



# GODHEAD

*Willi Goehring*

On the edge of the billowing waves, supported by a stick underneath, the king of the day teetered with stinky impunity: a half-rotted fish head, rocking in the sandy wake, gaping at the overcast grey-blue sky above. It was the only worthy attribute of a common, bleak lake.

A few kids stood awestruck at its open mouth, the stillness of its poise as it pulsed with the sweep of each wave, the shuffle of the sand as it quietly adjusted in the warm lake-water that sifted between two logs, logs that created a sort of altar. A nearby stick became a prodding tool, the eye of the fish the most intuitive part to poke. It jiggled, gelatinous under the slight prod. At this, the kids fled, dropping the stick, screaming their high-pitched screams to report the finding to other children.

About one week before, maybe longer, their parents began to drop them off at a local YMCA for “Summer Splash Camp,” and the children vaguely understood that each day they were brought to a new body of water at which to spend a few hours. They learned that they should not lose their sack lunches

on these ventures or they would go hungry, and that they should try not to drip on the floor of the school bus or they would get trouble from the frightening, toothless driver. The pamphlet, which had been an instrumental tool in convincing the children to attend, though none remembered a pamphlet, made it look different, brighter.

The screaming of the kids turned to laughing as they reveled in running together, sharing a half-contrived fright. They rejoined the majority of the group, all playing solemnly in a cordoned-off portion of the lake with rusting buoys that rolled against the water, not there for a clear purpose. At impulse the runners leapt into the water, invigorating the others with a great fervor and intensity. Ball games became ball competitions, swimming together became pick up wrestling matches. However many there were, for no one ever counted, joined each other and left each other without thought, without concern, the warm, dirty water sliding effortlessly between their limbs to join and disjoin them in a mass undulation of turning shoulders and unpredicted waves that tossed their spindly bodies like a single entranced witchdoctor.

But one of them felt that something was deeply wrong in the presence of the fish head. He found himself uncomfortable, unable to forget how it looked at him, how it rotted and stank. He wondered what a dead thing was doing so close to him, why it seemed to burn into his eyes. He could not shake its image, cold and alone.

He decided to cross the distance from the sands of the lakeside to the lunch tables with the older, big overlords who wore red trunks and one-piece swimsuits, sunglasses and always neon-yellow whistles to indicate their status. They spent most of their time talking to one another, but occasionally one, almost always a male, would venture into a game and throw it into complete confusion, taking a ball, or building a superior sandcastle. The undefined objectives of play would be obliterated by a sudden and brief, dominating presence that escalated competition to a point that was rarely fun. The kids sometimes resented them for keeping them from running at the edge of the water, too. But they appeared to be a necessary evil, carrying the coolers with their lunch boxes, heralding them onto the bus to go home and providing, when needed, consolation for the crying and care for the injured in such a way as to seem motherly.

He noticed one of the females stretched suggestively across a table, her developing breasts clad in red. One of the taller ones had crossed arms. The women of this group, he had surmised, were the only trustworthy ones. He felt there was something strange, perhaps wrong with these postures, as if he shouldn't be there to see them. But he was articulate for his age. "Sorry," he began after he had waddled close enough to gather their attention. "I think there's something you guys need to see."

They would not follow him to the fish. “Ahh, don’t sweat it,” one said. They told him not to let it concern him. After a mild protest, “but, it’s just sitting there,” they conceded a little, advising him to stay away from it. “We’ll handle it,” one said. Bewildered, the articulate boy tottered back to the cordon of the play area, the warm, brown lake alive with giggles and screeches a few feet from where he paused on the sand, various bright instruments of play scattered about him. He supposed that now the only thing to do was to sit down, recuperate.

There were a few power lines across the lake. Three of them. He put his finger ahead of his eyes and felt each power line, rubbing them. One. Two. Three. He noticed a house beneath them, a house without windows, perhaps a garage for a boat or something. He sat down and looked at the power lines against the cloudy sky, then lowered his gaze to the other children. He saw, but they did not see, how they acted according to impulse. He was thinking, and mumbled to himself something unimportant, something that did not show what its sounds represented.

