

**P O E M**

**CLAWLESS OTTERS**

It had been a long day in the field.  
I dumped my pack  
then sat down on the slope overlooking an oxbow lake  
to enjoy the last of the winter sun  
before it disappeared behind the Drakensberg.

They emerged from the reeds on the opposite shore,  
an adult female, two half-grown young,  
and a huge male,  
sliding into the water one after the other  
like a giant chocolate-brown python.

Each immediately began diving for food,  
disappearing and surfacing  
like bubbles in a boiling pot;  
treading water while they ate crabs,  
feeding them into their mouths  
with blunt-fingered fore-feet,  
white-cheeked heads tilted back,  
clutching to buff chests any pieces that fell;  
then pausing briefly,  
long wet whiskers glistening with back-lit droplets,  
before arch-humping their backs, seal like,  
and diving again.

The adults were the first to leave the lake,  
rolling on the grassy bank to dry themselves,  
then lying idly, grooming,  
and finally resting, replete .... at peace.  
But only until the two young ones came ashore,  
started play-fighting,  
wrestling each other,  
rolling, tumbling, and clambering over their parents.

What happened thereafter I'll never know,  
for it became too dark to see.  
I was cold and tired,  
but exceptionally happy.  
Part of the otters' secret life had been exposed to me,  
while they were unaware of my presence,  
the presence of a member of an alien species,  
the species that constitutes their worst enemy.

I shouldered my pack,  
and plodded wearily up the slope,  
thinking of Thomas Gray's churchyard:  
leaving the lake to darkness,  
and the otters.

Dave Rowe

From "Green water, grey sand, and high places" by Dave Rowe (2005).  
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