



Andrew de Freitas

# Abhorrent to Nature

The pool is rectangular and so is the hall surrounding it. The space in the hall is of the same proportions as the pool itself: twice as long as it is wide, equal in height and in width. The hall is set well below ground level so that you have to go down two flights of stairs to get there. The tiles of the stairwell are matching with the tiles in the changing rooms. There aren't any windows but he looks up and guesses that the ceiling is at about the same level as the ground outside.

He's taking a shower before entering because they always have those signs telling you to please shower before entering. His body is dripping as he goes through the door from the changing rooms and his feet are leaving glassy footprints on the floor. The tiles are dry so he must've been the first person to enter since however long a time it takes the tiles to dry out. He's walking past the low diving board. A 'closed' sign is balanced at the tip of the plank where you usually bounce off. He's getting into the water at the end where they have the signs telling you the speed at which you should swim in each lane. The lanes take up one-half of the total area of the pool and the other half is reserved for non-lane swimming. The one half is divided into three long bits, slow medium fast, and the other half has one rope going across the width of it, to stop you swimming lengths where you should be doing other kinds of swimming. He's sitting on the edge of the pool to adjust his goggles. There's one lady swimming in the half reserved for other kinds of swimming, and in the other half of the divided half there's another woman as well as an old man. There's one person in each of the slow and medium-speed lanes and two people in the fast lane. He's getting into the medium because he knows that people often choose the fast lane and then swim slowly in it anyway. The water feels really warm on his legs but then cold on his chest and head as he slides under. He resurfaces and whilst the water is draining out of his ears he begins to notice the music they're playing, which is that song *Iris* by the Goo Goo Dolls.

He can see the bus stop through the glass doors and decides to wait in the entranceway until the bus comes into view. The snow must've stopped falling whilst he was swimming, but the wind has picked up and it's blowing sideways along the streets. He picks up a free newspaper and turns to about the fourth page where they usually have the least important stories. There's a headline saying *Phantom Nets*. The image is of three orange buoys forming a line in a grey-blue sea. There's no land in view and tall cumulous clouds are gathered at the horizon. The caption below the image says that 'ghost fishing' occurs as a result of fishermen who lose their nets at sea or dump damaged nets when they're no longer useful. He leans on the glass and positions his body so that he can glance up easily and keep an eye on whether the bus is arriving. He's reading about how a huge number of lost and discarded fishing nets continue catching fish autonomously and unattended, until the weight of the catch exceeds the buoyancy of the floats. Then the nets sink, and when the catch is totally devoured by other bottom-dwelling fish and crustaceans they float up to the surface and the cycle starts over again. Fishermen these days are mostly using nets made from durable synthetics and the phantom nets can continue their destruction for very long periods of time. It says that between 1980 and 1981 the French government offered a reward to anyone who retrieved the nets and handed them to the coast guard. The project had to be abandoned when they discovered people were vandalizing non-phantom nets in order to claim the reward, without having recovered anything of consequence from the ocean.

There are still a few paragraphs to go but he refolds the newspaper and replaces it in the rack with the others. The bus isn't there but he's going outside anyway, to stand in the elements. The snow makes a sound as the flakes bounce off the hood of his jacket. He imagines himself in the pool again - head above water, releasing all of the air in his lungs, sinking slowly until his feet touch the bottom. He needs to take a breath - he knows it's imagined but he can't seem to overcome the idea of needing breath. He begins floating back up to the surface.

It's beginning to feel cold so he makes his way into the bus shelter and stays standing because it will probably be warmer that way. Just a few feet away there's another man waiting for the bus. The space between the two men is divided by the thick glass of the bus shelter. One is inside and the other is out. There's a scratching noise and he looks above him to see the three pigeons settled on a ledge above a lightbox advertisement. Their eyes are opening and closing slowly and repeatedly. Their necks are drawn into their bodies for warmth.

