I arrive at the indoor pool early, because I’m not a strong swimmer, and I distrust water. I jump in at the shallow end. The impact on the cement rings up my knees, rattles my tooth fillings. Chlorine permeates my pores, stings my nostrils. I start the ten laps that the instructor requires at the start of each lesson. Shimmering light surrounds me. The pool is warm, but the air on my face is cold. An angular backwash ricochets off the end and splashes in my face.

The past speaks to me through water. Memories held in my muscles bubble up. Troubled accounts I pushed down long ago, buried deep in my reptilian brain, the one that wants nothing to do with memory. From deep inside, an image rises, like a blurry dream in a wet awakening. It surfaces against my will.

In this image, I am back in Hawai‘i, standing with my feet in the sand. The waves lick my toes. My mother is on the beach, standing in a two-piece black bikini. She is distracted.

Doing laps, I struggle to stay above water, to catch my breath. On my fifth round, the image flashes again, like a slide show stuck on repeat. I remember waves. My mother in a black bikini. I am bowled over by water.

Water enters my lungs. I choke and come to the surface. I look for my mother, but I’m back in Boulder, Colorado, not Hawai‘i, taking lessons to earn my certification in SCUBA diving.

The water is my undoing. It has loosened something beneath my skin. Nerve endings fire. My heart palpitates. Memory fragments rise and I go under. My mother’s hips, her beautiful inky hair, I want to drown in it. Waves keep coming, water everywhere. I am four years old and I cannot swim.

Terry the dive instructor jumps in. His arms wrap around me. He pulls me out, lays me on the cement.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Sorry,” I say.

“You want to skip today? Maybe go home?” Terry asks.
What I want is to be his favorite. What I want is for him to see me doing well. But I’m not, and his words make me cry because I can never go home.

I get up and jump back in. Terry whistles sharply.

“Nah, that’s enough for today.”

“I didn’t do ten.”

“That’s fine. You’re struggling.”

I climb out and stand at the dive pool, as the others finish their laps.

“You sure you’re okay?” Terry wants confirmation I’m not going to drown.

I nod and suit up with the rest. Black neoprene clings to our skin and tanks bear down on our backs. We jump into the dive pool, buddy up. The iron cylinders allow us to breathe self-contained, underwater. We look like seal pups. Any moment I expect one of us to start barking.

Terry tells us to practice descent.

I get a foot below surface and bob back up. Something prevents me from going deeper.

Back at poolside, Terry straps a weight belt around me. I jump back in and drop. I kick to try to slow my fall, but my fins hit bottom. I look up. Terry is at the edge, a shadow of a man. I feel so small, four years old again. I exhale; watch bubbles rise. Old unexpressed emotions get caught in my throat.

I walk out into the cold January air. There is two feet of snow on the ground. My hair is damp. I rush to my microbiology class at Ketchum Hall. I’m a sophomore, and this is an advanced course. I can’t afford to miss the lecture. The professor is talking about the interior of cells. I scribble notes, but remember hands, as if on my thighs, but not my thighs.

It feels as if the room is filling with water. I clasp my throat, trying to soothe the thing caught there. I can’t breathe. I grab my notebook and bag, and back out of the room.

Water is swimming inside me.

The memories lie beneath my skin, beneath my heart, in the water of my cells, in my blood, my bones and tissue. I put so many memories in my body that it becomes clogged with pain; aches deep in my right shoulder from carrying them for so long. The pain reaches down into my knees, a stitch at my side. They expand to the front of my rib cage. I start to cry.

As I swing open the door to my dorm, a resident stops me and asks what’s the quickest way up to the Flatirons. I point and give her directions, but rush inside, anxious to get to my room. She stands, looking after me, as if she doubts me. I should have more conviction, but I don’t.

People may doubt my words. They may doubt this piece. That’s part of it, the not knowing for sure, not having a witness. Not believing it myself, except my body knows it’s true. My mind cannot wrap around the images, or the why or how these things happened, but my body has carried them all these years. My muscles ache with confirmation. I feel I need proof. This happened.
I am a resident advisor. All the students on my floor are freshman. New to campus, forever asking directions to buildings I’ve never been in, always going through rush, always with issues—freshmen fifteen, hangovers, break-ups, eating disorders, or flunking out to rebel against parents who pay their tuition. Their problems are not the same as mine.

I knock on a door. “Talk’s about to start. You coming?” I feel disoriented, water in my ear. I am on a beach in Hawai’i. My mother is in a black bikini, talking to a strange, bearded man. She doesn’t see when I’m hit by a wave and taken under.

I walk as if still at the bottom of a pool, as if walking through water, as if weighted down. We get to the cafeteria, where the dorm is hosting a talk by an incest survivor. We’ve come to listen to this woman speak. An incest survivor. Heart palpitations fill my chest.

I am four when my mother begins to leave me with other people, so she can spend time with the bearded man from the beach. She forgets to pick me up from pre-school, once leaves me with an uncle, and then desperate to be without me, takes me to her mother’s place. Grandma doesn’t like me, says I’m spoiled. But all I do is sit in the one spot in front of her window, waiting for my mother to return. I do nothing as I wait. I don’t even talk. I don’t smile. Just sit, staring out the window. Waiting.

