

# Underwater, I Am Weightless

by Natalie Marsh

I.

I blow through the locker room door to the pool deck too forcefully, nearly slipping on the tiled floor. Coach Kay's gravelly voice echoes across the open space.

"You'll do the final two-hundred at race pace, and we'll use starting blocks for that one."

There are murmurs. I slide in beside Leah, pulling my bright red swim cap tight over my ears. My nostrils fill with the scent of rubber as I let go and the cap snaps against my head. Coach Kay calls out goal splits, and I close my eyes, pay attention to the way my pores open to the muggy warmth of the indoor pool. My hands are shaking. Leah taps my shoulder, and when I open my eyes she's there smiling in that way she does, her mouth closed but her big buck-teeth peeking out just slightly between her lips. I know it means Coach Kay just read our split. We've been the two fastest ninth-graders on the 1971 Girls Swim Team at Cambridge High ever since we joined this winter.

"Let's get 'em, Lou."

I make a clicking sound with my teeth and point at her with finger guns, too scatterbrained to say anything in response. We do this workout once a week, but I always have that same flitting feeling in my chest, my entire body suddenly vibrating, my eyes bulging, taking in too much harsh overhead light. I dip my goggles in the pool and suction them to my face methodically, ritually, making sure to press each lens three separate times.

After the usual Monday warm-up, Leah and I high-five across the orange buoys separating our lanes, sending chlorinated water hurtling outward from the place where our hands meet. And then we're off, rushing water drumming against my swim cap, the sound broken up by my rhythmic breaths. I see Leah's swooping arms to the left in my peripheral vision, using her steady start to guide my pace. The sound of my own heartbeat fills my head, its soft thudding blending with the waves that splash across my face when I turn to breathe. We flip-turn in unison, and I kick hard, knowing the backstretch is my turn to lead. I smile to myself as I rush past the dark tile marking my lane on the pool floor, the movement coming naturally, the water sweet and smooth against my skin, holding me.

After the second to last rep, my breathing has gotten bad, and I'm gulping down air at the wall. Leah just pulls down her swim cap and pushes her goggles to her face, knowing by now that I'll get over it in a minute. I focus on the orange and maroon pattern on the wall, slowing my breathing to the rhythm of an internal chant of the words painted there in bold letters: GO TIGERS!

And then we're on the starting blocks, lanky bodies sleek in our multicolor suits, and Coach Kay blows her whistle, and we cut the water with our outstretched arms. As we bring it home on the backstretch, I close my eyes, imagining the pain collecting around a single point, like magnets to a nail. My body tears through thick darkness; my hip flexors burn with each kick. I pay attention to the angular rotation of each arm above my head, the way my shoulder extends forward and lengthens my stroke. I open my eyes on the next breath and see the flags overhead, and Leah is there beside me, our strokes perfectly matched—and for a moment this movement of

ours is the entire world, our bodies propelling forward side by side. And when we shoot up out of the water at the wall, droplets wicking off our sleek heads, I am laughing an uneven, hiccupy laugh through sharp gasps. *Yes.*

## II.

It's a Sunday in July of 1972, twenty-two days before I turn fifteen, and the electricity has gone out at the corner store again, leaving all three of our fans dusty and still. The drink cooler sits darkened in the back corner, but the greenish outlines of Coca-Cola bottles seem to be generating light, glinting through the fogged glass. I open the blinds on the eastern-facing window, letting the weak six o'clock sun filter in. Swaths of dust motes become visible all at once, swirls of iridescent particles moving in and out of the stacks of canned vegetables and king-sized candy bars. I stand there for a moment, breathing in the musty air, taking stock of the familiar place: to the left of the door, our July display overflows, an enormous tin bucket of saltwater taffy, plastic flowers sprouting out of the candy. Boxes of soda line the street-facing wall, and next to them peach, apple, and strawberry preserves, tins of salt, garlic powder, and cinnamon, murky jars filled with pickled things. And there, nestled in the corner opposite the door is our cash register, which I approach and unlock, its springs sending a puff of dust out at me.

