

Spring 2019

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Recommended Citation

Ong, Amye Day (2019) "Painting Park Lake," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 89 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss89/11>

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AMYE DAY ONG

PAINTING PARK LAKE

It is only by selection, by elimination, and by emphasis that we get at the
real meaning of things.

-Georgia O'Keeffe¹

COLOR APPARENT

UP CLOSE THE lake's water is green—a hollow green full of emptiness. Gulp it down and still there's that tickle in your throat, the need for more. When green, the lake can only offer promises unfulfilled. Flickers of fish tails. A dimple where the snapping turtle was. The taste of moss thick and wet on the tongue though not a clump is in sight.

In a wide steel bucket the lake's water disappears completely. The only indication of its existence: a surface film that refracts a shot of light

¹ Though most well-known for burning desert landscapes and the unflinching nature with which her flower petals unfurled, O'Keeffe was also a great painter of lakes. From 1918 to 1934, Lake George was the setting and subject that spurred her brush. To O'Keeffe the lake and its surrounding mountains were shape shifters, manifesting on her canvases as a crash of kaleidoscopic color or a woman's lips pursed under starry skies or a black feather fluttering on its side. The lake never remained just one thing.

Her Lake George, the largest lake in the Adirondacks, is situated more than 1,100 miles as the crow flies from my Park Lake, a thimble-sized, man-made watering hole in the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky. For all their differences—scale, origin—I am here to tell you they are the same. For my lake lacks not one color or shape. And it will not be made to stay still.

here and there. Perhaps the water vanishes into gray because it instinctively wants to be carried away. It yearns to have a pail dipped into it, to slosh itself side to side as it's carted up a hill, back to a cabin buried in the woods.

On a sunny, cloudless day the water mimics blue. It's a beauty overwhelming and impossible to tolerate—a mirror held up to the heavens that blinds. How to behold such majesty? Trap it in a picture. Twice remove it from the source.

In the black of night, the lake assumes powers of absorption. The line between water and air evaporates before the eye, becoming perceptible by touch alone. Terrestrials learn of their limits too late, after the water, animated in its inkiness, has already surrounded them. The lake can make anything its own.

Below a moon the water becomes as solid and white as an egg. So easy to grasp and roll around in your hand. A weighty ovoid holding all the elemental matter of the universe. In the morning you crack it, fry it for breakfast.

FAUNA

INSIDE THE LAKE live swimming contact lenses—freshwater jellyfish as big as quarters. An “X” marks the spot over their translucent hearts. They map the lake, hovering where the water is cold and deep. When disturbed, their gelatinous bodies contract, descend, dissolving back into the empty green.

Skinny-nosed snappers poke out their nostrils, poised for move-

ment. The tiniest current of a canoe paddle or crunch of gravel from a nearby road causes them to dive deep down into a safe murkiness where they cannot breathe. On sunny, quiet days, they climb onto collapsed tree trunks. After jockeying for the best sunbathing spot they close their eyes and bask in the heat, relishing its penetration from rugged shell to squidgy core.

The smell of smooshed white bread, the lingering wriggle of a worm that's been pinched apart by hand, these dangling treats bring out the bluegills. In the water, the bread dissolves like an old tab of Alka-Seltzer, hurried along by pecking nibbles from the school. The worm is meaty and requires mastication. It is this thoughtful chewing that ultimately results in the bluegill being shot into the air like a daredevil from a cannon. Sequined scales glitter in the sun from all the asphyxiated twitching. What really bothers the bluegill—more than the lightheaded disorientation that's beginning to take over—is the dawning realization that the bit of worm sitting just inside its lips will never reach the stomach.

The catfish will not be hurried along. More bovine than feline, they are interested in grazing. Twilight days and pitch-black nights are spent in a slow, mindless digestion of any edible passing in front of their whiskers. Catfish hover over carcasses felt but unseen. Taste is heightened. Like any good insomniac, they know that food is better eaten in the dark.

Minnows, not minnow. Plural, not singular. Multitudinous even in small groups, they differ from a flock of birds. Absent is the elegant dip-swoop down, the synchronized loop-the-loop to the sky. They are not on

a journey to but a collective dart away from. Their bodies constantly spell out a sign that reads: “Danger.” The escape route circuitous, the exit never found.

MOVE

FROM BENEATH YOUR aluminum rowboat the water knocks, asking to be let in. It has a sixth sense for empty vessels. It dreams of seeping into, submerging them, claiming each and every one. The wind has encouraged these fantasies, enabled the water to rise up again and again. Rap, rap, rap underneath your feet. Such behavior cannot be tolerated. Slap its surface with your wooden oar. Enough!

The sun is gone and in its place a heavy cloud begins to prick the lake. Perforations run in every direction across the water’s surface as the nimbus pours itself in. The lake has no choice but to endure the swell. How painful to watch this addition to the self—a forced feeding of the elemental kind. Fish dive for cover. No smooshed breadcrumb or wriggling morsel can entice them now. Below surface, they watch the upper layer of water turn gray. Not the clear, happy gray of a galvanized pail, but that of smoke blossoming thick from a fire unseen.

The water has other fantasies besides pulling empty vessels into a deep, wet slumber. It also dreams itself an ocean peaked with waves, lassoing tides to the moon. The wind intuits this as well—it is a friend both incorrigible and kind. On occasion, it gifts the lake a blustery day, pushes it forward like a child on a swing so that it may crest up and see a few inches

higher, gain for a split second a new vantage on its very own body.

