

CELESTE HENERY

## THE SWIM TEST

**ON AN ORDINARY** January morning in 1965, my father stood feet planted on a pool deck. I can see him—vigilant, his thin dark body covered only with shorts and a towel draped across his narrow shoulders. At twenty-two years old, he could be the oldest freshmen at Howard University staring at the water that day. I think of him just the year before in the interior of Guyana, working by daybreak as a chemist in a bauxite mine. He's stashing away his earnings to fund his college education. When he saves enough after several years, and with his parents' blessings, he set forth, north, to this historically Black college for a scholarship and an opportunity.

On deck at what becomes Burr Gymnasium, he awaits Howard's mandatory swim test. Alongside him, fellow students, also wrapped in towels, form goosebumps and scan the water. When it's my father's turn, he climbs the ladder of the three-meter springboard, plunges into the pool, rises to the surface, and travels two laps to successfully pass the test. The end.

Until a handful of years ago, I told this story as an introduction to my father—my way of conveying the pride I felt for him that had no simple description. Sometimes I spoke of his early years in Guyana. Sometimes just this moment at the pool. I didn't detail whether he went in head or foot first or if he doggy-paddled his way to success. The truth was I didn't know the particulars; my father never shared them. His jump into the unknown existed as another act of his wonder, a beautiful mystery to me because despite passing the test, my father did not know how to swim.

### **BARTHOLOMEW, 2020**

*The parking lot at Bartholomew pool is mostly empty. I walk through the facility's gate, where the attendant checks my temperature and waves me through. This aquatic complex on the east side of Austin was one of the city's first desegregated aquatic facilities when it opened in a white neighborhood in 1961. When I moved from California to Texas in 2002, I discovered these free public pools, several of which, like Bartholomew, stay open year-*

*round. The kiddie pool and water slides sit empty, closed for the season and the pandemic. The twenty-five-yard lap pool has two open lanes.*

*On this autumn afternoon, a swimmer pushes off the wall while a woman and her baby bob in the shallow end. The high eighties make it easy to strip down, slide into a lane, and stand with the water lapping just beneath my chest. It feels bath-like. That familiar bleach scent greets my nose as I stare at the juvenile oaks that line the pool, finding the ordinariness of the surrounding park's landscaping unexpectedly inviting.*

*I swim a dozen laps. When I return to the water, it all comes back—the embrace, the smell, the hours upon hours that have made this place another home. I transition to a kickboard and push off the wall, head up. A lap in, an older white man with neck-length gray hair ambles on deck, rests his bags in the shade of a tree, and hops into the water a couple of lanes away from me. He reminds me of some of the old-timers at morning lap swims at Big Stacy, another year-round pool. He treads water rather than swims, moving slowly down the lane, head up with arms circling in breaststrokes. He immediately begins chatting with the teenage lifeguard. As I draw closer to him, I drop in on a patchwork of thoughts. “The wonderful thing about swimming,” he says, “is that you are free to think about whatever you want.” I fall out of hearing distance as I flutter away.*

*It's true. What began with the burn of water up my nose decades ago grew into hours of motion, the subtle contraction of my abdomen, the rotation of my torso, the extension of arm after arm, and legs that sometimes enjoy the ride. This is not the form to win a race. It is the conversation held in my body that years later moves me by memory and allows my thoughts to drift.*

*I cannot say whether the story of my father's test inspired my own swimming. I do know his courageous leap initiated this incipient writing project about Black people swimming that I entertain as I now kick. After so many years in the water, my time must have taught me something about those of us who swim, who swim less, or not at all. And about a body, my father, belonging and letting go.*

*My thighs grow heavy, and I hear my fellow swimmer again. He recounts the moment of boarding a plane to Vietnam in the 1960s, gun checked on board and heading off to war. He doesn't detail what happens when he arrived or what would occur but comments on how restrictive flying has become. He continues traveling the lane as if on a moving walkway at the airport, where each story leads him to a different gate and destination. At the end of the next lap, I release the kickboard and swim*

*to contemplate what this veteran might have seen and where he'd learned to swim and what brought him to the pool today. These curiosities return me to my father, who set out on different journeys and fought other kinds of wars. I'll call him when I finish this swim and share about the veteran and the water. In these final laps, I imagine him swimming in his own way alongside me.*

**MY MOTHER SWIMS** sidestroke in San Francisco's Rossi pool. Her black suit jets forward in pulses, lap after lap, during an evening rec swim. I am five and sit in wonder at her constant motion. I've read that having a parent who knows how to swim influences whether their children learn. This is one of the theories behind why more white than Black and Brown children learn the skill.