He watched the others playing, the ones who played alone, the ones who wrestled, and the ones who turned in slow circles together in the water. He looked at the girls, even. They were all playing. “Playing,” he said to himself. It seemed to him that “play” existed in a realm of half-real things, things like the ghosts that he worried would grab his ankles as he jumped into bed. They

looked at each other and, for a reason that he couldn't surmise, they didn't seem to see each other. They looked through each other. They didn't see themselves, even. Instead, they went elsewhere; they were transmuted by the white stripes of the colored beach balls, the sting of the sand between their toes. They became corporeal masses that were half-boy, half water. No, he thought, that was inadequate for all except the lonely ones. Most of them were reflections of each other, reflections of the whole. To the articulate boy, they were the pressings of two pages of a coloring book together, leaving a strange, dull spattering of crayon colors from both drawings, distinct at first outline and in hue. They were a part of a bond between the water and their playmates that only argument or human necessity could rend. They shared the submerged feeling by being above the water together. He wondered, briefly, how many of them peed in the water, if they drank each other's urine by accident.

He saw that a few of the boys had begun to cluster together, slowly making friends whose names they learned through a few days of mutual play and watching one another in fascination. Although he could not have put it into words, he saw that they gathered in this way according to their mannerisms and attributes. Almost all of them were the same: skinny, gangly, except for a few truly fat ones. Then there were the loners who sat alone or took a ball to splash pensively in the water, most of whom had glasses or were like the ones with funny limbs and talk that they had seen in church or school.

There were some girls, perhaps many, a few of whom joined the games and were boys for all purposes. Most of them, however, were confined to the sands or the edge of the water where they played with each other. The boys rarely noticed them.

The children played and the articulate boy watched without even thinking of the fish. After an indeterminate amount of time, a measure that did not matter to him, he got up and began to play in the water again, gently, quietly, like he had sometimes seen others do. He could not fathom the fish head ever being alive, although he tried. He dragged a bright red and blue beach ball into the water alone. As he threw the ball ahead of him and swam to it, head bobbling out of the water, tiny limbs twisting, he became frightened. Someone might see the fish, he thought. Others could look the fish in the eye and continue to play, enchanted by the water that bore the dead thing, and other dead things. "Things die here," he concluded silently as everyone around him but a dreary few played together, bouncing and reflecting off of one another. "Someone will want to poke it again," he said, and then said it again to himself to hear himself saying it.

Some minutes later, just long enough for the one who had poked the fish eye to tire from playing and decide to lie on the shore, there was, by chance, a mass shift in activity. The poker, not realizing his popularity, had dragged with him a considerable posse of children who were not aware that

they were actually doing anything but enacting their own will based on his suggestion. The cold sand and warm water was comfortable. The poking boy was fierce, indignant.

The poking boy had cornflakes for breakfast, sitting next to his mother, who wore a pink bathrobe as she went about the kitchen and house in the mornings before school. She would lean over his bowl and ask, “All done?” as he tipped the bowl towards him to get the last bites, full of the sugar he scooped on top of the bland flakes that hadn’t dissolved. He liked sugar. “Yup,” he’d say back, his eyes still tired from waking so early, which made him bitter with his mother. He’d recall the imminent bus ride in those moments, the boring drive to the places with all the water. He wore red swimming trunks, not in some Hawaiian pattern, but bright red, which were very important to him. A single stripe ran down the sides, blazing white and reflective, like the water. He liked how it would shine in even the vaguest sunlight. He was handsome, an only child. He thought of nothing as he lay on the beach, surrounded by cohorts, nothing but himself.

For the poking boy, the play was fantastic, a thrill, a heart-pounding affair with all the intensity of a battle. He loved to wrestle, to feel the mangling touch of boys as much as possible as he rolled around amongst them, wet, slippery, spry, and quick. Nothing was better, for him, than to be hopelessly outnumbered by them, to flee, to feel the desperation and panic of real life. He

never bothered to remember names, he used faces instead, and barely that. To him, faces were a layer of skin, beneath which lay what was real, what was substance. The poking boy remembered who was fat, who was strong, who tall and who short, little else unless required by his mother or a lifeguard. He loved pizza and his mother, but for the most part the world of things, of items and ownership, bored him. The sun wouldn't come out, he knew, but the white stripes of his trunks would shine slightly anyways. He thought of himself lying there, out of breath, and envisioned himself in a pair of sunglasses, riding a half-mechanical beast that frightened the other boys. His conclusion, to his surprise, was that he would ride on this beast to the fish head to save it, to protect it.

