

## *Nudism*

I WENT BACK to the torrent I had seen for the first time last winter. Now the weather was hot and, not surprisingly, the idea came into my head to strip off my clothes and go naked. Nothing but the trees and the birds could see me. The torrent gushed out from a cleft in the hillside and then flowed down between high banks. Everyone with a body at all knows what a good thing it is to expose it to the sky. Even the roots protruding from the high banks were bare.

I bathed in the pool where, fully extended, I could just touch bottom. The water was warm from its contact with the land and smelt of earth. Over and over again I plunged in, then threw myself down on the grass to let the sun burn me all over, while bright drops like sweat trickled over my skin. Above my head, between the tree tops I could see the sky, looking like another empty pool. I stayed there until evening.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS NOW, I've spent every afternoon naked in the sunshine, walking about on the grass or the edge of the pool. Sometimes, though very rarely indeed, when I throw myself dripping wet on the grass, I lose all consciousness of my body. This is nothing like the feeling of resentment and frustration I used to have, as a little boy, when I was made to undress and have a bath. Now I pull off my clothes in a mad rush, eager to find myself again and reappear, with a wildly beating heart. I was conscious, too, of a certain uneasiness lest something might happen to shatter my solitude, which means I should have to act as if I were prepared to be seen.

I'm not talking about people in general. On my way to the torrent I walked past fields where men and a few girls were busy with the harvest, but it was unthinkable that one of them might come upon me in this hollow in the ground, ringed around as it is by bushes and steep banks. I could hear the slightest movement of a quail or a lizard and so should always be warned in time to cover myself. My disquiet stemmed from a different cause and I found it not entirely devoid of pleasure. My state of complete nudity staggered and amazed me every time it happened, as if it were something of great importance I had achieved here unthinkingly. Every time I stretched out, remembering to cover the nape of my neck, I knew the sun had its eye on me, searching out every part of my body from head to foot. What difference is there between me and a stone, a tree trunk or a speckled caterpillar, unless it is precisely the mental disturbance I feel when considering the point. Now water and the sun have dealt with me to their liking and have thrown a veil over me. Even in this I seem to understand that Nature will not tolerate human nudity and will do everything in its power to absorb the body as it does the dead. Sometimes I fancy I ought to stay in this place day and night. Instead, I go there every day and take off all my clothes, resisting the impulse yet at the same time exposing myself to the gaze of Nature with as much pleasure as I can. Close by the pool is a hollow where the grass grows high, always marshy, always in the shade. I go there sometimes to look around. The grass grows up to my middle, my feet are in the mud, but coolness is not what I'm after. I go in there to hide and

come out at some unexpected moment even more naked than I was when I went in.

THE SHRILL SOUND OF BIRDSONG above my head tells me they are paying no attention whatever to me. Everything is going on as if I were not there at all. Looking upwards from the bottom of this hollow I see passing clouds and the way the tree-tops are rustling as if there were an abyss between them and myself. The wind doesn't reach me, down here. As soon as I have thrown myself down I forget town and country places. My horizon has shrunk to the narrow limitations of the pool. Idly, but with amazement, I watch a butterfly or a tree trunk, as I feel with my body the pulsation of the earth on which I lie. At intervals the shadow of a cloud passes over me and then the air is cooler. Plants that are almost invisible in bright sunshine show up plainly like a tiny forest. They see their reflections in the water, their colours softened, yet distinguishable at a glance. Then I stand up and shake myself. I am as bare as a tree trunk underneath its bark, cool and fresh as the air around me. I see the sky behind the trees is bare, too, bare and at peace.

The shadows increase and I look at the wood or the still water, but I cannot express what I see and think. The key words are "grass" and "roots", "stones", "mud", the splendour of it all—no other word will do—but my body will not accept it. Enter into the grass, into a stone, my body would say, but that is not enough. This hollow in the ground has a nameless magic. To realise that this is so one must walk about in it, feel it, touch it. I have to make a real effort not to clutch at the roots and clamber up higher into the wood, between the thorny bushes and the green trunks, and walk about there. Instead, I content myself with discovering all I can about my own body.