When I was seven, my mother signed my brother and me up for swim classes. I ask how she learned to swim, and she tells me her grandmother registered her for Red Cross's swim basics at the Sylvan Plunge in Redlands, California, in the summer of 1948. Far from inspiring a love of swimming, these early lessons soured her taste for the pool, but she continued to practice on her own. She took me on her night swims where I'd sit back against the tiled walls, breathe in the humid air, and imagine myself as her.

When my brother and I returned for a second summer of lessons, my father decided to join us. We made the forty-minute trip to Beth's suburban home. Beth—a masters-level swimmer—had coached and taught swimming for decades. The leathery patina of her skin showed those years spent perambulating the pool deck in shorts and flip-flops directing an endless flow of surfacing elbows and roiling feet. Never entering the water, Beth instead held a long metal pole at arm's length away from her students, beckoning them into the deep end, having them trust each labored stroke.

On that first day of summer lessons, my father walked onto the pool deck wearing bright blue shorts and grew quiet before entering the water. The lesson began with the three of us lined up, blowing bubbles while holding on to the wall. Beth was having us grow accustomed to having our faces submerged and adapting to the immersed exhale and side inhale. Legs kicking, arms stretched, with hands clutching the wall, I peeked at my father in between breaths, craning his neck, searching for air, doing what I was learning to love to do.

I have only one memory of him reaching for Beth's pole. By the

end of those two months of lessons, my dad could swim up and down this backyard pool. He'd set off into the open water with long, jagged strokes. With each breath, his body breached before sinking like a whale, sending waves into the shallow end. The effort required to learn this new form roused in me a tenderness for which I had no language. I saw none of the levity or freedom I felt when swimming. His body a weight, his will combusting to keep him afloat as it had for the swim test. In the water, I couldn't turn to him for help. Maybe for the first time, I understood I was carrying myself.

There is more to this image. I glimpse at my own reflection—my brown body struggling with its out-of-placeness. In the pool that summer of 1986, I felt the comfort of having him close, just a stroke away. Just by getting in the water or having him stand on deck, his body translated mine, taught mine, helped me make a home of a place and the word Black too.

## BARTHOLOMEW, 2021

*In these first afternoon laps, each stroke pulls me back into a younger body. I arrive at my first practice for a synchronized swimming team (now artistic swimming) with my faded peach summer swimsuit that sags from use. I have neither cap nor goggles and have never swum a length of a standard pool, let alone the thirty meters of San Francisco's Garfield in the Mission. At the end of my second summer of swim lessons, Beth suggested I might enjoy joining a team. Now, months later, my eyes burn as I share a lane with other girls for the first time. My ponytail unravels within laps. The only thing I can do is practice what I have for two summers and not stop. Over months I learn how to contract in the center at the end of a lap, how to send my legs through the air to find the wall and push off into an infinity of strokes, how to breathe every third, how to exist horizontally as a mammal without eyes on the side of my head. For years, these motions and calculations repeated by dawn and evening, in pools spanning middle, high school, college workouts, meets, and games, and now when the spirit hits me. In those early years, I paid such close attention to the timing of these movements. Now, like the vet said, my movement requires so little, I can almost just be.*

*Today I am the only Black body in the pool. As I swim, I scan the pool's floor imagining the substantial crack that I've read prompted Bartholomew's renovation in 2014. Racial fractures define the area. White*

*flight from school busing brought Black people into the neighborhood only to be displaced more recently as the neighborhood gentrified. I fantasize about other Black bodies swimming beside me just as they had in a Brooklyn city pool in 2017 when these ideas prompted me to swim again. Head down, I pull and kick with this reverie and absence as I have many times before. Between breaths, I study how the indigo tiles lining the pool's walls shimmer as they catch the afternoon light. An elegant public pool feels luxurious. I feel the same way when another nonwhite swimmer comes on deck. I notice, relax, and keep swimming.*

**MY FATHER GRADUATED** from Howard in 1968, two years after Guyana gained its independence. I read about how racial and economic struggles fomented under British colonial rule mired the new nation, and recall how my grandparents told my father to remain in the U.S. He narrates his decision to stay with as little detail as the swim test, moving on to his first job after Howard, working as the lone Black accountant in a New York firm, and how, ultimately, he traded those immigrant dreams of financial success for less secure ones of graduate school in California. I know so little about his changing sense of home or the education he couldn't afford, but he affirms he met my mother months later.

