

Prologue

*'I am no prophet – and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.'*

T.S. Eliot

I didn't know bitterness until I had to step into the shadow of my own achievements, then watch someone else achieve what I believed should have been mine. It had been almost a year since my final race and every day after I had woken up disbelieving; squeezing my eyes shut and willing myself back into the dream, only when you fall asleep again the dream isn't the same – you can't get back to the place you want to be. Now, here in my room, I felt as fragile as if that race was yesterday, a sickness and a rage that tasted like chlorinated betrayal. I felt like walking through my house and systematically smashing everything. Instead, I sat. My cream-coloured bedsheets beneath me, slightly yellower than the cream-coloured carpet on the floor that blended seamlessly into the walls, the TV throwing static down the stairs. I opened the window to hear it better. Shrill and circus-like, the commentator was giving background

on the event as one by one they walked out, and I could imagine the camera panning round to rest for a moment behind the starting blocks of each lane. Their race was about to start. I wanted to close the window to stop the sound of cheers erupting into my room after the announcement of each competitor's name and country; it was like looking directly at the sun. But I couldn't. I didn't want to watch but I couldn't miss it either. Listening felt like a bearable compromise; I knew exactly what it looked like: after all, I was supposed to be there.

The perfect race will haunt you forever. I didn't know that – there are so many things they don't tell you. For example: that when it's over for you it's over, immediately. Just like that. Worse still is that it doesn't stop: the next season rolls on without you like you never existed; the next competition happens like they had never announced your name at any competition before and you're left alone to drag yourself away from the wreckage. That you'll shred your cartilage into nothing after so many years of repetition and wake up in the night years later dripping in sweat with your shins on fire, phantom pains shooting through your hips. That you'll lose your mind, and you won't realise until it's truly gone – you've forgotten what your comfort zone ever felt like and all your memories are a disorganised chaos. But the perfect race is eternal, like an embarrassment so acute you see it every time you close your eyes and feel it every time your mind wanders too far. I could replay it over and over, flawlessly, my moment of ecstasy. I held it close, like an addict, and relived it whenever I could bear to, careful not to use it

up. But sometimes it came to me in a flash, a feeling, triggered by a sound or the smell of chlorine in a garden centre. I never resisted because secretly I feared that the feeling was gone forever, and that a lifetime, *my* lifetime, might pass me by without my ever getting to feel it again.

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Two sharp, clipped trills. I step forward, tension coursing through the arms as I think about lacing my fingers around the front of the board, waiting for the second whistle. I was perfect and I knew exactly when it would come. One long whistle followed. Exhale. I step up, slamming my right foot into the adjustable wedge at the back; slowly I transfer my weight forward, lowering my head, using its weight to bring everything I am into the ball of my left foot. Poised. Every muscle in my body tightens. I always close my eyes now, my Black genes twitching as I imagine the line marshal: he's lifting his hand in slow motion, he holds his arm out gesturing sideways to the starter, we are under his control. The start marshal lifts the microphone to his mouth, I'm playing out every move, his left thumb comes down slowly, I think I can hear the button click. Silence. Inhale. 'Take your marks,' he bellows, with long, drawn-out vowels. I empty all the thoughts from my mind, the ones I know and all the ones I don't, every training session, every instruction, every practice, every length, gone gone down down. I empty my whole mind to forget. My body doesn't need my brain for this, so I let go, until I am only a body and nothing more, sinew, muscle, rippling brown skin taut and

stretched over my small, too-short-to-be-a-sprint-swimmer-body. I forget my family, my friends, my coach, my name: I forget everything that makes me worry, forget everything that makes you human. The buzzer sounds, I spring. They are still on the blocks.

The silence at the start of the race is almost religious. The stadium is church-like, its congregation hangs from the stands. And everyone, every person, is looking at you, in the very middle, furthest away from the wake that slows you down as it hits the edge of the pool: lane four. If you haven't already psyched yourself out in the call room, or in warm-up, or with a shaky heat swim in the morning, or a rip in your racing costume, this moment will finish you off. It's a silence so pure and pregnant most can't prepare through it, because in that silence you can hear your heartbeat thumping in your ears, it threatens to sever the connection between your brain and your limbs. But that's how you win: you beat the silence, because after it, there's only noise. My body arches faultlessly and for a moment I am completely still in the air, feeling the hyperextension of my shoulders as they hold my head in place, drawing a line to the tips of my fingernails. Just as my body starts to fall, I flick a wave of motion from my hips, my chin drops a couple of centimetres and my straight body, which I have just flung headlong off the blocks, aiming for the flags, tilts forward. My fingers hit the water. A small porthole, no bigger than the circumference of my swimming hat, ripples out from this contact, and through it I disappear below the surface.