The two children, the articulate and the poking, were roused instantly when screams began to come from the direction of the fish head. The poking boy stood and ran, legs pumping through the sand. Others followed, a general clamor amongst them. The articulate, bobbing through the water, left his ball to float away and edged closer to the shore that the fish head owned.

One of the quiet children, the fat ones that played alone, had gotten bored with his sandcastle, which was not turning out as good as the rest of them. Looking for something to do, he was stepping clumsily between the logs that the fish lay within and, quite suddenly, stepped on the fish head. He slipped and was overcome with a moment of fright, followed in seconds by

grief, then by an awful, inarticulate shame. Although nobody had seen him, he felt slimy, tainted in a way that could never be fully cleaned. He sat on the sand beside it, eyes wide, gaping at the open mouth and the gaping eye that faced the grey sky, sloshing under the waves like the buoys in their play-cordon. His feet protruded awkwardly from his body and he seemed unable to stand, his gut doubling over itself. He began to wail in fear, which was followed almost immediately by hot, shameful tears.

“What have you done?” asked the poking boy severely. He armed himself with the only sizeable stick at the entire lake, which he had used when the fish was first discovered. An interrogation followed, the other boys teasing, yelling at the fat boy for disturbing the fish. “Get out of here, fatty.” They had the high-ground, standing on the logs. “Don’t call me fat!” He screeched at them, turning red and wishing to disappear. One of the others threw a rock at the fat boy, and the others followed suit, throwing sand. The fat boy cowered until the poking boy yelled: “Don’t hurt the fish!”

They stopped, and for a moment the beach was silent, everyone looking at the poking boy.

**“FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!”**

The fat boy, in a fit, was allowed to leave, his language shocking and in breach of an immutable law of the group. Stigma followed, and the fat boy would never be bothered again. No one will ever talk to me, he thought, and I

will eat my lunch alone for the rest of my life. He waddled off in the direction of the overlords red with anger, some feared to tattle. His enormous behind protruded from his green swimsuit as he went.

The articulate boy, seeing the fat one stumble away bewildered, crying, and filthy in a way he had never felt, knew that what he had thought before was beginning. The poker had begun a speech. The articulate boy trembled where he floated in the water.

“This is our fish, and we should protect it. This fish means everything, it sees us doing things that it wouldn’t like in real life, so we should make it safe and happy.”

It was quiet, and assent seemed to have been given. While some got bored and left the group, unwilling to play along and get tattled on, others stayed, their loyalty to the game increased. Sticks of varying length and strength were gathered. They rolled in the sand to make armor for themselves against enemies, armor that only they were allowed to bear, they decided. The sand coated them entirely in a thin layer that meant they had to roll about every few minutes to maintain it, coating all but their eyes, eyes that stood out as a result, the only window to their former selves. Some patrolled around the fish, but most of them sat on the logs, talking about what it meant to be a guardian of the fish head.

“How long do you think it was alive?” “Do fish sleep?” “Where did it come from?”

Meanwhile, the fat boy had made it all the way over to the overlords, and in a red haze of tears and self-loathing, told on the boys who had thrown sand at him. An attractive girl in red could see how he got picked on, and decided to do something about it, trying to prevent him from being ostracized.

She grabbed him by the arm as if it was his ear and tromped towards the fish head, where the sand-coated boys sat. They watched her approach, unafraid, laying across the logs on their backs. She presented the fat boy to them, towering over him. “Are you throwing sand?” she demanded. Silence. “Did you throw sand at him?” The poking boy was silent, but let his eyes give her his guilt.

