His voice was familiar, the way a hot bath feels. But it took me a moment to place his face. I hadn't noticed him enter the café; now he had one of my tea bowls in his hand, turning it as if to catch the light. It looks like pottery excavated from a tomb, he said, something you'd find an ashy body clutching in Pompeii. At first I couldn't tell if he had recognized me. Was he mocking me? But he looked so open I simply replied, "They're all mine," gesturing towards the two shelves of ceramics. It was only then he spoke my name.

It had been the first thing he had said to me, too. He had transferred to my high school and, like me, was on our swimming team. But for a co-ed school, our teams were very segregated. We went through most of that first year without speaking a word to one another. I used to doubt that he was even aware of my existence. He was one of those people who are effortlessly good at whatever they try—swimming, tennis, public speaking, maths and science—and like most really gifted people I have met, popular without seeming to care. So when I heard him call my name, just as I had braced myself to start another late-night swim at my local pool, I didn't quite believe it. I couldn't shake the feeling it was some kind of prank. I didn't think he even knew my name. It was only after he sat down, trailing his toes in the lane next to mine, that he asked how long I could hold my breath.

I started a few months after my parents' accident. I've had to re-enact my feelings on hearing the news so many times—to family, teachers, psychiatrists, and boyfriends—that it's hard to tell now what parts I really felt, and what parts I invented under the weight of all those expectant faces. But from the start, I know that I fixated on the moment of impact: what they must have seen as the car hit the water, as the air began to stream away in bubbles the way it does in the movies, as their vision was filled with the dark water. I would lie submerged and see the roof transform into a sunken city. It was months before my aunt caught me in the act. Through the wall of water, I couldn't hear

her knocking on the bathroom door; my first inkling of her presence was when her face blocked out the lights, just before her hands hauled my shoulders from the bath.

I've grown out of it now. After my aunt caught me, I changed bodies of water—spent hours practising swimming further and further underwater. Once you're used to it, there is no feeling like it: the calm stillness of a private, silent world, the hypnotic rhythm of slow, wide strokes, the faint echo of your heartbeat. Even the tightness in your throat becomes your friend. I've stopped trying to push myself the way I used to. Now, I'll do a few lengths underwater during my weekly swim, but there is no urgency to it. It's a kind of meditation. But back then I was driven. I would chase the dark clouds that eat the edges of your vision, the numb, leaden ache in your arms and legs that comes when you take yourself right to the edge. I used to love it. In my café, seeing him again, I just felt a hot wash of shame. I was afraid he'd look at me as though he knew.

That night, in the silence of the nearly empty pool, I hadn't searched his face for the same hint of derision—or worse, pity. I had more spunk back then. Chin out, I said, just watch. Normally it takes a good warm up to swim more than 25 metres underwater. And the worst thing you can do is try breath-holding angry: hot blood demands fresh air. But I was like ice. Before I knew it, I was at the other end, doing a rough touch-turn before kick-thrusting off again. It was only on the return length I started to slow. You feel it in your throat first. A clenching, like it's trying to swallow against your will. If you're not careful, you can start to panic then. But if you keep cool, you can gain a few more metres before the tingling starts in your extremities. I used to practise the piano in my head. Something with a steady rhythm—Dave Brubeck or Bill Evans—but complicated enough to keep my brain busy. Because once the tingling in your fingertips and toes turns to a deep throb, the blackness isn't far away.

That was when I saw his face. Just as my vision narrowed and smudges started swallowing the blue space around me. A little sneer. Disappointment. Disinterest, even?

My chest was aching now, but the imagined picture of him looking at me like a child drove me on. The lights throbbed in the water. I took another wide stroke. Less than two metres from the wall. Stretching out my fingers, I expected the familiar touch of tiles, but all I felt was heavy weight. I broke the surface, gasping for the first sweet rush of air. Instead of relief, I felt a wave of disappointment. Turning my head towards him in defiance I was surprised to see him beaming. It's funny, though, it isn't that look I remember all these years later—the smile he turned on for me, whether in the spa later that night, chatting until the pool attendants asked us to leave, or casually between team training sessions—but the one I imagined as my fingers flailed inches from the wall. I guess that's why it took me so long to recognize him.

