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ad CIVILIZATION. For
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CULTURE and CIVIL-
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● EDMUND WILSON

THE PICKEREL POND: A DOUBLE PASTORAL

Elegiacs, with amphibaenic (backward-rhyming) endings

The lake lies with never a ripple,
A lymph to lave sores from a leper:
 The sand white as salt in an air
 That has filtered and tamed every ray;
Below limpid water, those lissome
Scrolleries scribbled by mussels;
 The floating dropped feathers of gulls;
 A leech like a lengthening slug
That shrinks at a touch, black and orange;
A child's wrecked Rio Janeiro,
 One fortress of which flies a reed;
 The cleft and quick prints of a deer.
So, somewhere not far north of Nauset,
Between the girt bay and great ocean,
 It spangles the wrist of the Cape,
 A gem at once clear and opaque.

But the frogs hush their rich jug-o'-rumrum:
From above moves a menacing murmur
 That loudens to shouts, toward the cob-
 alt pond, through low pines and scrub-oak.
Amid laurels and briers, the spider
Winds up, surprised, then redips
 To wait at the end of her rope,
 As past down the white path pour
Dogs and people: brisk Scotties, agog;

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An old analyst, plodding and gaga,
 Left behind by a bad-tempered chow
 And a bare-footed boy who cries "Ouch!"
 At a tree-root but bounds like a leveret—
 While he chats about eating and travel,
 With a lady who loves Buda-Pesth
 And knows where they made the best *cêpes*
 In unspoiled and unoccupied Paris,
 Who has tasted new yam and cane-syrup
 In Haiti, known white vodka-nights
 On the Neva, seen Spain, Palestine,
 Nova Zembla, New Zealand, and Chile—
 While behind bustles Pavel Ilyich,
 Long an exile, who never strikes root
 But lives on continual tour,
 Amazing, amusing, absurd—
 A balletomane coupled in *drúzhba*
 With a David to harp to his Saul,
 Demanding incessant applause:
 A sulky and vain young Achilles,
 Smooth as silk yet hard-grained as silica.
 A learned Hungarian dwarf,
 Now a foundation-fattened fraud,
 Is gallant to old Gladys Doremus,
 Who has pleasantly spent every summer
 Since nineteen hundred and ten
 Making turbans and drapes out of net,
 While, behind her, thin, waspish and neat as
 A pin, in a yellow sateen
 Swim-suit, her prettiness pert
 If wizened, pedantically trips
 Her Clarice. She, carrying salad,
 Coquets with a young man from Dallas,
 Who majors in French, translates
 Aragon, thinks Valéry stale,
 And works for a Stalin committee
 And on tennis, at which she can beat him.
 Dropping off to pick blueberries, lag
 Her identical twins, tiny gals,

Whose father has vanished; dim soul of
Devotion, an old setter follows.

First a dip: now all figures are seen.
Of the Magyar and Viennese,
One floats on his back like a bobbin,
One squats on the beach like a nabob.
The boy pushes out a blue raft.
Overhanding it—Heavens!—out far,
The ladies make Pavel uneasy.
Renowned for her festive cuisine,
Old Gladys, doggedly gay,
Hands everyone half a stuffed egg.
They complain about Koestler, Camus;
Take harmless for poisonous sumac
Till old Gladys's girl sets them right.
Franz flaunts his Antibes attire,
A bright beachrobe.—“Meatballs or chicken?”—
They talk of Nizhinsky and Nikisch.—
No knives can be found to carve
Among flat silver loaded *en vrac*,
So they pull at the drumsticks. A subtle
Sprinkle of dill on lettuce
With mayonnaise, much admired.
The Riesling is cool and dry—
Ferenc's gift: “Pliz, pliz—it is nossing!”
The student and traveller, *Genossen*,
Are staunch for the Soviet courts.
The old white dog, with a stroke
Of his tail, overturns a tomato
Sandwich. “I eat automat,”
Boasts the Bolshevik, picking it up.
“This is all a big treat.”—“Let me put
Some wine in your glass.” “*Sposibo!*”—
A bullfrog, green and obese, hops
Away from the prod of the sticks
Of the twins.—The Russians do skits
On opera. An outboard horror
Bears down with a snort and a roar. “Oh,