When my father took our family to Guyana in December of 1985, my first time back since infancy and after I started to swim, I studied my grandparents' bodies. Without photographs, I had sensed them through the tiny gold hoops that adorned my ears, in the way my father sliced a mango, from the lilt in his unhurried English. Yet, my relatives remained only partially perceivable, as if viewed through water. That summer, my dark-skinned grandmother with gray, cataracted eyes ventured between the market and kitchen, trying to please my narrow American palate. She uttered few words, but I remember her laugh and the grin she directed my way. My light-skinned grandfather sat in the living room, housebound by illness and a stroke. He too beamed a half-smile at me when I drew near him in his wooden chair.

And there was water. My father's hometown of Georgetown—the country's capital—was hugged by the Atlantic and flanked by the mouth of the Demerara. In my grandparents' two-story wooden home, we hauled buckets of water from the garden up the stairs for showers and boiled it for drinking. A muggy downpour pattered on the metal roof, filled canals, and soaked our clothes as we walked the bustling

streets. Communing with all this water had me wonder if I'd been baptized.

Back in the U.S., during summer visits with my maternal grandfather in Arizona, my mother, brother, and I packed into the cab of my blue-eyed minister grandfather's pickup and wended our way down dirt roads into the high desert juniper to find a stream. Swimsuit, no swimsuit, I entered the water sometimes to sit on the rocky bottom and let my legs writhe in the gentle current as my brother learned how to fish. Other times, I'd wade deeper to feel the force of water against my thighs. At night, my woodsman grandfather encouraged us kids to dance for rain. The skies opened only once. I didn't care much for being rained on, yet I was recognizing my kinship with water.

Back home on the Northern California coast, I felt the command of an undertow and the way frigid salt water almost pickled my skin. On weekend visits to my parents' favorite beach, I made playmates out of Pacific waves that chased me up the shore. Sometimes, my father joined me, and we'd run from the surf or race each other through saturated sand. Sometimes, I gazed at wetsuit-clad surfers floating in lineups on different breaks. I tried surfing in my early twenties but never found a home in cold, open water. It's been pools that have called me back.

**ON A MONDAY AFTERNOON** in June of 2022, I sit side by side my father on an old bamboo wireframed couch. I am home, as I still say, in San Francisco at my parents' place where I visit more frequently now. I arrived with this project and questions and ask my dad about the swim test as if I had never asked him before. A crocheted blanket covers his legs, and his clasped hands rest in his lap. I sit close enough to observe his eyes track the TV screen and how delicate and sparse his eyelashes have become. Just beyond him, through tall windows, I gaze at the gray fog creeping down the hill over the pitched roofs of Victorian homes.

*"Dad, do you remember when you learned you had to pass a swim test?"*

*"It was my second semester, freshman year."*

*"So, it was winter?"*

*"Yes, but I didn't think of it as winter."*

*"Was it the morning or the afternoon? Did you have to show up at a certain time?"*

*"It was morning. I had to just come up and jump in the pool."*

*"Were you told to show up with shorts and a towel?"*

*"No, no, you knew what the dress code was."*

*"What was the dress code?"*

*"You come in your swimming shorts and towel and then you climbed the stairs and jumped in the pool."*

*"Did you know anybody there?"*

*"Well, my classmates, people who had taken the class with me."*

*"Did other people go before you did?"*

*"Mm-hmm."*

*"What was it like waiting, watching?"*

*"It was just . . . I became aware that these were younger people. I was the oldest person in the class."*

*"Were you nervous?"*

*"Yaas."*

*"Did they give instructions?"*

*"Pardon me?"*

*"Did they give you instructions?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And do you remember what they were?"*

