



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2019

Article 18

5-22-2019

A View with a Lake

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Class of 2019

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Prazak, Dylan N. (2019) "A View with a Lake," *The Mercury*: Year 2019, Article 18.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2019/iss1/18>

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A View with a Lake

Author Bio

Vermonters with a passion for writing and philosophy.

A View With a Lake

DYLAN PRAZAK

I received meager hours as a lifeguard during my summer at Lake Paran so the majority of my time was spent weeding. The lake developed a notorious milfoil problem during the hottest parts of the summer. With roots embedded deep in black silt that oozed along the bottom of the lake, milfoil grew up towards the surface in green wire strands and tickled the feet and legs of swimmers. This, of course, was unacceptable; someone had to pull the stuff out.

I remember the first time I was asked to weed. I was shown my tools: a red-orange canoe, a splintered paddle with an Indian chiefs' head painted on the handle, a pair of scissors, a cinderblock with twine tied through it, and a twenty-five foot long beach rake.

Mrs. Haaslich, a grade school teacher of mine, gave me the position. Over the summer holiday she managed the local lake and she hired me as a lifeguard with a concentration in odd jobs. The lake was man made and about a century old. It was a low and wide bowl of pond soup with a steep sloping hill between itself and the official entrance. At the top of the hill was the snack shack and next to it the pavilion. In between them townspeople funneled through like obligated citizens, paying three dollars and two quarters if they had it. If they didn't, there were many unofficial entrances to accommodate.

The town I grew up in was divided geographically. As if residents had physically trickled downward with continued generational misfortune, the valley held the housing projects, the motels, a profusion of liquor stores, a lousy diner and the municipality's high school. My old high school. The hills were where well-to-do folk lived, and they lived with little connection to anyone in the valley.

The lake was in the valley and the people who lazed on the grass were a reflection of that. People came to escape placidly staring at their TV's, maybe so that at the end of the day they wouldn't feel stung by the time that had slipped by them, wasted. A politician might seriously scale back his plans in office if they were to visit Lake Paran on the wrong day. The lake was also nestled just off the campus of Bennington College, a school where swank art students went to declare their love for Kandinsky, post-modernism, and walking barefoot to classes. They also came to the lake but predictably never paid and always sat on the Y dock that jutted outward on the far left of the

lakefront.

Work started at 11 each day. I would borrow my dad's Peugeot and pedal, the breaks squeaking at every stop. It was a downhill ride and only took five minutes. After setting my bike against the back wall inside the snack shack I would grab my tools and head down to the Y dock to meet my canoe again.

Shoeless, in black running shorts and a plain white t-shirt I would carefully tie the cinderblock to the yoke of the canoe. With ten yards of slack on the line between the cinderblock and its fastening point I would use the cinderblock as my anchor. I would put the rake next to me, the scissors behind me, and keep the paddle in my hand. Then push off onto the still water, my weight in the back of the canoe so the bow came lifting out, and paddle.

I would paddle until a thick of milfoil surrounded me. By this time the sun was already high. No escaping it on the lake. It beat down on my shoulders, beat down on my arms and hands and reddened the tops of my feet. It leathered the back of my neck. The sun cooked my mop of hair. The sweat it drew ran down my face, stung my eyes, soaked my skin and mixed with dirt to streak my body. Standing in my bathroom one night I shaved my head into the sink.

At the milfoil patch I dropped anchor port side. Standing up, balancing over my arches I plunged the head of the rake into the milfoil, letting the weight of the rake pull itself down into the water. The rake slid deeper, deeper, until it either hit the bottom or only a foot of rake was left above water. Then I would turn the rake clockwise. Turning and turning with the resistance gradually increasing until I couldn't turn anymore. That meant it was time to pull. Standing in the center of the canoe, bending at the waist to lean over the side I would get low before thrusting my hips forward and my head back, squeezing my eyes shut while ripping out thousands of milfoil strands. Eventually I wriggled the mess aboard and would cut it off the rake with the scissors. My boss always said I looked like Tom Sawyer.

That would be one "pull" and each pull the teeth of the rake would delicately slice my fingertips and palms. A good pull would fill about one twelfth of my canoe and weighed as much as two cinderblocks — another thing I sometimes had to dredge. In the morning I would fill and empty the canoe twice, then take my half hour lunch break to scarf down a grilled cheese sandwich. After the half hour I would go out for one more boatload.

I spent long days on the lake alone. I daydreamed a lot to spend the time, thinking of wild fantasies and scenarios where I was a hero. Sometimes I thought about true stories. The effect was the same. For a few hours I lost myself. Swimmers generally avoided my boat, giving it a wide berth if they had to swim by. From the patrons eyes I must have been grunting and haul-

ing that slop in a labored and unsettling way. There was only one person who came my way intentionally. Snapped away from a thought, I would sometimes see her gliding through the water. She was a tanned figure with long golden hair. Her name was Emily. I didn't understand why she came to the lake, but on better days she did. She didn't fit into the different groups that came here either. She moved like the poor people, the garbage, and the humidity that weighed everyone down weren't all there. Swimming along my canoe she looked up at me as if the sweat, putrid silt stench, and sunburned skin covering me couldn't bother her at all.

After swimming over to my canoe we would talk about anything. While we were talking she would help me from the water. Her help didn't speed things up much at all, but that was okay; the conversation was nice. I already don't remember any details from the talks we had, but I remember her smile. It was the only earnest thing on the lake. She had the kind of smile that might remind someone of home, or standing in sunlight. It never made sense to me that such a sweet thing chose to stay around such a lousy place.

A good pull meant I had gotten the milfoil by the roots, which further meant that the green tail I hoisted aboard ended with a thick coating of black silt. With each pull I had to squeeze the silt from the braid. Holding the braids black end over the water I would squeeze my hands around the silk, feeling the wet clay push through my fingers and along the palms of my hand as it slid off the milfoil into the water. The silt stained my clothes and my skin. Bleach got it out of clothes, but nothing got it off of me. Over the summer my hands and forearms darkened and my fingernails had a murky, black, dead look to them.

Before long the job became automatic. It was completely mindless, and because of that, soothing. The cuts on the tips of my fingers had no feeling. The leathered skin on the back of my neck had no tingling. The sweat in my eyes stung without ferocity. The rocking of the boat no longer frightened me, and the black stains on my hands, which I had tried indignantly to remove, no longer bothered me. At the end of the day my hands bled, my neck peeled, and the black stains that danced up my elbows wouldn't come off. And I was okay with it.