

A Brief History of Water

by David Ackley

In any event, one way or another, there were numerous family excursions, for a few hours or a day or a weekend which often led to water of any kind-- from a pond whose designation as a lake was a bit agrandising, to the shores of the North Atlantic(in more senses than one, our home waters.) Aside from the leisure and the oddity of having, during The Depression, what is now called “disposable income, “ there is something else particular about us here: the arrival at various shores seems a habitual, nearly inevitable destination. As if we were some nostalgic species of amphibian, landbound but yearning back to liminal origins, always tending back toward the shore. I wonder if its true of you, and the rest of us, as it is of me: no matter how roiled the voyage, even in the pitching gut of a troopship, among stinking gi cans of vomit, I never once was seasick. Were we born for the sea, endowed with sealegs, and strong stomachs, we Ackleys?

If it is our origin and fate to come home to the sea, though, it has not always been a kind one.

But for the time being, for an afternoon or a day or a weekend we settle comfortably on the shores of this or that body of water, this pond or lake, or along New Hampshire's abbreviated coastline--one long sandy beach, and a few piles of rocks, compressed as an afterthought between the long peculiar fishhook of Massachusetts, and the tucked and wrinkled coast of our home state of Maine, 3700 miles of inlets, bays, coves, river mouths, and nameless dents. Venturing into the benign or icy waters is left to the children, Olive stoically hiking up her skirts, Philip and Harry diving into the icy waves or racing to a float splashing and shouting under the bemused gaze of the parents, marooned ashore, fully clothed.

Fred in his constant starched shirt, necktie, polished black shoes, Lela in her faded print dress and lace-ups. They sit in folding canvas chairs, his pipe smoke drifting aromatically off on the breeze, she managing her needle work or knitting against the caprices of the same breeze. They alternate long peaceful silences with soft murmurs of conversation. To the eye, they offer nothing except a puzzle of inactivity; an aging twosome, evidently lulled nearly to stupefaction by the incessant stirring of wind over water.

They both grew up a stone's throw from the North Atlantic hard by the Gulf of Maine, and in their bones are lifetimes and generations of experience, and an articulate knowledge that surfaces in Fred as a man who knows this life's fluid to its deepest sources and widest uses: universal solvent, origin and sustainer of life, immanent source of all human existence. And even a tranquil pond, a little glassy island of water, marooned and stilled among the surrounding trees mirrored in its surface of polished slate, is for Fred a text to be read all through, source, substance and spirit; in the years before he became the superintendent of the entire city waterworks, he was supervisor of its ponds and springs, an intimate of sources. Though it's unlikely he's forgotten much of anything in the subject of water, if he had it would be more than most of us will likely ever know.

And Lela is inscribed with the felt history of generations of mothers and wives and sisters who saw their men off to sea for days, weeks even years at a time, on whom all the lonely responsibilities of family descended, who faced not knowing with each departure whether their men might come home with a boatload of cod, or an empty dory, or not come home at all, ever, the sea being most capricious with her gifts, especially with those who presume on her generosity. In the reading of the sea's moods and chances, who more astute and alert than the one who waits, searching the horizon, alone, ashore?

Her two youngest boys, Harry and Phillip, race each other to the float, frothing the calm surface of the water; Harry, the tall lithe one,

pulling ahead, his long arms, big spatulate hands like his father's, built for swimming, Philip, her youngest, steadily, competently paddles along behind. Where she came from, on the North Atlantic just shy of the Canada border, most of the men who went to sea had never learned to swim. If you went overboard in those frigid waters, you had only minutes: The thought was, why fight it? Best go numb and die the quicker.

Eugene her first born, had made it across the sea to a war, and back to take up his interrupted life. Her two other boys were nearly men, she and Fred had brought them safely that far. They can swim. If that were enough...

