



I

MUNICIPAL SWIMMING
POOL (2005–2011), CITY
PARK, TURNHOUT

ARCHITECT ANONYMOUS

As luck would have it, she landed on her back and could keep her mouth above water. Two weeks before her sixteenth birthday, Nathalie was caught by her long ponytail in the filter of the paddling pool. The incident occurred on a busy Sunday afternoon, when the adult pool was too crowded for her to swim lengths. Nathalie's uncle had brought her to Turnhout from the neighbouring town of Retie. While waiting for a 25-metre lane, she was playing with her uncle and young cousin in the shallow children's pool. She was seated with her back to the edge of the pool when she felt a sharp tug on her hair. The back of her head slammed into the tiled edge. Nathalie tried to scramble to her feet but was held down by a painful yanking sensation. She reached for her ponytail – by instinct, we cover the spots that hurt most with our hands – but where it should have been, she felt only the back of her head against the wall of the pool.

From the time her ponytail was caught in the suction outlet to the time of her rescue Nathalie was in no immediate danger of drowning, but throughout those tense minutes she was held in an extremely uncomfortable position.

Pool supervisor Bert was the first to rush to her aid. The obvious solution was to cut off the ponytail, but Nathalie was struggling with all her might. This made the trapped ponytail pull even harder; at any moment, the skin and hair might be

torn away from her scalp. Her thrashing also made it very difficult for Bert to position the scissors for the liberating snip. The girl was screaming blue murder, perhaps in severe pain or perhaps in protest.

As a pool supervisor, Bert was used to thinking on his feet. Without pausing to interpret her screams, he ruthlessly cut off the ponytail. Nathalie's uncle and a few concerned bystanders grabbed her and calmed her down, wrapping the back of her head in a towel. Bert – scissors in one hand, lopped-off ponytail in the other – then saw what must have happened. In the exact spot where Nathalie's head had been held against the edge of the pool, the circulation system had a suction outlet, protected by a cover four millimetres thick. The cover turned out not to have been screwed on securely, so Nathalie's ponytail had ended up behind it, pulled into the circulation system.

As soon as Bert learned of this fact, he took several immediate steps. He drained the paddling pool and reattached the cover, making sure it was screwed firmly into place. Problem solved.

Nathalie emerged from the incident free of serious injuries, but very shaken. 'It doesn't really hurt, but it *was* a shock,' she told a roving reporter from the local TV news.

At her birthday party two weeks later, I saw she had covered the bald spot with a large artificial flower. It was hideous, but we mentioned it only behind her back.

*

Since the opening of the swimming pool in Turnhout city park, in October 2005, it has never stayed open for more than three months at a time. All sorts of peculiar defects keep leading to temporary closures: from subsidence and system malfunctions to biblical scenes of its water transformed into milk.

The exorbitant cost and flawed design of the new swimming pool soon caused a scandal in the region. Ten million euros had been spent on it, and it never seemed to be open. The regular swimmers were left with a lot of unanswered questions – above all, whether their annual membership fee would be refunded.

At the time, the whole controversy surrounding the swimming pool largely escaped my attention. Less than four years later in 2009, after repeated electrical failures and water leaks, it became painfully clear that the swimming pool would have to close its doors for good. But by then I was studying seventy miles away in Ghent and had other things on my mind, such as world literature and severing my ties with the past. I went swimming once a week in the sublime Art Deco pool by the Leie River in the heart of the city. The boggy terrain of my hometown, and all the forces pulling me back there, were gradually releasing their hold on me. But the Turnhout swimming pool was being sucked in, quite literally.

Below the swimming pool was the boiler room. At an imperceptible yet steady pace, the room was sinking deeper and deeper into the marshy ground. The electrical system's safety sensors, three quarters of the way up the walls, were ultra-sensitive but not in the most strategic position: they detected leaks from the pool above, but not the rising water from below. The sensors were too high up to be activated until the water had almost filled the room. Well before that, the boiler and the other machines could be waterlogged beyond repair, and the swimmers above could be electrocuted.

