

Waterlog

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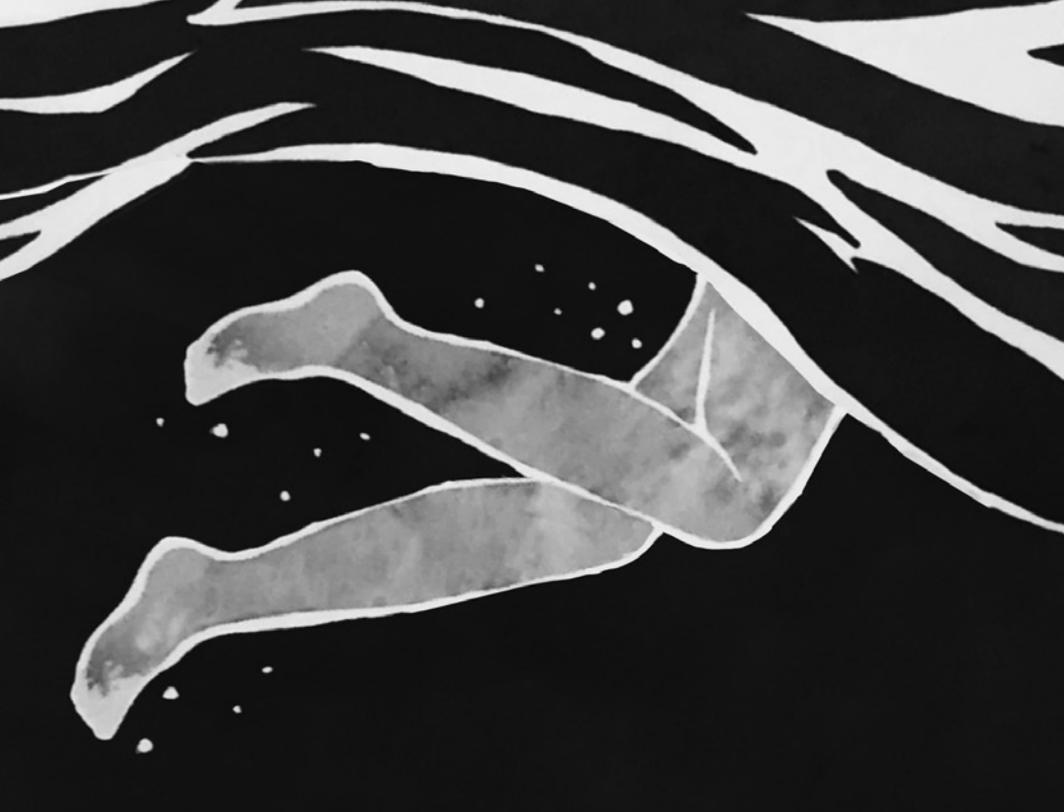
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Waterlog

A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain

Roger Deakin



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*This Summer I went swimming
summer I might have drowned,
but I held my breath
and I kicked my feet
and I moved my arms around
moved my arms around.*

—LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III,
“Swimming Song”

*Who would not be affected to see a cleere and sweet River in the
morning, grow a kennell of muddy land water by noone, and
condemned to the saltness of the sea by night?*

—JOHN DONNE,
“Devotions XVIII”

*In memory of my mother and father
and for my son, Rufus*

Waterlog

1. The Moat

The warm rain tumbled from the gutter in one of those midsummer downpours as I hastened across the lawn behind my house in Suffolk and took shelter in the moat. Breaststroking up and down the thirty yards of clear, green water, I nosed along, eyes just at water level. The frog's-eye view of rain on the moat was magnificent. Rain calms water, it freshens it, sinks all the floating pollen, dead bumblebees and other flotsam. Each raindrop exploded in a momentary, bouncing fountain that turned into a bubble and burst. The best moments were when the storm intensified, drowning birdsong, and a haze rose off the water as though the moat itself were rising to meet the lowering sky. Then the rain eased and the reflected heavens were full of tiny dancers: water sprites springing up on tiptoe like bright pins over the surface. It was raining water sprites.

It was at the height of this drenching in the summer of 1996 that the notion of a long swim through Britain began to form itself. I wanted to follow the rain on its meanderings about our land to rejoin the sea, to break out of the frustration of a lifetime doing lengths, of endlessly turning back on myself like a tiger pacing its cage. I began to dream of secret swimming holes and a journey of discovery through what William Morris, in the title to one of his romances, called *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. My inspiration was John Cheever's classic short story 'The Swimmer', in which the hero, Ned Merrill, decides to swim the eight miles home from a party on Long Island via a series of his neighbours'

swimming pools. One sentence in the story stood out and worked on my imagination: ‘He seemed to see, with a cartographer’s eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county.’

I was living by myself, feeling sad at the end of a long love, and, as a freelance filmmaker and writer, more or less free to commit myself to a journey if I wanted to. My son, Rufus, was also on an adventure Down Under, working in restaurants and surfing in Byron Bay, and I missed him. At least I could join him in spirit in the water. Like the endless cycle of the rain, I would begin and end the journey in my moat, setting out in spring and swimming through the year. I would keep a log of impressions and events as I went.

My earliest memory of serious swimming is of being woken very early on holiday mornings with my grandparents in Kenilworth by a sudden rain of pebbles at my bedroom window aimed by my Uncle Laddie, who was a local swimming champion and had his own key to the outdoor pool. My cousins and I were reared on mythic tales of his exploits—in races, on high boards, or swimming far out to sea—so it felt an honour to swim with him. Long before the lifeguards arrived, we would unlock the wooden gate and set the straight, black, refracted lines on the bottom of the green pool snaking and shimmying. It was usually icy, but the magic of being first in is what I remember. ‘We had the place to ourselves,’ we would say with satisfaction afterwards over breakfast. Our communion with the water was all the more delightful for being free of charge. It was my first taste of unofficial swimming.

