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### Swimming Lessons: Exploring and Embracing the Graphic Memoir

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**Swimming Lessons: Exploring and Embracing the Graphic Memoir**

by

Sophia M. Donati

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in English Literary Studies

April 17, 2023

Approved by:

Adviser: Jeremy Chow, Ph.D.

Email Approval Received 2023-05-02

Second Evaluator: Virginia Zimmerman, Ph.D.

Email Approval Received 2023-04-21

Honors Council Representative: Bernhard Kuhn, Ph.D.

Email Approval Received 2023-04-21

Department Chair: Meenakshi Ponnuswami, Ph.D.

Email Approval Received 2023-04-21

## Abstract

My thesis is both creative and analytical, delving into the graphic memoir genre and its components. My own graphic memoir is at the heart of this piece: *Swimming Lessons*, which I wrote and drew over the past four years. The first and main piece of my thesis is the 122-page completed draft of *Swimming Lessons* which details three significant parts of my life centering on my relationship with swimming. Following my graphic memoir is the analytical reflective essay which details the graphic memoir by situating *Swimming Lessons* in conversation with other prevalent texts in the genre. This piece centers on the themes of memory, the graphic genre, and the relationship between the memoir and the memoirist, while also touching on the Young-Adult sub-genre. Lastly, I detail my creative choices and process in the artist statement. My thesis is an exploration and embrace of the graphic memoir through my roles of memoirist, reader, scholar, and author/illustrator.

