

## Return to Cold Knap Lake

**Gillian Clarke**

Poems wait wordless for their moment. Or almost wordless. They can lie quietly in wait for the mind's attention for weeks, years, or a life-time, in what Yeats called the 'rag and bone shop of the heart'.

For me 'Cold Knap Lake' is one such poem, along with several others that have their source in that time, that place, kept safe in the rich compost heap of memory. When I was a year old, my parents moved to our first family house: 'Flatholm', named after the island we could see in the Bristol Channel. The lake in the park was just across the road from our house, and my bedroom window overlooked it. 'Cold Knap' was the third line in my childhood home address: Flatholm, Lakeside, Cold Knap, Barry, Glamorgan. We lived there until I was ten, nine crucial years in the development of a child's memory and imagination, a time of deepening and accumulating language, of imbibing stories, nursery rhymes, myths and legends, of exploring a gradually widening geography of the outdoor world of the street, and, in my case, of the park, the woods, cliffs and beaches.

I loved the name: Cold Knap Lake. I liked the beat of those three one-syllable words, especially the word Knap, the Anglo-Saxon word for hillock, or headland. The Knap was named for the promontory which jutted into the Bristol Channel between two beaches, maybe half a mile south of the harp-shaped lake in the park where I and gangs of children played throughout childhood. But why 'cold'? I don't know, but the word adds to its allure, holding within the image the snowy winters I remember from childhood, especially the legendary snow and ice of 1941 and 1947. There were often accidents in the park, cuts, broken bones and, in the lake and in the outdoor swimming pool nearby or the sea not half a mile away, people in trouble, drunks, drownings and almost-drownings. There was an American air-base not far away, and the park and roads were still unlit in the closing years of the 1939-45 war. Drunken airmen tottering

homewards often fell into the lake's feeder ponds. My mother, a trained nurse, kept her first aid box by the front door.

The poem recalls, as accurately as possible, an occasion when a man knocked on our front door and called for my mother to give first-aid to a child who had been pulled from the lake, apparently lifeless. I was about seven or eight years old. The child was four or five. She lay on the shore where people had placed her, draped with water-weed, 'water's long green silk'. I stood with the crowd of people watching from a few yards away while my mother gave the child artificial respiration, that we know as 'the kiss of life'. My mother was a beauty, with red, pre-Raphaelite curls, and, as a loved child and accident-prone, I knew she could kiss people better like no other. I watched her, misunderstanding the medical emergency procedure, but entranced, trusting, scared, and proud.

The lake is memory, as places such as castles and ancient earth-works are history, the personal and impersonal versions of the past. Water has special qualities which make it a good metaphor for memory. I have a notion that everything that has ever happened at a lake is stored twice in the water – in the reflective surface and in the murky depths. The lake 'remembers' faces and skies in its mirror surface, and in the thrown coins, lost watches, locket and wedding rings in its impenetrable muddy depths. And events are held a third way by the memory of anyone who happened to be there. Places 'remember' for us. Children sometimes turn verb and subject round, and use the word 'remembers' in a way that suggests that it is the inanimate thing, event or place that has a memory. The place where we saw a runaway horse 'remembers', or where we picnicked once, lost a favourite toy, where we quarreled, or fell in love. Water reflects. The mind reflects. Still water is a good metaphor for memory, and for the past. That almost-drowning, that stretch of water, had double power for the nascent poet in me from the start, but gained even more by echoing detail from the Welsh myths my father told me, the fairy stories my mother read to me, and which, by the time I was four or five, I was reading for myself, over and over, obsessed. In those stories, children were entrapped by an Ice Queen, or stepped through a looking-glass, were carried away by swans, taken by the sea-god to his watery kingdom and turned into seagulls to return to shore every evening to meet their father when he called their names. I was stolen away and taken to the kingdom under the sea, Daddy on the shore, calling my name. There were paintings too: in my Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia was a picture by the pre-Raphaelite painter, Millais, of Ophelia floating among flowers in a stream. As a child, I loved

that picture. I was unafraid of water and never remember not being able to swim. I was so confident in water that I liked to float on my back, like Ophelia in the painting, not drowning but dreamily floating, my arms slack, like sleeping in a calm sea or pool. A small arm movement, a flick of fins or a mermaid's tail, would propel me through the water.

That there might be a connection between the girl in my poem and the Millais painting of Ophelia only occurred to me long after the poem was written, by which time I had also seen many staged productions of *Hamlet*. However, it was far from my conscious mind when I wrote the poem. Likewise, my memory preceded by decades my reading of the poetry of W. B. Yeats, and his many references to swans. I, the poet, went way back into memory, past Hamlet and his tragedy, past all grown up literature, to the child I had been, haunted by nursery rhymes and fairy stories. In writing I concentrated only on remembering the child who fell into the lake and nearly drowned while reaching for a stick, but was saved by my mother's kiss.

