

A Girl Swimming Is a Body of Water



THE SWIMMING POOL is on the edge of a hill overlooking the valley where the town begins. From up here I can almost see Mount Kinabalu's dark rainforests. I know the names of the things that live among the trees and streams from flicking through Gong Gong's natural history books: the Bornean sucker fish, the Kinabalu serpent eagle, the enormous Rafflesia flower, the Atlas moth with white eyes on its wings.

My cousin Sara and I are ten. We were born just a month apart but she already knows how to dive head first into the deep end and I don't. I slowly lower myself down the cold metal ladder and swim out after her, kicking up a spray of white waves behind me, until my toes dip down and there is nothing there to catch me. I reach for the edge, gasping. I am happier where there's something solid to hold on to, where I can see our splashes making spiral patterns on the hot concrete. From here, I use my

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legs to push myself down. I hover in a safe corner of the deep end, waiting to see how long I can hold my breath. Looking up through my goggles I see rainforest clouds, a watery rainbow. I can see the undersides of frangipani petals floating on the surface, their gold-edged shadows moving towards me. I straighten my legs and point my toes and launch myself towards the sun.

Gong Gong used to drive us to the Sabah Golf Club whenever we came to visit. He would go off for his morning round while Sara and I went straight to the pool, our mums lagging behind us. Po Po stayed home, as usual. Over many years of visiting my grandparents in Malaysia, I can never remember Po Po coming with us to the pool.

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I am white and Malaysian Chinese, though not everyone can tell this straight away. My mother was born in Malaysia and moved to Aotearoa New Zealand when she was seventeen. I was born in Wellington. We moved to New York when I was three for my parents' work, moved back to Wellington four years later, then packed up again four years after that and relocated to Shanghai. I was fifteen when we left Shanghai to move back home again, although by then, home was a slippery word.

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Where is the place your body is anchored? Which body of water is yours? Is it that I've anchored myself in too many places at once, or nowhere at all? The answer lies somewhere between. Over time, springing up from the in-between space, new islands form.

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My first body of water was the swimming pool. Underwater, I was like one of Gong Gong's little silver fish with silver eyes. Like one of those he catalogued and preserved in gold liquid in jars on the shelf in the room where I slept, trapped there glimmering forever. It was here that I first taught myself how to do an underwater somersault, first swam in deep water, first learned how to point my toes, hold my legs together and kick out in a way that made me feel powerful. Here, we spent hours pretending to be mermaids. But I thought of myself less as a mermaid and more like some kind of ungraceful water creature, since I didn't have very long hair and wasn't such a good swimmer. Perhaps half orca, half girl.

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There were pink crabs scuttling along the bottom of the outdoor pool next to my international school in the outskirts of Shanghai. They shone through the chlorine

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like bright, fleshy gems. My friends and I were shocked to see the creatures here, right under our feet, in this colourless stretch of land where there were no birds and no insects but mosquitoes. The sea was not far away from us then, a dark mass just beyond the golf course and a concrete sea wall. It was always there but its presence felt remote, somehow not real, somehow not really full of living things. I felt an urge to scoop up the crabs in my hands and carry them back over the wall that separated us from the biggest body of water I had ever known, the Yangtze River Delta, and beyond that, the East China Sea.

In the concrete city of Shanghai, the over-chlorinated pool became our sanctuary. It sparkled aquamarine against a skyline of dust. Within my close group of friends, we had grown up all over: Singapore, Beijing, Michigan, Wellington. Shann, the coolest and most stylish of us all with her blue-rimmed glasses; Jessie, a blonde cross-country runner and mathematical genius; and Bex, a guitarist who read Russian novels and Kurt Vonnegut in her spare time, who was mixed like me. All of us had moved around the world every few years, and all of us could feel that our time together was running out. We were thirteen, almost fourteen, but underwater we pretended we were something other than human. Or maybe we weren't pretending at all.

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Underwater everything was different, bathed in holy silence and blue echoes. The slanted windows cast wavering lines of liquid light beneath the surface, across our bodies. We felt the way our limbs moved, lithe and strong and brand new. We pushed off from the edge into the blue again and again, diving deeper and deeper each time.

