

3 Dolphinesque



As silently as mirrors are...
his body cleaves the water with no sound
his body which is slim and sleek and pale
with arms that reach before him, legs that trail
in one sleek supple movement till the next
quiet whiplash shapes a thrust
and makes him quiver like a parody of lust...

and he glides inside and slippery and long
down gliding deep and deeper till his hips
buck and gather trembling and he kicks
and enters once again and slow and long
till his hands push downwards like the beat of wings
and he rises like a bird to breathe
and the droplets scatter from him in bright rings

and I pace myself to keep beside him
breast to breast a little in his rear
I pace myself to watch and to admire him
my dolphin prince, my underwater peer

and overhead the stars and vapour trails
explode and weave a fire umbrella
while silverly the light in supple scales
falls from his body in a bright *bosanna*

it is no ordinary joy
to see a swimming boy

I swim in this pool three or four times a week. It is not a beautiful pool. The building faces Parker's Piece and it is Spartan and ugly. It is a brutal 'Modernist' creation from the early sixties. But the pool has two big advantages. It is 33 metres long, which is a lot longer than any other

pool in Cambridge. More important, it is 4 metres deep at one end, and this means that I can dive. I don't particularly enjoy diving from the boards, but I love to dive from the side and swim under water. One whole wall of the building that houses the pool is built of glass, so it is flooded with light, and it is equally light beneath the water. I enjoy swimming here. I sometimes forget that I am in a pool, and I experience again the joy that I felt when I went swimming underwater as a boy.

And today there is something else that reminds me of that time. There is a boy swimming in the next lane. We passed in opposite directions at first, but we are now swimming in parallel, and I can see him clearly underwater. He is wearing the same small type of plastic goggles that I am wearing, and this makes it hard to get an impression of his face. But I can see his body clearly enough. He swims slowly, as I do, with a leisurely breaststroke, and he glides unusually deeply under the water at each stroke. He stretches his arms straight forward after each kick, and glides in a long, deep curve before rising again. He scarcely breaks the water as he rises and he turns his head discreetly aside to draw breath. And then he plunges silently again and unhurriedly, and his legs propel him forward in a long deep thrust through the water. There is something in the gentle rhythm of his body – the long slow thrust and the deep gliding and the gentle rising – that makes my heart leap with joy, and I watch him with fascination, pacing myself to keep beside him and a little behind him. I realise that I have seen him before. I have probably seen him many times, for he is a regular swimmer as I am. And I have probably admired his style of swimming before, but I have never observed his body so closely or for so long. Ordinary swimming compared to this is no more than an ungainly thrashing about.

There are separate areas for males and females, and on the men's side there are individual cubicles for changing. But in the shower room everyone is naked. You would be considered odd if you kept your swimming trunks on while showering. If you told someone that there would come a time when English public pools would forbid you to shower naked, he would laugh at the idea. Here, right now, nakedness is the norm. It is natural and unremarkable, and nobody thinks twice about it.

I hadn't expected to encounter 'my' boy in the showers – I mean the boy who was swimming so long beside me. I didn't deliberately get out of the pool at the same time as him and I didn't follow him here, and I didn't have any voyeuristic intentions when I entered the shower area. But when I meet him in the showers I look at him, naturally, and I look at him with interest. There are only the two of us here, and so I don't take the place directly beside him. I choose a shower at a respectable distance. And I don't stare at him – I just see him without deliberately looking. He showers in much the same way as he swims – slowly and deliberately and methodically. First he lathers his hair with shampoo and rinses it off. Then he lathers his body, beginning with his chest and working downwards to his feet. He is lightly built. He is not muscular, but he has the broad chest and narrow hips of a swimmer. His body is taut and lithe, and it has that special smoothness and sleekness that comes from regular swimming. I normally shower hurriedly, but today I take my time. And I watch him, of course, casually, and I am only half careful to look as if I am not watching him. And I know, of course, that he is watching me. For this is the strange convention of the men's shower room. Everybody sees everybody else, but because we are all males we pretend not to be interested in what we see.

I don't want to begin anything. I think of it, of course, and I make pictures about it in my mind. And I imagine what we might say and how we might meet and how it would be afterwards. I am the older boy (he can't be more than sixteen), so it would be up to me to make the first move. But I don't intend to do anything. I acknowledge that he is attractive. (Not exactly pretty, but attractive in a boyish way.) But I feel a kind of weariness, a reluctance. So I am quite sure that I won't begin anything, but then I begin it anyway and in spite of myself.

'Could I borrow some of your shampoo?'

He is startled.

'Thanks.'

The shampoo has a smell of synthetic *eau de cologne*. I lather my hair with it and afterwards I rinse it off in cold water. It is tangy and astringent and it leaves me with a tingling feeling on my skin.

