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Black Water, Strong Currents, and *Jaws* A Place of Fear Considered

Three feet of space. Three feet of empty depth between a steel walkway and a concrete bridge which Mark Partin, officer for Covington County, husband for a year, didn't see, didn't feel after leaping over the embankment, after coming to the aid of an officer pursuing a suspect on the walkway. He slipped through the three feet of space and fell ninety feet into the black waters of the Ohio River. The water was cold; it was night and early January. Hours after the fall, searchers found his flashlight.

On another day in another year, on an afternoon in August when the sky was blue and the sun hot and high in the sky as one would expect, I stood on the edge of what I thought was doom. I was standing on a wooden pier, warm and sprinkled with sand, which extended ten feet into a lake and formed a *U* with arms a hundred yards apart. I was looking over one side of the pier, down into the big, black lake. The water was black, completely opaque. Sunlight bounced off its surface; it didn't penetrate. I looked across what appeared to be miles of nearly still black; I could see a stone wall in the distance, the wall which divided the boy's lake from the girl's lake. I had been told that campers regularly raced to that wall, always accompanied by a friend in a row boat. I didn't have a friend with a row boat that afternoon. I didn't care about racing to the wall. I was having problems dipping my big toe into the black water.

I was ten when I stood on the pier and confronted the big, black lake. I was at summer camp for a week in late August. I was at Seven Ranges in Northern Ohio, a boy scout summer camp which meant earning merit badges in basketry and mammal study, tying a sheepshank for my meal, taking communal showers for the first time, naming the stars at night, and being always and woefully very far away from the girl's camp on the other end of the lake. There were no girls at boy scout camp. There was a swimming test which all scouts had to pass in order to earn an award particular to the camp, a piece of Native American pipestone with some intricate carvings on it. It was quite the honor, I assure you, and in order to earn it one had to pass a swimming test, four hundred yards. Not a great challenge for the aqua-enthusiast, but I was no swimmer. And there was that lake—that big, black beast—with which to contend. At the age of ten, my toes curled around the edge of the pier and locked themselves in place.

At the age of nineteen, when I learned Partin fell ninety feet into the Ohio, I was still no swimmer. But I was far away from water, far away from the lake, at the diagonally opposite end of the state. I was in Cincinnati, enjoying the winter break during the middle of my sophomore year of college. I was visiting Lyn, staying in her nice, dry suburban home. She had a pool in the back; that was fine. Lyn and I were in her den, watching *Jaws* when we first heard of Partin. We didn't learn of his fall through the conventional sources—newspapers, television—though the story filled them the next day. We learned of the fall through Lyn's younger sister, Jill. Jill had just returned home from her job as a waitress at a local sports bar. Partin's wife worked at the bar as well; she had called off that evening. The owner of the bar told the rest of the workers why.

At first I was stunned, as one would expect. I thought about Partin's wife. I thought

about the suddenness, the senselessness of his death. Later that evening, when my girlfriend and I watched the news, watched vid-feed of police boats dragging the river and learned that the current was three to four miles per hour, I thought of how he died. I thought of subfreezing water. I thought of the force of hitting the water from a ninety foot height. I thought of the black of the water, how it had swallowed him leaving nothing but a flash-light. The poor visibility is what the rescuers complained of. Not the cold. Not the current. They complained to the reporters about the black of the river, how they could not see beneath the surface. I remembered the lake.

I'm not a hydrophobe. At least the I don't think so. I take a shower each morning. As I'm working on this essay, I'm drinking a glass of water. I always drink water when I write. I read somewhere that Sondheim does that. When nature calls, the writer gets a nice break and a chance to regroup scattered thoughts, a chance for new ideas to form. My idea about the lake is that I was not simply afraid of the water; there was something more, something about the place.

I should not have been scared of the black water. I had been taking swimming lessons at Estrabrook, the local rec center. I had been preparing for the test. The water in the Olympic-size pool was different from the water over which I now stood. I had learned to live with red eyes and the feeling of being burned which followed an accidental gulp of pool water; I knew the worst of Estrabrook. Fear of depth was not present at Estrabrook; I could see the increasing depth in feet painted on the side of the pool. More importantly, I could see bottom in all parts of the pool; the water was clear, the water was crystal.