I've run the store on Sundays for two years now, ever since I turned thirteen. Ma always said she needed a break by Sunday, and that it would be good for me to work alone anyway, give me hands-on skills and teach me how to problem solve with no adults around. I didn't need her to give me a reason; I liked the shock of the morning air against my sleep-blurred eyes as I crept out of the house, careful to engage the lock slowly. I made up stories about myself as I walked the mile down the road to town, one day a farmer going to sell the week's crop, the next a fugitive on the run, only traveling by cover of darkness. I loved the soft blue wash of the sky at that hour, the way the horizon seemed to be lit from behind. The rituals of opening the shop always smoothed out that uneven, jittery feeling in my chest—I watched my hands move about in the dim yellow light, muscle memory guiding them to unlock the cash register, open the blinds, restock the bucket full of caramels at the checkout. I relished the simplicity of it, working at the corner store. It wasn't circuitous and tricky like Mrs. Greenwood's geometry problems, or ironic in a way that I never understood like Sheila Bowman's jokes, her enormous green eyes always looking right past me and all of the other nobodies at Cambridge High.

At the corner store, I felt like I was creating something, adding to something real. It was the click of the cash register, the sharp *ping* of the bell as customers walked out the door with their familiar Butterfingers and Heath Bars, or Jay's Potato Chips and French onion dip. But it was something more, too. When my classmates complained of having to work for their parents, I beamed. My grandparents had started this business sixty years ago, converting the old auto shop into the town's first corner store with their own bare hands. I liked thinking about how they had done that, picturing the two of them on their hands and knees, sanding the wood floors in the thick August air. Sometimes when I took inventory mid-morning, after the first round of

customers, it felt like all three of us were standing there with clipboards in hand, squinting at the gleaming jars of mayo and horseradish.

Today, the morning is slow. Mrs. Young stops in for a pack of cigarettes. The Mason children come by with their weekly allowance, meticulously selecting an assortment of candies. A gust of air thick with humidity ruffles the newspapers stacked near the entrance as the three of them scurry out the door. Every couple of minutes, the wind chime out front tinkles, penetrating the silence shrouding the little store. I shift periodically in the tattered chair behind the cash register, my hips aching dully from yesterday's meet. I am absentmindedly rereading my frayed copy of *Slaughterhouse Five*, only half absorbing the words.

Mr. Levitt comes in around noon for a sack of cornmeal. As he crosses to the register, he shoves a calloused hand into the taffy bucket and grabs as many as he can hold in his enormous palm. I wince at the abruptness of it—his leathery hand driving so sharply into the rainbow candy, his nails rimmed permanently with dirt, thin black hairs sprouting up out of the scaly skin.

He's been our closest neighbor ever since I can remember, but we don't talk much. The only thing I know about him is that his wife left sometime when I was in elementary school. People in town made a big deal out of it for a week or two, saying it had been something bad, something they wouldn't have expected from a man like Levitt. Something about a girl out in the wide open fields past town. It happened at night—no one could be sure of the details—and she was so young, everyone said. No one knew how she figured it out, his wife, but she was gone within the week. People went on talking like they always do, but everyone forgot soon enough. And that was how it was with people in town anyway—always making a big deal. Who knows how much of it is ever true.

Sometimes Ma invited him over for dinner after that, even though I could tell she never felt like it.

"It's important to be *hospitable*, Lou," she'd say as if trying to convince herself, the tail end of the word coming out of her mouth awkwardly. "Besides. He's got to be lonely over there."

Now he steps right up to the register, too close, his potbelly pushing up against the counter, round and taut under his tucked-in T-shirt. Suddenly I am thinking about that girl, about the raw fear that must have swallowed her up out in those fields, the night so black she couldn't see her own palms. I never even knew her name, and besides, no one talked about it anymore. But I can't take my eyes off Mr. Levitt's rough hands, even after he slides the taffies toward me. He takes heavy breaths through his nose as I count the misshapen candies two by two, and I can feel his eyes on my moving fingers. When the cash register springs open, I flinch.

III.

"The door was unlocked when I got to the store this morning, Lou."

"Oh. Sorry."

"And the door to the supply closet was left open."

"I must've gone in there for the broom after closing yesterday and forgotten..." I trail off, knowing she's staring at me. I look down at my hands, focusing on the creases in my palms, my mind racing.

“Well just try to remember to lock the door next time. We don’t want anyone getting in there.”

I mean to say something more, but I just nod. Ma gets up from the kitchen table to take the trash out. I stay like that, eyes fixed on my palms, until I hear the screen door swing shut, the clack of wood against wood.

I imagine how it would be if Bo were here. His eyes would flicker with sudden understanding, just knowing from the way I sat. Maybe he’d ask in that soft way of his, “Hey kid, you sure everything’s okay?” Maybe I would even tell him, or at least try to piece together what I knew—those dirt-crusting hands, the walls of the supply closet tightening around me, how strange it was that I could hear that dripping pipe in the back corner the whole time.

