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The Cool Blue

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Stephen Simons

The Cool Blue

There was a time in my life when I loved being in water, or just thinking about water. It didn't matter what form. Pools, lakes, rivers, streams, just as long as it was clear, cold, and blue. Depth was another plus, unless it was a stream, pushing and pulling me in its waist-deep coolness, and when I relaxed I would tumble, floating, with my heels dragging on the rocky bottom.

I was spoiled as a child by the lakes I grew up around. We lived — from the time I was three until I was twelve — just up the street from the cleanest lake I've ever seen in my life. It was called Lake Shriner. It was spring fed from two different directions, and before the boats went out and stirred it up, I could see twenty feet down, clear as crystal and slightly magnified.

When I was at the age where everything in nature fascinated me as new and beautiful, I would get up early on summer mornings and ride my bike down the hill to Lake Shriner. It would be cool so I would take my jacket, discarding it after peddling for five minutes in the morning sun.

There was a little market off the lake that had a pier and a raft they would let people use — no one was a real stickler about strangers going out on their piers but it was sort of an unspoken thing. I would park my bike and walk to the end of the pier looking over the right side because the sun was slanting off the lake to the left. Watching the sand turn to pebbles and drop, gradually from three to six to nine to twelve feet as I moved towards the end. Then I would lie on my belly with my head hanging over the edge and my hands gripping the end, and stare. There were always minnows, but there are always minnows in every lake. In Shriner there were always Blue Gill, right off the end of the pier, clearing out little bowls in the sand where they would lay their eggs. No matter how many times people went swimming and stirred up the area, they would come back and float motionless except for a little jerk of the tail and lunge when another fish came too close. When I would drop little pieces of hot-dog in they would fall with a plop to the water then flutter down to rest in the sandy circle. The fish would dart over, his mouth near, and with a silent pop, the meat would vanish. It was ok then, not to get into the water. The pleasure was just looking into the other world, wanting to be in it but knowing that I would disturb it and once submerged it would go filmy, pale, blurry, and the crisp colors would be faded.

For a few years I didn't just love swimming, I was obsessed with it.

There was something about being in water that made me think about it all the time. I'm sure, looking back at what I enjoyed, that it was the change of all the laws I grew up with. Gravity seemed to take a coffee break, and sound warped and blended with a muffled echo effect that made me want to talk underwater until I was out of breath.

To me it was an alien atmosphere. I could dive, kicking my legs above the water line so their weight would propel me down towards the blue-green darkness. I always imagined that I could make out seaweed way below me, but I know now it was just the light ending at slightly different depths giving the water a gray/black tie-dye affect. All the while I had to hold my breath. That was the thrill part, diving deep, or searching on a shallow sand patch while my lungs seemed to expand and clutch at my throat. I would push it, but not too much, not as much as my older brother. I was afraid, because I heard that after a certain point you just passed out. I could hold it past the pain in my chest, but once my head felt at all tingly, my will broke and I would shoot to the surface, slowly letting bubbles of air out, a way to fool my lungs into giving me more time, I thought. Only once, as I was kicking and clawing my way towards the light, did I think I couldn't hold it long enough. I knew I was at the end of my tolerance and I looked up. The surface was a lot farther than I thought it would be and my breath was coming, it had to. That was when I learned the trick of breathing out a little as I surfaced.

It was because of the other-world feel of swimming that made simple items more fun or scary. From the first few times I went swimming (even though I had taken many baths) I was content to just slap my hands on the water over and over, watching it lift, break up, and spray into droplets and mist. Then trying to coordinate the movements of my hand so that when I slapped the water and lifted my hand and the water spout followed, I could quickly bring my hand back down, pushing the fountain back into the lake. After a little practice I could dribble the water like a basketball. Water had the ability to make normal things – balls, frisbees, cups, even squirt guns – into novel toys with whole new possibilities.

There was a public beach at one end of the lake. It was about fifty yards of land that a hotel/restaurant/gas station owner took care of. It got deep gradually and was sandy out to about ten feet. At about six feet depth there was a stump; the remains of a pier. It barely stuck out from the sand. Just a black, smooth protrusion from the off-white bottom. At a certain age the water was over my head at that point unless I could find and stand on the wood, balancing with one foot while waving my hands and leg gently. It was nothing, just a piece of wood, but in the water it became the center of most of our days at the beach. Finding it was the first game. Then we would hold our breaths and dig around it, play king of the hill over it, or just touch it with our toes while we talked.