*"Well, there was the head of the department who had the class. And he told me that I didn't need to be afraid. That they had first-class swimmers in the water and his job was to not let anything happen to me. But I needed to understand that I would be taken care of. And that did not reassure me, but I told him I was prepared to do it anyhow. And that is what I did. I jumped right into the pool."*

*"Off of a diving board?"*

*"Um-hum."*

*"You just had to jump off?"*

*"Uh-hm."*

*"Do you remember that jump?"*

*"Yah."*

*"Were you terrified?"*

*"I was scared, yes."*

*"Do you remember landing in the water?"*

*"Uh-hm."*

*"Coming back to the surface?"*

*"The four guys came around me and made sure I was good. Escorted me to the bridge."*

*"To the bridge?"*

*"You know, to the stairs."*  
*"Okay. You just had to jump? You didn't have to swim?"*  
*"No, but I floated. You know."*  
*"So, you jumped off of the board and you came back to the surface?"*  
*"Uh-hm."*  
*"Did you have to swim at all?"*  
*"Not really."*  
*"That was it?"*  
*"Mm-hm."*  
*"I thought you had to swim a lap and back?"*  
*"Mm-mm."*  
*"No? That was the swim test?"*  
*"Mm-hm."*  
*"Just jumping off the diving board?"*  
*"Mm-hm. Surfacing and then going to the stairs and coming out."*  
*"Do you remember what you did afterward?"*  
*"Took a shower, got dressed, left."*  
*"Tried to forget about it?"*  
*"I was forgetting about it by the time I came out of the pool. I was surprised how easy it was."*  
*"Once it was over?"*  
*"Once it was over."*  
*"But you never had to learn how to swim laps?"*  
*"No."*

**I DON'T REMEMBER** feeling uncomfortable around my new and first teammates who were from Irish and Italian working-class families. These swimmers welcomed me. Yet my eyes quickly noticed the Filipina and Latina girls, and the other one with curly hair like mine. On some days I saw this swimmer's white mother pick her up after practice, like mine, and on others, her Black father, like mine. I appreciated this swimmer's ease in the water, her practiced movements, and saw who I might become.

I don't remember whether I doused my hair in lemon juice or Sun-in one summer in high school. I was teaching swimming at a suburban California summer camp and hoped that while I taught kids to grow more comfortable in the water my dark curls might turn golden. I coveted the way white swimmers' hair announced their sport with that distinct sheen—their bodies synonymous with swimming. I prayed my

hair might play emissary for my summer spent teaching mostly white children how to swim.

I don't remember whether back at school my Black friends detected my striving or what my slightly lighter hair might communicate other than a desire to swim. I knew only two other Black swimmers in my predominately white high school, and I didn't ask. I could feel alienated at the pool even when I called it home. I don't know what my Black friends thought about me in the water; I was too busy hoping they saw me as one of them.

What I do remember is walking on deck at a water polo camp one summer in high school. I looked at the countless tall and fit white teens with big feet and Speedos, chatting and laughing with each other. A familiar dread traveled my shoulders down into my gut, leaving me queasy. The green-haired blond boys continued to talk loudly and at ease. Their triangular bodies appeared as if they had been born to move water. I want to learn to shoot better to channel the momentum of balls through my cupped right hand and hurl them precisely at the net. My memories hold this moment of paralysis like a photograph. Did the other woman, a collegiate player, carry this image? Did the pool notice either of us?

I also remember playing a water polo team from southern California at a high school tournament in Florida. Sleek brown bodies sprinted, passed, maneuvered around opponents, and this team called their plays in Spanish. I dreamt about what it would be like to join these feared players. In the pool, I welcomed Brown in the near absence of Black. When we finally played their team, the girls threw balls around me, swam past me, and spoke words I couldn't understand. I wanted their language and recognition. I wanted their courage and ease. I wanted the pool to be browner if not Black.