Gosh, it will scare all the fish!"
 The boy curses, casting. "*Ein Schiff!*"
 Pavel hails it. The chow paws the dirt up,
 Having got wind of something putrid.
 Gay Gladys hands round the cake
 But nobody wants any cake—
 Perhaps a drop more of the white wine.
 Chirps Clarice: "On a clear moonlight night I
 Love to walk miles"—"Mama!
 Can we have another ham?"—
 "Alone on the sand, like Thoreau.
 I imagine the moon-goddess Astoreth"—
 The travelward leer of her beau
 Has made her a xenophobe
 As well as a bore, as he tosses
 Out "bourgeois" and "yellow dog," says it
 Just makes him fuming to hear
 "Bellyaching from émigrés
 Who cleared out and betrayed the masses!"
 "That word is your open-sesame—
 Means nossing, unlocks no doors,"
 Declares Ferenc.—The boy is rude.—
 "Are the masses Staline and Vyshinsky?"
 (The twins cry, "No fight, Fergus! Ixnay!"
 Holding a Scottie in leash.)
 Pavel chatters; his dancer, Achille,
 Provoked by the epithet "fascist,"
 Grows peevish and spits a shaft
 That stirs Gladys to say with a smile,
 As she proffers gin-fizzes with limes
 From a thermos, kept cool by the vacuum:
 "Never mind about Miliukóv!"—
 And, pouring out coffee with cognac
 By a vacuum kept hot: "Oh, can you
 Make her tell how she camped with Kirghiz
 On the steppes? how she managed to see Greek
 Islands no tourist had trod?—
 That archaic lean life, I'd adore it!"
 And, relaxed from contentions, efforts,

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WILSON

Frustrations, defeats, trophies,
 Some swim, some take vitamin pills,
 Some walk on the beach, and some sleep.

Was I there? Did I share their mild revel?
 Did I listen to all their palaver?
 Did I say pleasant things? Did I laugh?
 Many times between April and fall,
 Many somnolent hours of sun, a
 Comforting muffler upon us,
 While our lame words recurred like this rhyme
 Of wheels that slip round in a mire—
 Of boats, tied betimes in a haven,
 That lift and that dip and will never
 Put out now to sea, where sleek sharks
 Are circling and steamers crash.
 But tonight I come lone and belated—
 Foreseeing in every detail,
 And resolved for a day to sidestep,
 My friends and their guests and pets,
 Their poses, opinions and gossip;
 To try the wild freedom and peace
 again of this spare little spit
 That beckons with bent finger-tips
 To the peaks of the nearest Azore,
 As the sun, a dry *vin rosé*,
 Orange-pink, darkens the pines,
 And I startle a pair of snipe,
 By the pond's marshy side, from a tussock,
 Where their chicks with rich leeches they cosset,
 But I stumble from hummock to hole
 Toward the purple-topped stalks where, below,
 In search of their prey, my prey lurk. Hip-
 deep and hoping for pickerel,
 I peer: there the deeper part stops—
 Here the patching of paler spots
 Shows plain as the sunfishes' home,
 Fin-brushed, where, unflurried, they mosey,
 Gray shapes that glide briefly or stay—