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On a beach on the Kāpiti Coast of Aotearoa, my dad and I wade out across the sand to where shallow waves lap against our calves. Buckets in hand, we feel with our toes for pipi shells poking through the sand. At the place where the Waikanae Estuary widens and empties into the sea, I stand at the edge of the low sandbank and push hard with the balls of my feet. Cracks form in the sand like an ice sheet breaking apart. At the slightest touch of my foot, small sand cliffs crumble beneath me into the shallow estuary. The slow current shifts to make room for the new piece of shore I've created. I learn that with the lightest pressure I am capable of causing a small rupture, a fault.

When we moved back to Aotearoa I taught myself not to be afraid of open water. There is no sand here at the edge of Wellington Harbour, on the beach by my parents'

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house, only pebbles and driftwood and shells. Everything scrapes against me, leaves a mark on my skin: rocks, wind, salt. The cold hurts at first but we push ourselves head first into the waves and come up screaming, laughing. I push away all thoughts of jellyfish and sting-rays, the ones the orca sometimes come to hunt. The shore in sight, I float on my back and let the ocean hold me in its arms. Big invisible currents surge up from beneath, rocking me closer. I dip my head backwards and there is Mākarō Island hanging upside down in my vision, perfectly symmetrical and green, as if it's only just risen out of the water.

To swim in Wellington Harbour is to swim in the deep seam between two tilted pieces of land that have been pulled apart over time. Repeated movements along the Wellington Fault have caused cliff formations to rise up above the harbour's western shore. Little islets Mākarō, Matiu and Mokopuna, which punctuate the narrow neck of the harbour, are actually the tips of a submerged ridge that runs parallel to the taniwha-shaped Miramar Peninsula.

Near Oriental Bay, the harbour carries debris from a summer storm just passed: shattered driftwood, seaweed blooms, plastic milk bottle caps, the occasional earlobe jellyfish. The further out I swim, there is a layer of clear,

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molten blue. It's January, the height of summer, and I've flown home from Shanghai, where I've been living for a year, studying Mandarin at university. My friend Kerry and I dive above and below the rolling waves. At this moment in our lives neither of us is sure where home is exactly, but underwater, the question doesn't seem to matter. Emerging from nowhere a black shape draws close to my body and I lurch, reaching for Kerry, but then I see the outline of wings. The black shag is mid-dive, eyes open, wings outstretched and soaring down into the deep. Kawau pū, the native black shag. They perch on rocky beaches all over the Wellington coastline holding their wings open to dry in the wind and sun. Another wave rises over us and we turn our bodies towards it, opening.

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Home is not a place but a collection of things that have fallen or been left behind: dried agapanthus pods, the exoskeletons of cicadas (tiny ghosts still clinging to the trees), the discarded shells of quail eggs on Po Po's plate, cherry pips in the grass, the drowned chrysanthemum bud in the bottom of the teapot. Some things are harder to hold in my arms: the smell of salt and sunscreen, mint-green blooms of lichen on rock, wind-bent pōhutukawa trees above valleys of driftwood.

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The Ladies' Pond is hidden in a meadow in the corner of Hampstead Heath. I go alone to find it one day during an April heatwave. I put my green swimsuit on under my clothes and stuff some things in my purple backpack: a towel, water, two peaches and a Kit Kat. My swimsuit is the colour of green apple-flavoured sweets and the fabric is shiny, almost metallic, which makes me feel like a mermaid when I wear it. When Sara and I used to pretend to be mermaids in the pool, I always imagined for myself a shimmering tail made of green and purple scales.

I pass the sign at the gate that says 'No men allowed past this point'. I notice that the wooden bench where I've left my things is engraved with the words 'RECLAIM THE NIGHT', and I begin to get a sense that this is a sacred place in many women's lives. The sunlit pond is fringed with reeds and willows and blue dragonflies skim about the surface. Lowering myself down from the platform at the edge, I launch myself into the water too quickly. The cold shoves air out from my lungs. I take deep breaths with my lips close together, trying to steady myself.