## RAMSEY, 2022

*Amidst Sunday errands in July, I head to Ramsey for a quick swim. Ramsey resembles many of the neighborhood pools with six lanes enclosed in a park, only this pool is set apart by the million-dollar homes that surround it. As I walk through the gate, I spot a flyer advertising summer-league water polo for boys and girls.*

*Three lanes are dedicated to lap swim. I slide into the shallow end of the only open lane, push off the wall, and survey the turbid water.*

*Something is likely off with the chlorine. I've heard many people bemoan the chemical as toxic, preferring spring or saltwater pools. I can hardly disagree but have never been bothered by the pungent disinfectant, understanding it as the great democratizer of swimming, what has kept public pools safe and available for large numbers of people. I think of it as the scent of my becoming.*

*I adjust my goggles at the wall, and a waft of artificial coconut passes by—another enduring fragrance from my childhood: white women oiling themselves into the comfortable side of Blackness and my shame of longing for lighter curls and carefree swims. This coconut aroma is now that of parents smothering their kids in lotions to protect them from skin cancer. I know I burn and typically wear sunscreen but skip it for this short swim. The sun heats the space around my racerback as I swim for memory and summer, while the kids dive for toys in the open area next to me.*

*I freestyle in three, four, then five feet of water before the pool's bottom drops suddenly like an ocean floor. I envision water polo practices in the small deep end of this pool and speculate whether children from other neighborhoods know about the league and its ratio of girls to boys. I also grow curious about whether these kids' parents take them to pools across the city. I think on the histories of segregated pools, first by gender and then by race, and swim, feeling both how much and how little things have changed in public waters.*

*Over the next laps, I note how the fading thick black line sweeping the pool's bottom beneath me was painted in multiple strokes. On my left, kids continue to play. On my right, a woman swims breaststroke, like the veteran, head out of the water as if on a stroll. I see no dark bodies. I keep swimming, remembering, and dreaming.*

**AFTER THE SWIM LESSONS,** I never saw my father in a pool again. There was an occasional ankle-deep run into the ocean at his favorite beach and ambles on shores. He confidently spent hours on pool decks at my middle school meets, my high school tournaments, and later, in college, he and my mother attended championship games. He watched Olympic water polo on TV with me as avidly as he did soccer and wore my collegiate track suit that I gave him after my final season. He proudly donned the clothing as if he had played the game, but entering the water became a thing of the past.

One year after our swim lessons, on a family road trip, my father reticently agreed to canoe on the Rogue River in Oregon. The hour's

trip required only that he float the river's back with a life jacket strapped around his chest. He stepped into the rocking vessel and sat between my mom and us kids and stayed silent the whole time—my forty-something-year-old father, who grew up by the sea and passed a college swim test. This was the first time I'd been in a boat with him and assumed the swim lessons had given him more confidence to be around water. After a near tip, my father's body stiffened, and his hands clutched the oar he barely rowed. By the end of the hour's ride, I figured it wouldn't happen again. The swim lessons with Beth might have made the canoe ride possible, but we had different relationships with water.

In these past years, I've weighed what got him into that canoe. Maybe it was to show his ability to try new things, to appease his family or, like the swim test, his usual way of willing himself through hard moments. Maybe the prospect of a boat ride beckoned memories from all-night ferry trips up the Demerara or living in a rented room near its banks before college and the U.S., my mother and us kids. Maybe he just wanted the experience of floating again.

In our conversation that summer, I did not think to ask him about the canoe ride or whether the slight tip of the vessel opened a portal to another time. I didn't think to ask him about the first Black woman Olympic water polo player and whether he had seen her play. Maybe some part of me thought I'd asked him enough about swimming and not enough about being Black or an immigrant from Guyana, what he fantasized about when younger or what he'd wished for me when he was gone. I outlined the many shapes of my father, the one that emigrated him to the U.S., that helped him build a self-directed life, an interracial marriage, that survived cancer, a stroke, almost going blind in one eye, even the form that got him back in the pool again. For each of those moments, I watch him climb a diving board and jump. Each arrives in the imagery and language of swimming. Swimming as challenge, swimming as accompanying, swimming as surviving. Swimming not drowning. I translate for myself that he, like so many other Black people, had been swimming much of his life.