**I**F ANYONE WERE TO COME ALONG when I've only just thrown myself down, dripping wet, I don't think I should bother to move. I'm as lazy as a block of wood. Water and sun, working together, are making me less and less active. They imagine they can cancel me out in that way, cover me up, but they don't know that instead they're

making me more and more like an animal. They harden my body so that it is capable of acting for itself. When I get here, covered all over with sweat, I am seized with the crazy idea of plastering myself all over with mud. I scoop it up in handfuls and rub it all over me. Then I lie in the sun till the mud has dried. (This, too, is a way of covering myself.) In this way, when I've washed it all off, I seem to come out of the water more naked than ever.

Whenever the pool is almost stagnant and the water covered with slime, I'm satisfied to stretch out and reach clearer water, so that I come out clean. Somewhere below the surface there is a spring. The water from it is bitter and cold. I try to find it, rolling on my back in the mud or crouching like a toad under the big roots that overhang the water. The slime quickly becomes mud and a whole afternoon is not long enough for it to become clear again. One might say the sun concentrates his most ardent beams on this hollow. It looks like the sky does in a heat wave. Now the water, being opaque, can no longer reflect anything. As I get out I still feel sweaty, with drops of water streaming down from my chest to my thighs.

After such bathes as this, the smell of swamp and mud is stronger. The hollow lies baking in the sunshine. There are rustlings, flutterings, a splash or two, and the song of birds. They seem to come from heaven knows where, but cannot be more than three paces away from me. It is at such a moment I forget I am naked. I close my eyes, and everything, the countryside, fruits, the steep banks, even a passer-by, should there be one, all from then on reveal their own personality, their existence and living space beyond the trees. Everything has its own scent, its savour, its individuality. All this comes and goes inside my mind as I lie baking in the sun. Why should I move if someone were to come?

But nobody does come. Boredom does, though, indeed it does. I absorb the sunshine, the water; I wander about a bit and sit down on the grass, look around me and sniff. I go back to the water, but nothing ever happens. Little by little the shadow of a tree lengthens until it covers the place where I lie. A different freshness starts to fill the

hollow, the stench of mud and of death increases. Now I can smell it as I smell my own body, which seems larger and more naked. Nobody comes, but why can't I go away?

The first time that whimsical thought occurred to me I felt terrified but I soon laughed myself out of that. Now, to rid myself of the taste and smell, I run up the path I came down to reach the pool, and stop between the low bushes where the grass is level. No longer am I conscious of any barrier between myself and the countryside. Beyond the trees I can see the plain where the cornfields lie. I throw myself down on the grass, lying on my back to face the sky in the last rays of the setting sun. I fear no contact, not even with the stubble.

THE HARVEST IS FINISHED NOW and the fields are deserted. No matter which way I go, I never meet anyone. The pool is waiting for me and I mourn for the days gone by. The risk was well worth taking.

My mind turns to the people who bathe in the river Po, especially to the women who imagine they are nude when they have taken off their clothes and put on others. Up and down they walk over cement or sand, making signals to one another, glancing behind and chattering as offensively as if they were in a drawing room. Then they expose themselves to the sun, some of them slipping down the straps from their shoulders to gain another handsbreadth of sunburn. They all undress and look around for their friends, but not one of them will put into words what they all have in mind—that their bodies are very different from those of other people. They have the courage to congregate in groups but haven't what it takes to do what they would all like to have done.

