Chlorine

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I.
At four years old, I don’t pass the swim test. I doggy-paddle the entire length of the pool, twice. I won’t be able to start lessons for another year. In the locker room, my mom tells me not to stare at the saggy breasts and huge white underwear. Pruney toes squeak into sandals while chlorine burns my eyes and nose. Mildew and dirt are in the cracks of green and brown tiles. I’m too young to be scared of staph infections.

II.
In January of fourth grade my classmates and I have our math and language arts lessons shortened by thirty minutes. We pile into busses, bright winter coats and plastic bags of towels and suits. Five minutes later, we wander down sea foam-green halls of the high school to the locker room. I can swim breaststroke, backstroke and freestyle. I place in the level-five swim group, the highest. We learn to tread in the deep waters of the diving well. I don’t worry about not being able to see the bottom. My instructor is a senior named Mark with dark hair and eyes. He holds me under my arms, his fingers tickle my ribs and I feel it in my lower stomach. Push your arms out while you kick your feet. Yeah, just like that, he says as water drips from his hair and lands on my shoulders.

III.
Eighth grade swim team. Elizabeth Brady stands on the cement bench connected to the beige lockers. She steadies herself as she slips one tanned leg into a pair of Abercrombie jeans. I just think he looks dumb, I say about President Bush. Let me guess, she hisses. The rest of the locker room goes quiet. Your parents voted for Clinton. I want her to fall from her cement pedestal and crack her skull. I want her blood to mix with the blonde of her hair, making a shade of pink to match her toenails. You’re just a disgusting Democrat, she says, shaking her head as her other leg slides into the hole of her pants. She doesn’t fall and I don’t say anything. I wish at thirteen I had been comfortable calling someone a bitch.
IV.
The summer before my freshman year. The pavement is hot and pools appear in the distance. It hasn’t rained for days. I’m riding in the passenger seat of the family minivan, an old green Voyager, a Modernistic Carpet commercial on the radio. We’re one stop sign away from home. Tori, my mom says, a woman was raped yesterday morning in the locker room at the high school; he had a knife. Her daughter was in the room. She pauses and looks left and right. Be careful, Never go in there alone, do you hear me? Her voice sounds angry. It gets that way when she’s concerned. She yells at me when people on the news get caught for drugs. If you ever do that, she says and I feel like I’ve lit up a joint or stuck a needle in my arm. There are too many weirdos in the world, she says.

V.
Junior year of high school, water polo practice. I have ten minutes to finish rinsing my hair and suit in the shower before History class where we’ll finish watching Shindler’s List. The water pounds my hair and droplets splatter the ceiling. I think of concentration camps. Gas pouring out of showerheads in tiled rooms. A teammate screams at a spider. The shrill echoes wall to wall, corner to corner. I wonder if that woman screamed. If she saw this exact ceiling or if she was forced to look at the floor.

— Victoria Blevins