

calm of the tepidarium—a long, placid smooth of blue. All luring me toward the water—this enigmatic element that all my life I inexplicably both desire and fear.

Perhaps some trickle of belief still lingers, clinging to the cleansing baptismal properties of water. Perhaps I am just preoccupied with it as symbol—or embodiment—of death. And so, also, of life.

John 4:13—14: “Jesus answered and said unto her, whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”

A human can survive only three days without water.

In the smooth, warm water, my legs stroke as my fingers hold the edge, and then my torso floats up. As if I am swimming. Imitation swimming. Emboldened, my hands also attempt a stroke. Pushing. Separating the liquid. Then spinning, spinning, spinning. Twisting in 3.5 feet of terror. My hand grasping again for the edge. My thoughts surging, tumbling, like unexpected waves in a still pool.

My body is trembling in my memory of the small upstairs backstage room at the second Baptist church where my fingers, or maybe my mother’s, were zipping up the flowing baptismal robe until it swallowed my thin teenage form. Maybe naked. Maybe covered in a one-piece swimsuit for the long-feared pool.

And then I was descending the stairs to the baptistry during the prayer, my father’s eyes likely open, peering, somewhere down in the pews, the bowed head of the whole congregation soon rising to witness this long unrepentant sinner at last offering her parents—in exile at this new church—the gift