

Mystic Swimming

CAROLE GREENFIELD

MY WHOLE LIFE LONG, IT'S NEVER been hard for me to waken early, but on humid summer days, waking before sunrise is nearly unavoidable if sleeping without the air conditioning. I'm not naming names, but someone in the house—who claims he can't sleep with it on—shuts it off before he comes to bed each night. That said, there are certain perks to being up before the sun at this time of year. The one place still available to me for swimming opens its gates at 5:00 a.m. on weekdays. I've swum there off and on for the past twenty years, but never have I arrived as early as I've been doing this summer; the desire to avoid the hordes motivates me to get myself out of the house while it's still dark.

Although I'd promised myself last night that I'd get out for an early swim today, I nearly turned back the instant I stepped out our front door into

the stagnant, soup-like air. But I was up, I was (minimally) dressed, and I figured I might as well try. The place is about a half-hour's drive without traffic, and driving at 4:30 a.m., light traffic is generally a given.

When I arrived at the pond this morning, I couldn't see across to the other side. I had swum once or twice before when a slight mist was rising off the water but never anything like this. It reminded me of being up in the mountains, of cloud forests. Two swimmers were already in the water, visible only by way of the neon-colored plastic bubbles attached to their waists. (They seem to be all the rage this year, these glaring-orange and hot-pink floaty attachments.) On my way to the stone wall where I usually leave my things, I passed a group of three masked swimmers still standing on the shore. I acknowledged them from behind my own mask and parked myself several feet away.

As I tucked my hair into my swim cap and removed my sandals, one of the women called over, "How are you going to swim?"

Not quite sure what she was asking, I replied, "Straight across and back."

"Even though you can't see where you're going?" she asked, perplexed.

"Yes," I said, equally puzzled. "It's what I always do."



Back in the day, over three decades ago now, when I first started swimming laps in indoor pools, I was extremely near-sighted, and trying to make it to one end of the pool and back was an interesting experience. I kept banging into the tiled walls until a kind stranger pointed out that the big line down the middle of each lane was for swimmers to follow. (Not sure if that qualifies as an "aha!" moment or more of a Homer Simpson "doh!" one.) Swimming in lakes and ponds was even more

challenging, as I had to keep my very short-sighted sights on the opposite shore in order to find my way.

Something I loved about wearing glasses—but never fully appreciated until I’d had my eyes lasered—was the relief that came with taking them off—the sudden softening and blurring, the relaxing of muscles along temples and forehead. That particular relief is gone for me, but stepping into the water this morning and swimming off into a mist so deep I couldn’t see more than five feet in front of me brought back that sudden blurring of all sharp edges. I could see neither in front of nor behind me and could barely discern the tree-lined banks as I swam along. Removing my goggles didn’t help a bit; the view remained unchanged. I just had to trust that I would make it to the other side.

This morning was the first time I experienced a sense of solitude in the pond. It’s what I’d wished for all summer and what I had accepted I’d never get, along with certain other things in my life. (Is that what they mean when they refer to the wisdom of age?) There have always been people at the pond this year, no matter how

early I’ve gotten there. This morning, however, was different; unable to see any of my fellow swimmers, or even hear them, it seemed as if I were the only one there, at least for the time it took for me to get across. Looking down in the water, I knew I was close to shore when logs and rocks began coming into view beneath me. It’s deceptive in this place; you think you are closer to solid ground than you truly are; if you try to touch down, you very quickly realize that the water is still over your head; the sandy bottom below you is deeper than you believe it to be. It tricks me every single time.

I always pause for a few moments when I finally do make it to the far shore, to catch my breath, breathe in the quiet, listen to the sounds of water, wind, and trees. This morning, as I set out once again for the home shore, I thought of the other swimmers, the ones who today were sticking closer to the shoreline for fear of going in circles or getting lost, and the ones who, like me, were striking out into deep water. May we all be safe, I whispered to myself as I took a breath and began to swim. May we all make it to the other side. ☀

