游泳班里的狗刨毕业生

暑假第一天，我妈把我送到游泳池门口，千叮万嘱别把水喝进肚子。我换了泳衣站在池边，往下看了一眼，池水蓝得发深，一层一层的水波从池底晃上来，我的腿就有点软。教练吹哨点名，别的孩子扑通扑通往下跳，我扶着梯子，一级一级往下挪，挪到一半又停住，手把铁梯攥得发白。

头二十天我跟一块橘色浮板形影不离。抱着它蹬腿，抱着它划手，洗澡都要把它夹在胳膊底下。教练说松手试试，我嘴上应着，手比脑子诚实，一沾水就又抱了上去。浮板边缘被我攥出两排浅浅的牙印一样的指痕。

出糗是在第二十天。教练让我练换气，头埋进水里吐泡泡，抬起来吸气。我数着数，一二三抬头，嘴刚张开，一口水正好从鼻尖灌进去。那一呛从鼻子一直酸到眼眶，我扶着池边咳，咳得弯下腰，池边一圈孩子都回头看。有个女生小声说，他脸红得像煮熟的大虾。我从池边走到台阶，一路上觉得全池的水都在看我。

转机来自一个不教游泳的人。他四十来岁，每天下班来泡水，仰躺在水面上看报纸——报纸搁在肚子上，一页一页翻，人纹丝不动。那天我坐在台阶上生闷气，他游过来，说小家伙你怕的不是水，是脚不着地。他让我在浅水区蹲下去抱自己的膝盖，让水漫到下巴，就停在那儿数数。我头一回发现，水漫到下巴也不会怎样，耳朵里嗡嗡的，像隔着一层毛玻璃听世界。练了七八回，我敢把后脑勺泡进水面了。

结班那天测游泳，二十米。别人排着队游蛙泳，胳膊腿摆得规规矩矩。轮到我，我深吸一口气蹬出去，游的是没人教过的狗刨：两只手轮着扒水，腿在底下乱蹬，脑袋一点一点从水里拱出来。姿势难看，速度倒不慢，中途没停，一口气扒到了对岸。手扒上池沿那一下，岸上的我妈在人群里鼓掌，拍得比谁都响。

回家的公交车上，我靠着窗，手指泡得发白，皱皱的一层皮，指甲缝里还有游泳池消毒水的味道。车上人挤，没人注意一个浑身湿头发的小孩在偷笑。二十米，跟人家五十米的标准比不了，可暑假第一天那个扶梯子不敢下的我，跟今天这个扒到对岸的我，中间隔着一整个夏天。

后来我常想起那个把报纸搁在肚子上看的大叔。不知道他叫什么，也没再遇见过。我只记得他走之前丢下一句话：水这东西，你越怕它，它越淹你。我觉得这话比游泳班所有的口令都管用。

A Graduate of Doggy Paddle from Swimming Class

On the first day of summer vacation, my mother walked me to the gate of the swimming pool and told me a hundred times not to drink the water. I changed into my swimsuit and stood at the edge, looked down once, and my legs went weak: the water was a deep kind of blue, wave upon wave rising from the bottom of the pool and swaying up to my face. The coach blew the whistle and called names. Other children jumped in one after another with splashes. I held the ladder and moved down one rung at a time, stopped halfway, my hands gripping the iron until they turned white.

For the first twenty days I was inseparable from an orange kickboard. I kicked

holding it, stroked holding it, and tucked it under my arm even when taking a shower. When the coach said let go and try, my mouth answered yes but my hands were more honest than my head: the moment I touched the water I hugged it back. The edge of the board wore two rows of shallow finger marks from my grip.

The embarrassment came on the twentieth day. The coach had me practice breathing: bury my face in the water and blow bubbles, lift up to breathe. I counted, one two three, lifted my head, and a mouthful of water poured in right through my nostrils. The sting ran from my nose all the way up behind my eyes. I coughed holding the pool edge, bent double, and children all around turned to look. A girl whispered that his face was red like a boiled shrimp. I walked from the pool edge to the steps feeling as if all the water in the pool was watching me.

The turn came from someone who never taught swimming. He was forty-ish and came to soak in the water after work every day, lying on his back reading a newspaper — the paper resting on his belly, page turning page, his body not moving at all. That day I sat on the steps sulking, and he swam over and said: little guy, what you fear is not the water, it is your feet not touching the ground. He had me squat in the shallow end, hug my knees, and let the water rise to my chin, then just stay there counting. For the first time I noticed that water at chin level does nothing to you; my ears buzzed as if hearing the world through frosted glass. After seven or eight rounds I dared to soak the back of my head under the surface.

On the last day we were tested on twenty meters. Others lined up and swam breaststroke, arms and legs in neat order. When my turn came, I took a deep breath and pushed off, and what I swam was a doggy paddle nobody had taught: two hands raking the water alternately, legs kicking in a hurry underneath, head bobbing out of the water bit by bit. The form was ugly, the speed was not slow, and I never stopped on the way — one breath, raked all the way to the far wall. The instant my hands caught the pool edge, my mother was clapping in the crowd on the bank, louder than anyone.

On the bus home I leaned by the window, my fingers soaked white, the skin wrinkled in folds, the smell of pool disinfectant still in the cracks of my nails. The bus was crowded, and no one noticed a soaking-wet child secretly smiling. Twenty meters cannot compare with other peoples fifty, but between the me of the first day who could not let go of the ladder and the me of today who raked to the far wall lies a whole summer.

I often think of the man who read with a newspaper on his belly. I never learned his name and never met him again. I only remember the sentence he dropped before leaving: the more you fear water, the more it drowns you. I think that line works better than every command the swimming class ever gave.