Years later, driven mad by the heat one sultry summer night, a party of us clambered over the low fence of the old open-air pool at Diss in Norfolk. We joined other silent, informal swimmers who

had somehow stolen in, hurdling the dormant turnstiles, and now loomed past us in the water only to disappear again into the darkness like characters from *Under Milk Wood*. Such indelible swims are like dreams, and have the same profound effect on the mind and spirit. In the night sea at Walberswick I have seen bodies fiery with phosphorescent plankton striking through the neon waves like dragons.

The more I thought about it, the more obsessed I became with the idea of a swimming journey. I started to dream ever more exclusively of water. Swimming and dreaming were becoming indistinguishable. I grew convinced that following water, flowing with it, would be a way of getting under the skin of things, of learning something new. I might learn about myself, too. In water, all possibilities seemed infinitely extended. Free of the tyranny of gravity and the weight of the atmosphere, I found myself in the wide-eyed condition described by the Australian poet Les Murray when he said: 'I am only interested in everything.' The enterprise began to feel like some medieval quest. When Merlin turns the future King Arthur into a fish as part of his education in *The Sword in the Stone*, T. H. White says, 'He could do what men always wanted to do, that is, fly. There is practically no difference between flying in the water and flying in the air . . . It was like the dreams people have.'

When you swim, you feel your body for what it mostly is—water—and it begins to move with the water around it. No wonder we feel such sympathy for beached whales; we are beached at birth ourselves. To swim is to experience how it was before you were born. Once in the water, you are immersed in an intensely private world as you were in the womb. These amniotic waters are both utterly safe and yet terrifying, for at birth anything could go wrong, and you are assailed by all kinds of unknown forces over which you have no control. This may account for the

anxieties every swimmer experiences from time to time in deep water. A swallow dive off the high board into the void is an image that brings together all the contradictions of birth. The swimmer experiences the terror and the bliss of being born.

So swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries: the line of the shore, the bank of the river, the edge of the pool, the surface itself. When you enter the water, something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking-glass surface and enter a new world, in which survival, not ambition or desire, is the dominant aim. The lifeguards at the pool or the beach remind you of the thin line between waving and drowning. You see and experience things when you're swimming in a way that is completely different from any other. You are *in* nature, part and parcel of it, in a far more complete and intense way than on dry land, and your sense of the present is overwhelming. In wild water you are on equal terms with the animal world around you: in every sense, on the same level. As a swimmer, I can go right up to a frog in the water and it will show more curiosity than fear. The damselflies and dragonflies that crowd the surface of the moat pointedly ignore me, just taking off for a moment to allow me to go by, then landing again in my wake.

Natural water has always held the magical power to cure. Somehow or other, it transmits its own self-regenerating powers to the swimmer. I can dive in with a long face and what feels like a terminal case of depression, and come out a whistling idiot. There is a feeling of absolute freedom and wildness that comes with the sheer liberation of nakedness as well as weightlessness in natural water, and it leads to a deep bond with the bathing-place.

Most of us live in a world where more and more places and things are signposted, labelled, and officially 'interpreted'. There

is something about all this that is turning the reality of things into virtual reality. It is the reason why walking, cycling and swimming will always be subversive activities. They allow us to regain a sense of what is old and wild in these islands, by getting off the beaten track and breaking free of the official version of things. A swimming journey would give me access to that part of our world which, like darkness, mist, woods or high mountains, still retains most mystery. It would afford me a different perspective on the rest of land-locked humanity.

My moat, where the journey first suggested itself, and really began, is fed by a vigorous spring eleven feet down, and purified by an entirely natural filtration system far superior to even the most advanced of swimming-pool technology. It is sustained by the plant and animal life you will find in any unpolluted fresh-water pond left to its own devices and given plenty of sunlight. There seems to have been a period, from the later Middle Ages until the seventeenth century, when moats became as fashionable in Suffolk as private pools are today. There are over thirty of them within a four-mile radius of the church in the nearby village of Cotton. Moats are now considered by historians like Oliver Rackham to have functioned as much as status symbols as anything else for the yeoman farmers who dug them. Mine was probably excavated when the house was built in the sixteenth century, and runs along the front and back of the house but not the sides. It had no defensive function except as a stock barrier. It would have yielded useful clay for building and formed a substantial reservoir, but it was certainly never intended for swimming. Its banks plunge straight down and it has no shallow end. At one end, where you climb in or out by a submerged wooden cart-ladder I have staked to the bank, a big willow presides, its pale fibrous roots waving in the water like sea anemones.

The moat is where I have bathed for years, swimming breast-stroke for preference. I am no champion, just a competent swimmer with a fair amount of stamina. Part of my intention in setting out on the journey was not to perform any spectacular feats, but to try and learn something of the mystery D. H. Lawrence noticed in his poem 'The Third Thing':

Water is H₂O, hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, But there
is also a third thing, that makes it water And nobody
knows what that is.

Cheever describes being in the water, for Ned Merrill, as 'less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition'. My intention was to revert to a similarly feral state. For the best part of a year, the water would become my natural habitat. Otters sometimes set off across country in search of new territory, fresh water, covering as much as twelve miles in a night. I suppose there is part of all of us that envies the otter, the dolphin and the whale, our mammal cousins who are so much better adapted to water than we are, and seem to get so much more enjoyment from life than we do. If I could learn even a fraction of whatever they know, the journey would be richly repaid.

Packing, the night before I left, I felt something of the same apprehension and exhilaration as I imagine the otter might feel about going off into the blue. But, as with Ned Merrill in 'The Swimmer', my impulse to set off was simple enough at heart: 'The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty.'