

Swimming against the current

Marisa Webster MD



Air Hunger” is a poem loosely based on a quote by Virginia Woolf. She writes:

I’m fundamentally, I think, an outsider. I do my best work and feel most braced with my back to the wall. It’s an odd feeling though, writing against the current: difficult entirely to disregard the current. Yet of course, I shall.

This poem is about having the knowledge that one is an outsider, yet still deciding to dive in and swim against the current—both figuratively and literally. There is always risk in choosing to stand alone.

Air hunger

She is the girl who dives headfirst
into the deep end, sheds her life
jacket like an orange peel.

Underwater, her gangly legs
trail like the tentacles of a jellyfish.

The other girls watch
poolside, dip their toes into the water,
soft bodies stung by fear,
mouths prickle with envy.
Cool waves nip at their 8-year-old feet.
The cement is slick, unforgiving.

They scrutinize
in the hot pride of summer.
It is a rite of passage—
the baptism of a fierce season.

With a sudden snap
of the diving board, she jumps.
Its reverberations emit a steady growl.

The other girls point and laugh and shriek
when she erupts from the water,
hair matted, head bobbing with the throb of panic.
Coughing and sputtering, she tries
to paddle to shore, a lame dog.
The lifeguard grabs her by the armpits,
lays her flat in a film of water,
reflected fire of the sun.

Her airways tighten like tiny fists
pale neck,
a broken swan.

The other girls gawk,
hover from above as if watching
from some glass-bottom boat.
She is breathless,
silent as though still submerged,
sinking towards the inky depths,
cast out, alone, at sea.

Dr Webster is a second-year anesthesiology resident at the University of Calgary in Alberta and is a past winner of the Cynthia Davis Writing Prize and the Hunter Humanities Award.

Competing interests
None declared