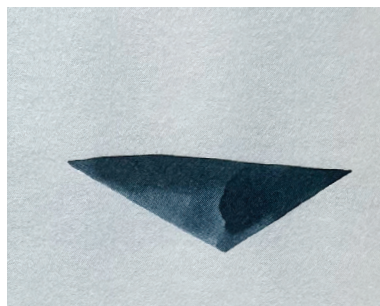
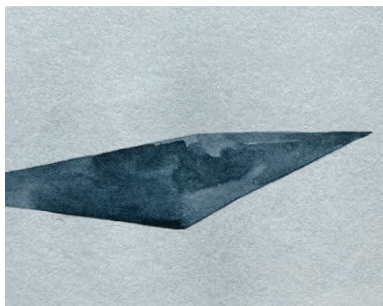


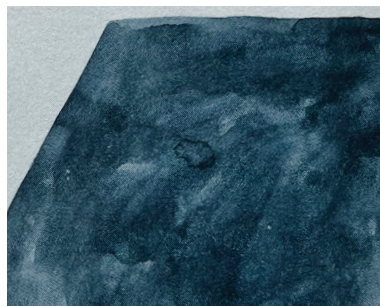
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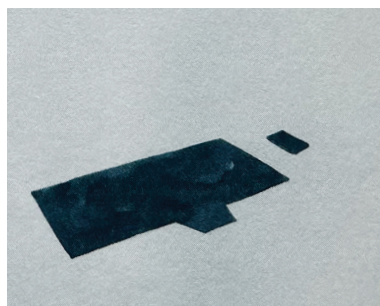
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13. Asphalt Green (Upper East Side), New York City

14. Fitness First, Baker Street, London

15. Highbury Pool, London

16. Serson Pool, Mississauga, Ontario

17. Barbados Aquatic Centre, Barbados

18. Foster Pool, Lakewood, Ohio

Seven Swims

OMAR EL AKKAD

The American Ambassador's Villa

It must have been the fall of 1988 or the winter of 1989. We were first-graders at a pool party: we lost our minds. For a few hours it was all cannonballs and sugar and squealing, and maybe somewhere on the periphery a grown-up in the employ of the embassy was watching to make sure none of us drowned, but they were invisible to us then, or invisible in my recollection now.

I remember it was a hot day. Of course it was: we lived in a desert; they were all hot days. I thought I remembered the smell of chlorine, though I'm probably superimposing it onto the memory because it would make sense for the pool to smell like chlorine. I don't remember the face or voice of the ambassador's daughter, my first crush. I don't remember what we said to each other during those couple of minutes when we found ourselves alone under the diving board, hanging off the edge as it rubber-banded under the feet of our diving classmates.

The only thing I remember clearly is feeling in that moment, for the first time in my life, completely weightless. In the more than three decades since, I've only come close to that same lightness a handful of times, brief carefree bursts amid the sludge of obligation and anxiety and numbing day-to-dayness of growing old. Moments when water does what it does, pulls the punctuation out of the body's sentences, and life can be lived as it should be, in run-ons.

The Doha Sheraton Hotel and Resort

Every Friday afternoon the staff would inflate a giant red dog named Pluto and drop it in the middle of the pool. Pluto, who looked nothing like the Disney character, who more than anything else just looked kind of stoned, had four limbs, each stretching out perpendicular to the tube that made up its torso. Once deployed, Pluto became the site of an aquatic King of the Hill. The big kids clambered on and tried to climb the unstable, upward-pointing tube Pluto's mouth and bloodshot eyes were painted onto. The smaller kids would team up, try to hoist one another onto the thing, usually without success. It was chaotic, and I imagine people don't do this sort of thing anymore, like how they took those spin-till-you-throw-up wheels out of most playgrounds.

