

JOHN UPDIKE

The *Orphaned Swimming Pool

Marriages, like chemical unions, release upon dissolution packets of the energy locked up in their *bonding. There is the piano no one wants, the *cocker spaniel no one can take care of. Shelves of books suddenly stand revealed as burdensomely dated and unlikely to be reread; indeed, it is difficult to remember who read them in the first place. And what of those old skis in the attic? Or the doll house waiting to be repaired in the basement? The piano goes out of tune, the dog goes *mad. The summer that the Turners got their divorce, their swimming pool had neither a master nor a mistress, though the sun beat down day after day, and a state of *drought was declared in *Connecticut.

It was a young pool, only two years old, of the fragile type fashioned by laying a plastic liner within a carefully carved hole in the ground. The Turners' side yard looked infernal while it was being done; one bulldozer sank into the mud and had to be pulled free by another. But by midsummer the new grass was sprouting, the encircling *flagstones were in place, the blue plastic tinted the water a heavenly blue, and it had to be admitted that the Turners had scored again. They were always a little in advance of their friends. He was a tall, hairy-backed man with long arms, and a nose flattened by *football, and a sullen look of too much blood; she was a fine-boned blonde with dry blue eyes and lips usually held parted and crinkled as if about to ask a worrisome, or *whimsical, question. They never seemed happier, nor their marriage healthier, than those two summers. They grew brown and supple and smooth with swimming. Ted would begin his day with a swim, before dressing to *catch the train, and Linda would hold court all day amid crowds of wet *matrons and children, and Ted would return from work to find a poolside cocktail party in progress, and the couple would end their day at midnight, when their friends had finally left, by swimming nude, before bed. What ecstasy! In darkness the water felt mild as milk and buoyant as helium, and the swimmers became

THE ORPHANED SWIMMING POOL/51

giants, gliding from side to side in a single *languorous stroke.

The next May, the pool was filled as usual, and the usual after-school gangs of mothers and children gathered, but Linda, unlike her, stayed indoors. She could be heard within the house, moving from room to room, but she no longer emerged, as in the other summers, with a cheerful tray of ice and *brace of bottles, and *Triscuits and lemonade for the children. Their friends felt less comfortable about appearing, towels in hand, at the Turners' on weekends. Though Linda had lost some weight and looked elegant, and Ted was clumsily jovial, they gave off the faint, sleepless, awkward-making aroma of a couple in trouble. Then, the day after *school was out, Linda *fled with the children to her parents in *Ohio. Ted stayed nights in the city, and the pool was deserted. Though the pump that ran the water through the filter continued to mutter in the *lilacs, the *cerulean pool grew cloudy. The bodies of dead horseflies and wasps dotted the still surface. A speckled plastic ball drifted into a corner beside the diving board and stayed there. The grass between the flagstones grew lank. On the glass-topped poolside table, a spray can of *Off! had lost its pressure and a *gin-and-tonic glass held a *sere mint leaf. The pool looked desolate and haunted, like a stagnant jungle spring; it looked poisonous and ashamed. The postman, stuffing overdue notices and pornography solicitations into the mailbox, averted his eyes from the side yard politely.

Some June weekends, Ted sneaked out from the city. Families driving to church glimpsed him *dolefully sprinkling chemical substances into the pool. He looked pale and thin. He *instructed Roscoe Chace, his neighbor on the left, how to switch on the pump and change the filter, and how much *chlorine and Algitol should be added weekly. He explained he would not be able to *make it out every weekend—as if the distance that for years he had traveled twice each day, gliding in and out of New York, had become an impossibly steep climb back into the past. Linda, he confided vaguely, had left her parents in *Akron and was visiting her sister in Minneapolis. As the shock of the Turners' joint disappearance wore off, their pool seemed less haunted and forbidding. The Murtaugh children—the Murtaughs, a rowdy, numerous family, were the Turners' right-hand neighbors—began to use it, without supervision. So Linda's old friends, with their children, began to *show

up, "to keep the Murtaughs from drowning each other." For if anything were to happen to a Murtaugh, the poor Turners (the adjective had become automatic) would be *sued for everything, right when they could least afford it. It became, then, a kind of duty, a test of loyalty, to use the pool.]