“If I hear any more about it, I’ll make sure your moms all hear about it,” she said. They had strength in numbers, she thought. “Everyone deserves a chance, okay guys? Play nice. He just wants to be friends, don’tcha?” She was uncomfortable, the sand-coated boys not looking frightened, but rather, on edge. Aroused somehow. She patted the fat boy on the behind with uncompromising finality and turned around. “Go play,” she said. The coated boys looked at him like animals, their eyes glinting fire beneath the grainy layer.

Just then, a neon whistle, shrieking, pierced the tranquil air, and in the distance a red-clad young man was calling them to lunchtime. Roused to movement, the sandy boys stood, brandishing their rocks and sticks menacingly, a pride of lions. The fat boy ran. They spat and threw sand but did not chase him. The poking boy crossed his arms and laughed into they sky.

Some of the kids darted to get to the blue lunch coolers first. Others trotted slowly, more or less like zombies. All games were halted; ball and shovel were abandoned in the sand. The camp migrated towards the picnic tables and blue coolers. Many had looked forward to this moment all day, the brightness of snacks and colored packaging a welcome break from the soggy, dreary lake or whatever body of water they happened to be visiting. A whirl of orange peels, potato chips and chocolate chip cookies followed, each baggie unpacked lovingly. Trading was required; sharing was a ritual. A mass flailing was at hand, a cluster of feeding brood encouraged by their mothers to eat, eat. "Eat, growing boy!" they would say, "Eat up so you can grow big and strong!" The fat boy sat at a crowded table and laughed heartily with his huge sandwich, though no one wanted him there, wondering if he would explode again.

This was the point when some asked themselves when they would get to go home, but most sat somewhere where they knew no one and were

completely comfortable, content to wander back to the beach for a while afterwards.

Suddenly, the fat boy, inspired by his sandwich, bit eyeholes in a piece of bologna and put it on his face, like a mask. After a wave of laughter and pointed, little fingers, the other began to follow suit, laughing rehearsed laughs, “Ha Ha!” Noticing, he stood atop the table, laughing, and danced, pretending to be a bear with bologna on his face. His table became popular, and he sat at the full table, having fun, throwing bits of food at others who laughed back at him and copied his idea if they had sandwiches good enough. People began to give him food for a piece of his bologna to make masks with, and he gloried in a collection of sweets, the children’s only substantial possession, that he collected in return for the sandwich, laughing his high-pitched laugh.

The articulate boy ate the top half of his oreos first, saved his Doritos for last. He was happy for the fat boy, but frightened for him as well. He watched over his shoulder, towards the gaping head.

For some of them, the articulate boy knew, had not gone to lunch. The poking boy and a few other, sand coated boys did not give up their game, though most of them had dashed into the water to clean themselves before rushing away, taking the fat boy’s cue. The few that stayed thought that they were more mature, more serious than the others. They stood on the logs that

guarded the venerated fish head and watched the others eating and talking, giggling and chasing, with contempt.

Some children saw them playing their game and wanted to see what they were doing. Finished or, rather, bored with their lunches, they came to the logs to ask what the sandy boys were doing, what the rules of their game were.

“Protecting the fish head,” they replied.

“There is no fish head. You’re lying,” “Where?” “Prove it,” was the response. They demanded to see the fish head, and a discussion followed during which violence was threatened. The poking boy stood severely on the edge of a log closest to the water. It was decided that a small tribute was needed to see the fish head, and if it wasn’t good enough, the guardians would beat you with their sticks. A cookie or a bag of chips would suffice, they gathered.

“You can see the fish head,” the poker said, “but tell the others.” They were allowed to see it without tribute, to spread the message.

Popularity spread in a matter of minutes, and for the first time, girls began to migrate over, wanting to see the fish. They were colorful and gentle, some of them attractive, dressed in green-blue one-piece swim suits, bearing fruit or desserts. The poking boy permitted them, one by one, to look at the fish head. The sandy boys rolled around to replenish their armor. Boys venerated it; girls became disgusted and returned to their games. A crowd of

boys had soon gathered around the logs, loitering, trying to understand what they had just seen. Some rolled in the sand and found sticks, some decided that they would play alone for the rest of the day, lose themselves in the pattern of a beach-ball rolling in the tepid water. Most went back to their previous games, unchanged, as if they had expected the fish all along.

