

# Learning to Swim

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When you are a child, you learn to swim. You fill your lungs and submerge, releasing your breath in corpulent bubbles that fizz to the surface. You learn to tilt your head to alternate sides when you take a breath, learn to breathe after odd—not even—strokes so your neck doesn't develop a crick, pace your breaths so you aren't dizzy from flinging your head from side to side. You learn to slow your heart, steady its rhythm, push it back down from your throat where it pulses, ready to leap out, taking the contents of your stomach with it. You learn to tune out distractions.

You remember this when, at thirteen, a man follows you from your dance rehearsal in the city, down quiet laneways to where your father is waiting in his car. You turn your head on every fifth step, sneaking glances over your shoulder as if you've pulled ahead in a race. You push your heart back down, emerge onto the main street and clamber into the safety of your father's car.

You remember again at eighteen when your father is given a prognosis of three to six months to live, with

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a promise of treatments that will wrack his body and shatter his courage. You sit with him in hospital between university lectures or hole up in the library to read medical journals. You tune out distractions. You keep swimming.

You remember once more at twenty when a boy gets your phone number from a friend of a friend and calls you. Repeatedly. Until you agree to go out with him once, heart pulsing in your throat, hoping you'll make it back. You breathe. You slow your heartbeat. You don't see him again.

You remember to inhale and exhale when your father, who survived his prognosis by five years, is visited once more by malefic demons clawing at his lungs. You are practiced at this stroke. You slip through hospital corridors, glide through specialist appointments. At 3 am by the edge of his bed, his body folded in half as his lungs betray him, you breathe with him. He survives another five years.

When he dies, you forget how to breathe. Two weeks later, your first pregnancy ends. There is not enough oxygen in your lungs.

When years later, your first-born falls into the quagmire of depression, self-medicates, doesn't sleep, you inhale

and exhale in measured breaths. You learn survival strokes.

When your first-born disappears, leaving a note and a kiss, your lungs empty. There is no air in your lungs. There is no air anywhere. You keep your head above the waterline thanks to the lifebuoy of your second-born. You do not breathe again until your first-born reappears at the other end of the day. Your limbs, weak from the lack of oxygen, collapse beneath you. You forget how to swim.

For the next four years you relearn how to swim, relearn how to breathe.

Then it is your second-born's turn to self-medicate. He swims into turbulent waters, swirls into psychosis. The whirlpool drags you under, forces the air from your lungs once more. You gasp, grasp for handholds, refuse to let your progeny drown. A hand reaches for you, and for your second child. Your first-born, lungs filled with air, pulls you to the surface, lifts his brother too, swims to the shore with you both. He is a strong, confident swimmer now.

The three of you collapse on the beach, spent, the air around you undisturbed except for the rasping of discordant breathing.

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The furious pounding of your hearts slow, fall into a rhythm, harmonise. Your breath steadies. Together, hands clutched tightly, you venture back to the water's edge. You wade in, take small tentative strokes, feel the water around your legs.

You will not let each other drown.

Together, you make for deep water.

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