Of course, the pool regulars and other taxpayers had their theories about the closure, but the local authorities were savvy enough to keep the sinking boiler room out of the news. Instead, the public debate focused on a confusing multitude of ever-changing technical issues.

In October 2009, a banner was hung above the entrance to the pool:

TEMPORARILY PERMANENTLY CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE

This unaccommodating announcement seemed designed to permit the authorities to say, ‘We told you so,’ no matter what the future might bring.

In the months that followed, all sorts of investigations took place into ways of improving the electrical system. There were visits from one expert after another. Cost estimates were made and remade, late-night meetings convened – all in the hope of finding a new reopening date. And sure enough, in January 2011 – after being closed for a year and a half – the swimming pool reopened.

The new era lasted only a few weeks. In April, the banner was retrieved from storage, with a slight adjustment:

TEMPORARILY PERMANENTLY CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE

How often did I swim there myself? Not often enough to justify the significance this *lieu de piscine* now holds for me. In my defence, you often don’t know until after the fact what you should remember, and by then you’re stuck with the things you would rather have forgotten. And vice versa, in this case. Nonetheless, my first sight of the new swimming pool is still etched in my mind.

It must have been the first summer after the opening, July 2006. I am only fourteen years old and venturing out unchaperoned for the first time. Through my red bikini bottoms, my swelling hips are starting to show. My top is an orange polyester triangle, the sharp end pointing down at my exposed navel. On the inside of my wrist is a tribal stick-on tattoo from a bag of

crisps. I want a new bikini like Eva's, with high-leg bottoms and two separate pockets on top, one for each of my non-existent breasts. Eva is playing with Max in the water nearby – her bikini top is a size B with underwire. Max is a chubby ten-year-old boy from her neighbourhood with a cute, freckled face and a mischievous smile. When he's bored, he tries to touch us in places that don't really interest him but that he knows embarrass us. Eva's breasts are currently his main target.

It's really too cold to swim outdoors, but the indoor pool is closed for technical reasons. Eva and Max are in the water; I'm lying on my towel on the grass nearby. *Gooseflesh, pasty, scrawny*, lists the cruel inner voice of a fourteen-year-old girl gazing at herself. It also tells me my belly's sticking out too much, so I stretch back on my elbows to flatten the imaginary bulge. No one is looking at me in particular, I'm practically invisible, yet I can feel all the eyes of the outdoor swimmers burning into my flesh. I thrust my flat chest out, just in case anyone wants a look after all.

'Don't do that Max, stop it!' I hear Eva shouting. Propped up on my elbows near the edge of the grass beside the pool, I can see the lonesome weeping willow in the next field. It's an old hayfield, which grows up to knee level in July. From my perspective, the long stalks seem to brush the bottom of the willow's hanging branches, and wherever they touch, it's as if the image is zipped shut and loses depth – a painting by a pupil still struggling with perspective.

I'm reading a modern retelling of the medieval love story of Abelard and Héloïse, set in New York – Arthur and Lois, they're called in this version. In Latin class, we've just translated the myth of Hero and Leander. Tales of doomed romance go well with weeping willows: the combination ignites the pilot light in my fourteen-year-old heart.

I lie flat on my back and then bring my chin to my chest to

see the willow poking out just above the long stalks. From this angle, the stalks seem to be climbing the tree, slinging themselves around the branches like ropes. Dangling from the largest branch is a noose of grass.

*

Eternal afternoon. The colours are radiant. No one has to work. *Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool* (1966). California sun on men's bare buttocks. David Hockney's paintings celebrate the backyard swimming pool as a temple of relaxation, good living and sexual licence.

