

GARY BARWIN

## COMMENCEMENT FOR COOTES PARADISE

1

Fish hovering above silt. Their mouths open, hoovering the almost dark.

10,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools. If humans are 60% water—heart 73%, lungs 83%—how many humans is that? Varicoloured humans reaching forward, displacing the river, swimming, floating in liquid sky.

Someone left a valve open.

They told us in science class: Love + Time = Death.

No, that was my grade 9 girlfriend. Our world is sensation and memory, our 73% brains, our 31% bones.

Stellar nucleosynthesis resulting in the complex organic molecules necessary for life formed in the protoplanetary disk of dust grains surrounding the Sun before the formation of the Earth + energy = city counsellors.

24 billion gallons of sewage is what is going on inside of us, while 24 billion gallons of sewage is what we do on the outside. Or, according to David Kessler, grief.

Old David Foster Wallace fish: Morning, boys. How's the water?

Young DFW fish: What the hell is water?

2

The moon fills bedrooms, kitchens, basements with its silver, staircases slick with shine. 24 billion gallons of fish slide into our homes, our 73% brain a stippled perch spawning at night.

Here's the heart pumping under its sheath of shad.

Here's largemouth bass slithering upstream toward heart chambers. A thousand vena cava tributaries, the watershed of our fist-size swims.

A valve releases fish and eels, frogs and water voles into our chests, our "forever" mudrooms and rec rooms. Here fish + eels + frogs + voles = 24 billion gallons of sewage and runoff.

A mouth a kind of valve, open—large-mouthed, duck-faced—to the dark everywhere. Here our breathing strained through the weir of our teeth. How many breaths fill an Olympic pool? No. We breathe air, it's the gills of our grade 9 girlfriend where water fins.

City counsellors stock pockets with frogs, fish, eels, water voles, lift glasses from their civic desks, tip lakewater in. A sidereal biome. Removeable. A hands' worth of pond or river. Shh, the susurrations of rippling. Shh, the secrets held in a closed mouth, a net, a Celtic knot of fish.

What-the-hell water where fish glug and burble, tell-it-truth light slanted toward silt. What is river, is lake, is marsh, is Time + Death = Love.

My grade 9 girlfriend and me on the shore of Cootes Paradise, human as driftwood, twig-sized toes sunk and wet in the near shore sandy muck, blood circulating under our high school skin as if across the upper city, combed by waterfalls raked over escarpment cliffs, runnelling down rivers into a lake where our feet stand in the cool and, hands in each other's hands, we open our mouths to the dark, breathe stickleback, tadpole madtom, green sunfish, finescale dace, northern hognose sucker.

How much dark in a river, lake, or marsh? How much light? Watershed of night, of day. Those with veins. Those without.

No, it wasn't my grade 9 girlfriend. It wasn't me. We weren't looking at 24 billion gallons, its dark surface, 100 billion pounds of starlight gone. A nearly 100% full moon.

What + what = this? What + what is here to breathe the silt of this dark night?