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Abstract

### *Swimming Lessons*

#### Reflective Analytical Essay

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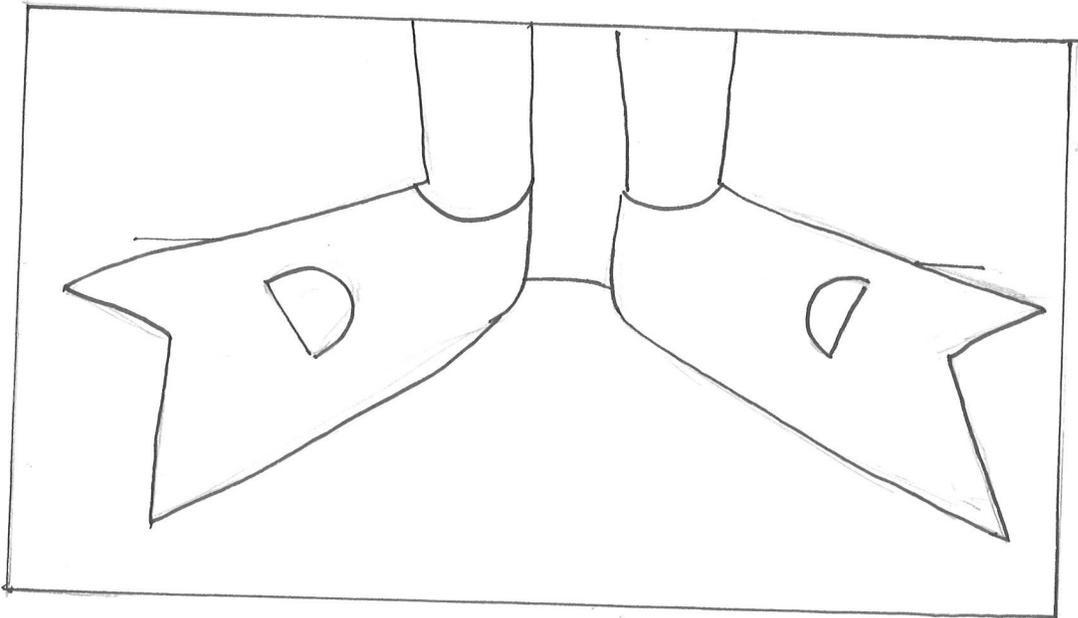
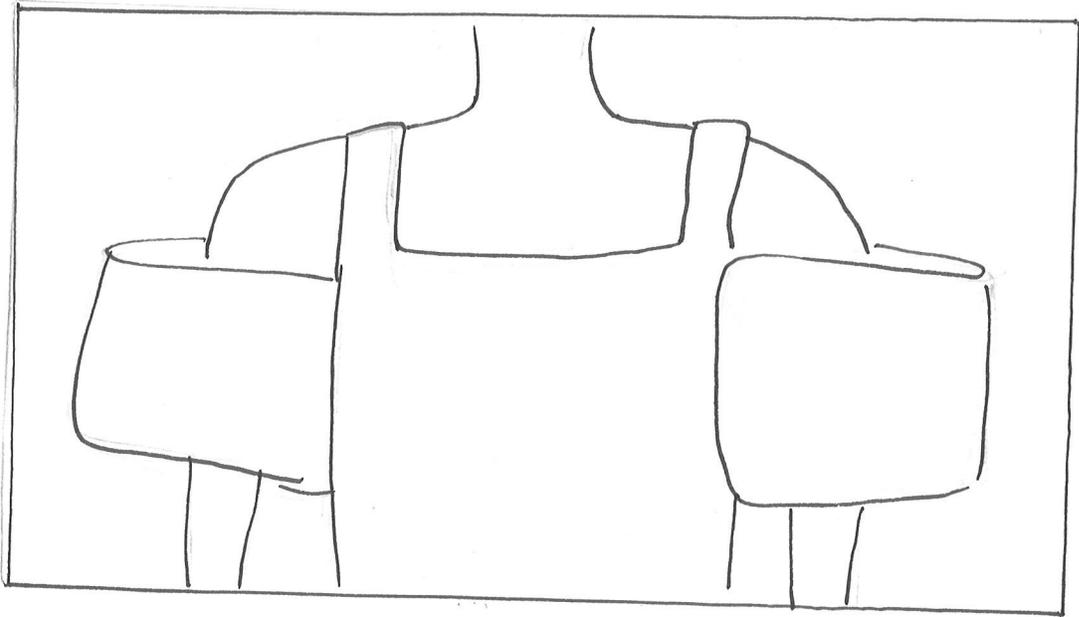
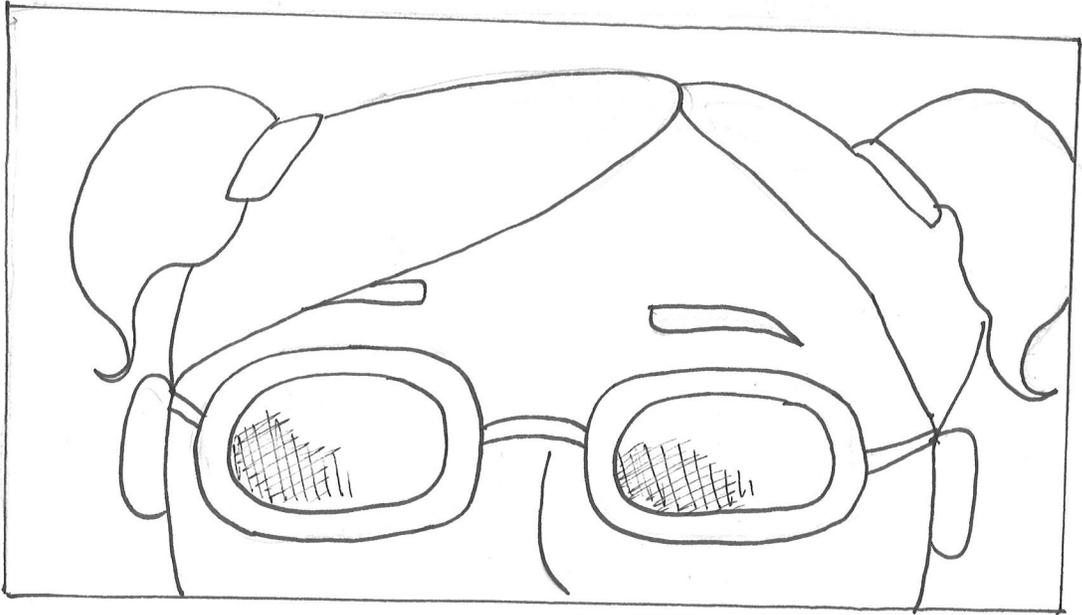
Artist Statement