It is August 2017. I am visiting the temporary exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Drove to Paris on impulse. I've spent the past weeks working manically on a commissioned series of poems. Before that came a busy year and the year before that was busy too. I can hardly remember a time when I wasn't busy. I'm the busy type. I'm probably worn out, but I won't admit it. Instead, I'm always losing my temper over nothing. The only remedy is looking at art. I try to draw new energy from Hockney's expanses of pink, blue and yellow. *A Bigger Splash* (1967): simple forms, a playful explosion, a cheerful palette. The sun is beyond the edge of the canvas, but it must be blazing to judge by the colours, which drip with heat. How distant it seems, a simple life with a swimming pool – too far away ever to reach.

In *Portrait of an Artist – Pool with Two Figures* (1972), a man, probably Hockney himself, is standing at the edge of a swimming pool. The backyard overlooks a scenic landscape, mountainous, green, deep breath. Yet the man at the side of the pool is not looking out at the view, but down at the nude figure glimpsed through the water's surface, swimming towards him. Refracted light marbles the water. The swimmer lies

frozen in the pool of blue. It seems improbable that he will surface and look up at his observer. Is it the man's gaze that traps him underwater, or my own desire to see a cage in everything?

I wander through the exhibition, passing scenes and colours, collages and pencil drawings, pop art influences and rebellions against them, and portraits of the men in Hockney's life – again and again, the roguish buttocks, the recurring swimming pools, the years rushing by. A man's existence in his work. Sixty years of brushstrokes – one way to pass a life.

In the last gallery is Hockney's video installation, *The Four Seasons*. Four panels face each other to form a square of screened-off space. I slip through the opening between two. On the inside, each wall consists of nine separate screens, together displaying a single moving image. I install myself on the bench in front of the winter wall.

Woldgate Woods, Winter, 2010: the camera advances down a snow-covered road through the woods at the speed of a careful driver. An earlier vehicle has left tyre tracks in the carpet of snow. Along the road are bare trees covered with snow and frost. I watch and the motion pulls me into the image, into the landscape, into the white, and I am the observer, I am the driver, and at the same time I am the slow camera following the road into the woods. Yet I seem not to gain any ground, because the landscape, as I move further into it, does not change, or at least so I thought, because now, before I know it, the snow-covered road is not only on the screen in front of me but also behind me; I am on the bench in the museum and in the middle of the snow, moving still deeper into the white landscape – no, letting the forward pull, the mesmerising image, draw me still deeper into the white. In sync with the slow movement of the camera, I feel – just as I am being drawn through the landscape – salt running through me, as if tears

were following the very same snow-covered track through my body. My god, I'm so tired. The white is so pure.

*

Not long after the swimming pool's permanent closure in 2011, rumours began to circulate in the Turnhout cafés. Friends from the old days brought the story to Ghent. Or maybe not; maybe I heard the rumours when I was back in the Kempen, perched at the bar in Café Ranonkel. Had I heard about the architect of the swimming pool? The long litany of technical troubles was rumoured to have driven him to suicide. Depending on whose turn it was to tell the story, the architect might even have hanged himself in the sinking boiler room, the scene of the failures. A pitch-black joke.

The question of whether the architect had really come to such a bitter end soon became secondary to the story's success. As the rumour gathered momentum, it was widely asked whether a person who caused a public fiasco on the scale of the Turnhout swimming pool, who showed incompetence in his profession and contempt for the public and their wallets – surely that type of person should pay the ultimate price? The storytellers believed, or wanted others to believe, that the construction faults could have led the architect to take his own life. For them, that belief was enough to justify passing on their version of the facts: an urban legend in the making, fictional but more convincing each time it was told. It was true because it was believed to be true, like the one about the killer in the back seat, which has terrified generation after generation by the glow of the campfire.

The cruelty of the reasoning behind the suicide story did not hit me, to be honest, until several years later. At first, I don't think I questioned the tale at all. Sometimes that's how it

works here in Turnhout. Later, when I told the story myself, I spiced it up with a hint of dark romance, painting the architect as a tragic artist, desperately unable to make good on his ambitions.

