8-1-2018

My Only Protection (Creative Work)

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In an earlier life I was a lifeguard. Early each morning I sipped my spinach-tinged smoothie while my mother drove me in a car too big for the roads, snaking down the red hills to the athletic club. I spent summer days in a crimson swimsuit—lounging on a white tower, pacing and retracing circles around the rectangular pool, counting laps of triathletes, barely raising my voice to call “Don’t run!” to the children dancing on tiptoe. I refused to blow my whistle. I covered my swelling breasts with thick white squares of tape that left behind a grimy residue in two small shadows on my rosy skin. The swimsuit fabric was so very thin.

I measured time by the sun’s arc or the waxing and waning shadows on the ground, forbidding myself to look at the clock. On my breaks I would lay on the floor of the cool, dark supply closet with a fan blowing on my legs and read magazines—pages filled with sculpted women flexing, running, pointing, smiling, “You can be this too!”

Sometimes I’d submerge my body in the blue pool and my coworkers guarded me while old blubbery men lounged in speedos and watched. I’d propel myself through the water: to the far end of the pool and back, and again and again, pulling the liquid toward me and kicking it behind me. I was not satisfied until my muscles wept.

At the end of each break I’d return to the closet to rub sunscreen on my flaking shoulders and the emerging freckles on my nose. I’d massage the lotion in little circles, admiring the oily sheen on my skin. It was my only protection.