

H
OW
TO BE
WHEN YOU
CANNOT SEE

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photo by Scott Anderson

Mid June through the end of August is open swim season in Minneapolis. For two hours three times a week, you can swim back and forth across Lake Nokomis. A loop from the Main Beach to the 50th Street Beach and back again is 1200 yards.

The poems in this collection were created out of log entries from my weekly swims during the summer of 2018.

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VISION TEST 1

D	1	20/200
O N	2	20/100
T P A	3	20/70
N I C N	4	20/50
E V E R D	5	20/40
O U B T Y O	6	20/30
U R S E L F L	7	20/25
I N E U P T H E	8	20/20
B U O Y S T R U	9	
S T S T R A I G	10	
H T S T R O K E S	11	

A poem about how to B when you cannot C

Anxious adjustments
 Barely visible buoys blinding bright
 big beach little beach bridge spanning
 Cedar avenue congested cars clear lake cloudy vision
 Dodging ducks and drifting swimmers
 dark triangular shapes disappearing
 Emptied mind, emptied lake, everything erased by
 eroding eyes
 Fogging
 Goggles getting off course gaining perspective on not
 seeing only feeling
 How to swim straight how to be when you cannot see
 Isolated isosceles
 Jumbled views
 Kayaks keeping out menacing boats
 Lifeguards lining the course
 Muscles moving then stopping to sight, mid-lake
 motionless messed up maculas magically
 making bright orange buoys disappear
 reappear then disappear again
 Nothing to sight but
 Opaque water occasionally the color of
 Pea soup thick hiding Northern Pike Yellow Perch
 a percolating panic is
 Quelled even as quirky gaps in my central vision
 Remain removing random objects, often red or orange
 ones I
 Swim without seeing
 showing off strong shoulders and straight
 strokes.

Touching toes testing limits tracking towering light
poles tired yet triumphant
Unbroken
Victorious
Weightless worry-less wiser
eXiting the water with a silent joyful exuberant
"Yes!" to an audience of
yellow paddle boats yelling kids and my yellow
backpack its many
Zippers zipped, indifferent to my effort unfazed by my
exhaustion

THE BUOY IS NOT A METAPHOR

The buoy is not a metaphor.
Not a beacon of hope.
Not unsinkable resiliency.

The buoy is an orange inflated triangle
sitting on the surface of Lake Nokomis
with two other orange inflated triangles.

Together they mark an invisible path
from the big beach to the little beach
keeping swimmers on course during open swim season.

I look for these buoys
while swimming wondering
will they or won't they appear?

And mostly they don't,
hidden by waves or sun
or my inability to see orange often.

But occasionally they do.
Sometimes just the idea of orange
appearing in my mind.

Sometimes the sense of something large looming.
I lift my head up to sight
and feel one close by.

And sometimes, if a buoy hits just right
in the small bit of central vision I have left,
I see it in the distance.

A quick flash of bright orange
reassuring me
I am not alone.

How is this possible
to be here now
swimming straight when I cannot see?

How do I not panic when nothing exists
but a field of waving blue
stretched out endlessly in front of me?

But I don't panic and I do keep swimming,
trusting straight strokes and
my body's birding instinct to find land.

VISION TEST 2

B	1	20/200
E L	2	20/100
I E V	3	20/70
E Y O U	4	20/50
A R E A B	5	20/40
I R D U S E	6	20/30
Y O U R H O M	7	20/25
I N G S K I L L	8	20/20
S T O F I N D A	9	
W A Y B A C K T	10	
O T H E B E A C H	11	

THE HAIRBANDS

June 1st
A month ago
the lake was still covered in ice.
Now the water is warm
and too clear.
After repeatedly trying
to avoid eye contact
with a trio of hairbands
settled on the beach bottom
I have decided
I prefer opaque water.
There is a limit to what I need to know
and this is it.
Not knowing is better.
I can still believe
all that's here is
me & water.
Me, swimming
Water, wanting to hold me up
or to help me glide
or to go about its business unnoticed
readying itself for the splashing kids and
the boarding paddlers and
the diving ducks
the floating bandaids
the dearly missed nose plugs
the long forgotten easily replaceable hairbands
and whatever else is planning to join us in the lake.
By next week

the water will be opaque
light brown steel blue thick pea soup green or
on especially sunny days
lentil dal yellow
and I will not think about
what it contains.
Only occasionally will I encounter a fish
and just once will I step on a sharp steel something and
almost cut my foot
and never will I remember the multiplying hairbands
sadly scattered on the sandy floor.

ORANGE BUOYS

Pump
kin colored
pyramids. Towering
triangles. Super-sized
samosas. On land large, in the
water tiny specks. Three in a crooked row

or
not in
a row, askew,
off course. Of course
it's obvious to all of us im
patient wetsuits wading near the
shore where the buoys should go but
the lifeguards almost never seem to know.

On
a rare
Sunday morning
they know what they are
doing. The first buoy leaves the
shore tethered to a kayak straight on
the invisible path, bobbing confidently.
The second follows in line just behind gliding
smoothly. Then, the third. Achieving a perfect for
mation. A definite diagonal from the vertical white buoy
of the big beach to the floating dock of the little beach. I
breathe and watch this processional knowing it will be fine.

