

SPRINGS

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FIVE WAYS OF SEEING THE STEINSEE

Steve Mentz

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The true eye of the earth is water.

Gaston Bachelard



Lili Wood. *Après le plongeon*. Pigment-inks print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and La Slow Galerie. All rights reserved. This image has been cropped from its original dimensions.

I. The Last Shortest Day

On my last day as a Landhaus fellow at the Rachel Carson Center, with thin December light not quite thawing the snow, I abandoned packing to hike out to the Steinsee. A small Alpine lake near the town of Moosach about a half dozen kilometers away from the fellows' house on the ecofarm in Herrmannsdorf, Germany, the Steinsee contains, on its southeastern corner, a small swimming area, Moosacher Bad. That was my final destination on the shortest afternoon of the year. The trudge across roads and fields, past the Sonnenhausen hotel, and through the woods wasn't my most frequent hiking route in the surrounding country—that would be my daily sunrise circle around the Herrmannsdorf farm, along the Philosophy Walk to the Labyrinth, past the Blue Flower and faux-Stonehenge, which I would often wander in the company of horses. But Alpine lakes are the eye of the world, to paraphrase Bachelard. I wanted to look into that eye one more time.

There wasn't enough light to make it there and back before the looming sunset, which came at 16:22 on that solstice day. The walk to the lake, which I'd done many times during my three-month fellowship, is just far enough that you forget exactly how far it is. One hour? Three? As I crunched

the snow underfoot on the long hill after I passed the Sonnenhausen, I realized, accurately, that I would stomp the last few kilometers back in the dark.

I came to the water's edge in silver-grey twilight, the sun long since hidden by hills. The swimming spot was pockmarked with boot prints. Clearly some local enthusiasts weren't deterred by a little snow. I walked to the edge and saw a rough-hewn rectangle broken out of the ice. There was just enough space for a body to step, dunk, and flee.

The ice framed a brittle gateway. What will you find? What would it feel like?

I stared at the water and at the ice around it. I thought about that door all the way back home.

What do the places we don't reach teach us?

II. An Open Eye



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III. Water as Invitation

It asks us to enter. What if we only go partway? We terrestrial mammals can only go partway into water.

My eco-thinking during this still-young century obsesses over watery forms. I spend my days writing, talking, and teaching about what we learn from immersion and watery proximity. The Landhaus, landlocked on the edge of the Bavarian Alps, was an odd home for my blue-humanities project. I got into a few swimming holes, mostly on excursions to France, Portugal, and Norway, plus I made

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the occasional trip to a small, child-filled pool in the nearby town of Glonn. But the Steinsee was my eye at the RCC, my focalizer, and my portal. It's the place I think of most often, now that I'm back home, looking at the snow on a frozen beach in Connecticut.

I remember my first swim at the Steinsee, on a sunny afternoon in early October, luxuriating in the warmth of sunlight absorbed by the top layer of still water. Not many days later, I returned to find the swimming area in the shade. The underwater thermometer, which I'd not checked before, now read 11 degrees. I'm not an ice swimmer or Wim Hof devotee. Mostly I take single digits as an uncrossable Rubicon, so 11 degrees meant: swim now. You won't want to later. A temperature of 11 seemed a just-ajar door, a passage to enter.

Striking out from shore, accepting the lake's invitation, means—as swimming always means—entering into partial alienation. I'm not as strong a swimmer as I used to be, and I wasn't in especially great shape during my fellowship, but I fell into my habitual crawl stroke. The lake opened cold and smooth. My chest slid forward, carving a V-shaped wake behind me. At each sideways breath, I angled my torso slightly so that my ribcage formed, by alternation on each side, a functional, temporary keel. A human swimmer's body cannot be a fully seaworthy vessel, and in the front crawl most of the body, except the arms and crown of the head, remains underwater. But the form kept me up and moving, for a time.

On the warmest day that I remember swimming there, I was with another fellow, and we almost managed to cross the lake. A manicured lawn on the far side, part of a then-closed summer bathing club, beckoned to us as it sloped up from shore. Instead of focusing on the green lawn, I stared down through my goggles into the clear, fresh darkness below. Even in the bright sunshine, the light could not penetrate very far. The water felt thin and transparent, so unlike the silty green-brown ocean, teeming with seaweed and the occasional jellyfish, back home in Long Island Sound. What could I almost see in the Steinsee?

Despite my now 400+ days of thumb-typing with Duolingo, I'm not a proficient speaker of German—but since I'm an eco-theorist and poet who believes that rhymes comprise the hidden structures of language, my Anglophone ears can't help hearing, in the German word *See*, which means lake, an insistent pun on the English *see*, as well as its English homophone *sea*. What can I see in the *See*?

A series of words flitted beneath my attention as I swam out and back. I recorded them on the Notes app on my phone that day, but I'm only returning to them now. These are some things that water does with human minds and bodies.

See. Reflect. Distort. Chill. Connect.

IV. The Steinsee

To see, to see—

As if reflection were the source of vision
And immersion the chill bite of a reality
Too vast for eyes.

Water reflects—

Because all light bounces itself forward into fragments
And distortion, because each mirrored
Inversion changes what we see.

Water distorts—

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As the enveloping garment of environment
Wraps its chill around blood-fueled flesh,
So that swimming changes nothing.

Water chills—

Except one's position in the water-world,
Since what is connection except experience
Of and in and through a particular place?

Water connects—

Self to system to splashing in-going,
So that immersion's distorting chill
Reflects and connects self into not-self.

Water binds us as it hides us.
Water guides as it knows.
Water holds.

V. Another Future

It's just barely imaginable that I might go back. Perhaps, as the days stretch toward the languor of the summer solstice, I could go without telling anyone. I could hide myself inside the systemic anonymity of Ubers, airports, planes, stations, the S-Bahn, the Grafing train station, the 440 bus. What if finally, maybe twenty or thirty hours after I sneak away from home, I were to get off at the bus stop in Zinneberg, but instead of turning east toward the Almcafé to walk across the fields back to the farm, I would steer my sleepless body west and north through the woods to Moosacher Bad? The swimming spot would be crowded on the summer solstice. The water would be warm. The eye of the Steinsee would open fully. Would anyone recognize me?

There's a line in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in which the poet looks at the Atlantic and asserts that the ocean will "refuse to go back without feeling of me." In this imaginary other future, I'm in already, cleaving clear water, darting quickly out past the shore bathers toward the middle of the lake. I tread water and look below my feet. The dark, light-craving pupil that is the center of the lake, the center of the eye, buoys me up.

I might not really get back there. But I like what I would see.



Steve Mentz is professor of English at St. John's University in New York City. His environmental- and blue-humanities publications include the books *Ocean* (2020), *Break Up the Anthropocene* (2019), *Oceanic New York* (2015), and *Shipwreck Modernity* (2015). During his Landhaus fellowship, he published the poetry chapbook *Swim Poems* (2020) and completed *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, forthcoming from Routledge in the summer of 2023. He (still) tweets [@stevermentz](https://twitter.com/stevermentz) and blogs at www.stevementz.com.



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