Or maybe we would just sit in silence. He didn’t mind sitting in silence, which I liked. Sometimes he would blurt out some wild thing, like suggesting we go sit on the roof while it snowed so that we could watch the world change from above. I would nod along, and that made me feel like I was living someone else’s life for just a second, someone simpler and less afraid.

Bo turned eighteen last year, drafted into the army three weeks later. Ma was always hinting that she was worried about me now that he was gone, worried I wasn’t making friends. I convinced myself I liked it better this way, curled up in my room every Saturday night, paging through his old comic books while Ma sat alone at the kitchen table, hunched over piles of bills and crumpled catalogs. Besides, I like the quiet. I feel a hot rush of blood from my stomach to my head every time I think about the sticky air out past the wheat-processing plant, David Bowie crackling through some senior boy’s radio, the tall grass rustling in the darkness, crushed beer cans accumulating in a pile somewhere.

I look up when the door bangs shut again, and Ma is already at the kitchen sink, scrubbing her hands vigorously, with her eyes set straight ahead so that I can tell she’s upset with me. I cross my arms on the table and fold my head over them. The sun is an enormous orange orb, sinking fast through the western-facing window, and its hazy golden light splits into a kaleidoscope of blurred shapes when I squint. I stay there like that, head in the cradle of my arms, until Ma has gone up to bed and the room is dark and still all around me.

#### IV.

I am lying facedown on my bed, breathing in my own dried sweat. I alternate between opening my left eye, then my right, feeling the pilled sheets against my moving eyelashes. Stretching my arms out to either side of myself, making my body into a T-shape, I turn my head to look out the fogged window. Dead leaves swirl wildly down the road, lifting in a flurry of browns and oranges, then shooting back downward. I can hear the slow drip of the leaky sink in the bathroom across the hall. Christmas is in three days, and still no snow.

“Lou? Honey?” I let her voice hang in the cold, dry air of my room.

“Lou Lou? I’m going to the store. I’m all out of Hamburger Helper. Come with me?”

I plug my left nostril with my thumb and breathe in through the right one, then shift my thumb over and breathe out through the left. I do this until I hear her footsteps creaking away from my door, then down the stairs.

Something always opens in my chest after I hear Ma’s footsteps fade. Not quite a pang, more of an uneven sinking sensation. The thing is—it’s never purposeful. I always think I am

going to reply. Sometimes I see myself splitting in two, a wiser self and a more bitter one, the two always debating about how to interact with her. The bitter self usually wins, most often by keeping me quiet. Which I know kills Ma.

I try not to think about her face as she shrugs into her tattered parka downstairs, the way her eyebrows bunch together as she bites her lower lip. Feeling the house shudder as she closes the door behind her, I breathe out, sending stale air across my pillow, creating miniature flurries of dust which glow from behind in the waning five o'clock light. I rotate my body, sliding my numb toes into my slippers. My vision fills with dark splotches when I stand up, only the second time I've stood up all day. I wait for that tight, swelling feeling in the bridge of my nose to subside, and then I head downstairs.

V.

It was one of those days when everything seemed to glisten with a fresh coat of wax, the sun so bright and clean, the Wisconsin sky an enormous bowl. It was the summer after eighth grade, and I was sitting on the steps outside the Cambridge Community Pool, competing with myself in a cherry pit-spitting competition. I liked the *pop* of the pit as it left my mouth, and I rushed my way through the bag of warm cherries mostly for the satisfying way my cheeks filled and then deflated with each attempt. I was the only one left waiting for my ride, as usual, but time was no issue, the golden day radiant all around me. The wet cling of my suit against my dewy skin didn't even bother me. I was in that floaty post-practice state, where everything feels soft and easy by comparison with heavy breath and burning muscles.

I was waiting on Ma to close up at the corner store, so I finished the cherries, keeping one last pit in my mouth to roll around with my tongue, and headed back to the locker room to pee. The familiar scent of rubber mixed with sweat rushed out at me as I leaned into the swinging door, the smell momentarily transporting me back to countless other swim practices. I made a beeline for stall number two out of habit, knowing before I got there the way the metal lock would feel between my fingers. It was once I wrestled out of my sticky bathing suit, fused to my torso like skin, that I noticed it. A tiny reddish-brown glob smeared across the inside of my suit, between my legs. I remember holding my breath, my fingers fumbling to check if this was really happening. I'd only ever overheard other girls talk about it—usually keeping quiet in some bathroom stall as Sheila Bowman bragged to her entourage that she'd been using tampons since sixth grade. Ma never brought it up.