I hand back the shampoo bottle. He takes it, and there is for a moment the possibility that our fingers will touch. But it doesn't happen.

'You're welcome.'

I try to think of something to say, but I can't think of the right thing. All the things I think of saying are either too little or too much. So I just smile. He smiles back at me. And then the moment is gone. Two other boys enter the shower room and I go to look for my locker.

I hope he might follow me, but he doesn't. I casually stroll between the lockers, hoping that I might meet him. But he isn't there. So I go to a cubicle and change into my clothes. Normally I hurry to get dressed. But today I take my time. Afterwards I spend a long time in front of the mirror, brushing my hair.

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I swim three or four times a week. I swim a hundred lengths of the pool, which takes about an hour and a half. I don't aim to swim particularly fast. I mostly swim a leisurely breaststroke. The main thing is to move and to keep moving. On the days that I don't swim I usually jog for an hour. I jog along the path to Grantchester Meadows, or along the river. Sometimes I work out in the College gym. I am not concerned about keeping fit. I simply need to move. Twice a week I have a dance practice. I need to move.

My Grandfather once remarked that the human body was designed for movement, and that we are only truly ourselves when we move. I was a child when he told me this, and his words were mysterious to me. For children do not need to be told to move. Children move constantly and in every conceivable way. They run, jump and dance spontaneously. Movement is part of a child's being, but our civilisation conspires to thwart movement and to constrain it. We imprison children in schools and chain them to desks and benches. We give them tasks that they can only perform while sitting in a classroom, and afterwards we cynically introduce 'gym' and 'games' as part of the school curriculum, as if children can only learn to play games or run or jump or dance if they are taught these things in a school.

It was not always this way, my Grandfather told me. There was a time when education did not happen in schools. It happened in open spaces and it started with movement – with gymnastics, athletics, dance and games. At that time men believed that you must begin by training the body. You must teach the young to move vigorously and beautifully. When the body is healthy and harmonious it becomes the natural vessel for a sane and healthy mind, and the moral development of the child will follow automatically. And afterwards, when the body and soul are fit and in tune with each other, there will be plenty of time to teach the intellect and to acquire such skills as reading and writing. ‘But we go about it upside down,’ my Grandfather concluded. ‘We try to cram knowledge into brains that are only half grown. In the process we distort the body and stifle the imagination. And afterwards we think we can heal the damage we have done by giving boys a weekly gym lesson and a few hours of football or cricket.’

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It is raining when I leave the leisure centre. Parker’s Piece is swept by a thin mist through which umbrellas and human forms surface briefly and vanish again like reflections in a rain-spattered window. I go to the end of the covered walkway that leads to the junction with Mill Road. There are benches here and there are people sheltering from the rain. I don’t mind about getting wet. I have, after all, spent the last hour and a half under water, and walking though the rain is for me one of the pleasures of life. I am about to step onto the road when I come to an abrupt stop. I reach out for the pillar that supports the canopy above me, and I turn my back to it and lean against it. I press against the angular section of the pillar till I feel it cutting between my shoulder blades. On the bench to the right of me, only a few yards away, he is sitting – *my* boy, the boy I have been watching for the last hour, the boy I spoke to in the shower. He is wearing a black school blazer and he has a satchel across his knees. He is staring straight ahead as if he is determined not to notice me.

A gust of wind with rain in it blows towards us from the Mill Road side. The flimsy canopy above us creaks and groans. The contents of a waste-bin dance merrily along the street and get blown against a hedge. I sling my sports bag over my shoulder and I sit down on the bench beside the boy. He turns to face me and he affects surprise. The silence that follows is full of the empty things that each of us is thinking of saying. We could talk about the rain, or about where we are going and why we are waiting here before we go. We say none of these things. Meanwhile, around us, the drizzle of rain grows more feeble. The people under the shelter begin to drift away.

The boy looks ahead of him with downcast eyes, playing with the brass buckle of his satchel. I am about to say something, but he is the one who speaks first.

‘I like the way you move,’ he says. I can hardly believe that I have heard right. ‘I mean the way that you swim,’ he adds hastily, as if correcting himself. ‘I like your technique - the way that you move when you are swimming.’

I don’t know what surprises me more. The daring behind the words, or their power to dissolve what surrounds us. I take stock of things, as if I might need to recall this moment another time. The looming grey weight of the sky above our heads, the moody quicksilver sullenness of the puddles that reflect our pale faces, the streaky grey drabness of the concrete walls. These things

are still there, but the ground beneath us has shifted. We were inside the prison a moment ago and suddenly we are outside it. I try to speak, but all I manage is an almost breathless laugh. I try to catch hold of the laugh as it comes out of me. I am afraid it will sound as if I am laughing at him. But it is myself I am laughing at. Or the craziness perhaps, the craziness of all the fear and tension.

