

Closeness

by Anna Purves

I haul the kayak into the cabin of the car as I can't muscle it up on top of the kayak racks by myself, lassoing the back end with a rope this way and that to the hatchback door. Its pointy nose pokes up by my driving arm like a benign shark as I travel the eight miles down to the lake, the one that's in front of Chocorua mountain. I park lakeside and bump the kayak down into water in just a few steps. In the hold goes my camera, lunch. This is the only thing I've wanted to do all week. It will turn out that this day is a mathematically timely one, as though I planned it. Had I?

There's no one out but a single fisherman in his own kayak and a tiny handful of swimmers that stay right by the shoreline. The sunshine is unusually abundant, the sky rainbow blue. The trees all around the lake muscle their branches, their tops as far into the sky as they can. They're so green they're nearly on fire.

I paddle up to a pair of water birds--loons-- parents with their teenager. The kid bird, all dull brown down, is ungainly as any other adolescent and is practicing how to hydroplane on the lake surface. He's not too good at it yet. His parents are identically beautiful: elegant black heads, tapered, blade-sharp beaks, black and white feathers nearly Parisian in their sophisticated pattern. The birds show no fluster that I'm there. I insert the paddle with utmost quiet to propel forward. They turn their backs on me but stay put, a sure sign of unconcern.

I stroke towards the mountain. It's magnificent—one of the most photographed mountains in the world. It has long, broad, maternal arms encasing many ridges and mounds. The top is an Egyptian pyramid of pink granite veined with scrub growth. On the summit you can see all the way to the Atlantic, a 90 minute drive away. Everywhere, in all the available space left between the photons, the invisible rays, the natural dust, my mother is shimmering in the air. Of all the many peaks in New Hampshire, Chocorua was her favorite, but the water is all mosaic today and so, no images reflected. She is present without form. The brightness of the day charges everything inside and outside my skin in equal measure and I am not sure where I end and all other things start.

I arc south to have the sun more at my back for better pictures. How close I can get to the loons before they worry? The paddle slides in, softer than a ripple. I was 60 feet then which is good for a wildlife sighting. Now I am 50. Now 45. One parent and the teenager bob their way leisurely over to the edge where the chartreuse marsh grass grows. I put the camera down and nose away so they don't feel pursued, rest the paddle across the bow. The kayak takes itself towards the middle on a slow and steady drift, following the hidden current. We are on lake time.

Then! the other loon, the off-duty one, surfaces 20 feet from the kayak's edge. It swims in place and looks at me for a minute, then another minute, three minutes. It is thinking loon thoughts and has quite clearly sought me out. No offense taken as I bring the camera up again, nor at the shutter clicks. The loon dives and I assume that that is that. The boat drifts and the loon re-emerges less than 10 feet from my left elbow, regarding me calmly with its dark red, utterly untamed eye: We are alone together in the same room of the world.

It takes a while before I recognize that this day is the 40th since Mom died. Some first cycle has been gone through; the connection of all things is always closer than we thought.

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