There are three steps up onto the bus. People are dispersed amongst the seating in an order that doesn't seem just random. He notices the pattern of the upholstery on the vacant seats - a deep blue background scattered with small, yellow-orange triangles. Shapes and color. He takes a place on the right side at a window near the middle of the bus. He's thinking about whether he should take out his book and read a little. The swimming has made him hungry and when he's hungry he tends to pay more attention to the things surrounding him. He thinks that maybe he'll be too distracted to read and also it's only ten minutes on the bus. There's a man standing in the aisle near the rear door, watching him as he takes out his book. The man is wearing a long grey trench coat over his expensive suit and galoshes over the polished black leather of his work shoes. This older man is looking at him but he doesn't notice it. He still has his hood on and he's going to read on the bus. It comes to another stop and the older man gets out. A woman in her thirties is following the belt of the man's trench coat with her eyes as he descends onto the street. She thinks that he mustn't have far to walk because he's left his coat unbuttoned. She has her hand on the bell cord so that she can pull it for the next stop as soon as the bus starts moving again like she usually does. She looks over at the young man across from her who is sliding the hood off his head and tussling his wet hair with his fingers. She imagines standing behind him and patting it dry with a warm towel. A young girl with headphones is looking at the woman who hasn't pulled the cord yet even though her fingers are still curled around it. The girl shifts position in her seat then reaches up and pulls the cord herself. The woman's hand jolts slightly as she regains awareness and the towel evaporates as she turns her eyes away from him. The girl is turning up the volume on her ipod because she knows it'll be harder to hear Bjork when she's off in the street. She looks at the younger man reading and wonders how he can even concentrate on the book anyway when there's all these people on a bus. He's on the next page already. Only a minute or so has passed but he's entirely immersed in it. He's reading James Joyce and the protagonist is reflecting upon what happens in literature when the artist broods upon himself at the centre of an epical event. When the writer/character's brooding is long and hard enough, the narrative becomes progressively less personal until the emotional gravity of the story is equidistant from the artist and from all the others. The personality of the writer melds with the narration itself and flows around and around the people and the events like water in a sea.

He's reading this and thinking about that feeling you get when you're reading a book and are moved by it. He thinks about whether it could actually be a physical sensation as if something's leaving your body or entering it from outside. He's thinking that maybe it's something totally internalized. Memory and feeling and things already inside you are aroused by the ideas from outside, prompting them to shift and move around. Sinking and rising.

He's reading again and the character in the book is thinking through writing and the shapeless thoughts are flying through his mind like the birds described in reference to Swedenborg - birds that correspond to things of the intellect: 'Creatures of the air and the mind, who have their knowledge and know their times and seasons because, unlike man, they are in the order of their life and have not perverted that order by reason.'

He's re-reading that bit about birds and how they're more synchronized with the natural order - and then the bit about humans being perverted by reason. He's thinking about how when you're younger you tend to be more mindful of animals. He's recalling that when he was asked which animal he would rather be if he could be any animal, he would say a land animal that can also swim really well and hold its breath for a very long time underwater. He's recalling that even at a young age where imagination has fewer limitations he still always thought that for some reason to want to be a bird and fly always seemed an unreasonable projection. He's thinking about the reason that limits flight and the perversion that destroys the natural order.

There are 15 steps up to the house. He checks the letterbox and inside he finds a plastic fork and a postcard. He's entering the apartment and the cat is looking at him with it's head to one side, propped up on two paws with it's back legs tucked underneath and it's body curved into a crescent. There's a moment when his line of vision blends with the cat's and he sees himself through the gaze of the animal, standing where he is with the fork and the mail. He's letting his eyes rest on the postcard and they come into focus on the center of the glossy digital rendering. There are intersecting lines and circles and it looks like a kind of sinkhole and it's totally inorganic. He flips the card over and reads that the image is depicting a 'Heavy Higgs' Boson' as imaged through the CMS detector at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva. The postmark is German. His friend's handwriting explains that the Higgs' Boson is also commonly known as 'the most abhorrent particle to nature'. It describes how some physicists believe the particle travels through space and time in the form of a mythical bird, dropping baguettes into CERN cooling towers and deliberately sabotaging research projects - experiments with purposes so unacceptable to the universe that they're subverted by the future and doomed to failure.

He feels a strong impulse to respond to something immediately. There's already a pencil so he opens an electricity bill in order to write on the reverse side. He's holding the pencil suspended and thinking about whether he's really got anything to say. The birds that glide through space and time are still doing that in his mind - he thinks - and probably he should write about the birds or about animals generally. The cat is at his feet looking up at him and he's thinking that surely he won't write about the cat. He's thinking about how the birds in James Joyce weren't really birds because they were only thought or written about. Probably Joyce never even saw any birds and just brought them to mind. He's thinking about how the birds who fly through space and time to destroy the experiments at CERN are probably a similar kind of bird to the ones that flew from mind to mind through Joyce's writing and also from there into his own mind. He's thinking about writing all this but it's way too difficult. There isn't even an entry point besides the birds and they're really hard to explain.

He's thinking about language and about animals. He remembers reading that it's language that separates people from animals - it's language that makes men capable of reckoning with one another. He remembers reading that there's an abyss of non-comprehension between men and animals and between men and other men too. Language forms a bridge between the men, and we only ever see animals from the other side of the abyss. He's imagining a precarious bridge between two men and he starts to become disillusioned by the prospect of replying to the postcard. He's imagining the bridge again and how it's so fragile that people only send words across it without even daring to set foot.