SWIMMING  
LESSONS

SOPHIA DONATI

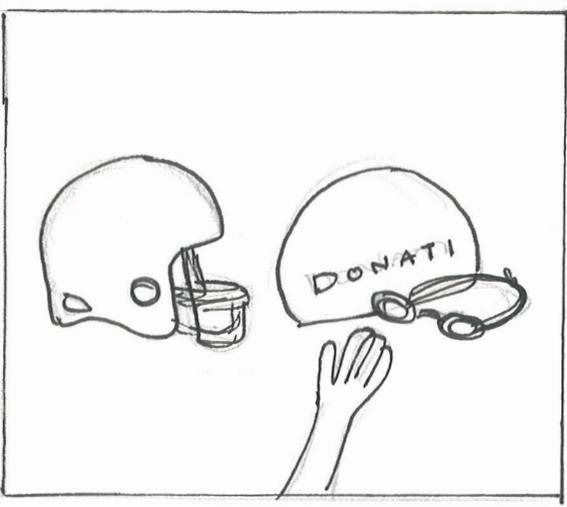


THE FIRST SPLASH

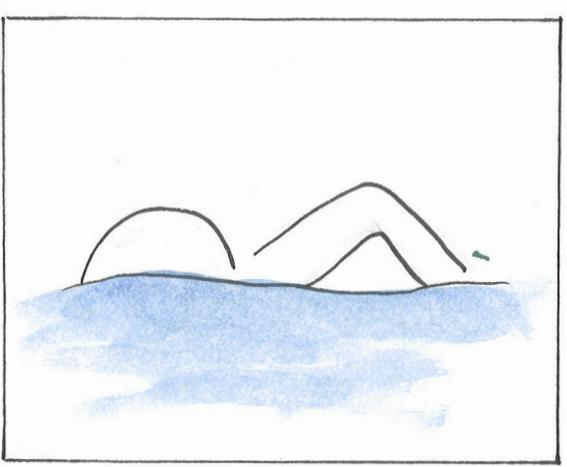




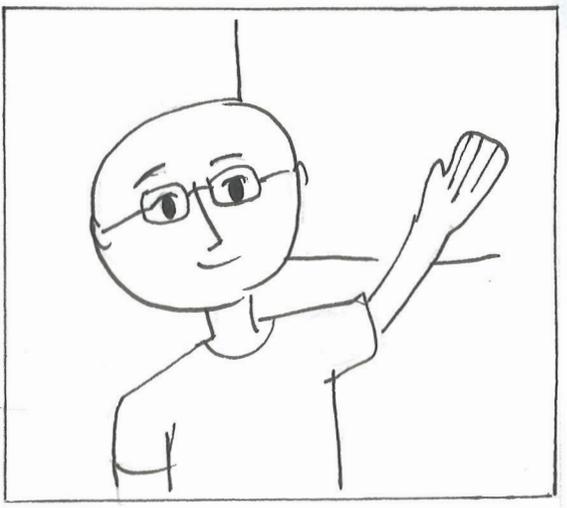
When my dad was young, he chose swimming over other sports.



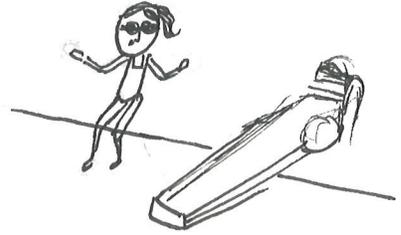
He was the first swimmer in the family and fell in love with it.



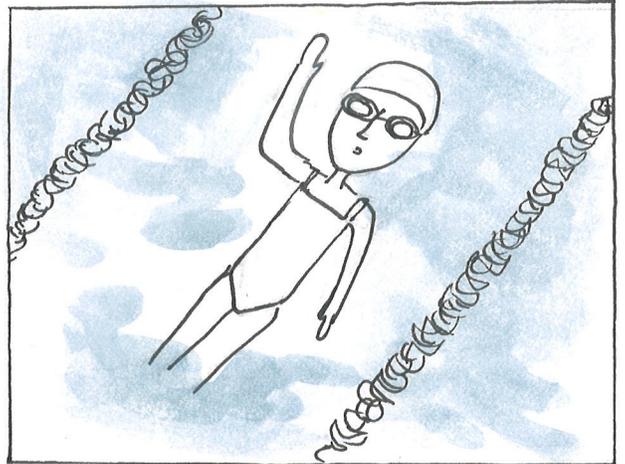
He swam through college and became a teacher & swim coach.