*"What would you say is your relationship with water now?" I ask my father. I can't let go of this conversation about water and about him.*

*"Well, I have a better relationship with water now because of my experience with Beth."*

*"Can you say more about that?"*

*“Well, I think Beth indicated to me that I’d let my experiences at university affect my going forward, and I agreed with her.”*

*“Would you say you liked those lessons?”*

*“I think she was a much more skilled teacher.”*

*“Was it scary to get into that pool?”*

*“Not really because there was so much positive reinforcement. But I never really understood in my body that she was trying to tell me that nobody would let me drown. It was the opposite of that. It was that someone was . . . they were all trying to create a relationship between myself and the water. That was it.”*

**I ASK A FRIEND** who is a professor at Howard University to take me to the pool while visiting her in DC only a month after the conversation with my father. She’s also an alumna, and I query her about the swim test and what it included. She recalls a jump into the deep end and a possible lap or two but no upset or trauma. Like my father, she later pursued adult swim lessons at a YMCA in Maryland.

We arrive on the western edge of the historically Black campus, passing the business school, and walk toward Burr Gym. I take photographs of the buildings on my phone and text them to my dad. I know he barely checks his messages but send photos with enthusiastic messages anyway. The grounds appear free of the lifeblood of students and lack any animating quality of what my father as an eager young man might have once observed. At one point when my longing to share this experience with him takes hold I call. He answers, and I can hear the chatter of CNN correspondents. I tell him where I am on campus and ask if he remembers the buildings, letting him know about the photos. He laughs almost habitually and says something about the “Big H.” He feels only partially present and my heart contracts, this time, only slightly. Over the past year, his questions and interest have dissipated, leaving a quiet disappointment I’ve grown accustomed to. I playfully tell him I’ll leave him alone and say, “I love you, Daddy,” before returning him to what has become a life in front of the television.

We arrive at a brick building bearing a white-stone plaque etched with “1963,” presumably the gym’s opening date just years before my father’s arrival. Like a tour guide, my friend gestures to the glass doors, and we enter, stopping in the foyer. Flashing her ID, she tells the attendant that my father was an alumnus and asks if we can visit the pool. With an ambiguous grin, the attendant informs us the pool is closed

but says that we can have a look from the observation deck.

We follow the simple directions upstairs and through a corridor, where we peer through clear panels at the pool below. My eyes fix on the blue bison mascot painted on the wall. I scan the water and picture it choppy with swimmers. Howard is now the only historically Black university with a swim team. Their head coach, also an MVP swimming alum, has grown the program to national acclaim. I conjure an image of my father in the water. Almost sixty years separate our bodies in this building, yet I can see him clutching the wall with goosebumps spreading across his skin. He clammers up the pool's ladder where, from the safety of the deck, he turns back to view the remaining students take their tests. I want to wave and cheer as if this were a meet and my father has completed his first race. The pool sloshes. Swimmers pant. Onlookers clap.

The water lies motionless, a blank slate that helps me dream the moments before the test. I try to make eye contact with my dad. I want to see what he sees, garner some of his steadiness. He gazes at the water with purpose concentrated in his eyes. He no longer is my father. He is another Black youth striding purposely to the water's edge. He climbs the ladder to jump. It would be hard to tell that he doesn't really know how to swim. I hold my breath. I want to bear some of this unknown, if only I could swim for him. But I can't rescue him from what's happening then or now, even if he wanted a hero and I was fit to play that grand part. None of this matters. He is airborne.

My father descends through air to water, where I watch him submerge in the effervescence. Suspended like a jellyfish, his arms and legs slowly wave about and then his blurred mass rises to the surface. He is not struggling. His head crests, his limbs dance. He takes a big breath and just floats.

## GOVALLE, 2022

*In the late morning sun, I swim at Govalle, another pool in a gentrifying east-side neighborhood. I've only swam here once before and am reminded of its recent renovation in the smooth curve of the pool's coping and the lane markers laid of tiny lapis-blue tiles. The lanes are all in use, and I head to the far one, where another Black woman swims. Another Black woman swims. I sit for a second, embraced by the still humidity and listen to the*

*croaks of ravens emanating from the nearby mature pecan trees. I slide in on my side of the blue tiles and behold how the pool's floor glimmers with streaks of light.*