The lake water wasn't clear. As I said, it was black, opaque, a solid sheet of carbon paper which occasionally rippled. As I stood on the pier waiting, dreading the signal to dive in, one of the lifeguards, a tan man of nineteen—they were all tan men of nineteen with bleached hair and Olympian muscles readily revealed in tank tops and short swim trunks—dipped a long wooden pole into the lake. I watched the pole descend into the depths. I continued to watch the pole descend into the depths. The guard just smiled; he lowered the pole at least six feet without striking bottom, shrugged, and raised the pole. I wasn't happy; the pole was to be my tool for rescue if anything went wrong. I thought about dipping a toe into the black but kept my feet on the pier.

The morning after Partin's fall the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that searchers had not located the body. Boats continued to patrol and drag the bottom of the river. Divers soon joined the effort. The search was slowed by rusted girders and slabs of concrete which filled the River. Another bridge had once crossed the River; the civil engineers of Cincinnati had thought it best to detonate the bridge to make room for the one from which Partin fell, to allow the debris to collect in the Ohio. Now the debris was just an obstacle, a challenge, along with the cold, the current, and the black of the water. Another officer fell off a patrol boat and into the river; he broke his arm on a chunk of concrete and was nearly swept away with the current. He was fished out; his fracture was set, and he was sent home. Something else fell into the River that day: a wreath placed on the bridge by Partin's wife.

I read somewhere that Shelley, shortly before his fatal accident on the *Don Juan*, was walk-

ing along the beach when he came across a strange funeral. A young man's body had been placed on a pyre at the edge of the beach and was being consumed by the flames. Shelley thought he saw himself in the corpse, thought he had seen his doppelganger, a sign of impending doom. Shelley drowned when the small yacht on which he was sailing overturned; his funeral was held on the beach, and his body was burned. Shelley was no swimmer.

Standing on that pier, standing before the dark water, I looked around for my own doppelganger. I saw a kid standing next to me with a freckled back and too tight trunks. I felt impending doom. Swimming lessons or no swimming lessons, I did not want to leap into that lake. It was not like the pool. It was not clear. My trunks were still dry, and I preferred them that way. But before I could run my hands over their stiff, finely stitched surface one more time, the tanned and smiling lifeguard blew his whistle, and I leapt head first into the lake.

I regretted that decision, leaping in head first. A true coward would have gone in feet first. It must have been an instinctive decision. The water was cold, a bitter ice. The water was colder than the showers. I half expected the mammalian diving reflex to kick in as I sank. And I did sink, down and down, farther than the pole. I struggled to right myself, to have my head pointing to the surface and not the invisible bottom. I opened my eyes. I saw nothing. The water was as black in its heart as it was on its surface. I kept sinking. I strained to see the light of the sun poking through the surface. I was nearly out of breath. I saw a spark of yellow and began kicking my feet, forcing myself to move towards the spark. I reached the surface and took a deep breath; water filled my throat and nostrils. I tried to spit it out, all the while attempting to dog paddle—yes, dog paddle—to keep my head above the water. The paddle—really more of a desperate flail of shivering limbs—got me back to the pier. I grasped a steel support. I looked up to the top of the pier, a good three feet above the water's surface, and cried, "Get me out of here! I'm drowning! Jesus Christ! I'm drowning!" The lifeguard walked over to where I was holding onto the pier. He smiled and dipped his pole into the lake. I reached for it, but he used it to push me back. "Swim," he said softly and walked away.

I've often wondered what would have happened if I just sank, if I just stopped flailing the limbs. The lifeguard would have helped, I guess, I hope. I wonder if Partin tried to swim, tried to struggle against the current and the cold. The news reports said his equipment would have weighed him down. He may not have been conscious when he hit the water. He may have died on impact, smashed against a rusty girder. All because of a three foot gap and a misplaced step. But if he did try to swim, to reach the surface—he was young and strong; maybe it was possible—did he just give up? Did he allow the River to swallow him? After tiring of flailing his arms and legs, did he just let them go limp and sink into the cool waters? Could sinking, could yielding to the lack of solidity, have been, in a strange way, a relief, a release? A pleasant loss of control? Of course not, he was fighting for his life. I was fighting for my life in that summer camp lake; I certainly was not going to allow myself to sink, even for a moment.