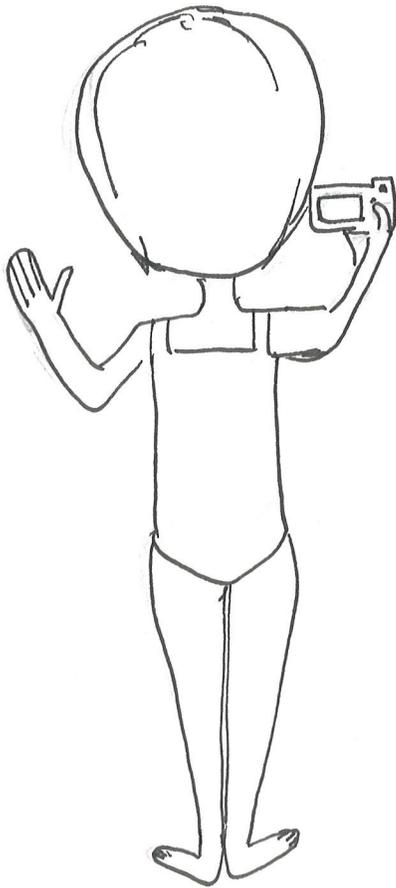
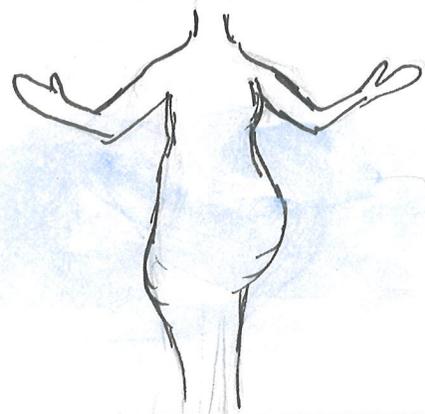
My mom also fell in love with swimming at her community pool.



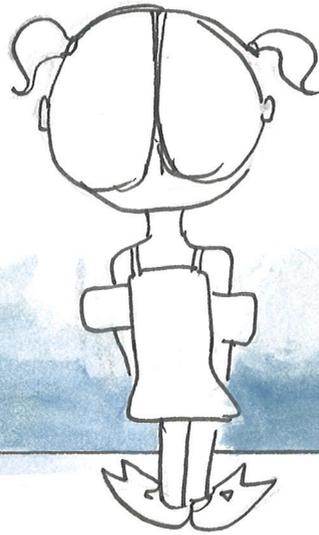
She worked her way up to swim at a Division 1 school - a backstroker.



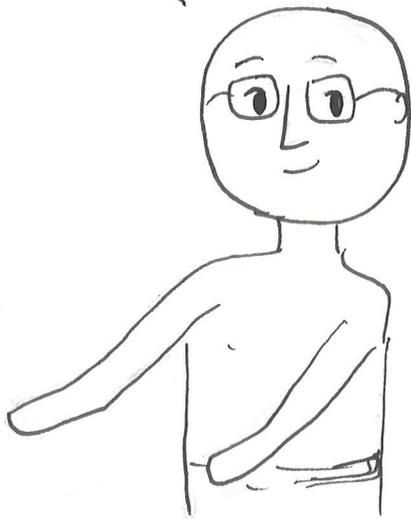
She swam after college even swimming 8 months pregnant with me.



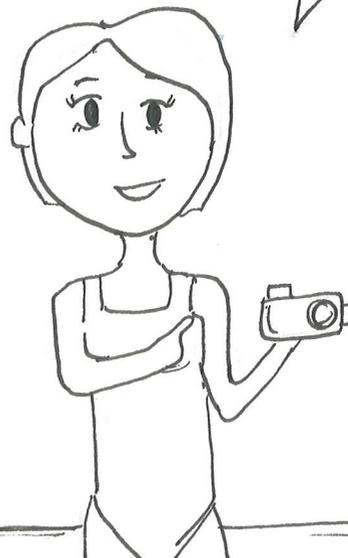
I stood before the pool. Afraid to make the jump.

