



HOW I SWIM

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Class begins in one hour. I have been brainstorming in the shower, as usual, but procrastinated until now. Clearly, I am a last-minute writer and enjoy creating under pressure.

My writing begins with a free-for-all and quickly scribbling my ideas onto scraps of paper before the thoughts evaporate. Sometimes the perfect sentence suddenly will appear—as if there is a play button in my head that has been pressed, something like whispering a secret in my own ear. This can be a problem when I am shampooing my hair.

Placing my words on paper is a strenuous task, because I have spent thirty years composing under the artificial rain in my bathtub. Thirty years of poetry and letters. My secret thoughts disappeared unrecorded and unspoken. The words were quietly forgotten as the soapy water carried them down the drain.

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On my twelfth birthday my mother sent me a gift in the mail from 3,000 miles away. I admired her florid script and sniffed the brown paper, hoping to catch her scent. I savored the opportunity to feel an object her hands had recently touched. Barely able to contain my excitement, I gently unfolded the wrapping to reveal a journal. The small book had delicate cherry blossoms drawn on its cover and was held firmly closed by a deep pink satin ribbon tied into a neat bow. I filled the pages easily. Writing in my journal allowed me to release emotions and languish over my pubescent poetry. I wrote to my journal with complete freedom. It held all of my secrets, without judgment.

When my mother came to visit later that year, she read the journal. One afternoon I came home from school and discovered her sitting on the edge of my bed with the defenseless little book in her hand. She told me I was a slut. In a harsh whisper, more piercing than shouting, she demanded to know if I was becoming a “godless les-bi-an!” I said nothing. I tore out the offensive and traitorous pages, shredded them into small bits, and threw them into Lake Washington. The ducks tried to nibble at the pieces before they sank into the cold darkness. As a teenager I would return to that beach to drink beer with boys and in my twenties to skinny dip with friends, but I never wrote down another intimate thought again.

So much time has passed. I need to write. Writing captures my jumbled feelings and shapes them into meaningful insights. Writing forces me to collect the tangled perceptions and clots of emotion hiding just beneath the surface.

I write, "Collaboration is always helpful and would make writing a richer experience." That sentence is a load of rubbish disguised by a floweret of pink frosting. I am afraid to leave the safety of the shower.

I muster up the courage to approach the lake's edge. I am confronted by my vulnerability and eager to have someone hold my hand as we plunge into the murky waters. Reluctant to expose my inner workings, academic writing has been a safe, predictable, and dull hiding place. I cannot afford to be tenuous.

I plop my soggy paper down on the table in front of my tutor for editing. I want to hide. I am both ashamed and proud of what I have written, but will she interpret my words as meaningful? Will she savor my story like a ripe plum and suck on the pit for a while, or have I just secreted a cancerous tumor and indulgently smeared it around on the page like a toddler? I close my eyes and hold my breath as the tutor reads my words out loud. They are no longer a secret.

With each draft, I inch closer to submersion. I need help. I am coming up for air before the next wave hits. Divorce, bedbugs, foreclosure, and death. Crash, crash, crash! Spinning head over heels, I find it impossible to tell which way is up. No longer writing to get a good grade or to impress my teacher, it is time to be real. I open my eyes.

The tutor reads on, and it is as if my twelve-year-old self has sent me a message in a bottle. I am embarrassed by her loneliness. She is here with me, drowning, just beneath my skin. Loss has a powerful undercurrent, and I can barely see the shore now. My silence has become a vast ocean. I have to use my voice. I am grasping for dignity, grace, and humor before hypothermia sets in. Today I am writing to save my life.

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I almost died before my fourth birthday. Convinced that I could breathe water, I was quite happy walking around in our backyard pool. The water was about a foot taller than me, and my big sister noticed my long reddish-brown locks floating on the surface. She pulled me out by my mermaid hair and bent my legs to pump the water out of my stomach like in old cartoons. I was furious. Breathing air was quite painful, and my sister rudely interrupted my conversation with Jesus. My father dismantled the pool that evening. For years I believed that Jesus must be hiding in someone's swimming pool or at the bottom of a lake. I've never had a firm grip on reality, but I am an excellent swimmer.

Memories wash over me as the words flow from my body and splash onto the page. I get out the big girl scissors and slice my paper into ribbons. The meaning is becoming clear to me as I puzzle the pieces back together. The sentences begin to have a natural ebb and flow. I let out a deep breath. I can

forgive my imperfections and admire the writer I am becoming. Being naked feels right sometimes, and it is too laborious to swim with clothes on.

Gaining strength as I arrange the paragraphs, I lose my modesty and discover my own narrative. A sense of urgency propels me forward, but the words come fast and easy now. Their effervescence delights me, like sea spray tickling my skin with a thousand tiny kisses.

You are here with me. Shamelessly. We are explorers. I want you to know my mind. I need you to walk around in my rooms and inhale the essence of my illusions. We take a breath and dip under the surface with eyes wide open. Let's interrogate our reality together. If I find the right words, you will fall in without resistance. Come on in. The water is fine.