The more sentimental versions of this fictional tale gave the architect a psychological backstory – not in the role of tragic artist, but as the underappreciated son of a well-known architect of the Turnhout School, a modernist movement that had put our town on the architectural map in the 1960s. The father was said to have arranged for the son to design the prestigious pool: a golden opportunity for him to make his own reputation instead of dining out on his father's success. In this version, what supposedly drove the son to the depths of despair was his failure in the eyes of his father and mentor. That's how cruel we can be to those we suspect of receiving unfair advantages.

Barroom gossip. Provincial rumours. A settling of scores. In any case, people were outraged about the swimming pool – and anger needs a target. Even though nothing had been proved, people thought it reasonable to point the finger at the architect. After all, *he* was the one who had designed the swimming pool with the boiler room below, in that marshy spot. Yes, perhaps it was too late to fix the mistake, prevent the failure, but at least in our narrative the person who had made the mistake had to pay with his life. The fictional underground suicide was confirmed and reconfirmed by every telling and each new twist. In any case, no one asked that the story provide any evidence for its own veracity. Therein lies the heartless verdict.

Of course in reality any number of individuals could have been responsible for the pool's endlessly multiplying failures; the link to the architect was an imagined one, but all the more powerful because of it.

Whenever I climb down the ladder into any swimming pool, I pass two phantoms from my memory. Him and me, sixteen years old for ever. It's a Sunday afternoon, and we're interlaced against the wall of Turnhout's indoor pool. I am weightless in the water, my legs wrapped around his waist, his hands on my ass, his fingers reaching from there to explore the inside of my bikini bottoms. Between my legs, I can feel him getting hard in his orange nylon tent. Under water there's less friction, but even so, he's thrusting against me so hard I'm scared he'll bruise me. We kiss without pausing for breath, like washing machines, with dramatic sweeps of the tongue. Between kisses, he tells me I'm 'sexy', but I can't be sure, because he has his eyes closed when he says it. I want him to look at me.

Meanwhile, I don't dare look at him. I keep my eyes shut tight and remember a magazine article I recently read, by a girl who wrote about having sex with her boyfriend underwater. His penis got stuck inside her, vacuum sealed. It was really awkward. I consider our options if we find ourselves in a similar scenario. We could run off and join a travelling circus, as the stars of the sideshow 'The Siamese Lovers'. I'm crazy about him, I've just started the pill, and my body's pulsing with the promise of sex. The children we're scaring, the adults we're embarrassing – what do I care? The public swimming pool is an extension of my bedroom, where I have no privacy either: my mother makes me leave the door open when I'm sprawled on the bed with him.

Not until we hear screaming do I notice the world around us and push him off. On the other side of the pool, a small cluster of people has gathered around the lifeguard, who seems to have collapsed to the ground. There is blood on the non-slip floor. Two boys are running out into the corridor, towards the changing rooms. Not long afterwards, the lifeguard is loaded into an ambulance, and we all have to get out of the pool.

Since the corridor with the changing rooms is part of the scene of the crime, we have to change in the entrance hall, just inside the gates – almost a hundred swimmers, dripping all over the floor. The police interview all the witnesses.

Apparently, after the lifeguard had pulled a twelve-year-old troublemaker out of the pool, the boy returned with his older brother, a muscle-bound thug who beat the lifeguard senseless. Others claimed that the lifeguard was grabbing the boy to shut him up when his older brother came to his defence. The surveillance images reveal nothing more than the lifesaver standing with his back to the camera, in front of the boy, before being attacked from behind by the aggressor.

After waiting an hour and a half, we giggle as we tell the officer we didn't even see what happened; we were making out. They let us leave.

The incident leaves the lifeguard with a broken jaw and foot. The two boys remain unidentified. For the next few days, the swimming pool stays closed.