The speaker is a lovely blonde with blue eyes. She is telling us how her father sneaked into her room when she was a little girl and had sex with her, how she lived through it, how she survived, but now as an adult, she has to be in control. She can’t have sex in certain positions, can’t handle the pressure of a man on the front of her body. It makes her feel suffocated. Sex in the wrong position, and she hyperventilates; passes out.

I remember sausage fingers that crawl and prod and separate. I think of a dry hand under the hem of my dress. I look down at the hardwood floors of the mess hall, noticing how the grain moves out in concentric circles like ripples of water. I wonder if I can make it back to my room without the residents from my floor noticing that I am drowning. I hear words spoken in my direction. I can’t make sense of them.

Everyone is in a good mood. These things they’ve just heard about didn’t happen to them, they happened to that woman, standing at the podium; they happened to someone else. My lungs feel constricted, as if I ascend out of control, at risk of the bends.

I worry about my mother, why she left, where she went. Concerned she might leave me at my Grandma’s house with the man with sausage fingers, forever. I worry I am not a good girl, and yet I remember this man sitting me on his lap, feeling secured by his arms, exposed and brought to life by his fingers on my little bit of flesh. My nub. And things feel better as he rubs. Somehow I feel guilty and ashamed of my body, ashamed of the pleasure, how good it feels to be rubbed on my button part.

In this image that is rising in my mind, those are my shoes and my favorite red and yellow dress. Those are my four-year old legs spread apart. That is the back of my neck pressed up against his chest. Those are my days of the week panties. I feel fingers reach beneath. At a time before I am ready to be initiated to sexuality, I am initiated. Before I understand a state of arousal, I am aroused.
Our RA team is scheduled for team-building exercises. At lunch, I motion to the guy I’ve been seeing to follow me back to my dorm room. We have time before we have to report to the gymnasium. He’s an RA, too, but in a different dorm across campus.

In my room, I have a bunk bed. He knows what I want. I strip and get on the bottom mattress, so he can eat my pussy, lick my clit, flick it with his tongue and for a moment I feel like I can hold myself together. Pleasure overwhelms anxiety, and I hold the memories under.

Later, at the gym, he joins his team; I join mine. In one of the exercises, we are told to make a net of hands to catch our teammates as they fall backwards. It’s supposed to build trust, but when it’s my turn I climb the stairs. My hands grip the railing of the platform on which I stand. I foresee arms at my back, touching my hips and waist. I imagine one holding a thigh. Hands tend to wander. I hyperventilate. I cannot let go.

Later, on a team retreat, I learn that our team leader has made calls home to our parents, asking about our past, my past, my most embarrassing moment. Everyone has one except me. My father couldn’t think of one. I imagine him laying the receiver on the kitchen counter, and calling for my stepmother. “You talk to them.”

I clench my fists, thinking of the type of control that is required not to remember the past. I don’t like the fact that they took liberties to speak to my parents, as if to find out my dirty secrets without my consent. It feels like a violation. I storm out into a snowy night. I never know when images will rise. I can’t know for sure what I’ve held down.

This memory is of me sitting on a strange man’s lap. I am four and I see the red and yellow ruffle of my dress, my black patent leather shoes and the white cuff socks with lace. The man has me sitting so my back is against his belly, and my butt against his crotch, and his hands are under my dress. I am not trying to get away, not squirming, secured by his arm, and his hand is against the parts of me I have no words for, only feelings in my body. But I can name them now, labia majora, labia minora, and clitoris.

A bad dream: my mother is gone. I run to her room and sit outside her door, because I know she’s in there with the bearded man. I must have fallen asleep in the hall. The door opens. The bearded man comes out. I wake up and he has me hard by the arm. “Listen you little brat, stay in your room.” He pushes me at my bed. “Your mom doesn’t need you always hanging around.” He shuts the door.

My arm hurts. I worry about my mother, but alone in my room I slip my hand down my pants and rub the little nub of me. I feel it swell, giving me pleasure in my loneliness. A trembling begins at the bud, shimming down my thighs to my ankles, curling my toes. Before I understand arousal, I am aroused. I did not discover this. I was introduced.

Later, in the bathtub, I lie back and scoot my tush into the drain, so the gentle warm flow of water from the faucet runs over my button until it sends shudders up my spine. I do it again and again until the warm water runs cold. I do it until the water spills down the excess drain making a loud gulping sound, like a thirsty mouth.

Mama comes bounding down the hall from where she and the bearded man have spent hours together in her bedroom. She throws open the door, which I am forbidden to lock. I know to leave my legs crouched ready to
spring off the base of the tub to hide my secret.

“What are you doing? Trying to flood the bathroom?” She bends down to pull the plug. “Jesus, the water’s cold.” She looks down at me worried. I recapture her concern for a moment. “You’re a wrinkled raisin. Come on, out!”

It’s difficult for me to know which is more important, her attention or this sensation, lacking one leads me to the other. As I get ready to step out, I think of her wrapping that big fluffy towel around me, telling me to get dressed and going back to her room.