Counting happens without effort, streamlined under the

water. I wait. Allowing the nothing to envelop me. One. Two. Pull. It's the moment just before the moment I start to feel myself slowing down. An instinct to keep moving forward, something in a prehistoric part of my brain concerned only with inertia. As my arms pull downward, travelling in deliberate lines to my side, grazing my chest, I sense their perfect communion with the water, my wrists twisting imperceptibly, even to me, as my hands create and escape the resistance of this liquid world. This part is like the dream within a dream, I know I'm coming up soon, but I can't rush, nor stay here any longer than I should. There is a lot of discipline needed to leave this place, so quiet and so smooth. The muscles that frame the top of my pelvis are straining. I kick from the bottom of my stomach to my ankles, like a shiver, and my soft feet move in response. Soft feet, soft hands, tight body, hard mind. My knees are yearning to part, and I hold on to the very last millisecond. I'm only 5 centimetres below the surface now and I start to let my lungs guide me up. The first breaststroke kick. Snap heels back, push hips down, flex feet, pull elbows in. Drive: legs backward, arms forward. I'm reaching with my body, reaching up to the shallows. I'm here. I can already hear it. I break the surface and fill my lungs with electricity, oxygenating my blood with the sound of a thousand people cheering.

The stroke count is right. Fifty metres pass me by like a landscape past a train window. I know I'm ahead, but I only have this thought when I'm replaying it, in the moment all my training stops me from entertaining this distraction. I reject the comfort of the wall; my hands retract immediately as I hit

the touchpad with all my power. My body contracts. Knees towards forehead, feet towards the unmovable object in front of me. Keeping my body small, I twist from my waist and my intercostal muscles turn all my mass on an axis. With every moment I spend here I lose energy to the wall, all the speed I've gained down this first length of the pool is being sucked away from me into the concrete and tiles. I move quickly now to keep some of this energy within me so I can force it in the opposite direction. Drive. Back to my underwater world and back up again. The air is hotter in my mouth as I suck it down into my chest, my lungs getting smaller and smaller with each breath. I make it a further 25 metres before parts of my conscious brain start to come back to me, the fear reawakens my mind and I can't believe I've made it this far without it. Don't seize up, don't seize up. There's no one around me and I'm not slowing down. How am I not slowing down? 'Shut up,' I tell myself. It arrives.

Lactic acid floods my veins, rushing from my thighs up towards my shoulders, consuming every muscle in its path. Pain unimaginable: ribbons and rivers of white fury devouring every drop of oxygen in my bloodstream. But with it something else too. Slowly, everything begins to melt into the background, becoming the bits of a painting that are too far away to have any details, soft, fuzzy trees on a hilltop far away. Everything is fuzzy and far away, everything except this new warmth. It's spreading from my sternum, coating my body in joy, I'm lifted. I think I'm smiling now. Gliding and floating, and this time my body leaves me instead, wrapped

in euphoria, my favourite music and my mother's voice. I can just about hear the dull, faraway sound of cheers. I feel no pain. And the water isn't wet because my body is not here. I'm smiling still. I look for the wall, it's so close. Everything is perfect and nothing hurts. The motion I know better than any other is carrying me under the 5-metre flags. I squeeze my forearms together, and one last breaststroke kick pulls my hips up and forward. Hyperextended from my shoulder blades to my knuckles, the tiny arena on the very end of my middle fingers meets the wall and I know the clock has stopped. Slowly my broad brown hands come into my view and I'm still moving forward but it's over. In a split second all my world comes back to me, my body comes back to myself, and everything goes black. I lift my head out of the water and look upward at the scoreboard, at the very same moment the background leaps forward, the wetness of the water, the noise, the colours, the pain, everything bursts into technicolour.