During the past few days I've enjoyed strolling through the fields under the eyes of men and women reapers and their oxen. Good folk who don't concern themselves with where I'm going. At any moment one of them could come to my torrent to wash or to quench a thirst and discover among the briars my body, burnt nearly black. Such people as these, if they think of going for a bathe, strip off their clothes without a moment's hesitation. Perhaps,

though, they do not bathe unless they did so when they were boys. I walked close to the sheaves of corn and noticed the ears were dark brown, exactly matching my body. I watched the reapers stretch out their brown hands, and bend their backs, their red kerchiefs fluttering. All the uncovered parts of their bodies are the colour of tobacco. Their shirts and trousers are as earthy as the bark of a tree trunk. People like these have no need to go naked. They're naked already. As I walk among them the clothes I am wearing on my back seem to weigh me down. I feel as festive as an ox decked up for a parade. I wish they could know that underneath I'm as black as they are.

IT'S HAPPENED! One woman at least knows my secret. I had gone into the water to wash off the earth clinging to me. I was floating on my back with my arms outstretched, looking up at the clear sky; thinking of nothing at all. I straightened up, slipping about on the muddy bottom and I bent over to swill myself off when a woman walked across my hollow. She was tall, a married woman with a bundle of leafy boughs at her hip. She came towards me, not in the least surprised or concerned. She saw me bending forward, my hands in the water, then she turned away towards the ravine, still carrying her bundle. I heard her paddle through the water of a spring, then she disappeared among the bushes. Her feet were bare. I saw her strong back reappear in the sunshine between the bushes and I heard her gathering more branches further in.

She had come down the path I used when I ran up to throw myself down on the grass. She must have seen me from up there, yet she calmly continued on her way, not even giving a backward glance when she had passed by.

Standing upright in the water, naked, I listened to the sound of her footsteps dying away in the distance. I was certainly more shocked than she was. Drops of water were running down from my skin. I went out to dry myself and I still couldn't believe it had really happened. How was it that I hadn't heard her coming? A woman's steps are different from a man's, but I

wasn't thinking of that just then. I was thinking of the way she had looked at me, without a blush or any curiosity, as if it was a natural thing to happen. If she had paused, or spoken to me with a smile, that would have been very different. I should have covered myself and perhaps even touched her. In either case I should not have been so agitated. Yet she was young, for in this part of the world, wives lose their beauty early.

THE CHILL OF EVENING was falling and I felt even more naked. My thoughts turned to that woman's eyes. She was sunburned, too. Was she tanned all over? Certainly she had no need to be. That isn't what matters. What is really important for her is to be healthy and to produce fine strong children. She gets as much sunshine as she wants while walking about in the open air. The same sun ripens the fields and the fruit, for here everyone drinks wine. Grapes darken colour, even when covered by leaves. The important thing to realise is that underneath there is a corporal entity.

She wore a dark coloured skirt around her strong legs and she walked heedless of stones or trailing roots. I can still see her striding purposefully into the wood to gather branches from the acacia trees that grow in such profusion there. They overhang the steep sides of the ravine and thrust out their roots. To me it seems they are peering down into the underworld and up to the sky. This is a hidden part of the wood, appealing to the senses with its dark shadows, its gloomy depths. By now the woman must be far away from here. Before me I see a bare ledge of veined stone that tells me the wood has its own individuality as the whole countryside has, covered with earth that in its turn is covered with growing things, naked and true to itself, as we all are. I touch my skin that still retains the warmth of the sun and I feel glad the woman saw me.

On my way home I pause for a chat at the cross roads where there is nearly always someone with something to say. Yesterday I saw Marchino and told him where I'd been. "I should go bathing there, too," he remarked. He's a sad-looking man with two-fingers length of beard and hard eyes, but

courteous enough not to ask if he could come with me.

He told me that tomorrow he was planning to go swimming at a place he knew where a mill stream broadens out to form a lake and there is always running water. "If you'd like to come?..." he suggested. I raised the difficult point that I don't wear bathing trunks. "You know best" he replied. "With me there's no need to."