“Just ten more minutes,” I plead, knowing she’ll be happy for more time with him.

“Okay, but don’t fill it up anymore.”

I am forced to rub, rub, rub. Shudder, shimmy, and shake. What marvelous afternoon fun, a secret game the man with sausage fingers taught me.

For the open water certification, I must free dive on a single breath, retrieve my mask from deep below, put it on, clear it of water, and rise back to the surface.

“You’ll do fine,” Terry says. “It’s just 30 feet.”

“The pool’s 15 and I can’t do that.”

Terry looks at me surprised.

He grabs my mask and throws it into the pool. It floats at the surface for a second, takes a gulp, then sinks.

“Go after it.”

A small shadow wavers with uncertainty.

“Come on, don’t make me go after it.”

I gear up and jump in.

I attempt the dive, but without the mask, chlorine stings my eyes. I see only the bluish green of the bottom. I can’t make out the mask.

I come up and tread water. Students for the next class begin to arrive.

“Ten laps,” Terry yells but they know the drill.

I see a dark silhouette. I dive again. This time reaching the bottom, I feel around but I can’t put my fingers on it. I surface for air. I dive again and again and again.

The open water dive is held at the Blue Hole in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. We leave on a Thursday night, missing Friday classes.

On the edge of the Chihuahua Desert, at the junction of Interstate 40 and Route 66, the hole is a blue chasm. An arid wind blows over us; reddish soil sinks beneath our feet. A rock wall surrounds the water; scrub oak and juniper trees litter the landscape.

On the morning of the test, we descend, buddy breathe, and rise. Then it’s time for the final trial. My mask is placed 30 feet below on a rocky ledge. I have attempted this retrieval many times in the pool, but never succeeded.

At the surface of the Blue Hole, I look down, unsure where the ledge is, but from all my practice, I expertly
breach, bend my body and dive. Unlike the pool, the water is fresh and clear against my eyes. Some journeys feel like forever, but I finally reach the ledge, my mask within grasp. It would be so easy to take it and go the rest of the way, but I tread water.

Earlier in the week, my RA team assembled in a small dark room. We talked about rounds during finals and gossiped about a girl who’s rail thin. The next thing I knew I was telling them how I was molested as a little girl by a man my mother left me with. The words rose up, as if I had no control. I don’t understand why the words passed through my lips for others to hear.

I tread water.

Afterward, the RAs went silent. I’m not a great RA. I don’t like enforcing rules. I don’t like confiscating beer from underage drinkers. But I like to plan events, and I’m always willing to open my door and listen to residents if they want to talk. Sometimes they confess things to me. I don’t know what to say afterward. Maybe it’s enough, to allow them to be heard. I serve as a witness. It’s not a burden.

I tread water.

The mask is not concrete. Its edges are blurry, but enough to discern. I pick it up, put the band over my head and settle it over my eyes. I expel air and clear water from the mask until only a bubble of atmosphere remains. Another kick and I am at the surface again, bobbing, breathing through my mouth.

Terry congratulates me as I sit at the edge of the hole. I see a hunger cross his eyes, and I think of all the things men have taken from me: my innocence, my mother, my home. I might let Terry take more, but the look dissipates, and he encourages us to explore the hole, but be wary of the depth and altitude; read our dive tables.

In the Blue Hole, it’s a mystery just how deep the subterranean caves go. There were several deaths of divers, students from Oklahoma State University. They went down into the waterways, but didn’t grasp the danger.

I imagine the sudden horror of realizing you’ve taken a wrong turn, become lost down some long, dark passage and can’t find a way out. The water is cold in the places where the sun’s rays never reach and the pressure, great.

Master divers went down to retrieve their bodies, brought them back to the surface. Shortly after recovery, the city installed a grate about 80 feet down to block others from entering the caves.

I swim cautiously near the opening, which looks like a drain. I dive further; touch the mossy rocks, then cold metal. I suspect spirits linger. I shine a flashlight through the grate, but the rays are quickly swallowed by blackness. At any moment, I imagine the plug to be pulled and I will be sucked down into the murky sewage of my past. I sometimes still doubt the memories I’ve recovered. The images are out of focus, wrinkled and blackened, as if bruised.

I imagine dropping them so they free fall beyond the bars, expanding in the darkness, too large to rise again. And why not, someone else hid them. I think of her now, the little girl me, who didn’t understand, didn’t have the capacity to grasp the idea of molestation. She had enough to worry about with her mother, about losing her to the strange, bearded man. So she pushed down what she could, just so she could get by day to day. She was brilliant to know how. I want to un-remember these memories; put them into some unknown cavern of my mind.
But along with these images, I recover her: bucktoothed, pudgy bellied, eyes so wide with worry, long inky hair forever falling in her face, and how she'd come running into her mother's arms, any time she called for her. I recall this little girl, masturbating in a tub, trying to figure it all out, wanting to feel safe, to feel loved. I wrap her in a warm, fluffy towel. I whisper through water: it's not okay what happened to you. She smiles back, this perfect child, so forgiving through her forgetting. It is a gift, her innocent wonder. I cradle her in my arms. She is weightless.

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