One Friday, I dove into the pool at exactly the wrong time, as the staff were easing Pluto in. When I looked up, the water's surface had turned a dull red. Panic set in. The sense of drowning comes with a clarity of sorts: you get to know intimately, if only for a few seconds, your body's every avenue of retreat. At any given moment there are at least a few voices conversing in my head, and the dominant one is in second person: *You need to do this. You forgot about that.* But I discovered on that day that in moments of real terror, the same voice switches to close communal first: *We're going to die.*

I thrashed until I saw daylight. Breaking the surface, I clung onto the line of little red and blue buoys that separated the shallow and deep ends. Likely there was no real danger. But for the rest of the day I felt impervious. Back then we lived, my friends and I, these incredibly sheltered lives, upper

middle class in the wealthiest country on earth, a place whose upper middle class was, by anyone else's definition, filthy rich. We were newly teenagers, and we spent our weekends at the hotel pool and our weekdays at British and American schools, and when danger arrived, rarely, and even if without any real teeth, it was a kind of aliveness. I'd survived a brush with drowning; I was toughened by it, immunized somehow. By the next day the feeling was gone.

Naseem Gardens

For most of high school I lived in a gated compound next door to what was called the Pizza Hut plaza, this gaggle of fast-food joints where, there being nothing much else to do in Qatar in the mid-nineties, everyone hung out. On weekends you could spend hours watching the Land Rovers and Mercedes sedans drive in slow circles around the plaza, the drivers yelling their phone numbers out at the girls as they passed.

Naseem Gardens was, like a lot of compounds in the Arabian Gulf, made up of the same block villas and populated overwhelmingly by expats. The villas were all concrete, painted white to deflect the heat. In the middle of the compound was a massive pool.

I lived in Naseem Gardens for five years and swam in that pool maybe a dozen times. Most days it would have been mine alone, all the little awning-sheltered lounge chairs deserted. But I hardly ever bothered. It was nothing special, to have a private pool at your disposal.

Every expat in a place like Qatar lives a kind of gilded but temporary existence. The day your work visa doesn't get renewed, you're done. The year I turned sixteen, that day came for my dad. He'd seen

the writing on the wall years earlier and, as a contingency plan, began the process of applying to immigrate to this place we knew nothing about: Canada.

One night during my last week in Doha, a few of my friends came over to Naseem Gardens to visit, and we went night swimming. It was after hours, but the security guard looked the other way for fear one of us might be the offspring of someone important, someone who might, on a whim, get that security guard deported. We swam for hours. I remember it was late August, the humidity so thick the air felt wetter than the water. I remember the relief of plunging into that pool, and again something like weightlessness, the end-of-year exams over and done with, all of us young and the summer ours. But beneath all that, there was something else, the earliest understanding that I would miss this, that I should have soaked it up while I had the chance, this privilege, because it was going away now, and my life would never be like this again.

By the start of September my parents and I were in Montreal, cooped up in a rented apartment downtown. The first time I got on a city bus, I folded a twenty-dollar bill and stuffed it in the coin deposit, assuming it would spit out change: I'd never used public transit before. It's a crushing thing, to start life over. It's the opposite of lightness.

The Baths

The most beautiful swimming hole in the world is on the southern coast of a tiny Caribbean island called Virgin Gorda. The cheapest way to get there is to fly down to Saint Thomas, by way of Orlando or some other tourist hub, then take a series of commuter boats, first to Tortola, the largest of the British Virgin

Islands, then Virgin Gorda. It's a couple days' travel, at least, and pretty ad hoc toward the end: sometimes the boats show up, sometimes they don't.

The Baths is a small beach lined with massive granite boulders. Over the years, the boulders have been smoothed out by the surf. They lean onto the backs and sides of one another, and in the crevices between them is a network of tide pools and half-submerged tunnels, made glittering in places by shafts of intruding sunlight. Every nook screams adventure; you can't help but feel like a child.

