

The Lake

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The North American Great Lakes have existed for over 20,000 years. During that time, the climate cooled and warmed, the ice sheets expanded and melted, and species most people have never even heard of were born and then died.

I used to think about that history while I was swimming in the vast expanse of Lake Michigan. I found it ironic that a lake that majestically greeted the first people ever to set foot on the North American continent meant no more to most people than an early-afternoon picnic. Still, I found the lake's history comforting.

I had returned home a few months earlier from school than expected when the recent pandemic forced the campus to close. My life had become more uncertain than ever — I had left my friends, my classes, the place that had just begun to feel like my home, and I wondered when I was coming back. I noticed I talked less and less to friends I thought I would be close with my entire life; I found myself wearing the same pajamas for far too many days to count, and I canceled my subscription to the New York Times. Reading the news and staying informed was once one of my favorite pastimes. I saw this activity as my responsibility as a world citizen, but I steered away from reading about the world's destruction, something I cared about dearly. I was paranoid — I called and texted my grandparents every day because my greatest fear had gone from oversleeping to my grandparents dying before I could ever see them again and say goodbye in a matter of days.

After a few weeks in Illinois, I needed to remind myself of when my life had been normal. The meditative practice of lap-swimming had once soothed my fears, so I told my parents I would start swimming in the lake. I woke up before sunrise every other day to walk through the crisp early-summer air to the lake's rocky beaches. I first fought my way through the waves on a frigid Tuesday in June. It wasn't easy for me to look out at the sky while swimming. The waves were so high I strained to tilt my face away from the wave caps, creasing my lips to not choke on mouthfuls of freezing water, but now and again, I glanced at the slate-gray sky.

That summer had been severe and sweltering, so everything was gray and bleak and covered by clouds even though the sun had long since risen. One morning, standing up in the water and staring into the distance, unable to feel my toes against the sharp rocks of the lake bed, the horizon oscillating as the waves rose and fell for miles ahead. The dark, featureless clouds that remained after a misty rain the night before blocked most of the sun's rays, so the steely gray of the sky slowly transitioned into the listlessness of the lake.

I recalled a few days prior when the sun rays that shone through the gaps in lighter, more sparse clouds had seemed almost biblical, like pillars of light joining us with the heavens, as if from a Rembrandt. Today the waves were larger and colder and foggier than I had ever seen them, but just as rhythmic as in summers past. The world had changed, but the waves had continued rising and falling. Again and again, up and down. The storm that weekend had made my world appear gray and frigid for a time, but the waves folded over themselves as they had done for thousands of years and would for thousands more.

I trudged out of the lake, tripping over the waves, my feet and ankles speckled in coarse grains of sand. As I turned around, taking one final look at the lake before my day began, it occurred to me that my worries were more distant, softer than they had been in weeks. I could no longer remember how my life had ever felt so immediate. The lake was always there, and the lake always would be there. It would outlast my worries—just as it had all of humanity for the past 20,000 years.