

Jen Grow

The End of August

*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?*

—Robert Frost, “Reluctance”

We were alone together at the pool, swimming and resting in the sun. It was the slow end of August. The leaves were dark green, the sun running out. We hadn't seen each other for many months though we had once been in love. That afternoon we were trying to be friends again somehow—perhaps in vain—spending time together casually, as if the change between us had been slight, had been a shadow lengthening.

The only other person at the pool was the lifeguard who sat at a table under an umbrella and knew none of our history. Perhaps to her we seemed married, like parents. She flipped through her magazine and bit her nails.

I cooled off in the water and swam laps. He slept in his lounge chair and gathered the last sunlight of the day, the warmth that's left before evening. I raced the light too, trying to swim as far as I could before the day faded. I was—I am—a strong swimmer, but I don't believe this has ever helped me in any significant way. I glided in the water, the length of the pool, arm over arm, back and forth, back and forth, the pattern of our relationship. At each turn I looked up from the water to see if he was watching. But he dozed unaware of me except for the steady splashes I made. There was a measure to my breathing as I swam, a rhythm to his while he slept.

When I finished my laps, I lifted myself out of the pool and sat by the side for a moment, wondering at the quiet end of things, waiting for I'm not sure what.

The surface of the water was a mirror to the sun, the soft ripples gradually becoming flat and still. There was the silence of nothing, of birds flitting overhead, and car doors closing, of lawnmowers in the distance. I stood and patted myself dry and dripped on the cement near my chair. The droplets seeped into the cement and formed strange shapes that merged together. Shapes that would eventually dry and disappear.

His eyes were closed but he knew where I stood, had always stood. He roused himself barely and said something.

“How was it?” he asked. We hadn't spoken much lately.

“This is my favorite time of day,” I said. I meant it. I was trying to say exactly what I meant.

The sun sank slowly into early evening. I didn't want it to go yet. It's difficult for me to leave a place by the water in late August. Just one more minute, I think every day, every year. Just a little bit more. I wanted to gather

the sun to my chest, hold it, keep it still and alive. I was usually alone this time of day but I didn't want to tell him that.

I said, "I wonder how far I swam. How long is this pool, do you think? How many feet?"

"I don't know," he said, "a hundred?"

"No, not a hundred," I replied, answering my own question. "Maybe seventy-five."

"Maybe."

I liked having his company even if there was nothing left between us. We were comfortable by the water, but not in love. Whatever was said now held no meaning.

He stretched in his chair. Then he stood up. He walked away from me and leaned over the edge of the pool as if he were examining the filters. Then he jumped in. He splashed a bit and swam on his back, his ears under water, face toward the sky. He floated and kicked and pulled himself across the pool. He doesn't swim as well as I do, but that has also never mattered.

The lifeguard flipped through her magazine. The trees swayed with a breeze and their shadows lengthened. The sun had moved and I was in a shadow. I was alone. I was usually alone this time of day. I watched him swim and pretended to read my book. For a while I wished for something else.