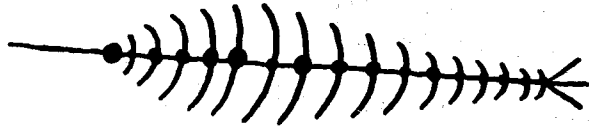
Hardly moving, the females wait.
 Now a weed-stem has twined on my spinner;
 Now a faint nibble nips and renips;
 A mudded branch snaps my gut;
 A dull weight that gives at my tug
 Turns out, tenaciously shut, a
 Damned mussel not worthy a tush;
 Now my line springs alive—pull!—it spills
 A slim eel—a quick squirm and he slips
 From the bank. Is this sport? I might tire.
 Have I brought the right bait at the right time?
 And as, soundless, I poise with my pole,
 Still casting and cold on the slope
 That dips toward the densening shadow,
 Where lumps that loom turtlish or toadish,
 Vague fish-forms, a forest of stem
 And old leaf-mould and slime have met
 To melt: the alert, the alive,
 Made one with the duller and viler—
 As I pause here, so long have I pored
 At the brink of the mind's dark drop,
 Where, below life's articulate noise, you
 Feel all in unuttered confusion,
 All fluid, all formless— But what?
 Rod arches and line stretches taut!
 A sunfish flashing, blue dappled.
 On yellow, gills dabbed with bright red, lepid-
 opteral, swings to my reach—
 No sweet prize such as sportsmen cheer,
 Yet, emblazoned, with black and gold eyes, a
 Splendor that queerly consoles, as I
 Flourish him, suddenly bared,
 Who, suburban by habit, looked drab
 Or moved like penumbra on mud-lees
 That, neutral and narrow, concealed him—
 As I grasp his strong spines and fat side,
 And detach him before he dies.
 So, elliptical, slippery, gemmy,
 He rises, unsought, like an image

WILSON

That, in hours besotted and soured
 When it brings no repose to drowse,
 Unaccounted-for skims to the retina
 From *bas-fonds* not barred by that janitor
 Who guards the true gate of dreams—
 Where dreads with desires are smeared
 Upon horrors forgotten since suffered,
 Old foods now rejected as refuse,
 Out of which appear patterns of lace
 That appal me, and faces assail
 My consciousness, smiling or solemn,
 That no recognition mellows,
 Always staring but not at me;
 That, speechless, would push me to scream,
 As one ebbs and another brings pressure;
 That, plagued there too clear, usurp
 At once the known drama of day
 And night's not unknown masquerade.
 Ah, better my friends than those demons!
 These see me and hear me, these know me.
 Like them, I must outlast an exile.
 Yes, liefer their flightiest lies
 Than those watchers that fear no reveille,
 Whose bodiless heads never waver:
 Girls cat-eyed, not young but smug;
 Gross men that show ugly gums
 In a grin that embraces their molars;
 Gourds clerklike or salesmanlike, sallow,
 Mustaches kept short, minds applied,
 Eyes cold, self-contained, crocodile,
 Gooseberry, grayish or hazel—
 Faithful either to outmoded *laissez-*
faire or new government rule.

No pickerel has plunged to my lure,
 As the sky squeezes down its last lemon
 And the lake gleams a blacker enamel.
 In this pond of the pan of my skull,
 Where spawned thought should take body, the luck's

No better: no bright live elaborate
 Sunfish, but only those terrible
 Faces like bubbles in scum
 That pop from the deepest muck;
 And, persistent above the blank water,
 I, perverse, twist or wrest the retor-
 sion of words—flapping wings that would soar
 Pinning back, spiring tendrils that rose
 Training down; tack and turn on a de-
 vious route, tracing boustrophédon
 Words that must always withdraw
 From the boundary they labored toward;
 Creak a tune darkly dodecatonic
 As it cancrizans creeps and cannot
 Be caught; drive a widdershins rout
 That ends in the Dark Tower—
 Till, as even the shallows grow dimmer,
 As I lose my last live-bait amid
 Mosquitoes that needle a mood
 Masochistic, benumbed by our doom,
 All such mutinous music as muttered
 Between the bleak spring and mild autumn
 Now but hobbles and stutters, half-dumb:
 Hungry pickerel that nuzzle the mud.



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