

CYRIL DABYDEEN

At Swim

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On the day I was born my mother lifted me up in her arms, admiring me for a moment, then threw me into the winding black-watered creek.

“Swim, you bugger,” I might have heard.

Rampaging alligators coming after me, and I had to swim in order to get out, to live another day. Thrashing, my right arm comes down hard!

It’s what I’ve been telling people ever since about my swimming style; and maybe the blackwatered creek or river has always been with me, the same tributary of the Orinoco or the Amazon.

This memory, or it’s just wishful thinking. My heart pounding, and young as I was, I had to swim and get out of the water, or face the consequences. Alligators’ jaws opened wide, then ready to snap shut!

Now each time I’m in the pool, the lifeguards eye me, no doubt considering what I’m up to with my inimitable swimming style. Don’t they?

Or do they have it out for me, one lifeguard in particular? I’m in the swimming pool again, in the North, as if destined to be here. Now don’t get me wrong, I’m a good swimmer. But that encounter on the first day of my life, my head bobbing up and down, and my feet and arms flailing in the wild urge to save myself... it was my real boring!

The male lifeguards know instinctively what I’ve been through; but this one, the same female, her eyes keep boring holes into me... as she walks up and down, following me all the way... from one end of the pool to another. Distances, really;

Tell the other swimmers here in this swimming pool in Ottawa—the coldest capital city in the world, where it’s like Vostok, the Russian research base in Antarctica which boasts the coldest temperature ever recorded. Ah, Ottawa is colder!

I must swim hard now, as if to fight off the cold outside, though I am inside. I really am.

Others in the pool, at the shallow end, look at me; it’s their curiosity, nothing less. Some on the deck stretched out languorously are also watching me; and maybe I’m now the centre of attention because of my swimming style. I am South America attraction, indeed. Each one is taking note of me, how unique I am perhaps. Aren’t they?

A laugh or snicker, I hear. I keep doing my favourite breast stroke, and spurt water out of my mouth. Then it’s the crawl again, twenty strokes to one end of the pool, then another twenty to the opposite end.

Almost tireless I am. Nicole, well, she’s looking at me again, walking up and down.

How am I doing?

Suddenly it’s like being in the most sociable place in the city.

Really? Water everywhere, as I go under next, like a game I am playing with her, with everyone. Nicole is wondering how long I will remain under, as her eyes follow me down the entire length of the pool. One more time?

She keeps up her stride, as I want her to look at me only. It’s a real game we are playing. The same I’m playing with the others too?

She smiles, she knows what I’m thinking as I gulp in water, yet fantasize. Does she really know my background, about rampaging alligators coming after me in that first encounter? My mother, well, I think about her again.

Nicole’s about to reprimand me; and maybe she thinks I’m a sexist because of the thoughts I have. Now she indeed wants me to swim the correct way, doesn’t she?

—Hey, you!

I splash water, my right arm coming down hard once more.

—You! It’s not like that!

Christ, tell her about the Orinoco or the Amazon, and other rivers with stygian black waters: like the Demerara and Berbice, all I grew up with, Canadian rivers too, the Ottawa, St Lawrence, the Fraser, no? Canada indeed with thousands of lakes and rivers all around, the more I think about it. Go on, tell her!

Maybe Nicole is wondering why I don't take proper swimming lessons, as

Nicole laughs, and she yet sees me with the other swimmers coming around. The other lifeguards also come around, watching me as I pant. A large man comes next to me, his body like a barrel floating.

—*It's for your own benefit.*

What?

—*To swim correctly.*

I must be a *Canadian* swimmer, is that it?

—*Keep doing it!*

What more do they say? And once more I go underwater, and start swimming, as if heading for a cave. Do I invite the others to do the same, to come with me; and maybe we're all looking for El Dorado? Look for what's lost, but will never be found again? Atlantis I am also looking for now? We all are, come to think of it.

Nicole smiles, as I look back at her, her shapely legs, thighs.

The blurry sea or ocean, almost mythical. Manoa, the city, or the king of El Dorado. A straggly-bearded one, with pothos for hair no less.

Water-hyacinths all knotted together.

Not Odysseus... or Poseidon?

—*You, come up... from deep under!*

Voices calling out, and Nicole makes a face. She's worried, I can tell. And all the others are alarmed, aren't they?

But I keep swimming under... going into a lost kingdom, I imagine.

—*Come on up... or you will die if you stay under much longer.*

The streets with gold dust everywhere. A real El Dorado!

—*Can you hear me?*

Who's speaking? They're truly concerned, including the large barrel-sized man.

Slowly I surface, being out of breath.

—*Are you okay?*

I splutter and cough, as if it's my last breath.

Nicole forces a smile, relieved that I am safe.

How did I manage to stay under for so long?

Fingers point to me, and I'm embarrassed because of what I've been thinking. Nicole bends down, her face level with mine, making full eye-contact. Her freckles, mottled skin in places, lips curved in, as she looks at me, as if from one particular spot.

—*You must try swimming close to the surface.*

The others laugh. I yet try to catch my breath.

—*You must also learn to swim the correct way!*

Slowly I begin swimming in a circle, as if I've been doing this from a long time ago. My continuing circular motion, and they're not sure what to make of me now.

Does anyone, anywhere? Tell my mother this too, from my vantage point in Canada. *Go on.* Beginnings... without ending, I want to tell her.

I must!

The waters swirl around me. Rampaging alligators once more coming after me. It's all.

Nicole waves to me, in our continuing game, I can tell.

It's what I'm thinking now, and maybe yearning to be in another place also, if not Cuba, then somewhere else.

But I'm actually in this pool, this building with concrete walls all around. And the ones splayed out, languorously watching me, and it's no escape. Nicole has put them to it, I know, making it happen this way.

Am I prepared to go under again?