

2024 HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

Swimming

By Chelsea Zhu

Dedicated to father

The first time you take me swimming, I confuse your arms with a lifeboat. Believing I'm ready for the deep end, you let go and mistake my pleas for prophecy—you believe I'm born for the waves. Choking on chlorine, I try to scream your name. The weight of the water pushes my pulse out of my larynx. My body sinks. Seconds ago, you said, *One day, this will be you*—pointing to the swimmers wearing knee skins. Separated by a pool rope, I watch their freestyle kicks act like anchors. How they make these waters their cove of sanctuary. When you sign me up for swimming lessons, I swallow another wave whole—my stomach green.

During practice, I never complete the swim sets on time. Instead, I take turns with my friends to see how far we can swim down 13 feet. While I touch the bottom of the pool, the first time with my feet and the next time with my hand, I open my eyes. This is the first time I hear the ocean. Crescendos and decrescendos. For the first time, everything seems connected. Then, your face emerges in front of me. You shake your head, realizing the stroke you taught me to swim is my slowest. When I rise to the surface, I see the divers practicing their somersaults and twists. This pattern of jumping so high and hovering in the air in the tiniest moment—only to fall back into the water again.

If only I knew my skin would become a stranger to the pool.

It was all my fault. Please forgive me. Please remember all I want is to stop the water from digging into my body—too sore to climb out after all these meters. I forget about the evening swims—us two finding peace in the electric blue. You swim butterfly while I drift on my back, the sky shining over us. No matter how much I love drowning into the tune of the crickets and your lyrical splashes, I tell you I never want to swim again when you enter my room. This is when I burst out of the ocean, leaving my body behind—and you, engulfed in algae bloom.

I didn't understand how I was not racing against other swimmers—but racing for a memory with you. Stuck in between two colliding waves, I'm castaway from your dreams.

Throughout the years, I remember you saying there are many concepts you can't explain, you don't know, and I think it is still beautiful if the oysters we find don't have pearls inside them. The Earth becomes more forgiving when we find reassurance in the rock bottom. When we know that we can survive in the deep sea. I will swim back to where I left you. Today, I'm still waiting to discover what lies in these waters.