Lunch had ended, or at least, petered out. Full children stumbled groggily to nap on the sand or rushed back into the water, wrestling, turning, playing together. The fat boy, dancing on his table and accepting trades, realized that his time was over when he laughed loud and high into the sky, throwing his head back with such force that his meat-mask fell off. He looked around: his table was empty, a heap of gutted bags and empty cans. He began to eat at crumbs on the table, biding his time until the bus came and he would go home for another meal. It struck him that the leftover food, left in the warm daylight, smelled like rot, like dead things. I will try this again tomorrow, he thought, eagerly awaiting the call of the neon whistle to feeding time. He ate his mask.

The sandy boys received tribute after tribute, but were still hungry, fueled by the stench and the fumes of the fish head. As the patrons began to trickle away, they grew bored with their game, and they wanted to go home or return to the lake, where they could turn with other boys and wrestle. Some decided to leave, but those who stayed became more loyal to the game, to the

fish. They sat talking gently about their favorite TV shows and then, in a sudden lull, became silent. They turned and looked at the fish head, all simultaneously. They stared. Then one began to hit his stick upon the log, gently, just audibly as they stared into the fish. He used just the tip of his stick, going “tack, tack, tack” on the wood. “Tack, tack, tack,” another stick boy responded. The sound repeated, louder.

“Tack, tack, TACK!”

A boy screamed, rolled on the sand and began to dance, making all the boys who were lucky enough to find sticks that were suitable, beat, beat, beat their sticks into the logs and the rest to roll about, yelling. They began to sing in tongues, spluttering out blather into the sky, some merely screaming nursery rhymes or well-known Disney songs at the top of their lungs in no recognizable pitch or progression, many portions ad-libbed. They jumped into the water to add to their engagement, washing and replacing the sand by rolling in and out of the tide yelling, swallowing sand and dirty water and fish guts that lie decomposing somewhere at the heart of the lake. They took their trunks off to feel the sand between their thighs, upon their little groins and hairless genitals. It was tepid and wonderful, and they laughed. The poking boy dove into the circle of logs where the fish head lay and suddenly, violently, began to swirl his stick around his head, turning in circles and bending

towards the fish, as if to listen to it speaking to him, or rather, to listen to it look at him; to hear its eyes with his eyes, to hear the voice of God.

Overcome with excitement, the boys began to cheer him on as he turned about faster and faster, yelling into the fish head, brandishing the strongest, most fearsome weapon at the lake: the eye-poking stick. It was heavy, slow, and covered with sharp places where its limbs had been trimmed away.

With a sudden, sharp belt that echoed across the grey lake the poking boy stopped and slammed his stick into the sand beside the fish head. The yelling ceased, and for a moment they all stood silently, seeing him see the fish head below him, standing above it stark naked, with his sandy legs apart and arms raised into the sky. The poking boy solemnly drew a circle in the sand around the fish head.

The articulate boy was having a crisis, watching the dance from where he had returned to the sand. He didn't understand how anyone could hurt like that, could feel without knowing, could be so reckless. He was afraid of the poking boy. He saw an overlord heading towards them.

And yes, red young woman was jogging dutifully towards the hooting, naked children of the fish, her whistle in hand. The naked kids were a liability for her. She had worked hard for an internship and ended up here instead. The

naked children were all standing in a circle, watching the poking boy stand with his stick in the air, like a warrior.

“Alright!” she said. “None of that! Put your trunks back on!” A few of them sheepishly went for their trunks. “That’s not okay.”

“Why?” the poking boy demanded, his sand coated body not paying homage to her but to the sky, his legs still spread over the fish head. He knew why. It was petty fear of playing too hard, too rough, too intensely. He had gotten this before and knew how to deal with it.

“It’s ‘indecent’” she said. “Do you know what ‘indecent’ means?” The poking boy had no idea what it meant, but the articulate boy, who was approaching, heard the words of the law, and understood the consequences of the ultimatum. “Get your trunks on and put the stick away. You can play your game just as easily without rolling in the sand, too. Yes,” she settled on something, “you’re all filthy. You shouldn’t play dirty games. Go play with the other kids.”