*This morning, I've come to the pool with Leon Hunter on my mind. I've been reading about this Black teen who drowned in Deep Eddy—a once-popular swimming hole in a bend of the Colorado River that crosscuts Austin. In 1915, the Austin Statesman reported that Leon had drowned among classmates on a school outing. I've read about other Black teens who have drowned just this summer as well as the last along with other articles about swim programs for Black kids sent by friends. I decide I want to swim for Leon here at Govalle, forgoing Deep Eddy, the pool named for the bend in the river and the first concrete pool in Texas. It's across town and too cold for me. I also forgo the historic Rosewood, the first city pool constructed for Black people in 1930. It's closed for cleaning.*

*As I push off the wall, traveling two feet under, I dedicate the first lap to this kid. One arm arcs through the air, then my hand makes a clean entry into the water. The other arm has already begun the same motion. I imagine Leon excited to enter the water with his friends, the water a balm to the Austin heat, a respite from this teen's possible worries. The newspaper provides no testimonies from his classmates about the drowning, who Leon was to them, or how the river water felt on their skin that day. I visualize him like my father at the water's edge and wonder if these two stood with loose arms and palms open before stepping in.*

*I begin to pull harder as if to save Leon. The water holds so many people's fears, and I suspect it might have a few thoughts if asked. For each swimmer who, like me or the woman next to me, swims with ease, is another, like Leon, claimed? I catch and pull again. No reply. I deepen my kick. A thought of my father disrupts my facile equation. He loved the water but made no home or grave of it. Perhaps in another life, my father would have joined the Howard swim team and Leon would have detailed his river swim to his father, Dennis.*

*I surge forward to the thud of my heartbeat. My striving does not soothe or honor anyone. I flip, push off the wall, and opt to swim only with Leon's name. I no longer care if my hands slap the water or my kick is efficient. I think, I must just keep swimming. I utter "Leon" with my inner voice. Leon—lap three. Leon—lap four. The nameless who've drowned swim with me. I am desperate and reverent. All the while my father sleeps thousands of miles away.*

**MY LAST COMPETITIVE** swim meet was in 1995; my last water polo game in 1999. In that first-year post-college back in San Francisco, I'd show up at a lap swim and push my body as if I were at college practice, still hearing my coach's directives. A year later, I coached a high school girls' swim team when the original coach unexpectedly went on bed rest. I recycled old workouts and attempted to convey to the girls that I took them seriously as swimmers and internally that I took myself seriously enough to do the job. For several months, I paced the deck in shorts and flip-flops in a city pool calling out sets, and accompanied the team to swim meets where people were sometimes surprised that I was the coach. I taught a couple girls to dive and flip turn—small victories—and witnessed the whole team grow stronger. I recall no Black swimmers. Coaching gave me a way to stay connected to the water before questioning if I had swum enough.

Over two decades later and after the pool had called me back, my father began slowing down. Stiff limbs and a vacant stare were forms that found no easy analogy in swimming. Nightmares, a runny nose, confusion, and daytime sleeping first received a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. When he was unresponsive to medication, the neurologist determined his pauses and freezes were his brain cells drowning in Lewy body proteins. The sharp and quick walk that once made him look like a sprinter halted his thin, idle legs in front of his favorite wooden chair. With each frequent visit home, I glimpse my mother turning into a beach lifeguard as my father is slowly pulled out to sea.

## MARTIN, 2022

*A half hour of lap swim remains at Martin, and there is time for a quick swim. Martin resembles Ramsey but was built on the east side of town, close to my home, and was flagged by Parks and Recreation for renovation. I waste no time, slip in, and push off the wall. The temperature of the water is almost indistinguishable from the sultry air. A few dolphin kicks propel me forward. The old competitor that drove me up and down the pool for years makes another appearance before the compulsion dissipates. Her loyalty in the water is unwavering.*

*Layers of paint smooth over chips and fill divots on the pool's floor. I recall a man repainting the pool's bottom one winter. The paint covers years of use, ruptures in the concrete, novices leaving the security of the wall, a middle schooler swimming their personal best. Another layer covers the city's history*

*and how this pool once served as a summer refuge for those on the east side of town. Each layer keeps the pool open for future swimmers, the repainting of this thick black line an arrow continuing to show the way.*