The first thing he wanted to know was how long I'd been living there. The café was quiet, so I made him a coffee and joined him. He had just moved, he said, for a six-month stint. He was cagey about his work, fiddling with his coffee cup, and before I could ask more, he turned the subject back to me. I liked the way he smiled when he apologized about the Pompeii quip. I don't have an eye for pottery, he said, but I like the glaze inside. As I talked to him about the years since university, I went behind the counter and brewed myself a tea. When I showed him the way the colour changed when the cups were full of good green tea, his eyes shone. It's like you're underwater, the way it traps the light!

I felt a teenage shyness when he asked for my number, but he didn't seem to notice. The image of him turning in the doorway stuck with me for a long time after he left. Naturally, the conversation had quickly turned to swimming. It turns out lots of our teammates gave up altogether: after all those years soaked in chlorine, the pool just reminded them of the aches of early mornings, shouts ringing in their ears. But for both of us, swimming had taken on a different role. I could swim for hours, I admitted, after a few lengths I find my rhythm, and my mind stops whirring. That's it; you find some

flow. It's a routine, too, he added, something that makes changing cities easier. Monday, Wednesday, Friday evenings stay the same, no matter where I am.

To start with, I didn't mean to spy. The pool is close, and though I prefer to swim as soon as the doors open, that evening without thinking I stuffed a swimsuit, towel, and magazine into a tote and headed out. He hadn't called me, yet, but had come back twice for coffee, once later that week and then the following weekend. Each time he seemed reluctant to leave. I had the feeling he was holding something back. I didn't have a plan; he had never mentioned what time he swam, and for all I knew he might use a different pool. But after the earthquakes, this was the only one that was still Olympic-length. Although I paid the full entry fee, I didn't change into my togs at first. Instead I found a spot on the grass down the far end, next to a couple watching some children swim, and opened the magazine.

His stroke was beautiful to watch. Smooth out of the water, hardly a ripple as his hands slid in, regular and rhythmic. I sat there as night settled around me, just outside the nearest cone of light, and watched him for what felt like hours. He arrived just after seven. You couldn't miss him when he stepped outside. Even in the dark, his figure and his height stood out. But what I found I loved more than his fluid movement was seeing him at rest, standing at the shallow end, chest rising and falling while he looked into the distance.

One day, after he'd paid, we started reminiscing about the national finals our last year at high school. It was the last time we'd both been here together. The flight down, the hostel, the minibuses—do you remember the aquarium, he asked, we spent the morning there before prize-giving, didn't we? I had forgotten it completely—our coach leading us through the central square to a pokey ticket office, down into a dark, cavernous world of fish. Halfway through, I separated from the team. I squatted in a corner. There, in a long, solitary tank, sat a single octopus. Its skin was a mottled purple-

brown, but if you looked closely, you could make out faint swirls of orange. Something about the way it met my eye made me feel like it saw inside me, as though it understood. Without judgment or expectation. By the time the coach came back to find me, the others had already barrelled through the gift shop out into the fresh air and the sunlight.

It was that night I think he saw me. I didn't have a schedule, and there had been some evenings where I had simply waited in the dark. The air was muggy, fat with the promise of rain. When he left the café that afternoon, I still had the feeling that he was keeping something back, but on the surface he had been so pleasant—charming even. Maybe that is why I let my guard down. Normally I slipped away while he was still swimming. This time, I waited too long. When I saw him hoist himself out of the water at the far end, I stood up, instinctively. That's when, out of the corner of his eye, I think he saw me: his face gave a twitch of recognition. But then he turned his back and walked away.

Halfway home, the rain finally broke.

After he left the café, I had panicked. What had happened to the aquarium after the earthquakes? I'd passed the site so many times over the last year, and hadn't thought about it once. Turns out, the building flooded; the seahorse tank had crushed the whole delicate family, dozens of other creatures did not survive. But one aquarium worker had crossed the cordons again and again, rescuing as many as he could.

I wrapped my towel over my showers and felt myself grow cold, the way I used to in the bath. The whole world was submerged.

When they searched the wreckage, the only animal they could not account for was the octopus. Apparently they are always escaping, breaking out of tanks, slipping through pipes to make it to the sea. Feeling the rain beat against my eyelids, I tried to imagine my octopus sliding through the ruins, feeling the burn of open air as he fumbled his way towards a place where he could breathe.