*

The architect who designed the pool is nameless; it has somehow proved possible to keep his identity out of the papers. This disappearing act only fuels the rumours of his suicide. Now and then someone claims to know who it is. Knowledge is power, even in café culture. Telling a good secret can earn you a free round, or at least persuade someone to hop on the barstool next to yours and keep you company. Rob V., a Ranonkel regular, says it wasn't the son of a well-known architect, but the nephew of a local councillor from an opposition party. René M. claims the architect wasn't even from Turnhout and certainly didn't die by his own hand, but the contractor disappeared without a trace when the building closed. Stan W., just as sure

of himself, swears it was the contractor who took his own life after being unjustly accused.

By this stage, legal proceedings have been in progress for seven years. The city is claiming serious damages. The parties to the dispute have formally agreed not to give out any information about the case.

A former local councillor tells me the contractor saw the problem coming, but his advice went unheeded. The priority was to open the swimming pool fast, and in their haste, the local authorities overlooked the design flaws. Unwilling to waste any more words on the subject, he concludes, ‘The municipality pulled the wool over our eyes.’

The mayor strictly observes the embargo on accurate information about the whole business. When I ask him exactly why the swimming pool was permanently closed, he parries the question with practised ease: ‘Because of mechanical failures resulting from the issues at hand.’

He is dismissive of the story about the architect but tells me he can’t comment in view of the ongoing legal proceedings. Instead, he shows me a few photos of the new water slide.

*

Danny lived on Driekuilstraat, a minor one-way street that runs parallel to the street where my parents live. Whenever I order a Duvel, I think of him. Every day at noon, he went for a drink at the swimming pool cafeteria. He travelled the two kilometres to the city park in an electric wheelchair. He had managed to qualify for a free one from Social Services, because of his obesity and fatty liver. He perpetuated his suffering, and his benefits, by drinking twelve to fourteen Duvels a day. My father says it was actually twice that number, but facts don’t always sound as credible as fiction.

In any case, while drinking he would sit at the window between the cafeteria and the indoor pool, placidly watching the swimmers, with no ulterior motives. He never made trouble or turned vulgar when drinking. He just drank himself into a stupor. By the end of his visit to the cafeteria, he would give off a sour smell, sometimes laced with urine. Apart from that, he was a polite customer and a reliable source of income for the cheerless cafeteria, where even the ham-and-cheese sandwiches were inedible.

When he drove home in his wheelchair at five, his wife would have a fried chicken ready for him, which he ate skin and all. After that, he would go to sleep and wouldn't rise again until just before noon the next day, when the whole routine would repeat itself. There was no money left for his wife to go out. His benefits and her pension covered the bills and the Duvels. She worked as a housecleaner, paid cash in hand, to meet unforeseen expenses. On Sundays, Danny would remain in the cafeteria longer than usual to watch the swimming club compete. The front crawl was his favourite event.

On this particular Sunday, the referee called a halt to the competition by order of the Sports and Recreation Service. Although Danny was fast approaching his fourteenth Duvel, he roused himself from his fog for the occasion. Through the window, he could see the members of the swimming club getting an earful from Bert the swimming pool supervisor. What Danny couldn't hear from the cafeteria, however, was that the swimmers had carelessly thrown down their towels and bags along the edge of the pool. In doing so, they had unintentionally covered most of the ventilation ducts (the club has three hundred members). In less than half an hour, this obstruction of the air supply drove the humidity up to eighty per cent, causing light-headedness and making it hard to breathe.

The Sports and Recreation Service and the referee reprimanded the members of the swimming club, but it was Bert who gave it to them with both barrels, calling them filthy scum, treating them like delinquent children instead of grown-up amateur swimmers who might benefit from a reminder to be more considerate of their surroundings. A few members mouthed off at him. The situation soon became tense. Yet despite the altercation, the swimming pool was evacuated in less than ten minutes.

Bert later acknowledged that he had responded ‘too impulsively’ and said he hoped to work with the club on constructive ideas ‘going forwards’: maybe he could station someone at the stairs full time, to make sure no one brought in any bags or towels?