One of the greatest times we had at Shriners was the summer we found an old section of a pier resting on shore. We shoved it into the water and holding

one arm on it, kicked our way out to the deep. With three of us standing up, and balancing just right, we could sink it levelly so that it acted as a sunken platform, raising us to our waists in the water. Invariably someone — usually the shorter one — would lose their foot hold and it would rise to one side. The person on the deep end would sink lower and it would slip from under him and rise out of the water, upended like a ship sinking in reverse. It was nothing more than a piece of wood. If we saw it while walking down the street we would have wondered why somebody didn't burn it, but the water gave it purpose.

Plants, which I used to walk through all time, sometimes grass as high as my head and higher, once put in water, took on an eerie mysterious repulsion. They became seaweed. Gently swaying their tops in small patches while their bodies went down into dark obscurity. If I was ever over seaweed, I would change how I swam so that my whole body clung more to the surface. Taking shallow scoops, waving my arms more out to the side and making tight stiff kicks with my legs, as if to make my body float an inch above the water while my limbs scooted me along. If I ever felt the slick, thin brush of the slimy grass along my leg I would literally try to jump out of the water. Really it looked more like I was just going horizontal and splashing a lot more. It sent chills and spasms throughout my body to feel it or to hover above it, until I forced myself to realize that it was just grass in water. But I knew that wasn't true. There were leaches and muck and giant snapper turtles — a friend of mine saw one once and he said it was as big as a dog — lurking down there.

In short, swimming held, for me, all the dangerous excitement and mystery of adventurous discovery. Before we were old enough to know better there were endless possibilities in the water. Sunken treasure, undiscovered monsters with webbed feet and intelligent eyes, uncharted depths of the lake, where cavemen's skeletons were resting peacefully. I didn't know that divers had been up and down every inch of Shriner long before I was born. Probably people who shared my childish thoughts and never grew out of them. Lucky them.

When we moved from Indiana to Iowa City, I figured I'd have to find another lake. I was excited to hear that were going to the Coraville Reservoir, until I jumped in and opened my eyes under water. I couldn't even see my hand if I held it at full length from my face. I got out feeling dirty and hating the new place we lived. I never found a lake with comparable purity in Iowa.

I got to go back to Shriner once with my brother when I was in high school. The first thing I was shocked by was that the place I grew up smelled completely like a swamp. The air was thick with a stagnant water smell and the moisture was something that could be brushed away from your face as you walked. But the lake was still clear. We went for a swim with some friends in the evening. I removed my shoes and dangled my feet in the water off the end of the

pier. It was so warm, warmer than the cool night. There wouldn't be any need to get used to the water, we could just dive right in. There was a comfort of being back in the lake I grew up swimming in, but at the same time, all the childhood fears of big lurking things below me. We swam out a little in the darkening dusk.

The lake gets up to 90 feet deep in the middle so swimming just a little out puts about 30 feet of water between you and the bottom. In the dark it is a little more frightening to dive deep. There is no vision and you just have to trust that you aren't going to come face to face with a tangle of weeds, mucky leech infested mud, or the gaping jaws of an ancient fish. I folded over and lifted my legs high into the air and parted my hands from above my head out like a cross and down to my sides, pulling the water apart like a curtain. It washed passed me, no sensations but touch, as the cooler depths rolled over my skin and the pressure mounted in my ears. Then I was where I wanted to be. Away from the sounds and lives of others, in a cocoon of chilling liquid with a deceptive infinity of space above, below, and on both sides of me. But my lungs wouldn't let me stay and I felt the familiar expanding, forceful, grabbing feeling in my chest and spreading out. But I wanted to rise slowly, so I let some breath out and paced myself with the bubbles, gently surfacing. The cool was washing passed only my legs and then gone as I rose. Then the always short lived feeling of discomfort as the water got warmer. I broke through the top and relaxed looking up at the stars.

There were voices around me now. My brother and his friends talking about their times in high school and younger and what they were doing next, but I didn't want to join them. I was happy where I was, staring up at a familiar sky from my own alien home.