Despite the cold filling my limbs, I managed to start something like a breast stroke. I moved slowly. There was nothing beneath me, nothing solid at all. There was no nice tiled floor, no reassuring vent. Down there somewhere, I was certain, was a lot of sand

and silt. I wasn't sure where; I just knew it had to be down there. As I swam, I felt something solid scrape my heel. A fish maybe. I just kept swimming and gulping down the lake's black water. I finished three laps with the breast stroke, turned rather clumsily onto my back, and really strained to keep my face above water for the final lap.

I eventually reached the pier from which I had leapt. The lifeguard lowered his pole and this time did not push me away. I climbed up the pole, fell onto the pier, and coughed violently. I staggered to the sand and the grass. I sat down on my knees and allowed the sun to warm my body. I had passed the test. I felt terrible.

Three days after the fall Partin's body was still missing. The search continued, slowly. Sophisticated diving gear from Australia was used to investigate the murky depths. Partin's fall was no longer the top news story. Murder, robbery, and rape filled the air time. A daily update brought only news of an increasingly frustrated search. One evening a reporter visited the Partin home and spoke with his wife; it was the first time she had been interviewed. She said a lot; at least I thought she must have since they continually cut shots. She cried a lot. I looked over at Jill who was curled up in her father's recliner. I saw tears on her face.

Near the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, while still upon the river, Kurtz breathes his last but not before exclaiming, "The horror. The horror." He may mean the sheer brutality of his jungle surroundings. Or he may mean allowing that brutality to enter his soul. Kurtz may have been destroyed, not from his surroundings acting upon him, but rather, from within him. Huddled on the beach, not feeling really proud after passing the test, I may have been a lot like Kurtz. I, who had been so afraid of being swallowed by the lake, had instead swallowed it. Shortly after reaching the shore, I began to feel the lake's effects, began to feel it hurt me from within. My arms and legs began to twitch uncontrollably. I doubled over on the sand and clutched my sides. I felt ill. I crawled over to the grass and released the water and that morning's breakfast. The lifeguard had been watching me. He came over to where I sat, clutching my knees and groaning. "Drink any of the water?" he asked. I nodded a "yes." "Dumb thing to do," he said. "Lots of algae. Makes you sick."

Not long ago I told Lyn I planned to write about Partin's fall and the lake which troubled my youth. I told her that I wanted to examine places that cause fear. I wanted to write about the only place that caused fear in me. I asked her a few questions: "Do you think some places are just inherently scary, spooky, eerie? Are there places that are just naturally frightening? Like haunted houses? Or do we bring our fears to those places?"

She didn't think there were any places which were inherently spooky. She said as a child she and a friend used to play in a graveyard near their homes. They played hide-and-go-seek, tag, and spud. She was never afraid to be in the graveyard. To her it was like a park, a playground with a lot of marble and limestone. "It's all in how you see the place," she told me. I agreed. I may have always thought as much.

Consider the lake again. Every other kid in my troop took the test that day; all of them passed. One of my good friends went for his swimming merit badge that summer; he had to retrieve a rock from the lake's bottom in order to complete a requirement. He didn't appear to be afraid of his surroundings, and the land which surrounded the big black lake

was pleasant enough. The surrounding beach was warm and sandy. Tall reeds, grasses, and cat tails filled the banks and hid frogs and geese at night. Campers played volleyball on the beach. There was a beach house and a life guard tower, freshly painted white, and a buddy board, on which a paper tag, one for each camper, hung from a steel hook. It wasn't a very frightening place. It was a peaceful place. Campers went there whenever possible; in the heat of late August, it was the only cool place. So if the lake was not inherently frightening, then what made it frightening to me? Why did I fear that place? Why did Partin's fall cause me to remember it?