PART I

Swell

Prepare

I

*I – have always carried deep
these islands,
this piece of Atlantic coastland
inside me.'*

Grace Nichols

I'm underwater with my eyes open, pensive and still. I've always had the feeling of being underwater; it's where most of my childhood happened. Pensive and waiting for my life to begin: for the bubbles to show me a route to the surface, or for the air in my lungs to run out. But there was a time before I knew the exquisite pain of taking a hit of water straight to the brain, the oxygen in my sinuses beckoning it after I dive in as the pressure difference pushes it up and through my nose. Before I knew the water as my home, I knew the uncertainty of a childhood spent moving constantly, coupled with the certainty

of my mother's love; and disappointment was a distant promise that I couldn't yet pronounce. We moved all the time and so did I, my body dancing through the days. They went by so quickly in my childhood, fast because they were so rich; not like the modern classics about coming of age in a nowhere place where nothing happens. Everything happened in my childhood. Before anything else, before I was even born, the first thing to happen was my father leaving. In a quiet pain I didn't understand or explore until much later, I grew up with my mother, and later my stepfather; and all the other people who had been brought into our orbit by a twenty-something white single mum in the early '90s with a mixed-race baby and student loans. She grew up poor on a council estate in Runcorn, a sprawling hell of concrete between Liverpool and Manchester, with a father who I never met; she wouldn't let him near any of us, my younger sisters and me. I was distanced too by my father's new marriage, my birth too close and my face too much like my father's for anyone to be confused about what had happened.

My mother had me young; she met my father when they were both teaching at a university. He was a professor of politics, very Black, very smart, very indulgent. His greatest indulgence was helping people he didn't know. By the time I was born my father had been in and out of prison multiple times, politically exiled from his homeland, Kenya, and led student resistance movements all across Africa. It was almost 1994, and in South Africa, where my father had studied, the African National Congress (ANC) – Nelson Mandela's newly

reformed political party – was about to take power. My birth coincided with the fall of the apartheid regime and my father leaving for this new South Africa, for the liberation of his people, and because, I've since learned, my mother told him that if it felt like a choice he shouldn't stay. A freedom baby: I've heard people say that about me. I used to think it was because of when I was born but realised later it was also *what* I was born. A breathing blend of my parents' skin, a squishy emblem of progress. Brown and in-between. Hair in-between, not big and beautiful like the hair belonging to the girls with deep blue hues in their high cheekbones, nor flicky and light and pullable, cascading down my back. Just in-between. Body also in-between. I was a strong, thin child, not short, not tall, naturally athletic from my first moments, African muscles but no African curves. My reactions were fast and clear in the way they communicated my wants and needs to my arms and legs; anything I tried, my body moved how I told it to.

In Reading, where my mother and I lived when I was three years old after returning from a small village in Malawi near the border of Mozambique, I used to ride a small yellow and red scooter to my nursery school a couple of roads away. We went to live in that small village in East Africa so my mother could do her PhD research. We came back because she couldn't really afford to do a PhD, and rented a small, terraced house from a man who would later become my stepfather. In the house there were pictures of me back in Malawi washing my small naked body in a shallow plastic bucket in the backyard. The earth is red, and the bucket is red, and I am smiling. I

had no sense of struggle, or the debt my mother was in; I only knew her love and her hands, reaching down to lift me into her bed at one in the morning when I would reach up to her with chubby fingers, finished playing with my multi-coloured wooden blocks because sleep had finally found me. On the back of the bathroom door, she had Blu-Tacked a poster of the flags of the world; everything was for learning. That's how it started. My mother, who grew up with so little love around her, wanted to bathe me in it; she washed me in it every day, she read it to me every night, she loved me so hard it hurt.

Competitiveness, like all things, is a practice. But I was born with it baked in, a head start, a small beast locked in a too-small cage, snarling at the bars whenever there was a task at hand. My mother started feeding it young. Maybe she recognised I was easy to motivate that way, or she wanted the little beast to break free and help me grow big and strong. Maybe, in birthing me she'd learned what my father had always known: that I might have to work twice as hard to have half as much. I walked early, I talked early, I read early. My mother read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to me and she would help me memorise verses; we played 'name the flags of the world' on the toilet. Knowledge was just a challenge, a game to be won. My early years were flash cards and breastmilk; I gorged on my mother's love; it never ran out. As she poured it into me, we grew up and together. I was a piece of her rib; she was my left arm. She made me strong, loved, smart, entitled, a winner.