After the evacuation, the humidity quickly dropped back to fifty per cent, but the swimming pool remained closed for the rest of the evening.

When the pool employees arrived the next morning to let in the early swimmers, they found the electric wheelchair at the entrance to the cafeteria, long before the usual opening time. Later that day, Danny’s wife confirmed that he hadn’t returned home the evening before. She had waited until the chicken was cold and then thought, *Ah, fuck it . . .*

*

On the blog *Old Times in Turnhout*, the mood is nostalgic. Under a sepia photograph of the outdoor swimming pools in the city park (three pools and a little fountain), I read the following response:

Whenever I think back to the outdoor swimming pool in the city park, I miss the good old days and can hardly believe

it's not there anymore. My heart breaks whenever I go to the city park and think back to how it was then, how it is now, and how it never will be, ever again . . . (W.P. – 29/06/2012 – 6:17 PM)

Reply:

Dear W.P., There was no other choice. All the pools were connected to the same electrical system. The problems with the indoor pools also affected the outdoor pools. If the outdoor pools had stayed open, it would almost certainly have led to another breakdown. I'm glad at least they could prevent that. (D.V. – 17/07/2012 – 8:34 AM)

Reply:

Utter drivel. Where the local authorities failed completely was in thinking we had to have a fancy indoor pool. They never seriously considered the arguments for a large, no-frills outdoor pool. A proper Turnhouter shouldn't need any warm water. (M.V. – 02/04/2017 – 10:32 PM)

*

Quarter past seven, cold water, short circuit. Up for four hours already. Never gone to a public pool so early in the morning before. Last night my boyfriend left me. These are the first, desperate hours, and I've been swimming for an hour and a half. Arms and legs: heavy and hollow. Chest: breathless. Belly: in knots. Skin: saturated with chlorine. Mouth: not drowned, lips just above water level. No young lovers at poolside today.

On the bus home I fall asleep and miss my stop. But I wake up at home in bed and then fall straight back into deep sleep, all

the way to the swimming pool floor. I'm back in the 25-metre lane. Stroke by stroke, I swim to the far end. Actual time and narrated time are identical in this dream, so I soon confuse it with my early-morning swim. Then moving becomes more difficult; the water feels thicker. As I reach the middle of the lane, I find I can't move any farther. The water has turned milky now. There are no other swimmers, no witnesses. The milk feels warm, warmer, I feel the milk-water around me warming up and sink down into it. Just for a second, I think, and I immerse myself in the thick, white warmth. That is, until I remember I need to breathe and my panic sends me swimming back up. When I reach the surface I collide with a moving membrane, elastic: it gives when I push, but it doesn't tear. There's no opening. I can't break through the skin on the warm milk.

'SWIMMING IN MILK' reads the headline a few days later, on Thursday 11 June 2009. On Wednesday afternoon, the water in the main pool in the Turnhout city park turned a milky white colour. The swimming pool coordinator was not concerned at first. 'When it's crowded, substances get into the water that can cause discoloration. That's most likely to happen in the summer,' he said dismissively.

But among the swimmers, panic soon broke out. A child playing with his father at one end of the large pool swallowed a mouthful of the milky water and then vomited repeatedly. Several swimmers attested that the water had a suspicious chemical odour. An elderly lady was helped to the poolside just in time, before passing out; she thought the Spirit of God had moved upon the face of the waters and turned them to milk, like Christ turning water into wine.

When the last remaining swimmers decided to play it safe and leave the pool, a power failure disabled the scanning system for the membership badges, blocking their exit. At that, the management evacuated the site without further delay.

On Thursday morning, the water was still cloudy and whitish. This led to fears that maybe the pools had somehow been filled with the recycled greywater normally used for flushing the toilets and cleaning the showers. The coordinator responded, 'Well, that's actually clean water, just not clean enough to swim in.'

On Friday, the Provincial Hygiene Institute is expected to come and take water samples. The test results won't be available until at least forty-eight hours later. The expectation now is that the swimming pool will reopen on Tuesday at the earliest. Meanwhile, all they can do with that white water is rinse out the pool – rinse, rinse, rinse.