‘I wanted to say the same,’ I hear myself say. ‘I was watching you. I watched you for a long time. I don’t think I ever saw anyone swim so...’. I pause. I was about to say ‘beautifully’, but I cannot bring myself to say ‘beautifully’. I am afraid it will scare him. The word ‘beauty’ is too raw, too brutal. ‘I think you swim pretty well,’ I conclude feebly, and I am ashamed of myself.

For the next few minutes, we talk about swimming. It is boys’ talk about technique, and the different strokes and timings and the different ways of training. No, he says, he doesn’t come to the pool every day, but he comes three times a week. It depends on when his last lesson of the day finishes. Yes, he says, he would like to be a competitive swimmer. But he hasn’t gone about it seriously. He belongs to the town swimming club, but there isn’t a lot happening in the club. He mostly swims alone.

And when there isn’t anything more to say about swimming I ask him where he is going. He nods in the direction of Mill Road. ‘That way,’ he says.

In the silence that follows the only thing I hear is the raindrops. The rain has started again, and there is a slow spatter of drops from the canopy above our heads. I find myself counting them. I would like to invite him to come back to my room, but I don’t manage to find the right words. I turn away from him and I gaze vacantly towards Parker’s Piece.

‘Do you want to go to the Reality Checkpoint?’ I ask.

He looks blank. He lives in Cambridge, but he has never heard of the Reality Checkpoint. It is the name given to the tall lamp-post at the centre of Parker’s Piece. I don’t know why it is called the Reality Checkpoint. But somebody has taken the trouble to scratch the words into the green enamel of the lamp post in large capitals. It was probably a student who thought up the name. It’s the sort of title that students would find witty and funny. But town kids probably don’t know about it.

He turns his face away from me. ‘Are you a student?’ he asks. I feel for a moment as if I have been living under false pretences.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I am a student. Do you want to come to my room?’ And so the words are finally spoken. Raw, clumsy, brutal. There is a new silence.

‘I am going that way,’ I say, and I nod in the direction of Parker’s Piece. ‘I’m going back to my room. The Reality Checkpoint is on the way. Do you want to see?’

It is late afternoon. It is still daylight, but the lamps around Parker’s Piece are already lit, and they glimmer feebly through the rain as we approach them. Meanwhile, the streets and trees around the square are sinking slowly into the mist. We haven’t gone very far when they disappear altogether, and we seem to be alone in a vast field of fog and rain. When we get to the spot

where the paths cross we stand at the base of the ornate lamp-post and I point out the inscription. It is just one piece of graffiti amongst hundreds of others, but the sprawling letters are larger and more deliberately engraved. For no particular reason we both begin to laugh. We are getting soaked to the skin. We swam for much of the afternoon and afterwards we dried ourselves and sheltered from the rain, and now we are standing about in the rain and getting soaked again. And there is something absurd about this. There is something absurd about the huge lamp-post with its feeble lamps and its pretentious title. There is something altogether absurd about Cambridge in October, when it is filled with grey fog.

‘My name’s Sion, by the way.’

I get the usual blank stare. Nobody knows the name ‘Sion’. Not in England, at least.

‘My name is Sion,’ I repeat. ‘It’s Irish.’

‘Dave. My name’s Dave.’

‘It’s a bit like being under water.’

Dave looks at me.

‘You mean here, right now?’ he asks.

‘Yes, I mean the mist, and the coolness of it. And also the quiet, I suppose.’

There are usually plenty of people crossing Parker’s Piece this time of day. But right now there seems to be no-one else, only the two of us. And it is eerily quiet. Even the noise of the traffic on the distant road is dim. We are standing at one corner of the lamp post, where the paths cross. Apart from the two of us the only visible thing is the lamp-post, which rises tall and straight as a lighthouse. I reach out and place my hand on it. It is wet and cool and clammy to the touch.

And what happens now? I remember how scary it was the first time I went with a stranger. Not actual fear, but uncertainty, like stepping into the dark. I am sure it is Dave’s first time.

He is asking himself what he is doing and why he is doing it. And he is thinking of saying goodbye and walking back towards Mill Road, which is the way we came. He could suggest that we meet up at another time. In the pool perhaps, on another day. And we might even do so. We will almost certainly see each other in the pool again. Tomorrow perhaps or the next day. So it doesn’t have to happen now.

But there is the sense of urgency welling up inside you. The need.

‘Do you have to be going home?’

I want to give him a chance to escape. He can turn away if he chooses. I want him to know that it’s all right by me either way.

He looks into my eyes. ‘Not really.’

‘Do you want to go somewhere?’

Dave seems to be waiting for me to say more, but I don’t say more.

‘Where do you have in mind?’

‘We could go to my room. Listen to some music.’

He lowers his eyes and looks away. He seems to be studying the graffiti at the base of the lamp-post.

‘OK,’ he says after a while. ‘Yes, let’s do that.’