I quickly smeared my fingers on a wad of toilet paper, huffing a hot, angry breath out of my nose as I looked around the bathroom stall for some miracle solution. All I could think was—*No*. I felt betrayed, my own body spinning out of my reach.

Five minutes later, I waddled to the car with toilet paper clumped between my legs.

"You know what this means, sweets—you've got to be careful."

I turned toward Ma, only half understanding, entirely engrossed in my own universe of discomfort.

"High school will be a different place. Boys might want things from you."

I sank down in my seat, letting my knees press up against the glove box, and responded to her with a sigh that came out as a half-whimper. That night, I didn't sleep.

VI.

"And what you seem to be suggesting, Jackson, is that Holden's red hunting hat could be a *symbol* for his isolation. Now, who wants to remind us what a *symbol* is?"

I look down at my palms, now tattooed with smudges of blue and purple ink. We are only twenty minutes into third period, Miss Albertson's English class, and I have exhausted the surface area on my hands. I mostly draw geometric things—shapes and lines and optical illusions—but sometimes I draw faces, adding details to their inky, two-dimensional expressions until they are unrecognizable. Sometimes I let the doodles snake all the way up my bony arms, but I try not to, because then Miss Albertson or Mr. Lafayette or Mrs. DiAngelo or whoever usually notices, and then the gravity in the room shifts, and students are twisting their spines and craning their necks to get a good look at me in the back corner, waiting for me to explain how I solved for  $x$  or how women's roles changed after the Second World War. And last time Miss Albertson noticed, she called Ma, and then I had to pretend to have too much homework to come downstairs for dinner for the whole next week.

Lily Peter's nasally voice brings me back into the room.

"A symbol is something that appears to be one thing but represents another, like a physical object representing an abstract idea."

"That's exactly it, very good."

I watch from behind as Lily tightens her ponytail, the length of it swishing from left to right as she returns her hands to her desk in a practiced gesture of self-satisfaction. I actually don't mind *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden reminds me of Bo. Ma always shakes her head when he comes up now, as if to say that she'd rather just forget she had a son fighting in Vietnam. I liked talking about him, though. It made it easier to live alone with Ma, remembering the way he'd sing loudly to himself in the bathroom, or the way he'd imitate all of his least favorite teachers at Cambridge High so accurately it sent me into fits of laughter, my face flushing bright pink until my cheeks were sore from smiling. I tried not to think about how different things would be if he were here.

The bell rings and the room churns around me, a whirlpool of fluttering notebooks and swinging backpacks, conversation blossoming all at once, feet scuttling hurriedly toward the cafeteria. I am zipping up my backpack, making sure I move slowly over the uneven part to avoid snagging it, when I notice Miss Albertson making her way towards me. I hurry up and scramble towards the door, but her voice cuts through the passing period hum.

"Lou—"

She says my name softly, more like a question than I was expecting. I turn my head toward her too quickly, and I can see in her eyes that she knows something is gnawing at me.

"I just wanted to check in."

"Mm, yeah, sure, thanks Miss Albertson."

I glance up at her as she approaches, then back at the floor. Miss Albertson is my youngest teacher, maybe thirty or thirty-five. Her purple cat-eye glasses slip down the bridge of her nose with each step, the soles of her ballet flats padding across the tile floor. She wears her auburn hair in a clean-cut pixie that always seems to stay the same length, framing her angular face.

"Something got you down lately, Lou?"

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just tired I think.”

She pauses. The last few kids trickle out the door, and the sound of squeaking tennis shoes blends with the din of voices in the hallway, filling the silence.

“I don’t want to pry. But know that I’m a resource. You can tell me what’s going on if you’d like.”

I nod, breathing in the smell of pencil shavings and floor cleaner. And then I glance up to meet Miss Albertson’s eyes, framed by her lavender glasses, and there is something there that is full of understanding—and I feel a current rise in me like a bucket about to overflow, and then it does, and I am sobbing in room 302, salty droplets hurtling downward onto my tattered Converse as I stand there picking at the hangnail on my thumb, my eyes cast downward, trying to catch my breath through snuffles heavy with snot.

She reaches out one hand, then another, and pulls me into her chest, and it doesn’t feel strange. The sobs come in surges, and I give up trying to wipe the snot from my upper lip with my sweatshirt sleeve. Standing there like that, with her arms wrapped around my shoulders and the thud of her heart in my ear, I tumble deeper and deeper into myself. In class the next day, she doesn’t mention it.