Soon we would move to Kenya for good, but for a short

time before that my mother and I travelled around Uganda. She was doing research while a junior lecturer at a university back in the UK. We would always fly through South Africa first and she would take me to see my father. His house smelled of another woman's perfume, and my older brother, his first-born son, was there. He got upset when our father took phone calls, I didn't understand why until later. My father had traded revolution for revelry. Marrying into a political dynasty in South Africa, his new life in Pretoria was shrouded by jacaranda trees and mining money. My mother's devotion to me – that I should know him – kept us all connected as he receded into this inaccessible world.

'Where did you get that baby?' People would ask my mum in the back of matatus back in Uganda. There were chickens strapped to the roof, a private shared taxi you paid a couple of shillings for, and they stopped whenever needed, spray-painted with Liverpool football club's anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. People hung out the side and carried small animals on their heads but none of this was out of place; nothing was as strange as the beautiful, tall, tanned white woman in the back with a brown baby on her breast. I had my third birthday in Uganda and that weekend we went down to Lake Victoria. With armbands, a floaty vest and a rubber ring on I would get in so long as my mother never let me go. My ancestors learned to be in communion with the water here, on the shores of Lake Victoria, and so would I. My father was Luo, a tribe of East African fishermen, proud and political – Obama's father was Luo too. Eventually it was time and I floated; the inflated plastic

swaddling me had kept only my fears at the surface. My mother took away her hands and the water became my home.

After we moved to Nairobi to be with my stepfather, he said I could keep one of the new puppies from the litter his dog had just birthed. He told me I could name them all too. My dad, as I called him, and as he became, wanted my mother so much that he also wanted me. I named all the puppies after herbs except mine, which I called Pip. His house was a beautiful sprawl, all on one floor, white and terracotta up a long driveway and a lawn that sloped down towards the hedge through which our dogs dragged the neighbours' dog one night and killed it. The neighbours were three Kenyan nuns; we gave them one of our dogs, Basil, in recompense.

My stepfather went to university at seventeen, he knew everything, and still does, and then he lived in Nepal before buying some land in the Kenyan highlands and settling into the humanitarian world. He planned for drought and disaster, how to get rice to remote places in the middle of a war. The first four years of my life it was just adults, and I still had another three to go before my first sister was born, but now I had the outside, the sunshine, and I knew what passionfruit flowers looked like. My toes were stubbed and bloody for most of these years and the landscape of scars on my shins that got worse in the gym years later was first marked in this garden climbing trees and walking barefoot, falling over hot stones and acacia thorns. My stepfather gave me an art room and filled it with patience, and in that time, he also became my parent. A small light-filled atrium at the back of the house with tall glass

letterbox windows. Among the boxes of coloured paper and glitter glue was glass paint. I squatted by the lowest row of the windowpanes, selected a square and painted small blue dolphins on the glass with him. My tails were puffy and misshapen, his were angular and fish-like. We would stay like this together for hours, painting other things that swam, building dams and throwing balls.

Over long weekends we took the one-hour flight from Nairobi to Mombasa. At the coast, I would spend almost eight hours a day between the pool and the Indian Ocean; my cornrows grew fuzzy after only a couple of days and my skin was dark sepia against my bright pink rash vest. Weekends were spent like this, making mermaids out of white sand on the long beaches and finding kelp for their hair and two fish eggs for eyes. Or we would pack into my stepfather's second-hand 4x4 and drive up-country to Naivasha, camping with my parents' friends and their children. Zebras became commonplace on these drives, giraffes too; years later, when I moved back to England, I found hedgehogs and badgers exotic, strange and rare by comparison. When I started kindergarten in Nairobi, I was moved up a year. I was four years old, and I started doing 25-metre swimming races at school galas. 'I predict she'll be a swimming star of the future', the head of the sports department wrote in my report at the end of that first term. Subconsciously, I was getting ready. The bus to school was an hour each way each day. I mostly stayed in my thoughts apart from one morning when I saw a man who had been on a bicycle hit by a car in the road. The handlebar went through his stomach. I

was scared of my imagination; it felt endless, like the deepest bath, and when I cried – which was seldom – my tears wouldn't stop coming, it was like I was leaking. A sadness I held inside me fell from my lids, and like Alice in Wonderland I thought I would drown myself in salty tears, a pool of fear. I never remembered what I was crying about when it was over, only that I couldn't stop; and sometimes I would cry myself to sleep, at the hairdressers' getting too-tight-braids, three aunties pulling at my little pale scalp.