

First Lake (Love)

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Six years ago, on an afternoon near autumn, I pushed my green bicycle thumping over the cobbles, crackling acorns underfoot. The heat was thinning towards cold. Mid-September.

The water remained warm. The light, gold. It was a crooked lake—in shape and name—a small, scratching depth in a glacial chain.

My first.

Some way along the shore, two women stripped bare in the trees and waded out, with water pooling over their round hips and breasts. I was alone, pulling on an H&M swimsuit, still too shy to be naked. But I swam.

I swam to the centre, where the green bruised black and cold on my toes. And there, I laid afloat, sky spinning. For a time, in the middle of the lake, I felt I had enough: of luck, of joy. That first swim, I did not know how much more I would be given.

I did not yet know I was a reservoir.

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Six years now, and I am weeks from leaving.

How to write about endings, last visits? Each swim, I've left the lake as though I may never be back. My breath catches in the throat, my gaze falls long over the water. It seems obvious to say I have a near obsession with goodbyes. The risk of not having them. A need that they be perfect, tidy, crystalline.

So it crosses my mind that I need to swim it again, just the same, if I am going to go. That leaving must be concentric if it is to be done right.

Is it shameful to claw for the past even when I'm happy? To wish myself back to that first swim, before I knew that days could pass without a clouded thought? To ask to be back at the beginning?

(It is only the beginning because I've written it that way. I'd done plenty of living before that swim.)

I ask anyway: *the same, the same*. I ride my bicycle, now rusted from rain, and draw myself to the crooked shore. The air cuts cold, but the water is syrup-warm. I wade to my waist, the lake pooling around me.

Swimming out, a crested grebe circles; its young moves beneath me, learning to dive. I pull my body far below, hands cupped and eyes pressed shut. I surface halfway across. The water bleeds deeper, bluer now. Leaves stand still, refusing to turn, fall. A cloud scuttles overhead, and the sunlight glazes white. It could not be the same.

But still, my lips wet with lake, its breath heavy upon me, I memorise: *soil, pine, sand*. The scent of freshwater. The softness on my mouth.

I want to say that living here was the longest I stood still. That I gathered lakes as much as love and loss. And simply: that I do not want to leave them.

I wrote water onto my body, asking only that it be indelible.