

I almost drown in the shallow end of a hotel pool nearly two decades later, when my first real boyfriend tries to give me afternoon swimming lessons.

We have swum, that morning, in the thick hotel bedsheets. But because I am still tangled up in a kind of thinning belief, still sometimes on my knees in my last bows before the Almighty, as if before a lover—in fear, though, rather than desire—my lover’s chlorine-scented semen only sprinkles the surface of my skin. A sin, to let cum fill my cavities.

The water enters my nose. My mouth. My eyes squeezed against the sunlight filtering through the indoor pool’s windows and roof and 3.5 feet of glassy blue. In the underwater blackness of my covered eyes, my arms flail for the slippery tile wall. My fingers grasp for the round edge that I cannot, cannot find. My heart sends shockwaves through the water. I never think to just stand up.

It takes only 40-60 seconds for an adult to drown, according to experts. Only? That seems an eternity.

In exchange for 1-2 seconds of deadly inverted immersion, baptism offered eternal life, symbolized in the final rise back to standing. “Buried with him in death; raised to walk in newness of life.” A paraphrase of Romans 6:4, narrated by the berobed pastor as he performed the watery choreography.

An almost sensual dance: The subordinate linked her arms through the preacher’s bent, locked arm, her fingers curling back over his strong forearm flex. Then the penitent reached one hand up through his arm to her nose, and the pastor’s hand covered hers. With his other, he grasped the back of her head, her neck. And then he dipped her, eyelids covering her sight in sensuous surrender.