My girlfriend and I arrive in Virgin Gorda at the tail end of a tropical storm. The wind sends the ocean slamming in through all the little gaps and fissures. The insides of the Baths resemble the bowels of a sinking steamship, dangerous with flooding. Elsewhere the tourists complain about their bum luck with the weather, but I fall in love. I remember the beaches along the north coast of Egypt, where I was born, where years later, on our visits back to see family, I played in the surf until the salt turned my lips purple. It's good to grow up with that kind of water, with the way it upends a body and how, in the oddest moments, the same upending can spark a memory and make a strange place feel, briefly, like home.

Lake Ontario

One night, my friend Anna comes over and we go for a bike ride. Back then I lived in Liberty Village, a little neighbourhood on the west side of downtown Toronto, about a five-minute walk north of the lake. It's summer, that unicorn week where it gets proper hot without being muggy, just before the long, sad decline into winter grey-scale begins.

We have nothing to do. The mid-twenties are the oldest that young can feel, and I don't realize yet how fleeting it is to be twenty-seven and have no real obligations beyond a day job, to have all this time to fit boredom into. The moon's out, it's pretty. I ask her if she wants to go swim in the lake. She says yes.

Somewhere past a pedestrian bridge on Lake Shore Boulevard we find the ugliest stretch of beach I've ever seen. We dump our bikes and go swimming. It's a terrible piece of water, clammy and boat-oil slick. As a general rule, it's not a good idea to go swimming anywhere within sight of the CN Tower.

There are boats anchored a few metres out, and we swim till we're near them and we listen for snippets of conversation and it occurs to me that this is my first real bit of night swimming since that last week in Qatar, the last week of my old life. And again there's that feeling of lightness, of owning time, of making a summer night do the sort of thing a summer night should always do: fester with living.

Halfway Log Dump

Up near Tobermory, about a four-hour drive north of Toronto, there's a gorgeous little bouldering spot right on Georgian Bay. Anytime but in the summer it's miserable, but if you get a good weekend in August, you can climb a smattering of rocks that overlook and in some cases sit up to their middles in the water.

The climbing is good, but the water's stunning. Ghostly emerald, the rocks underneath visible for twenty or thirty metres out, until the green fades into the dark-blue deep. My first time there, on a trip with a few friends from my climbing gym,

I stand awhile just staring. It looks painted. I ignore the rocks entirely and walk into the water. I swim until early hypothermia.

It feels like speaking a different language, the coldness of it. I read once that whatever weather you experience between the ages of five and eight is the weather you're acclimated to for the rest of your life. Probably it's the same way with water. I got to these places too late in life to become fluent in cold. It's a beautiful swim, but the lightness doesn't ever come.

Hood River Hotel

For most of the weekend, we have the pool to ourselves. I tell my daughter the key is to pretend you're riding a bicycle, though when I think about it, the movement of the legs is maybe closer to that of an egg beater. Then I start to wonder if she knows what an egg beater is, and by the time I look up, she's gliding to the other end of the pool, serene and oblivious on a floatie. I want to tell her that back in my day parents taught their kids to swim by throwing them in the deep end, but nobody ever threw me in the deep end. I don't know a single person who learned to swim that way. She splashes me in the face and moves on.

To keep from losing our minds during the pandemic, my wife and I started planning these little weekend trips to nearby hotels. The only requirement is that the place have a pool. The kids, now five and two and both having lived most of their lives in some measure of social isolation, love to swim.

I'm not a particularly good parent, I don't think. I was an only child. I spent very little time around babies and toddlers once I was done being one, and

I'm a slow learner: by the time I figured out how to take care of a one-year-old, my daughter was four.

But we're good together, she and I, and in the pool at night in some utterly forgettable hotel in some utterly forgettable town in the middle of northern Oregon, I can see her finding it, that same lightness. I know this might be the only language

her childhood and mine ever share—that likely she'll never really understand all that much about growing up on the other side of the planet or standing bewildered and freezing in Montreal at sixteen or the rest of the muddled existence that was me before her. But that weightlessness, that unshackling, that joy, already it's hers. B