When the water goes quiet, the surrounding mountains sense their moment and dive in. Without a splash, they displace the skittish minnows, the treasure-marked jellyfish, the gullible bluegills. Thousands of deciduous trees are the lake's lone residents now. Inverted, the mountains experience themselves as the earth in miniature—look up or down and it is only the heavens that surround. The crystalline water lets itself be the mirror in which the mountains see delusions of grandeur. The lake understands this need: the desire to believe that you are the whole and not just a part.

RELATIVE DENSITY

OBJECTS OF FLOATATION:

life jacket

life belt

life preserver

inner tube

paddleboat

Ivory soap

Clorox bottle

Styrofoam

body fat

full lungs

head laid back

eyes looking up

OBJECTS OF SUBMERSION:

wedding ring

rubber boots

fishing pole

open beer

leaking boat

winter coat

heavy pockets

gathered stones

leaden legs

fingers splayed

silent lungs

mouth agape

REM

OF THE TWO recurring dreams I have, one involves me swimming. I swim over the roofs of subdivisions, gliding so close that I can almost touch the nailed-down shingles, coarse and speckled black. To the eye it is air that surrounds me, but when I reach my cupped hand forward and pull, I feel the unmistakable viscosity of water. The giveaway: how it alternates between supple and stern based on the precise angle of my wrist. I stroke on and inhale deeply, savoring the rush of oxygen through arteries. I am a gill-less fish-child of the suburban sky. Water provides the means of flight and

breath. In slumber, the lake has found a way to inhabit the atmosphere of my hometown neighborhood to the north, to possess the paved streets and their right angles, the clipped yards of carefully cultivated green. The lake has demonstrated the far reaches of its dominion. How deeply they stretch into the cul-de-sacs of my mind.

TOUCH

I ONCE HAD a daydream that came true. I dreamt that I could trick a boy named Clay into holding my hand by suggesting we swim down to the bottom of the lake together. I'm scared, I imagined saying, I've never touched the lake at its deepest part. We would be hovering already over that exact spot, water skimming the tops of our shoulders. My hand would gently rise to the surface, palm up. He would see it there, waiting. He would reach out slowly, giving us both precious seconds to learn the sensation of water sliding through fingers, the ecstatic relief when the slide stopped because our crevasses had found each other, hands interlocked. And then, on the count of three, we would fill our lungs tight with air and propel ourselves down, pushing the water overhead again and again with our free hands until it was just the two of us alone at the bottom. There would be a kiss. I wasn't sure exactly how, but it seemed only logical in that growing darkness. We would kiss each other and let go of any remaining oxygen, bubbles retracing our paths to the surface.

In real life, when our feet sunk into the clammy lakebed, toes

immediately subsumed into a sticky mess of mountain silt and decaying carcasses, I instinctively pulled down on his hand so that he sank deeper into darkness and I was propelled back up to the top. He reemerged seconds after me, gasping.

SLICE

TRUE OR FALSE

1. The lake is actually a cake.

True. The lake is baked batter. Its sweetness comes entirely from white granulated sugar. There is no Splenda, nothing to impersonate the zing of sucrose. There is no brown sugar, no tree sap molasses to make it chewy-sticky-soft. It is a yellow cake. Yellow from the eggs cracked and whisked inside. The flour is whole nothing. It is a heavy white powder of milled goodness that will stop your heart.

2. The cake has seven layers.

False. It has four. The top layer has been whipped warm and light. Sponge cake spreads all the way across the lake but only goes five inches deep. You have to splay like a starfish if you don't want to dip down farther to the next layer, which is made with cold butter. Your arms tingle at first to touch it. But then, you come to room temperature—lake temperature—and can finally taste the pleasure pockets of air created from the creaming of butter and sugar. Below the golden second layer is the dense pound cake.

You catch its crumbs only after diving in from a good height, arcing down through it momentarily before you buoy back to the surface. The butter in this layer isn't the delicate tingling kind. Rather, it coats the roof of your mouth, the full length of your tongue, and lingers heavy there, slowing your impulse to return for more. The very bottom layer of the cake is almost never eaten, as something has gone awry. It has turned bitter. From too much baking powder? Rancid flour? The swap of butter for a green olive oil? No one knows for sure. What you taste immediately, though, if you get a bite, is that this bottom layer is not for savoring. It is merely the foundation for lighter, sweeter things—a sobering point of comparison that makes you quicker to recognize true delight when it is sitting squarely on your tongue.

3. The most delicious layer is the top.

Trick question. The most delicious part is not a layer at all. It's the filling in between: thin raspberry jam paste that's been slathered with a long, flat spatula. It is the threshold, the thing that tells you the layers are there. Its scant presence is what makes it so desired. That and the fact that it buries little seeds in the crevasses between your gums and teeth: your physical proof that the cake is indeed an earth-baked confection—one you've had the distinct pleasure of tasting.

GOSSIP

PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS ARE conveyed across the water. Unlike the wind or the ocean, the lake has no voice of its own and so it absconds with the sounds of others. Whispers intended for a single ear skip like stones—grey oblong wonders bounding across a taut surface—until they are lodged in the reeds or flung ashore. Unbeknownst to the speakers, passersby eagerly collect these morsels, tucking them into jacket pockets and ferrying them far from the lake of their birth—to town where they will be traded for other nuggets of hearsay between church pews, across the drug counter, or through the windows of idling cars that have slowed to exchange their hi-do's beneath the glow of a green stoplight.

AKIN

CHOOSE THE PAIR of words or phrases that most closely resembles the relationship between the original pair.

YOU : LAKE ::

- a) Baby : Womb
- b) Bare Feet : Grassy Field
- c) Fish : Lure
- d) Tree : Lightning
- e) Neck : Noose