That same evening we went to the place he had told me of, where the channel broadens out into a lake with banks of gravel and willow branches beaten down by the sun. At this time of day the boys are all in the fields. We took off our clothes and put them down in a patch of shade, then entered the water. It was silvery and caressing, though full of sand. Marchino swam with powerful strokes, while I stayed where I was, floating and looking up at the sky. In those few moments I was still thinking of the countryside, the tree-tops and the life that goes on up there.

When we came out of the water I had a better chance to look at Marchino. He must have been half naked while working at the harvest this season, for the only pale skin he had was on his stomach and thighs. He was hairy, covered with fine blond hairs bleached by the dog-days of summer. He was perfectly calm as he walked up the bank and threw himself down on the sand at full length. I turned my gaze away from him.

Between one subject of conversation and another we went back to the water to cool our heads. Marchino left it to me to talk of this and that, and he would reply at his own convenience after a while. Sometimes he spoke when I was already thinking of something else. I was pleased by the knotted muscles of his chest that didn't move, not even when he took a deep breath.

He remarked that I must have spent a lot of time sunbathing to be so dark, almost black. "I didn't get it while working," I replied, "I'd rather be you than me, getting it that way. It's important to be tanned all over. Otherwise what a figure of fun you'd look on some special occasion!" We were talking idly, resting our necks on little cushions of sand. After a while he agreed with me and saw the funny side of it. He

thought for another minute or two, and went on: "When they reach that point it's not our sunburn they're thinking of."

In my mind's eye I was watching the woman as she came through the wood. The thought struck me that Marchino would have been an ideal match for her. I felt inclined to tell him so, but how could I? Marchino would not have understood. It's typical of him not to think of things like that.

**A**PPROACHING MY HOLLOW, I came between the trees above the ravine in the warm dusk, treading the path the woman had taken, walking cautiously. Any country place is far from being simple. Just think how many people must have come this way to create such a path. Every bank of the stream, every spot in the wood, must have seen something. Every place has a name of its own.

Through gaps in the leaves, like little windows I look up to the sky. Below it stands the hill and the level ground, both with their carpet of fields. Their gentle sweetness bears a hint of work and sweat, an atmosphere that enfolds the whole wood and the uncultivated corners it contains, betraying their nakedness. It is here, in such wooded places, often marked by a thicket or a special stone, the land lies naked and unconcealed.

I pause a moment on the fringe of the trees. This is where cultivation begins and

the hard work it entails. A few clumps of acacia and alder, hanging above the cleft where the torrent begins, give the scene a wild, uncultivated air. I cannot go further in, since I am naked. This time I understand why, to undress, one must go down to the little clearing beside the stream; also why country folk wear clothes when they go into the fields to work and to clothe the land.

This is why the woman looked at me so calmly. She knew I was hidden, a luxury in itself. To see my body was much the same as seeing her own. She didn't know I was thinking of going out to the fields. Everything in the country has a name, but there is no name for a gesture like that. And neither she nor Marchino gave it a thought.

By this time the sun was setting, even here. I hear the grass waving about, making a rustling sound. Birds fly past; a deeper murmur lulls earth and sky. The land seems bare, but is not. Everywhere mists are rising, covering and sheltering the smell of sweat. I wonder whether there is, in the whole world, a ditch, a coastline, a little patch of earth not yet dug up and reshaped by hands. Everything bears the stamp of human observation, human language. It comes from the fields like a gentle breath, but does not reach my hollow, where water, liquid mud and the smell of sweat stagnate all together and have nothing to say to me. Yet every day I find life there, but then I lie fully extended and almost black, like a dead man.

## Blind Girl

Her hand, pitched by the bus's motion,  
fell in his lap, and stayed,  
moved in his lap, to the bus's rhythm,  
while her face  
stared ahead,  
beautiful behind dark glasses.

If the whole earth  
was going slowly blind. If the whole earth  
tapped through the firmament  
on white sticks, white forests of birches.

*D. M. Thomas*