## VII.

“Everything okay, Lou?”

Leah’s voice drifts from the stall over. Acid sears the back of my throat, globs of the peanut butter sandwich I ate two hours ago clogging my reply.

“Yeah,” I gargle. “Guess I’m nervous or something.”

This is the fourth time I’ve vomited in the locker room before swim practice, my insides roiling at the thought of the muggy pool. It isn’t so much the pulsing anticipation of sharp gasps after each rep, but the thought of standing there bare on the pool deck, my body exposed and not my own.

The locker room door creaks shut and I know I am the last one in here, my knees cold and hard against the stall floor. This is the first time Leah’s noticed. I haven’t been as open with her this season, and we both know it, but we don’t say anything. We’d always been “swim friends” in my head, the kind that limit outside-of-practice interaction to geeking out about world records and comparing splits. Now that it was junior year and Leah remained practically my only friend (except for Bo, but that didn’t count), the distinction seemed kind of ridiculous. But still, swim friends were good for high-fives and familiar cheers and breathing hard in unison. The words would come out garbled and wrong if I tried to tell her the full story. Even alone in the stillness of my own room, I can’t make sense of it. Sometimes I shoot up in bed, feeling the walls of the corner store supply closet around me and smelling its mildew, but sometimes I forget about that July day altogether, and instead something unnamed sits at the back of my throat, festering.

## VIII.

On the morning of my seventeenth birthday, I wake up to the heavy warmth of my down comforter sticking to my bare legs. The box fan that I have pointed directly at my head is quiet—the power must’ve gone out during the night again. I kick off my damp blankets and stare down

at my feet absentmindedly. In that slippery state between sleep and wakefulness, my gangly legs look far away, as if they aren't attached to my hips and torso. I hold up a clammy palm and trace its creases, like badly scarred gashes. Ever since I stopped going to swim practice, I've felt more like a passenger in my body—which is to say, I've forgotten its rhythms, the shape of it as I cleave through the water, the burning at the top of my chest as I gulp down the humid pool air. I can only remember a vague outline of that bursting feeling at the end of the last rep, when everything else falls away except for the pulsing word propelling me towards the wall: *Go*. Looking down at my legs, my memory shorts out when it tries to make the connection between this body and that one.

But that was before swim practice turned into something foreign, a place where hot acid coated my throat and I fell behind Leah lap after lap, her swooping stroke powerful and smooth, mine shaky and inconsistent. The day Coach Kay told me she had moved me to the next slowest pace group, the sharp pang I would have expected didn't come; there was no hotness rushing from my stomach to my head. I was already off somewhere else.

I start twelfth grade in a month, which means I'll have to decide by next week if I plan to rejoin the team for fall training. Ma has been asking about it every other day—not nagging like she used to, though. She's been softer since I started picking up corner store shifts in the time I'd ordinarily be at practice, helping her out with the afternoon rush now that her joints were worsening. She didn't pry that first day, when I lied and told her practice was cancelled, and she silently accepted the extra hand every day since then, the stripped tires of my bike crunching in the gravel out front to mark four o'clock. It went on like that for all of second semester last year, us quietly shuffling about the store together, two parallel lines traveling in the same direction but never intersecting. It wasn't so bad that way. I mostly did it by default, feeling so aimless that any task put in front of me would do. But there was a certain rhythm to it, something that ironed out the uneven ripples in my thoughts. Swimming used to draw me into my body, further and further towards my center until I was wild alive, every inch of me pulsing with energy. Working at the corner store those gray afternoons did the opposite: it brought me further and further away from myself until I forgot my body altogether—which is just what I wanted.

I swing my legs over the side of my bed, letting my calloused feet land on the floor with a thud. As I gather my greasy hair into a ponytail above my neck, I register the smell of blueberry pancakes, and I smile to myself for just a second. It's nice to see Ma make a fuss over my birthday still, even if we're usually floating through different universes. Working at the corner store these past few months had brought us together in an unexpected sort of way. In a way that skims along, penetrating no deeper than the surface, but makes the hours slip by more easily. We almost never talked during the afternoon rush, me always zigzagging around the store restocking candy bars and cans of pickles, her always clicking away at the cash register. But her eyes felt different on me during those hours, less full of piercing questions. I could disappear between those rusty shelves, bursting with corn nuts and sunflower seeds, all the while knowing that we'd walk the mile home together. It was the soft plodding of our feet in the dust that I needed—nothing overt or extravagant, just something tangible to hold onto, a thread connecting me to the world.