*Since returning to the pool, I've contemplated what the water has been to me beyond friction and resistance and a place where the intensity of thoughts and feelings lifted or could be digested. Swimming was where the space between my ribs opened, how I sensed how far one arm's pull got me, where I perceived how my skin lapped up the sun. Swimming taught me how to breathe, how to kick through constraints I couldn't change, how to keep on. I wish for people of all ages to learn how to swim so they can stay alive, swim anywhere, and with time, remember, explore, or simply drift. I want them to have these experiences in the water and to create their own. And I believe it's never too late to learn.*

*I keep swimming. After thousands of laps over a lifetime, I now think of swimming as mostly floating. A white woman recently approached me as I towed off to ask how she might learn to swim faster. She said, at over fifty years old, she wanted to truly learn how to swim. I commended her and said it takes practice. There is no shortcut. Maybe I want everyone to simply learn how to float.*

*A few pulls later, I glimpse a new lifeguard taking the chair. Lap swim is ending. Soon these summer pools will be drained and closed until next summer. I pull myself from the water and perch on deck. An image arises of my father sitting in his wooden chair and watching TV. His chest rises, and I feel mine. The swim test comes to mind. My father appears serene, as if he is lulled by my swim today. Our hearts beat, fueled by short, dulcet breaths.*

**IN NOVEMBER** of 2022, several months after our last talk about the swim test, my father tripped on the stairs in front of my parents' home and fell. He hit his head and suffered multiple brain bleeds, and days later, seizures. I flew home and joined my mother at the hospital, waiting and wondering if he would regain consciousness.

He lies propped up in a mechanical bed, covered by a white blanket, his arms limp, eyes closed, and his scalp gripped by electrodes. My feet are planted on the hard white floor, and my arms dangle at my sides. Amidst beeps from numerous machines, my own heart thuds forcefully, a sensation I recognize from swimming underwater. Then my hips begin to sway. It seems to be a new motion, but the stance I remember. I am on deck at a meet, awaiting a race. I am not prepared for this swim.

During the days that follow, I sway faster. I am out of practice and must remember to breathe. My father continues to lie there in white, his body lighter than in the days before, so light he looks like he is beginning to float. With my cheek pressed against his, I stroke his thinning hair and savor the comfort of having him close. This man that came from so far away, who didn't know how to swim but got in the pool anyways. I thank him in a whisper for teaching me how to jump, for staying on deck, for knowing I'd swim before I could.

Then it is time.

His breathing changes, and he shows me how he climbed the ladder and leapt.

**AT THE END** of our half-hour conversation about the swim test, I asked my dad, "What are your memories of me swimming?" He said, "I saw it as an opportunity for you to experience something that I had difficulty with. That's true. When I see you, saw you at the club, it was as if you were born for water. And I saw you from the beginning. I saw you in different places. There was just an ease with water."

**BARTHOLOMEW, 2023**

*When I return to Austin after my father's service, I decide to swim. I return to the water because there is nowhere else to go. I pick a February day that clears seventy degrees, and I head to Bartholomew pool. I arrive in my swimsuit under my clothes and head on deck. A lifeguard monitors a couple of swimmers in their own lanes. The remaining quadrant of the pool is open, and I claim it as my own.*

*I undress, put on my cap and goggles, and stand still in the dusk air. The fading sun makes its way to the horizon. Today, the oaks that line the pool appear as sculptures in front of the black metal fence. The sights and sounds of lap swimmers remind me of watching my mother years ago and the last time I was at Bartholomew, talking with my father on the phone after a swim—my father an ever-present witness to my relationship with the water.*

*I sit on deck and swing my feet into the pool. They undulate with swimmers' waves, and I pause and settle. A memory of my father arises, and I dedicate this quick swim to him.*

*I am a recreational swimmer now, writing about Black people and water. I choose to swim with curiosity and aim for ease. I muse to myself that*

*swimming could be my art practice. I don't have to count laps or swim hard. My body in water remembers. The past can stir; the present and future may speak. I wait for what materializes and what shapes I may take, all the while enjoying the buoyancy, my working heart now beating for us both.*

*Today there are no words from a veteran, no other Black bodies, and no test. There is just the familiar sound of swimmers carving water and an emptiness that feels befitting. An evening zephyr greets me.*

*I am at home and starting anew. I enter the water and glide.*