“They’re playing with the fish head,” the articulate boy interjected bravely, standing behind the lifeguard with his hands behind his back. “The one you told me to stay away from.” The poking boy gazed at the articulate boy full of malice. “So?” he said. “We can play how we want.”

“Oh no,” the overlord said, “c’mon. It’s okay. Just don’t play near the fish head. It’s gross.” She was beginning to realize the extent to which this one was the ringleader, the troublemaker.

“You can’t tell me what to do!” the poking boy yelled, suddenly breaking his connection with the sky, his sandy hair rustling with the effort. The ritual circle around the fish stood out at this defensive motion, the lap of lake water near his feet deepening the crevices, sanctifying each wave with the touch of the fish head as it rolled through. The other boys, their trunks on, stood and watched their leader’s solidarity, unwilling to remove the sand from their bodies. They walked the line between decency and indecency, remained disciples but accepted moderation.

“C’mon, don’t make me call your mother,” the lifeguard said.

At this, a few disciples ran away. Some had realized the extremity of their actions and didn’t want to repeat the dance again, an uncomfortable window into the soul, a journey into the eye of the fish head. Others could not take the idea of their mothers hearing of their actions.

“Tack, tack, tack,” went the leader’s stick, his remaining sand-golems responding in taps quickly, laughing at how fun it was to disrespect the red overlord, the dumb woman who prevented them from eating or going home when they wanted. The articulate boy backed away slowly, the poking boy watching his every move.

“Hey, I’ll do it, buster. Hand me that stick.”

“TACK TACK TACK!” went the poker’s stick on the log, murderously slow, the boy staring into the other’s eyes. The rest responded just as loudly. Then again, and again. In a few moments, the humid air became filled with the noise of a dozen boys beating their sticks in contempt of the law, of the overlords. One yelled, and they began to roll about again, creating as much noise as possible. Some removed their trunks again, even. The din was frightening to the young woman, who grasped the closest boy by the wrist as he tried to take his trunks off.

“I thought I told you to stop it!” she yelled through the pound of the sticks and the screeching yells of the mad boys, trying not to violate the boy as she yanked his shorts back up. Embarrassment and fear coated her like the sand of the boys, and she wasn’t willing to do this anymore, all of a sudden.

“God, you brats!” she yelled, looking at the poking boy.

“Fuck you! FUCK YOU!” the stick-bearer responded, screeching at the top of his lungs, a battle cry. The other boys, raging on in the heat of the dance, cheered when the poking boy charged at the young woman, stood atop the log and, now at eye-level, swung his heavy stick directly into her face. A crunch like stepping on a bug followed, and the girl fell flat upon the ground, her eyes mutilated by the sharp edges, her face bleeding. She wailed, screaming a cacophonous music that masked the dance in blood, that made

their sand suits seem to burn into their flesh. Some, frightened, rushed into the water to cleanse themselves, pulling up their shorts. But those who stayed began to beat themselves, hitting their heads upon the logs or smacking each other with their small, whip like sticks, screaming all the while. The poking boy went to the fish and put his ear down to its eye, hoping it would speak to him. "Speak!" he beckoned it.

A whistle call rattled through the humid air, the young woman's cry for help, and the fat boy stood atop a far away lunch table to see what had happened, if it was time for a second feeding. He slipped in a puddle of juice and careened onto the table, hitting his head badly. He was too hurt to cry or to yell, and so he sat, feeling the warm fluid enter his ears and run out the back of his head, gazing placidly into the bleak sky.

The articulate boy, petrified with fear until this exact moment, now knew what had to be done, and rushed in the direction of the other overlords, craving their protection. He ran into them as they rushed to the assistance of the screaming, blinded woman. "FUCK!" he yelled, knowing that they would not apprehend the poking boy until they had treated their comrade and quieted the screaming boys.

