

Critical Humanities

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Good Swimming Holes

Rachel Rinehart

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RACHEL RINEHART

Good Swimming Holes

For Elwood Childers

The way you tell it there were two or three
good swimming holes along Twelve Pole Creek
when you were a boy, and the one you liked best
pooled up by the old Spurlock place. No one ever visited
or even saw those folks, really. Crepey and mad
they wasted inside their ancient farmhouse darning socks
or whittling or doing whatever it is children imagine
the very old do to while away their waning hours.

Anyway, late one afternoon you shucked off your pants
and went skinny dipping out by the Spurlocks' with Everett
in the light-flecked water under the shade tree
and, sure enough, as you shivered and bobbed
watching the pumpkinseeds and bluegill flash,
thinking, maybe, as you ducked under that cool green water
of checking the lines you'd baited with safety pins and worms
before chores that morning, you didn't hear
through the dense susurrus of water in your ears
far-off tires cracking over gravel or the faint spit
of patent leather on stones.

When you surfaced, that girl was there on the bank,
cheeky, chin cocked, sun-glossy curls boiling
over the bodice of her lemon-cream dress.
"What are y'all doing?" she demanded,
though she must have seen your pants crumpled
next to her Mary Janes there on the grass.
And through it all, Everett crouched up
silent in the shade tree like a wayward Greek nude.

If she hadn't left, you finally say, you'd be waiting there
still hunkered in the last good swimming hole
watching the evening breeze chuff and ruffle
the hem of that lemon-cream dress.

More than eighty years on, it's Independence Day
and we are eating hotdogs with the lights off
in a house in a subdivision on the other side of the Ohio.
You say you can't remember why your folks
moved to town, and, anyway, home's all underwater
now. Everett dead, and the Spurlocks.
Probably the girl, too, whoever she was.

Somewhere, below whining speed boats
and RVs roosting at the reservoir's edge,
catfish nose over plowed furrows and junk cars,
through that shade tree and the kitchen windows
where, in times unfathomable, the once-young
Old Woman Spurlock watched her new husband
walk the fields home for supper.

Your mind eddies and funnels. Over the years
she's come at odd times. Once, in the Pacific
as you bellied down to goggle for mines
on the Partridge's wooden bow, you glimpsed
her reflection, light-cambered and luminous
like some impish antique bowsprit.

The night before they flooded it
you dreamed dark water in your armchair,
your wife's breath beside you like the creek
lapping an old stone foundation.
In the kitchen the girl balanced herself
on a Shaker chair, cradling your mother's sugar jar,
her dress a lamped plume in rising water
as she pirouetted, crooning,
"What are *y'all* doing?"

Rachel Rinehart's poetry collection *The Church in the Plains* was selected by Peter Everwine as the winner of the 2016 Philip Levine Poetry Prize and was published by Anhinga Press in January 2018. She teaches at Marshall University in Huntington, WV, and lives in Grayson, KY, with her husband and daughter.