

## Guide to Being a Girl When You're Not One, Actually

Here is how you find infinity:

Dip your head underwater with your eyes closed and listen to the world muffled around you. Not so much a sound as a distance from it. Open your eyes and squint through the clouded haze. If you're outside and it's daytime — perhaps a summer day, with heat and sun that slowly burns away your skin — follow the light as it slices through to the bottom of the pool, gathering in bunches on the concrete floor beneath your bare floating feet.

Hold your breath until you can't anymore. As of now you are young and invincible, so keep your eyes open against the stinging chlorine so that when you arise dripping wet over the edge of the pool, the vessels stain the whites and glow red, creature-like. Then you can slice a biting grin across your cheeks and show off those teeth, cavity-free, bright and fresh, razor sharp.

Before you do that, though, let your last imprisoned breath loose in little puffs or all at once (this depends on your bravery: on what your father last said to you, on the look in your mother's eyes early this morning). Squeeze the rest of the air out until your lungs are just wrinkled pink disks in your chest. Watch the bubbles rapture upward, where you were before you went searching for forever. Swivel your eyes in your skull and wonder at the gleaming round coin of the sun, and your breath rising up to meet it.

Never shy away from the deep end. This is very important, because you need to sink. Once the air is gone the rest of you will do the work; your bones are dense beneath the blanket of your flesh and the swell of young fat is a leaden apron. Feel the tingling numbness in your fingertips, but don't worry. It's all normal.

Down you go, now: down, down, into the glittering shine of sunlight draped in twisting fractals over the cold blue end. Push the heels of your feet into the concrete, and it will give way. You will go next and it will be less like sinking and more like flying. You know what it's like to fly

because you did it, once, when your father grabbed you by the sides and threw you into the air like a doll, and it was a lot like falling. The swooping loop of your stomach lagging behind, smashing against the fragile vertebrae of your spine, your hair flying around you to catch up: long, long, long. You smile because you are expected to but hide your sharp teeth behind the careful closed lips of caution.

Forever is a mirror. A reflected all-right to the all-wrong. Forever is the now, your empty-pink-flat lungs, the wrinkly-rough-dry of your small hands. The chlorine shrivels them up. You fall through the floor. Above you your bubbles pop and your breath is lost to the sky. You are looking up – eyes rolled back – and below you there is nothing. Your chest is strapped in and your lungs stretch against the over-tight bind of your ribcage, trying to remember what it felt like to breathe. Don't worry. Just a bit farther now.

Are you her, or him, or it? Your mother said to you once that the two of you are alike; that you have her eyes, her hair, her sweet little voice. But you think she was lying, and if she wasn't that she missed the most important part of you: the part now, the part that sinks. The part that hopes, a little, to bleed – with skinned knees and bravado and boyish, raucous laughter. The part that is real in a way her projected daughter isn't.

Now your father. Now your mother. Now your fragile spine, now your hands, now your feet. Now the reaching need for breath and truth all at once – remember that you cannot have both.

Your hair is so very long. You keep it long because they like it so, and you are gentle and obedient so the cut goes only to the falsity of your flesh, never to the flying chlorine-stained strands of your hair.

Fractals, and fractals, and fractals; forever all the way up and all the way down. Pattern over pattern over you over her; the her and the him and the them in between, your body and the sloping fat of your nearly-there breasts, the bubbles popping above you. Keep your eyes closed

and don't give in to the need for breath above the tensioned film of the surface, now, because that will break it, will break the freedom of not being there, of non-existence. Of infinity.

Remember that it's dark. Remember that the sun is waiting above, and it's warm, and familiar. Remember that your lungs are burning and you are hurting – you are hurting, because you've denied yourself this reality for so long; your existence sprouts like a limb coming back to life, in bursts of tingling pins and needles. You could leave but you want to idle in the uncertain, this superposition of self, where your heart is a thumping vibrant dangerous spirit, where you are infinitesimal in your bare-chested humanity. Remember that there's more for you than the familiar sunlit sky. You feel the water, the empty, the other; the writhing existence beneath that skin you can hardly call your own, dragging its sharp bony claws across the underside like a surgeon's scalpel. Soon you will be able to hear your heartbeat from the outside, and see the wet bone of your sternum. Soon the resistance of who you're supposed to be will break, and in its place is the chime of belonging.

A little longer now. And you cannot breathe but it doesn't bother you so much because you've found that you don't need to; that the hurt in your chest was fear. You belong here, with your razor teeth, your bloody chest. You are lovecraftian, invincible, imperceivable. Never before have you felt the too-big presence of your father. Mother's hair on your head is quantum.

Slink away. Eldritch, immense. Now your chest bare, now your flesh unreal. Now him and her — so to speak — but primarily, always, you.

Here is your infinity:

You are young but one day, blessedly, you will not be. You are her and him and you are a monster. You are joyous. Breathe in – the oxygen is swallowed intangibly into the round, plump, rising balloons of your lungs. Feel the lingering sunlight on the long, ragged expanse of your back, and dart through the abyss like a secret, like God's forgotten project.

Hold it tucked beneath your hat and clutched between your legs. Try to let it bite you. Maybe if some of it clings, some of this inconceivable unending eternity, people will see; and

they may shy away from the scars of jagged claws or the stench of change on you, but more than that you may find another, who is misshapen and grotesque and monstrous beneath the smooth babyish resistance of young girlish skin.

Emerging is like falling. Your father reaches out to catch you and though he tries, always, with protective chivalrous love, he will miss; instead your mother drags you by your scruff from the depths, and you hang limp from her slender handed grip, like a dead thing.

Behind your pinched lips, hidden, you taste the elation of eternity. It's a lot like iron, a lot like your gums bleeding. It's a lot like life.

For now, beneath the eyes of your parents and the weight of their swaddling love, you are just a girl. But you know – can *feel*, in the ghosting sharpness under your skin, in the memory of reality as it had glided over your scaled back – that you, in truth, are not.