The Heath is my neat portion of wilderness, my new home. I walk in awe under the ancient oaks, collecting

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red-veined leaves and miniature pine cones fallen from alder trees. Wanting to be able to describe things accurately, I learn the names of trees from the stories I've read since childhood but that I've never seen in real life. The words sound almost mythical to me now: hazel, yew, ash. I look up the names of birds commonly found on the Heath: siskin, coot, moorhen, redwing, mistle thrush, kestrel. They taste strange to me, like made-up words from English nursery rhymes, foreign compared to the birds I am used to: tūī, pūkeko, kākā, ruru, takahē.

The pond seems to contain layers of translucent pearls and blue-green clouds. A family of black tufted ducks floats around me as I become aware of what my body looks like: disappearing, half-swallowed by the deep. Here, there's nothing to push myself off from. I can't touch the bottom, I can't see more than a few inches ahead of me underwater. I am not sure where the shape of me ends and the dark water begins. The only sure thing is my body. I hold my breath and swim out towards the place where the sun touches the surface.

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When I grew older I looked beyond the canon of Western mythology for myths of women who are neither human

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nor fish, but both. In Malaysia and Indonesia, dugongs – a type of marine mammal similar to manatees, both of the order *Sirenia* – are linked in traditional myth to half-fish half-human creatures. In ancient Chinese texts there are mentions of various kinds of mermaids, including a sea-dwelling people who weave silk from the fine filaments that hold molluscs on to rocks. In Japanese folklore there's a fish creature with a human head called ningyo (人魚). And we can be eager to attach the mythical status of 'mermaid' to the real world. Ama – sea women 海女 – come from generations of skin divers in Japan. They once dived for pearls with only their skins to protect them from cold waters; now they dive for shellfish while wearing traditional white hooded suits thought to ward off evil. On Jeju Island in South Korea, the Haenyeo women also make a living from free diving. Articles often evoke the women as figures from a forgotten past: 'The Last Mermaids of Japan', 'Haenyeo: The Elderly Mermaids of Jeju Island', 'Inside the Island of Sea Women'.

In the Māori myth Pania of the Reef, Pania is a young sea maiden who swims with sea creatures during the day and rests on land at night. One day she falls in love with a human, Karitoki, who doesn't understand why she has to return to the sea each day. He consults a kaumātua, an elder, who tells him Pania won't be able to return to the sea as long as she eats food cooked by humans.

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Karitoki tricks her by putting a piece of food in her mouth while she sleeps. Pania wakes just in time and flees back to the sea, never to return to land again.

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I was near a body of water when I received a phone call from my mother to say Po Po had passed away. She had caught pneumonia in the night and her lungs could not cope. The River Thames flowed darkly beneath me, carrying bits of the city out to sea. I stared down at the current and used the rhythm of its flow to slow my breathing.

I didn't know Po Po well; I can't speak Hakka, the language of my mum's side of the family, and Po Po spoke little English. Our shared language was food. When we got back from the pool she would bring out plates of sticky fried chicken, aubergine and coconut curry, fried bananas wrapped in paper. She'd watch us from the head of the table, her eyes sparkling. A few years ago I gave her a copy of my first poetry book. She smiled and mouthed the title slowly, tasting the letters, her voice catching on the edges of these English words she knew but hadn't often spoken aloud. '*Drift,*' she said. 'What is *drift?*'

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The water radical 水, radical number 85 of 214, is one of the most common in written Chinese. In three short strokes of the calligraphy brush (㇇), it forms part of thousands of characters, most of them relating to water – *snow, river, tears, to swim, to wash, to float, to soak*. And there are some that don't directly relate, mostly verbs: *to live, to exist, to concentrate, to mix, to strain*. Scrolling through my Mandarin dictionary app, I find so many water radical words that there could be enough for an entire language of water radicals. I begin to imagine it. It's an inherited language, one I've carried inside me all along. It carries no distinction between past and present tense, nor between singular and plural; as a result it contains all the places I call home, as well as all my memories, and all my names.

Po Po's name, her real one, was an English name: Mary. The name we called her, Po Po, is the colloquial form of wàipó 外婆, meaning *mother's mother*. Two characters repeated: 婆 婆. Look closer: a woman 女 and a wave 波. There in the upper left-hand corner is the water radical, a small body of water at the edge of her, one I don't fully understand. When I write down her name, I see I have drawn a woman beneath a wave, a woman in the waves.