

## Not a day goes by

Pete Harrison © 2009

What gives? Here in the broken pool we see people gathered to watch a movie, 1968's *The Swimmer*. An outside cinema, complete with tickets, popcorn, ushers and an intriguing few minutes of footage, screened before the main event, of a man swimming the length of a sunlit outdoor pool. His shoulder bears a tattoo of a small heart.

He walks through the landscape in light blue swim shorts, looking like a god. Ned Merrill. He is there in every scene, made double by Will Foster's mirror-reverse of the film, projecting one version, running forwards, next to another, running backwards. Will's piece never becomes about the how of his technical skill; it is always about the why of that mirroring, of that setting. The story was conceived as a mirror; it was promoted as a work that says something about us, or if not us, then certainly 1960s America fighting to understand its bi-polar pulls. The tagline of the movie is "When you talk about *The Swimmer*, will you talk about yourself?" and the explicit short story shows the often-melodramatic film to be subtle and nuanced in comparison.

In John Cheever's short story of *The Swimmer* Ned Merrill's displacements are, time and again, slapped down in front of us with the nervous urgency of a prizewinning poker hand, their significance carrying as much mystery. The element though which Ned Merrill swims is memory, and it tugs at him. Processing and overcoming traumatic experiences often involves a moment in which the truth hits home, a phrase particularly fitting here, as the last line of the short story, and the last shot of the movie, shows Merrill, finally arriving home and he, "shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty."

This is the story of a slow unravelling of one man's assuredness of his place. His gesture of swimming home, to "enlarge and celebrate" the beauty of the day, set him on a course of events, meetings and observations of different kinds, that gradually released his nested trauma, until; "in the space of an hour, more or less, he had covered a distance that made his return impossible." A distance travelled internally. Merrill knew in his bones that he must go on, to confront or embrace whatever unknowns awaited him at the end. Soon his ex-mistress' dismissal of him breaks a pattern of bellicosity and he finally realizes that "he had been immersed too long"; immersed in the stained comfort of denial.

Dartington College of Arts has been incorporated. That's one word to describe it. The derelict pool, next to an old boarded-up school and abandoned tennis courts, are symbolic of the change taking place all around us on the Dartington Estate. In setting his screening in the derelict pool, and unearthing the other lost pools dotted around the estate, Will's piece proposes that when we talk about *The Swimmer*, we also talk about Dartington. In 1968 Dorothy Elmhirst died, aged 81. 1887-1968. Some of us have participated in bustling protests, then walked in silence through the campus, then looked upon the building site of the planned performance studios in Falmouth, and then walked alone around the new performance studios of Lower Close, knowing they will very soon be much quieter than they now are. It seems oddly fitting that the Dartington Trust's plan for Foxhole, the dilapidated and warmly-remembered student accommodation complex, is to turn it into a retirement centre for the elderly. Abundant Life is the proposed name for the centre. That name has a hint of doubletalk about it, though I suppose not too many elderly folk would want to end up in a place called Lonely Death.

## Not a day goes by

Pete Harrison © 2009

Who is the boy in the crucial scene ? The two projections arrive at the centre of the film and for a shining moment, seared into my memory, both screens show the exact same image. After the strange game of pretending to swim, as the boy bounces on the diving board above the drained pool, does he begin to understand how his own mind might flexibly situate itself alongside the real and the imaginary? Who is the boy here, and who is the man? Which one is looking after himself, even making a little money?

There is a special term for vomiting that people use at competitive eating events. They call it reversal of fortune. We are in a reversal of fortune now; economically for a few brutish years, and ecologically we are currently living through the sixth mass extinction event. Every generation thinks it's the last, and rightly, because EM Forster is correct; "We move between two darkneses...the two entities who might enlighten us, the baby and the corpse, cannot do so."

The desire is for abundant life to indeed flourish, for frontier species of one form or another to encroach upon the silent corridors and darkened studios. Birth and death, and the dash in between. In 1968 the actor Daniel Craig was born. He swam to the shore in 2006's Casino Royale, and unforgettably walked from the surf wearing light blue swim shorts. In 1968 the Hawaiian swimmer Duke Kahanamoku died, aged 77. Duke had won three gold and two silver medals over four Olympic games, but he'll be forever remembered as the person who introduced surfing to California and Australia. Before Duke, surfing was located to a locale, as a centre of Hawaiian culture for hundreds of years.

"When you're young" The Pet Shop Boys remind us in their 1990 song Being Boring, "you find inspiration in anyone whose ever gone and opened up a closing door.."

The movement from one thing to another. An 11 year-old girl lays dying from a treatable illness. Wisconsin, 2008. Her father refuses to call the doctor and instead the girl dies on the floor of the family home as people surround her praying. Last week, at the trial in which he was found guilty of her homicide, he told he jury, "If I go to the doctor, I am putting the doctor before God." As I write I receive a text message; "Jennifer gave birth to a beautiful baby boy on Tuesday 18th August at 9.50am, weighing 9lbs 13oz. We have called him Noah. Mum and baby are doing well. Brendan."

This is the world in which we live.