*

Good news: the new, custom-made filter expected to solve some of the swimming pool's recurring problems will arrive in Turnhout sooner than expected. As soon as it's here, they'll test it for a few days and try to predict how the water will look after thousands of people have swum in it. Depending on the results, the pool may reopen before the Christmas break.

But the 2009 Christmas break comes and goes, and in January 2010 the pool remains closed. The main pool is probably steadily leaking like a sieve, with water seeping down through the joints of the tiled floor and then through the concrete into the boiler room, where it drips onto the electrical wiring. No one is willing to admit that they'll have to pour fresh concrete.

'You say water is passing through the concrete; we say it's a leak. There are chinks, gaps and drill holes through which water could be leaking into the boiler room. Keep that in mind, and try to get beyond what you imagine is going on. Why do people in this bloody town always jump to conclusions before anything has even happened?' the spokesperson for the local authorities explains calmly.

*

In volume ten of the collected works of Charles Darwin, I find a passage about how humans and animals express emotion. It refers to the ‘grief-muscles’ in the face, activated by encounters with death, sorrow and failure. Darwin describes this phenomenon, in the thoroughgoing rationalist spirit of the nineteenth century, not as the outward expression of inner life, but as a muscular contraction, a physical response.

The grief-muscles are interconnected. Pinching the eyebrows turns down the corners of the mouth and also influences the circulation of blood in the face: consequently, the complexion turns pale, the muscles go flaccid, the eyelids droop, and the head sinks towards the chest. The lips, cheeks and lower jaw are all pulled downwards by their own weight. According to Darwin, this is why the face of a person who hears bad news, or experiences failure, is said to ‘fall’. Likewise, a perceived failure is said to result in ‘loss of face’. Our face falls off. We lose it. We have no more identity.

It’s just a metaphor. I don’t have to make so much of it.

*

For want of their own swimming pool, the Turnhout schools sent their pupils to two nearby villages for swimming lessons throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. I once nearly drowned in the Arendonk pool, but no one took it seriously.

The last swimming class before the holidays was always reserved for ‘free play’. Awaiting us in the water were colourful toys, some made of foam and others inflatable: pool noodles, floating mats, balls, kickboards and, across the whole length of the teaching pool, the belly slide. I was sitting on a red foam mat with the fat boy of the class when he told me he was in

love with me and then, taken aback by his own confession, shoved me brusquely off the mat. The shove I had not seen coming. The boy didn't know his own strength; I flipped over twice and ended up under the mat. Instinctively, I pushed up on the mat, in the direction of the noisy air, but with the fat boy on top, it wouldn't budge. Immediate panic. Again, I tried to lift the mat. I was unsuccessful, and when I started to realise it wasn't working, I felt something take shape in my head, a thing I can only describe as a thin thread. A thin thread pulled taut across the diameter of my skull, my dwindling air supply all wound together, a thin thread of breath inside my head that I had to hold on to.

When I think back to those suffocating seconds under the mat, it frightens me to realise just how fast I gave up, how little survival instinct I showed in that instant.

The children at play and the wild, sloshing water all around me must have set the mat in motion. Once I noticed it could move horizontally, I realised I wasn't trapped at all; all I had to do was swim out from under the mat and I'd be free.

I gasped for air as I surfaced, pulled myself over to the ladder and, once I was safely out of the water, filled the place with the sound of my wailing. The lifeguard, who wore many hats – he was also my gym teacher and the after-school coordinator – came over to comfort me. When I told him I'd nearly drowned under the red mat, he said, 'Of course you didn't.'

*

On 18 April 2011 the swimming pool reopened after a closure of four hundred and forty-three days. By seven that morning, quite a crowd of swimmers had gathered at the door. Everyone who had been a member at the time of the closure back in 2009 had been invited to visit that day for an extension of their