July was the hottest in twenty-seven years. People brought their own *lawn furniture over in station wagons and set it up. Teen-age offspring and Swiss **au-pair* girls were established as lifeguards. A nylon rope with flotation corks, meant to divide the wading end from the diving end of the pool, was found coiled in the garage and reinstalled. Agnes Kleefield contributed an old refrigerator, which was wired to an outlet above Ted's basement *workbench and used to store ice, quinine water, and *soft drinks. An *honor system shoebox containing change appeared beside it; a little lost-and-found—an array of forgotten sunglasses, flippers, towels, lotions, paperbacks, shirts, even underwear—materialized on the Turners' side steps. When people, that July, said, "Meet you at the pool," they did not mean the public pool past the shopping center, or the country-club pool beside the *first tee. They meant the Turners'. Restrictions on admission were difficult to enforce tactfully. A visiting Methodist bishop, two Taiwanese economists, an entire girls' softball team from *Darwin, an eminent Canadian poet, the archery champion of *Hartford, the six members of a black rock group called the Good Intentions, an ex-mistress of Aly Khan, the *lavender-haired mother-in-law of a Nixon adviser not quite of Cabinet rank, an infant of six weeks, a man who was killed the next day on the *Merritt Parkway, a Filipino who could stay on the pool bottom for eighty seconds, two Texans who kept cigars in their mouths and hats on their heads, three telephone *linemen, four expatriate Czechs, a student Maoist from *Wesleyan, and the postman all swam, as guests, in the Turners' pool, though not all at once. After the daytime crowd *ebbed, and the shoebox was put back in the refrigerator, and the last *au-pair* girl took the last *goosefleshed, wrinkled child shivering home to supper, there was a tide of evening activity, *trysts (Mrs. Kleefield and the Nicholson boy, most notoriously) and what some called, overdramatically, orgies. True, late splashes and excited *guffaws did often keep Mrs. Chace awake, and the Murtaugh children spent hours at their attic window with binoculars. And there was the evidence of the lost underwear.

One Saturday early in August, the morning arrivals found an unknown car with New York *plates parked in the garage. But cars of all sorts were so common—the parking tangle frequently extended into the road—that nothing much was thought of it, even when someone noticed that the bedroom windows upstairs were open. And nothing came of it, except that around suppertime, in the lull before the evening crowds began to arrive in force, Ted and an unknown woman, of the same physical type as Linda but brunette, swiftly exited from the kitchen door, got into the car, and drove back to New York. The few lingering babysitters and *beaux thus unwittingly glimpsed the root of the divorce. The two lovers had been trapped inside the house all day; Ted was fearful of the *legal consequences of their being seen by anyone who might write and tell Linda. The settlement was at a *ticklish stage; nothing less than terror of Linda's lawyers would have led Ted to suppress his indignation at seeing, from behind the window screen, his private pool turned public carnival. For long thereafter, though in the end he did not marry the woman, he remembered that day when they lived together like fugitives in a cave, feeding on love and ice water, tiptoeing barefoot to the depleted cupboards, which they, arriving late last night, had hoped to stock in the morning, not foreseeing the onslaught of *interlopers that would pin them in. Her hair, he remembered, had tickled his shoulders as she crouched behind him at the window, and through the angry pounding of his own blood he had felt her slim body breathless with the attempt not to giggle.

August drew in, with cloudy days. Children grew bored with swimming. Roscoe Chace went on vacation to Italy; the pump broke down, and no one repaired it. Dead dragonflies accumulated on the surface of the pool. Small deluded toads hopped in and swam around hopelessly. Linda at last returned. From Minneapolis she had gone on to *Idaho for six weeks, to be divorced. She and the children had burnt faces from riding and hiking; her lips looked drier and more quizzical than ever, still seeking to frame that troubling question. She stood at the window, in the house that already seemed to lack its furniture, at the same side window where the lovers had crouched, and gazed at the deserted pool. The grass around it was green from splashing, save where a long-lying towel had smothered a rectangle and left it brown. Aluminum furniture she didn't recognize lay strewn and broken. She counted a dozen

bottles beneath the glass-topped table. The nylon divider had parted, and its two halves floated independently. The blue plastic beneath the colorless water tried to make a cheerful, otherworldly statement, but Linda saw that the pool in truth had no bottom, it held bottomless loss, it was one huge blue tear. Thank God no one had drowned in it. Except her. She saw that she could never live here again. In September the place was sold to a family with toddling infants, who for safety's sake have not only drained the pool but have sealed it over with iron pipes and a heavy mesh, and put warning signs around, as around a chained dog.