I peel off my nightshirt, rummaging through my unfolded laundry for the T-shirt I wore yesterday, and the day before that. I hold it to my face for a moment when I find it, its stale smell



comforting. Blocky, faded letters span across the chest: Cambridge High Girls Swim Team. I slip it over my head and plod slowly down the stairs. When I enter the kitchen, Ma's back is to me, steam swirling wildly above her head as she flips the pancakes.

"Hey," I say flatly.

She whips around, sweat beading at her temples, her face flushed.

"Aw hey, sweets. Happy birthday."

Before I realize it, I've broken into a smile.

## IX.

Ma insists that we make the trip to the beach to celebrate, even though I'd rather not acknowledge graduation. She asks if I want to invite Leah. I skip over the subject quickly, lying that Leah will be on a week-long vacation with her family. I have no idea where Leah will be. We haven't spoken in months.

"Too bad. She was always so sweet at those swim meets. Thoughtful girl."

"Yeah," I say. I don't like when Ma talks about swimming as if I didn't stop going to practice altogether one day, didn't vomit before practice so many times that the acid tightened my throat, left me wheezing at the wall after every rep. But I don't want to have to explain it to her either, mostly because I don't have the words, I think. I only have the shape of them, the way they converge at the back of my throat in an unmoving, toxic mass.

She did say something once, early on, right when I stopped going to practice.

"What we enjoy changes, I suppose."

At the time, I mumbled a half-reply and slipped quietly away to my room to pick at my hangnails and rock slowly back and forth on my bed. Swimming hadn't changed for me. It was just that I couldn't do it inside myself anymore. As soon as I stepped onto the pool deck, my speedo a second skin, I left myself—and all practice long I would look down at my body with harsh, judging eyes. My spindly limbs and broad shoulders used to be my secret weapons as I sliced through the water. Now they felt heavy and wrong.

Two days after graduation, we make the two hour drive east to Lake Michigan, arriving in time to spend the afternoon there. The drive feels longer than usual, the flat land striped with rows of corn as far as I can see. I count out-of-state license plates to pass the time, and Ma interrupts the radio every once in a while to respond to the hosts as if they're in the car with us, nodding along with "Mhm," or, "That's right." By the time we pull into the parking lot at noon, my stomach is twisting itself into knots. I tear through the foil wrapped around my soggy turkey sandwich before we find a spot to sit, mustard oozing onto my hands as we walk. The temperature drops in sharp, unpredictable chunks as we near the lake, the wind picking up.

We wolf down the sandwiches under a maple tree up on the bluff, knowing we won't get any shade once we make it down to the beach. While Ma sops up extra mayo with the rest of her bread, I lick my fingers and trace the tree line with my eyes, thinking about how odd it is that I never have to set foot in Cambridge High again if I don't want to. Which I don't. At the ceremony, Principal Wang said my full name too forcefully, "Lou-eeze," hissing out the second syllable through his teeth. I felt like we were all inside some kind of uninteresting TV show as he read our names and gave his speech, sweat pooling on my plastic folding chair and dripping down the backs of my knees.

Ma and I make it down the steps, and there it is. Water extending all the way to the horizon. It's a Wednesday afternoon and almost no one is around, just an old woman walking an old gray dog, and further away a cluster of teenagers throwing stones off the pier. I turn to Ma and there is a rapture in her gray eyes that I can't remember ever having seen. Her sight is trained ahead on the blue expanse. She notices me looking and turns toward me, then nods at the water, a knowing smile growing on her face.

We stand there at the edge for a while, where the waves lick the beach, flattening out the sand like packed brown sugar. And then I feel something rising in my chest, like light expanding outward, the sun overhead pulsing down through a clear sky. I dive in all at once, the early June water icy and smooth, and then my entire being is one word: *Go*. I drive my body through the water like a wedge, waves lapping across my back. I scoop my arms downward and feel the water rushing through my toes, my breath in time with my heartbeat, and then I am off, moving toward the horizon. And I don't know when I come back or how, but when I do I am laughing through violent shivers, and I cannot stop even when Ma says over and over, "You nearly gave me a heart attack, Lou." The whole way home, I can see the stars out the passenger window, specks of light in the indigo sky. I look at my goosebumpy arms, my slender fingers, my bony knees pressed up against the glovebox. And rising slowly in my awareness, like distant music growing near, are the words I've been waiting for: *Thank you*.