the lake, the sound of summer, of a soul at home in the lake. And the lake is deep.