VISION TEST 3

G	1	20/200
I V	2	20/100
E U P	3	20/70
C O N T	4	20/50
R O L L E	5	20/40
A R N T O L	6	20/30
I V E W I T H	7	20/25
D I S C O M F	8	20/20
O R T O F N O T	9	
K N O W I N G E	10	
V E R Y T H I N G	11	

PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS

Choppy water today
Even a few whitecaps
Unusual for such a shallow lake

Just off the big beach it hits
The waves
Rocking me back and forth

Then in the middle of the lake
The swells
Swooping in making it hard to get in a full stroke

Reaching the little beach
I turn around
And encounter a wall of water

We strike up an animated conversation
Not quite an argument but a vigorous disagreement
Or passionate agreement with hand gestures

All around the lake
I catch glimpses
Of other animated conversations

Swimmers and the rough water talking
Arms flailing
Water spraying

Later leaving the water
And looking back
The lake seems calm

The waves merely slight undulations
all those conversations private
Hidden from view

DETRITUS

No matter how hard I try to concentrate
I can't seem to see the slimy sand seeping
inside, settling on my skin
but it's always there when I take off my suit.

I marvel at the unnoticed murk I have carried with me
streaks on my stomach, half moons under my breasts
then wash it off
before my skin turns red and my mood too dark.

Even as the murk dissolves down the drain
the lake never leaves
I smell it in my suit, days later
feel it in my dreams all winter.

HOW TO FLOAT

Try to
imagine you're
light lighter the lightest
high higher the highest, the most
buoyant.

Picture
when your daughter
cradles you in the shallow
water. Carrying you like a
baby.

You two
laughing splashing
forgetting gravity.
Unburdened by weight, land's logic.
Carefree.

Happy.
Pretend you are
sparkling grapefruit water
excessively effervescent
bubbly.

Barely
there. Only a
hint of flavor, mostly
fizziness shimmering at the
surface.

Do not
think about what's
below or not below
you. In fact, do not think at all
just be

relaxed.
Calm. Not Heavy.
Almost bursting with air.
Breezy & Loose. Liberated.
Unmoored.

Flat. Stretched.
Reaching out. Be
the horizon that cuts
through sky water, above beneath.
Be the

bridge
spanning the lake.
Delivering the goods.
Linking lands, logics, lives in
between.

Believe
in breath and your
body's ability
to not stay sunk but to rise up,
to float.

ERASER

in the middle of the lake
the only evidence I have
other swimmers exist
are bent elbows
bobbing lime green heads
torsos tethered to small bright pink buoys
and a stray warm finger unexpectedly touching my toe

i encounter whole swimmers
only when i reach a beach
we might exchange a few words
having briefly left our fish forms and become human again
to complain about blinding sun
or choppy waves
or misplaced buoys

i feel
a deep love
for these other half fish half humans
who seem to love deeply what i love
all of us sharing a lake a moment
a joy for the generosity of water

and i feel
continued annoyance
at their cluelessness
on how to swim straight
and their inability to wrangle
jutting elbows and flailing frog-like legs

i try to remember my love and forget my irritation
but when the lake water sloshes over my head gently
it washes away everything

IMPOSTER

Part of me wants to be a fish forever
submerged in the middle of the lake
but most of me wants to remain human
and crawl back to the shore.

With each loop I wonder if
a transformation will occur
before the beach is reached.
Will I sprout scales, gain gills, lose lungs?

But as the loop ends
and my feet touch the sand
I always (gratefully) remain the same
a human only pretending to be a fish.

SUBMERGED

Breathing every 5 strokes
 a constant rhythm calm
 relaxed and controlled. I
 keep my head below down
 under the water in
 the dream for longer not
 wanting to surface. But
 breathing is needed so
 I lift my head up and
 open my mouth for a
 quick intake then a plunge
 immersed again deep. A
 thought occurs to me: could
 above be the dream and
 below reality? Is
 my belief in an I
 false, a separate self,
 fabrication? Is my
 body not mine but the
 lake's ours together us
 fish milfoil swimmers all
 the same, longing to stay
 forever submerged? Yes.
 5 strokes at a time I
 am not I but we joined
 sharing molecules freed
 from gravity's pull and
 hungry lungs' demands

VISION TEST 4

N	1	20/200
E V	2	20/100
E R T	3	20/70
R Y H A	4	20/50
R D E R T	5	20/40
O S E E I N	6	20/30
S T E A D U S	7	20/25
E O T H E R S E	8	20/20
N S E S F E E L	9	
S M E L L L I S	10	
T E N H A R D E R	11	

LAST LOOP

Last loop.
Last turn around
the floating dock near
one beach before ending where
I started at the other beach.

Last chance
to keep swimming
even when I can't
sight beaches or swimmers or
anything but sky trees endless water.

Last glance
through peripheral vision
to try and spot
one big orange triangle looming
left, another hiding in the waves.

Last strokes
mid-lake 25 feet
above the water's floor,
thousands of feet below sky
thick with airplanes circling like sharks.

Last swim
of the season.
No more outside looping
just indoor lapping. Soft sandy
shores replaced with hard tiled walls.

AFTERGLOW

Reaching
the big beach
for a final time
gravity returns
before I'm ready.
Still unsteady I
stand
then drop
back down
kneeling
waiting for legs
to remember
how to be vertical.

When I
finally exit
the shallow
water
muscles are
grateful
happy to be
used. A gentle
delicious
ache slowly
spreads
not pain or burning
but glowing
satisfaction.

We--me
and muscles--
are pleased
with our effort.
We feel strong
brave
beautiful
enough
more than enough
everything

E N O R M O U S.

For now
too big to
stay in such a
small lake.