Suddenly it occurs to him how to respond. He's writing quickly and there's the sound of the pencil. It's true and it's about his friend with the expansive eyes who invited him to her house for a shamanistic journey. He arrived and it was a small warm room inside a bigger, colder room. There were glossy photographs of animals and people and nature pinned to the walls. She gave him big headphones and asked him which color mat he wanted to lie upon. He lay on the purple one and put his head on a pillow that might've come from India. She said that he could close his eyes if he wanted to but it didn't really matter and so he closed them. After that the drumming was the only sound because they were such good headphones. She'd explained that there needs to be an entry point like a hole. The hole can be any kind of hole: a nostril, a drain, a window - or it could even just be a kind of submersion, like sinking into sand or water. The drumming was fast and irregular at first, then it slowed down to a consistent rhythm. After a while the beat seemed to meld into itself and became a single sound, swelling and fluctuating until he wasn't aware of hearing anything at all.

It was all murky and then the image emerged and it was those small islands he'd visited where the sand was exposed at low tide and you could walk between them without getting wet. He didn't walk across this time because he was looking for an entry point. On the left it was the rocky beach where the water is choppy and the sand is scattered with pebbles. On the right where he usually swam it's calmer and he knows that he should get in because it's his entry point. He walks into the water with his clothes on and ducks right under. He feels the coolness of the water on his temples more than anywhere else on his body. He can see everything in the water but there aren't any fish, then he's running out of breath and has to resurface. He's worried that it's not supposed to be his entry-point and wondering where it's supposed to be. He thinks maybe he can smell something but the smell is more than a smell or at least not a kind of smell that he knows very well.

He's thinking about opening his eyes but can't seem to do anything short of recognizing that yes his eyelids are closed, then he becomes aware the drumming again. He takes another breath and this time the water is hot on his temples and he can't see anything in the water but knows that he's sinking. The descent doesn't feel like a going down but things are changing like the color and the touch and eventually there isn't any water any more. She'd told him to look for his animal because it would be a guide, but it's just these empty sandstone tunnels and orange light. He thinks where to go and he knows it should be left but as soon as he sees the junction he can't move at all not even backwards. He's just standing there leaning forward with all of his weight and there's an invisible force that's holding him up. He decides to forget his body and just send his mind around the corner to the left. He thinks about his eyes and what he's looking at and then feels as if he's slipping forward but this time it's a gliding and not a walking. His pure perspective is moving through the air towards the junction and reaching it and turning left and there isn't any light any more. He can't see and so he tries to feel around but can't connect the intentions with any limbs. It's just the blackness and the space and as he's realizing this his perspective starts to expand out into the space as if he's a small jug of water being poured into a huge body of water and then becoming the whole body of water all at once. The expansion is so rapid and total that it feels more like a violent contraction. He's going in on himself to the point that he can't even conceive of the internal depths and becomes aware of his body again. There's water touching his skin. He looks up and it's light through the water and he's resurfacing. The water is choppy on the surface and he sees that he's on the other side of the islands where he'd never really swum before. The sky is grey but bright. He looks towards the land and beyond the beach it's the small tropical forest with the sandy floor and the canopy that's all connected. He knows that's where his animal is and the desire is so strong that he feels as if he didn't even travel up the beach at all and just appeared there under the trees. He's remembering that no one lives on the island any more and that it's just a burial ground. He remembers how he'd trekked through the forest and found those caves - how it was only when he'd walked across the whole island to the other side that he saw the sign saying it's sacred ground and that no one should set foot beyond the beach.

He's in the same forest again and wondering what sacred really means. There's a goat ahead of him standing on a rock. He remembers seeing the animal the last time, and it hits him that this time he's supposed to look for his animal. He wasn't even looking and there it is. It's the same goat standing there on the rock and it's the same color grey as the sky. He knows this is his animal but he's confused because he's already seen it before. He feels anxiety wash over him and he's trying to determine whether he's seeing his animal as it appeared here before him or if he's just remembering the animal that he really saw once when he was physically on the island. He's also wondering whether or not these are two different things. She'd told him that it was a spirit animal but how could it be a spirit animal if it had once been just a real animal? The goat's eyes are black and unmoving. She'd told him that the animal might or might not speak to him but that they always have something to say. This time it remained silent.

In the moment following this the drums in the headphones would change their beat and he would slowly return or forget and eventually be able to open his eyes again. Presently he can feel the animal's gaze on his skin as if it's displacing the air and creating a physical breeze somehow. He's wondering if maybe spirit animals know how to cross the precarious bridge between people.

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