We were watching *Jaws* when Jill told us about Partin's fall, and I believe it sheds some light on my fears—or at least it gives me a framework for rationalizing them in the pop culture-fixated manner I love. We paused the film at the part where Chief Brody tosses an oxygen tank into the mouth of the very great white shark. The shark has devoured at least five individuals, including the captain of the sinking ship upon which Brody finds himself. Brody, rifle in hand, ascends the mast—slowly slipping under the waves—as the shark attacks again. Brody takes aim at the oxygen tank—still protruding from the creature's flabby lips—says, "Smile, you son of a bitch," fires his rifle, and does what Ahab never could by blowing the marine monster into a million Japanese delicacies. With the shark dead and the ship sinking, Brody lowers himself into the water and finds a friend he took for dead. They swim several miles back to shore. Brody is no swimmer. The film stresses his fear of water in several scenes. But as the film ends, he seems to have lost his fear. Dog-paddling along, he says he could swim forever. Brody has gained something Partin and I never could: control over the dangers in his environment.

I could not control the water I feared. I could not shape it as a filmmaker could: remove the giant shark and with it all the danger in the water. I could not make my lake into a place with a bottom I could see or with water that was warm to the touch. Partin was similarly powerless when he took his dip into the black water of the Ohio. I could not even remove the algae—a far more vicious predator than a rubber shark—which made me ill. I had to deal with the big, black lake as it was, with all its potential to harm me unexpectedly. I had to accept its inky depths and its apparent lack of a bottom. I didn't even have the skills to cope with the lake. I was no swimmer. I knew I was no swimmer. I could not control being pulled beneath the surface; I could not control drinking a good portion of the lake nor the little beasties which lay waste to my interior. The lake's violent response to my plunging into it, its ability to hurt me from within were not expected occurrences, were not conditions, like a giant great white shark, which could be removed. The big, black lake would remain the same cold, deep, algae-infested pool summer after summer. I could only know it in that way. That is why my toes clung to the pier. I wanted to stay in a place I felt I could control. When Partin was taken by the cold current of the Ohio, he lost the very control I valued and his life.

Maybe the issue of control is just a cop-out on my part. Maybe my use of *Jaws* is just a cheap gesture, too simple of a tool for understanding such a complex problem. That the horrors one is told the water holds in books and films has influenced my memories of the lake I won't deny, although I don't remember thinking of *Jaws* when I dove into the cold, black water. Whether I simply use these cultural constructs—the books, the anecdotes, the film, the newspaper reports, even this essay itself—to shield me from granting

the lake any sort of primordial power is a thought worthy of consideration. But I won't consider it. I'm not going to admit I was afraid of drowning. I'm not going to say I was scared of the unknown lurking beneath the lake's surface, that my life flashed before my eyes when the water first filled my lungs. I panicked. But I was worried because I could not control my surroundings; they did not bend to my influence. I was not afraid of the lake overpowering me. It's just a place; it can't dominate a person, right? So I will stick with the *Jaws* analysis even if it cheapens the tragedy of Partin's death and prevents me from really grappling with my fears. I've learned to avoid the lake.

The next summer I did not take the swim test. I never walked by the lake. I didn't earn my pipestone that year; when all the other campers went off to receive it, I stayed by the bonfire for another round of "Rise and Shine." The summer after that I did not even go to Seven Ranges, and the next year I quit scouts. I never took another plunge into the big, black lake. I've never even gone swimming since that summer. I'm not a Brody. This past summer, at the dawn of an August day, a friend and I, under the persuasive power of Jack Daniels, took a stroll down to a pond called Ebaugh, which in most respects is a smaller version of my lake. My friend began to remove her clothes and then saw the thick layer of algae floating on the surface of the pond. "On second thought. Maybe. No," she said. I didn't protest.

About five days after I returned home from Cincinnati I decided to call Lyndsay. I wanted to make sure that her parents had received a thank you note and that I had not worn out their hospitality. During the course of our conversation, I couldn't help asking her, "Have they found him? The officer?" She said she didn't know. She had not heard anything on the news nor had seen anything in the paper. "But they brought in all that hi-tech scuba gear," I said. "They dragged the river. They even said they knew where he fell." She reminded me of the depth and the dark and, most importantly, the current. "He could be half way down the Mississippi," she told me. He was just swept away. He couldn't resist.

—Paul Durica '00