Glossary

- Akron** an industrial city in northern Ohio
au-pair a girl from overseas who does light housework and/or looks after young children in exchange for room and board (French)
beaux the plural of beau "a young man who is courting a girl" (French); here, it refers to the babysitters' boyfriends
bonding a chemical bond is the force which holds atoms together in a molecule
brace a pair of two like things; here, two bottles of liquor such as Scotch and gin
catch the train *Ted was a commuter, taking the train to New York each day to go to the office.*
cerulean sky blue
chlorine and Algitrol chemical substances used to keep the pool clean
cocker spaniel a breed of dog; cockers are popular pets because of their good dispositions and relatively small size
Connecticut one of the New England states; its southern border is just north of New York City
Darien a wealthy, fashionable town in Connecticut. *The girls playing softball (a kind of baseball played with a larger, softer ball) were probably in secondary school.*
dolefully sadly, without enthusiasm
drought a long period without any rain

- ebbed** retreated; describes the action of a receding tide
first tee the beginning of the golf course
flagstone a flat, fine-grained stone which is split into slabs and used for paving; it is expensive and is considered quite elegant
fled past tense of flee "to run away, as from danger"
football *It is not uncommon for an American man to have been injured playing high school or college football.*
gin-and- tonic glass a tall glass, used for serving a popular summer drink made with gin and quinine water
goosefleshed skin momentarily covered by small bumps as a result of the cold
guffaw a loud, sudden laugh
Hartford the capital of Connecticut; known primarily for the many insurance companies located there
honor system a system of trust where each person stakes his good name on the fulfillment of his promise; here, to pay for what he ate or drank
Idaho *Divorce laws vary from state to state, though a divorce granted in one state is valid in all the others; six weeks' residence qualified Linda to obtain a divorce in this Western state.*
instructed Roscoe Chace *Suburban neighbors commonly look after each other's homes or yards when one is away.*
interloper someone who comes without being invited
languorous sensuously lazy, without effort
lavender-haired a hair color, a very pale tint of bluish purple. *Some women whose hair has turned white, and who are impressed by their own dignity and elegance as they age, consider it fashionable to have a blue dye added to make the white more brilliant.*
lawn furniture folding chairs with aluminum frames
legal consequences *Evidently the divorce was to be on the grounds of incompatibility, rather than adultery; if Linda could prove the latter, she might either refuse Ted the divorce or demand higher alimony payments.*
lilac a dense bush with sweet-smelling white or purple flowers in spring. *The machinery for cleaning the pool water was concealed in the bushes.*
linemen men who work outdoors installing or repairing telephone lines
mad insane
make it out come out from the city to his home

matron a married woman
 Merritt Parkway a busy highway in Connecticut
 Minneapolis a city in Minnesota
 Off! a brand of insect-repellent spray
 Ohio a Midwestern state, about 500 miles from Connecticut
 orphaned without parents
 plates license plates
 school was out *American primary and secondary schools are generally in session from early September to early June.*
 sere withered, dry (poetic)
 show up appear, arrive
 soft-drinks non-alcoholic beverages
 sued for everything be required by a court of law to pay a large sum of money in compensation for damages
 ticklish delicate, easily upset
 Triscuit a brand of salty wheat cracker
 tryst a secret, romantic meeting
 Wesleyan a university in western Connecticut
 whimsical fanciful, playful
 workbench a sturdy table. *Many suburban men have a workbench and tools for doing odd jobs.*

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

- *1. To what does Updike compare marriage? What examples does he give to support his contention about marriages that end in divorce?
- *2. What is the implication of the statement "The piano goes out of tune, the dog goes mad"?
3. What "packet of energy" was released as a result of the dissolution of the Turners' marriage?
4. How long ago had the Turners' pool been installed? How had it been constructed?
- *5. What is suggested by the phrase "the Turners had scored again"?