He rushed towards the placid portion of the lake, where most of the children played gently, quietly, with having fun in mind. The distinction between the two places disturbed him. He moved his spindly legs as fast as he

could, looking for a suitable weapon. As he passed a sandcastle, he stooped near a hole dug for a moat, destroying the creation and causing the girls that made it to yell, beating his legs. He scooped sand out from the deep crevice until he found warm, moist clay, and took a handful of it out. He smeared his face with it, creating war-paint underneath his eyes. It was camouflage, he thought, so that the fish couldn't see him coming. He packed the rest of the wad of clay and forced it between his fists, making it into a projectile ball.

Suddenly, with a roar, the sky began to pour hot droplets into the warm lake. The surface bubbled over with the collision of the sky and the earth, making it appear to boil. The calm children rushed from the water to dance in the rain, their games enveloping the entire world in which no part of them was left uncovered, no part left to discretion. Thunder began to roll and the wind picked up, the placid lakeside crows swooped about overhead, looking for shelter. It became darker than before.

The articulate boy approached the two altar logs from behind, where the sand coated boys had begun to melt, receiving a lecture from an older, male overlord. Some cried, their faces mangled in self-hate and regret, the rain beating the sand off of them, their protection now gone. In the midst of this, unnoticed the poking boy writhed in the sand between the altar logs like a snake, throwing sand upon his head and his body desperately. The articulate boy approached him from behind.

“Hey!” he yelled through the pouring rain, “get up! It’s alright!”

“It’s mine!” the poking boy yelled, the ground beside him roiling with mud spattering and grass tossed by the storm. The wind picked up, and the sand blew from his hair. “Finders keepers!” he yelled.

He rushed for his stick, lying in the sand close by, and the articulate boy threw the wad of clay into the face of the poking boy, making him reel in pain. He swept the fish head into his two small hands, and ran into the water as fast as he could, the poking boy close on his heels.

The boys swam out into the center of the lake, the poking boy trying to overtake the other, their heads bobbing over the waves just slightly, the fish head clasped under the water in the articulate boy’s hand. The buoys did not stop them, where a few children stood, gaping at the rain. They passed them, hands leaping out in front of the rest of their bodies to drag themselves along in the tactile, all-coating water. The articulate boy’s hand felt slimy on the fish, somehow different than the immersion in the water, more real than feeling something coating him.

Lightning began to strike in the distance, the sky turned greenish, tinged with red, and the wind picked up once more. The beach was in disarray, the overlords rushing towards their phones to call an ambulance for the blinded woman and to call the bus to corral the children into. The dancing turned to screaming as the wind picked up, and the children, washed of all

sand and masks, huddled together in the closest, safest place: between the logs where the fish head used to reign, watching the wind blow over them. The fat boy, long since dead, lying like a piece of discarded meat beside the lunch tables, was discovered by a few children, who carried his body to the overlords.

They reached the center of the lake, the two of them, and stared at one another in the boiling water. “What is it about the dead thing that called us?” they wondered at the same time. Knowledge of the lake’s taint seemed inherent in knowing the venerated flesh, its slime seemed to leak into every corner of the lake, of their tiny expanse of world. The articulate boy, the structural equal of the poking boy, was struggling to keep his head above water while holding on to the fish head. There was no logical shore to go to. What began as the drowning, articulate boy’s attempt to save the two of them became a final wrestling match to the poking boy, who ripped the hair of the other as he tried to save them. Their limbs writhed together in the sweep of the rain-pounded lake water, one holding on to their lives, the other drowning them.

They both suddenly felt a great giving out, and caught glimpses of the shore as they surfaced for a dizzying moment, their eyes filled with slimy water. The fish head passed between each other’s wrenching fingers, taking fingernails full of flesh between them, mangling each other as much as they

were able. The bus and the ambulance had arrived, and there were overlords swimming out to the center to rescue the two.

Somehow, amidst the breathless, drowning wrestle, the fish head was dropped. They unclenched suddenly, exhausted, and looked each other in the eye. They saw their reflections. Frightened of their limited, childish scope, frightened of the lives they saw in each other's eyes, the consciousnesses that they could not know, they clung together for a moment, longing the all-seeing, all knowing dead eye of the fish.

At that embrace, that declaration of the human condition, they went under the water, their tiny limbs exhausted, looking in the enveloping wetness for the lost fish head. Neither would see the surface again.