To the bookish child I was, myth was as real as life, and from babyhood I took in the songs, word-music and rhythms of nursery rhymes. So, by the time I, the adult, wrote the poem, though speaking through my childhood self, I had read, among many other swan poems, Yeats' 'The Wild Swans at Coole'. The very word 'swan' will have called Yeats' swans to mind, whether I knew it or not, as well as the swans on the shore of Cold Knap Lake, together with every swan ever encountered in literature or life. Every word – swan, lake, cold, water – bears its load. That is why language is such a potent possession. When I say 'swan', I am using one of the first words I knew. I return to where all poets source their words: the beginning of language. Water. Swan. Baby. Duck. Lake. Girl.

My work is not fiction. Poetry is the truth. The poem recounts the story of the girl in the lake as accurately as I could make it, recalling what I saw that childhood day, until the last two lines of verse three, where there is a change. Then I tell not what I witnessed, but what I overheard my father tell my mother. The poem takes a turn as my father takes up the narrative, and I am an eavesdropper, his words not intended for my ears. What he said frightened me, as most fairy stories did. I feel a moment of doubt, and verse four begins with the question: 'Was I there?' But I *was* there, by the lake when it happened, and in the house, hearing my father tell his part of the story. The first verses were observation, but this was overheard, me listening, not seeing, and the slight distancing from events makes space for Grimm's and other alarming fairy stories to enter the

poem. The unreal world of the myth is more frightening than real life. Until the moment, in verse three, lines three and four, when I report my father's words, and the myths take over, I am sure of the accuracy of every detail. Then I hear him tell my mother that the child was 'thrashed for almost drowning'. I, the adult poet, have always excused the distraught parents for that moment's violence, but the child in me was afraid, and from that moment the poem takes a dark turn, I am no longer safe. The most frightening fairy stories carry us into dark worlds, in imagination and in the poem. I don't take a deliberate turn. The words carry me there.

The change lets nursery rhyme influence the poem's music. Again, this is not a conscious move. Poets listen for language, and I like to let it come naturally. The double-rhyming couplet that closes the poem had come into my mind unbidden. Once those lines were written, I returned to the early verses to work on half-rhymes all the way through the poem in second, third, fourth or more drafts. I wanted no more than an echo between the end-words of the earlier lines, just a repeated end-of-word, end-of-line consonant, and nothing forced. The final couplet had come as easily as if the pen found it on the page, rhyming two of my favourite words: water, and daughter. It is part of the rhyme-pleasure that their spelling is at odds with their pronunciation, and, with the eccentricity of English pronunciation, they rhyme in spite of their appearance. 'Daughter' with 'water', not with 'laughter', 'water' not with 'later'.

The events are clear to this day, remembered by the child I was, still alive inside me, the child who knew nothing of death other than the deaths of pets, of farm animals, and news of distant relatives; nothing of despair, nothing of unhappy endings, except the death of Lassie, the collie in the film. (I recall having to re-read 'Babar the Elephant' to my daughter with a changed ending, because she was too upset to bear hearing it again as it was.) The mature poet dips a pen into memory, and tells the child's story, but by now that story is influenced by a lifetime of education, reading, hearing music, being alive, being aware, suddenly, of 'that troubled surface' which the pen finds as it sounds the mind, finds words, and uncurls from the pen onto the page. It feels like chance, swift and instinctive, and it is important that it should be so. The pen *finds* the words. RS Thomas spoke of 'taking pen and paper to see what words will do.' Students ask me, 'What were your feelings?' or 'What were you thinking?' I answer, I don't know. But I know that the word 'bleating' came to mind and pen from my experience of my grandparents' farms, and of delivering lambs myself. The lamb, born from the birth-flood, like

the child delivered from the lake, takes its first breath, and bleats. It is a joyful sound. It's the sound of life. The pen drew that word from my life.

To speak plainly, in spite of the Millais painting (happily mis-read by me, the child, as a picture of dreamy floating), the poem is NOT about suicide, as has been suggested by some teachers. Five year old children do not want to die. Quite the opposite: it is about the life-force, the instinct to survive, the drawn breath and first bleat of lamb or child. It is about a life saved, to the relief of a watching crowd. It's about my pride in my mother, the 'heroine'. There is a distinction between the 'voice' of the poet – the particular music and style by which we recognise a poet – and the voice of memory, recalled by the child inside me, the voice used to tell the remembered story. An example of such language is 'my mother gave a stranger's child her breath'. This was my childish, uninformed description of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The choice of the word 'bleating', as the child drew her breath, turns the saved girl into a new-born lamb. The word comes from a life-time of seeing lambs born, of watching a ewe drink the birth-fluids from its lamb the moment it is born. The birth-waters are exchanged for breath, water for air. The lamb is not a water-baby, but born to breathe air, and to live, like the girl in the lake. The past, the forgotten and half-remembered, return whenever I visit Cold Knap, and say my own little nursery rhyme:

All lost things lie under closing water  
In that lake with the poor man's daughter

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### **Postscript**

In January, 2016, I received an email from a stranger, a woman called Marion, a retired teacher who had returned to Wales after a working life in England. She read the poem, and had long considered writing to me. Marion was the girl in the lake.