6. What did the Turners look like? How old do you think they were? Of what social milieu?
7. What use did they make of the pool during the first two years?
- *8. When did signs begin to appear that the Turners' marriage was breaking up? What were the signs?
9. How did the pool's condition deteriorate when the Turners separated?
- *10. Where did Ted live after Linda left? Why didn't he stay in the house?
11. Who first began to use the pool again? How did the adults justify using the pool?
12. How soon after the Turners left had the neighbors taken over the pool? How were things organized?
- *13. Who swam in the pool besides the Turners' friends? Which of the various "guests" do you think would have been turned away if it could have been done tactfully? Why?
14. What happened at the pool in the evenings? Why did the Murtaugh children spend "hours at their attic window with binoculars"?
15. What did the neighbors do when they noticed a car in the garage and the bedroom windows open? Whom did the car belong to?
16. What was "the root of the divorce"?
- *17. How did Ted feel about seeing his private pool being used so freely? Why didn't he say something? Did his companion feel the same way?
18. What happened to the pool in August?
- *19. When Linda returned, what was "the troublesome question" her lips seemed to be trying to frame?
- *20. What did the pool symbolize for Linda? In what sense had she "drowned" in it?
- *21. When the house was sold, what did the new family do with the pool? Why?
- *22. What is the effect of the sudden switch from simple past to present perfect tense in the second part of the last sentence of the story?

* These questions are the most important for class discussion.

Exercises

A. **ARTICLES.** Fill the blanks with *a, an, the* or nothing, as required by the context. Be prepared to explain your choices.

It was A young pool of _____ fragile type fashioned by laying _____ plastic liner within _____ carefully carved hole in _____ ground. By _____ mid-summer _____ new grass was sprouting, _____ encircling flagstones were in place, _____ blue plastic tinted _____ water _____ heavenly blue, and it had to be admitted that _____ Turners had scored again.

B. **PREPOSITIONS.** Put each of these prepositions in the appropriate blank: *around, at, for, from, in, in, of, on, on, to, with.*

Children grew bored WITH swimming. Roscoe Chace went _____ vacation _____ Italy. Dead dragonflies accumulated _____ the surface _____ the pool. Small deluded toads hopped _____ and swam _____ hopelessly. Linda _____ last returned. _____ Minneapolis she had gone _____ Idaho _____ six weeks, to be divorced.

C. **WORD FORMS.** For each pair of sentences, change the italicized word in the first sentence to the form (of the same word) which is grammatically appropriate for the second sentence.

Ex. Upon *dissolution*, marriages release packets of energy.

WHEN MARRIAGES DISSOLVE, THEY RELEASE PACKETS OF ENERGY.

- The water felt *buoyant* as helium.
The water _____ them up.
- Ted was *cumbersomely* jovial.
Ted's hearty good humor was _____.
- The bodies of horseflies *dotted* the still surface.
The bodies of horseflies were like _____ on the still surface.
- A nylon rope with flotation corks was *reinstalled*.
The _____ of the nylon rope didn't take long.
- The gooselashed, wrinkled children went *shivering* home to dinner.
The children, gooselashed and wrinkled, _____ as they went home to dinner.

- Ted had to suppress his *indignation* at seeing his private pool turned into a public carnival. Ted felt _____ at seeing his private pool turned into a public carnival.

Topics for Discussion or Writing

- The first paragraph of the story is a statement about divorce. The remaining six paragraphs illustrate the statement by describing an "orphaned" swimming pool. Complete the chart below, then answer the three questions on it.

ANALYSIS BY PARAGRAPH

	<i>Time Covered</i>	<i>Description of Pool</i>
¶1	"THE SUMMER THE TURNERS GOT THEIR DIVORCE"	"THEIR SWIMMING POOL HAD NEITHER MASTER NOR MISTRESS"
¶2		
¶3		
¶4		
¶5		
¶6		
¶7		

- What time-span does the story cover?

60|THE ORPHANED SWIMMING POOL

- b) In which paragraphs is the pool described as a living thing?
- c) In which paragraphs is the pool described as something unpleasant or potentially dangerous?
- 2. What does the pool symbolize in the story? Why do you think Updike chose to focus on it, rather than on the children, or one of the parents, in discussing the effects of the divorce?
- 3. Why do you think Ted ran the risk of bringing his mistress to the house when he didn't want any of Linda's friends to know of her existence?
- 4. What effects of a divorce has Updike chosen not to mention in this story?