
2. An older woman stopped swimming and watched me. What a graceful stroke! What she loved, of course, was the mirrored beauty of her youth—the forgotten pleasure of her toughened skin.

3. The water undulates like a womb I do not remember. My fingers poke through for life. The air is unfamiliar.

4. I tell a friend that life is water. With a pretended fluidity his heart mimics the ocean—but he cannot swim. He answers that a cell full of water explodes.

5. Seventy-year old women stand naked in the locker room. Some use walkers, others have artificial hips, scarred legs and missing breasts; still, they love this morning swim with the distant sun rising.

6. In these women, I witness how I too will age. I avert my eyes, move to far lanes and other shadows.

7. I swim past men to prove my strength—after years of "throwing like a girl"; I lap them twice.

8. To gauge myself, I watch other women. Old women, pregnant women, girls without breasts who marvel at mine. The younger ones point at me, not believing that this is what their bodies will become.

9. The older women reflect the course my body must follow. My eyes wrinkle in patterns that mimic theirs. Breasts pull through water to escape the yank of gravity.
10. I tap slower swimmers’ feet to pass them. Their skin startles me, as though I’ve come upon schools of spot running south for winter.

11. Swimming is one of the rare things I do alone. Of necessity, lap after lap, I build faith in solitude.

12. Here there is no hand to hold, no ball to return, no score to keep.

13. Swimming gives me patience to write.

14. Cells transport oxygen in a precise biochemical reaction, evolved through an expanse of time, imagined only by God, at night, while He dreamed. I test the reliability of flesh—all but breathing water.

15. I dream of water. I thrash pillows. Mistaking my struggle for a nightmare, a man grabs me to his side.

16. I dream of fire. I dream of fire and combustion. The things water does not heal.

17. How do we breathe underwater? A moment without air is magic. Through goggles, I watch the bubbles insist on my life.

18. Fifty others swim in the pool. Water molecules vibrate with our personalities. I swallow each person’s breath, yet remain alone.

19. My men have gone for water. Their faces reflect the sorrow of departure. They have gone for deeper water and places where I drown.

20. I once swam competitively, pushing constantly against the limits of my body: one second faster, five-tenths for the blue ribbon, one one-hundredth for the record.

21. This — is — the — point — where I always — want to stop. Turn — legs — ache — lungs heave — arms weary — the distance — is forever — force the push — break water.
22. Every morning, two crows perch near the pool's glass doors and peck madly at their reflections. When no one watches, I jump out of the pool and run, arms raised and mouth squawking, to chase them away.

23. Then all three of us jump—the crows with fright to the sky—and me, chilled, to the diving well.

24. Every other breath my face sculpts a water mask.

25. Today the pool is too hot to even sweat. Heat curls from skin like humidity over asphalt.

26. Blood throbs, echoing the physics of water and sound. It sets up a rhythm between myself and other swimmers.

27. The echo of someone swimming butterfly is a song playing in your head all day.

28. All of it is the dull pound of a heart, blood returning to its origin is exciting as water tumbling in spring.

29. At a certain angle, the hand slices sheets of water. This requires a force the body is unaware of, even as pounds of water move away like the curtain rising over the first act.

30. What does it mean to drown in a dream? Is there the hope of bellying-up like a fish? Are we forced to forget breathing?

31. Some days there is no difference between sleep and dreams, between swimming and drowning, water and air.

32. What is unnatural is untrue.

33. My father tried to teach me to play chess. A reluctant student, one night I sleepwalked to the living room, arranged the chess board, and fell—hands first—on the queen.

34. There are sixty-four squares on a chess board! Swimming sixty-four lengths assumes the logic of a mile.
35. There is a theory that women who try desperately to lose weight also try to diminish their presence on earth.

36. After a winter of depression, inches of sadness float across the pool.

37. Sometimes, breathing, the heaviness of my own life amazes me. Sucking on air, I consume the world.

38. My best friend moves haphazardly at my side, misunderstanding when I don’t pause to answer his smile.

39. He is my friend and I tell him everything—or everything I know—or everything I learn when swimming.

40. Breaststroke beads the surface like mercury on skin. I’m a skeet barely touching water, needing it only to serve my own motion.

41. I try to describe my father, but he eludes me, fast as a rock skipping the ocean. I try to describe my mother, but she is too much myself—familiar as oxygen gurgling about my waist.

42. I learned to walk because my sister was born and I knew that I would never be carried again.

43. I learned to swim because my father threw me in the deep end and shouted “Swim!”

44. I sweat in the water and my face is cooled, ice cooled on ice.

45. As children, my sisters and I linked arms with my father and ran into the Atlantic, afraid only of letting go and coming up in some other ocean.

46. A man paralyzed from the waist down swims slowly, his legs quivering with the dream of motion. In a dream that my strength reaches him through water, I swim faster, give up another length.

47. At dawn the moon fits the socket of the sky like a great white bulb.
48. I am the cog of a wheel. I turn and separate men; they never meet and nothing is ever whole.

49. I love him as though all the time in the world were contained in the four walls of our room or the four chambers of my heart.

50. An old woman wears pantyhose under her bathing suit, keeping warm beneath a layer of material thinner than flesh.

51. I walked into fifteen-foot waves, tropics, mid-March. The crystalline water shattered over my head.

52. The lover who became a lover when the old lover was not a lover has taken a lover.

53. The word has no meaning.

54. A scar defines a woman's abdomen—a red mark of all that has been and all that must follow.

55. I escape gravity in water, the way others fly in dreams to escape danger.

56. I watch my sisters and brother closely. How is it that my blood is their blood, my face is their face, but my touch is not theirs?

57. Today I am red and the bullish world tramples me.

58. In one dream, my first boyfriend drowns in the Chesapeake Bay and I retrieve his body with a crab trap. The stench of that first loss—how it permeated so many years!

59. All of it slips off, like silk in passion.

60. My goggles are amber. The grass is lime green ice cream. The sky is deep gray. The water is a crystal chandelier.

61. When I swim I am the totality of water. I am hydrogen and oxygen. I am pure strength and energy.
62. An old girlfriend marries and dreams of babies red as geraniums. I swim from commitment and dream of hope, golden as fall.

63. I’ve been here before and am anxious to leave. I am young enough to have learned that all things are composed of change.

64. I shed water’s silk cocoon for the certain embrace of air; my body emerges from the pool, form from cut crystal.

Janice M. Lynch