

Duckweed Pond

Across the road and down the hill from our house is a small pond. Bushes screen it from the street and it is seldom visited. It has no name, except perhaps one it whispers to itself on moonless nights.

I take my little daughter there sometimes. Supposedly to teach her about nature, but really so I can see the world through her clear eyes as I answer clouds of questions with wisdom and paternal chuckles.

On bright days, sun-blotches plunge through the overhanging trees into the pond. They halt, inches into the blooming water and sprawl there, floating.

We lie at the edge, noses just inches from the water, bellies warmed by the sun-sodden earth. Weeds look very tall from down here. The lusty, musky smell of mud, water, and life fills the air. Dandelion seeds catch in eyebrows and noses. “Daddy, you have fuzzy things in your eye sprays!”

I reach for a minute blossom, but thistles sting my careless hands.

Peeking into the water, we see platoons of polliwogs and myriads of minnows marching and countermarching. “What are they doing, Daddy?”

“Looking for food, I guess.” Is that the answer? Surely those precision formations are more than that. Does a polliwog have purpose? A minnow motivation? Is it some primordial ritual?

“Do you know what those little ones with the long tails are called?”

“Yes, daddy, they’re pollywads. Matty told me.”

“Pollywogs, honey. Some people call them tadpoles, but they’re actually baby frogs. They’re going to grow up, get out of the water, hop around, and croak.” An unseen bysquatter emits a perfectly timed croak. “Just like that!”

Elizabeth’s delighted movement touches off graceless hopping as our froggy neighbor heads for tall grass and safe slime. He continues croaking with a reproachful note.

Further out, a small fish nibbles at the edge of a floating patch of duckweed. I am unable to point him out until he makes a small splash, more of a swirl, actually, and flicks away. My daughter watches closely, hoping for more action, but she gets restless. Immobility is not her style.

“What are those blue whizzy things, Daddy?” Iridescent creations of a madman’s insolent paintbrush fly dogfights over the pond, vying with swallows for invisible prey.

“They have lots of different names. Darning needles – because of their shape. Dragonflies – because their faces look like dragons. Granddad calls them mosquito hawks – because they eat lots of mosquitoes.”

“Why does everything have so much names?”

I have an opportunity to explain the vast arena of American, yea, even international etymology. I begin to frame my words. “Well...”

“Oh look!” she interrupts. A mallard duck arrives on the scene with a lot of unnecessary fuss, splash, and bustle. He settles into the water like a dowager into a soft sofa that is a trifle too low, and begins cruising, mumbling to himself. Periodically he upends, peeking under water and bobbing up again. A suspicious eye in a green head evaluates us. We aren’t a threat, but neither do we look like we might be good for a handout. We are tolerated.

“Let’s try something new, sweetie. Close your eyes – just listen and smell.”

Ears and noses flood us with sensation. The pond is alive with sounds we can’t interpret. What is the small rustle in the weeds? The faint clattering above our heads? Drowsy insect hum takes on many voices. The bomber drone of a bumblebee harmonizes with the honeybee’s alto. I flinch at the hysterical whine of an over-revved mosquito. Overhead, talkative Canada geese fly to a mysterious destination. Still higher, a jet plane carries its cargo to a more prosaic destination. Birds take on individual voices and personalities. The repressed police whistle of a red-headed woodpecker talks to the strange squeaks of a catbird and a starling’s harsh chirps rudely interrupt. An anachronistic owl hoots, a sound like blowing

over the lip of a soda bottle. Directly over our heads, a dozen crows suddenly break into raucous dispute over some obscure point of philosophy. Argument rages until the debaters can no longer contain themselves. They burst into flight and flap heavily away, shouting insults.

Our noses are also imbibing the life of the pond. The musty muck symphony of odor separates into an olfactory orchestra, with each instrument playing its part, occasionally taking a solo riff, and then blending back into the group. A skunk has passed this way, leaving an oboe note. The honeysuckle flute is momentarily cloying. Decaying vegetation plays a cello in the background. Sun-heated plants are a muted chorus of trumpets. The summer breeze conducts them all masterfully, bringing out the most delicate notes, but letting nothing overpower the melody.

“What’s the teedling, Daddy!? It’s on you!” A sociable cricket has decided my shoulder is an ideal platform for a serenade.

“It’s just a cricket, Liz.” I corral the critter. “They’re cute. The Japanese make little cages and keep them in their houses for luck.”

“Can we take him home? You could build a cage.”

“Oops, he got away.” Clever Daddy. “Maybe we’ll catch another one sometime and we can do it then.”

I recline once more and contemplate a bee and an ant working the same flower. Were it earlier, it would be pistils at dawn.

“Oh, look. He’s so gluey!” Dirty fingers have uncovered an earthworm.

“He sure is, sweetie. Earthworms make the ground good for plants, the more of them there are, the better the soil. But we’d better head home. Mommy will be wondering where we are.”

Warm sun massages our backs as, hand-in-hand, we walk up the hill toward home.

My wife asks, “What did you do? What did you see?”

Elizabeth looks quizzically at me as I answer, “Nothing much, we just went to the pond.”