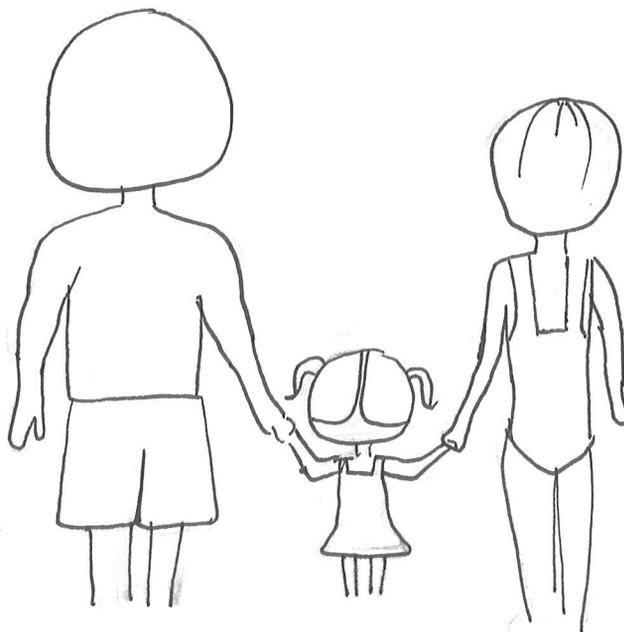
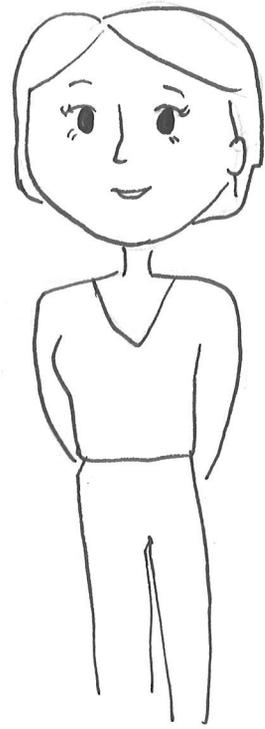
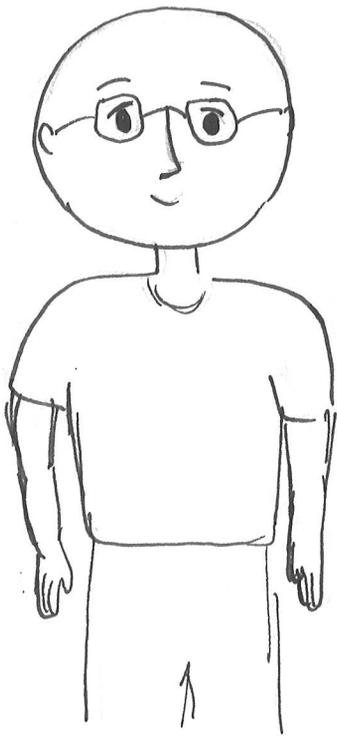


It's ok Sophia. I'll be here to catch you.

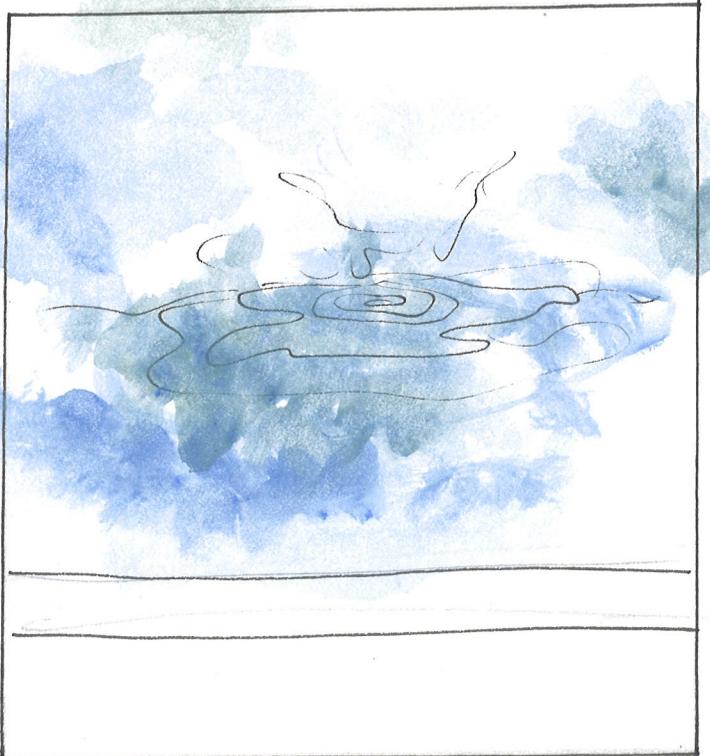
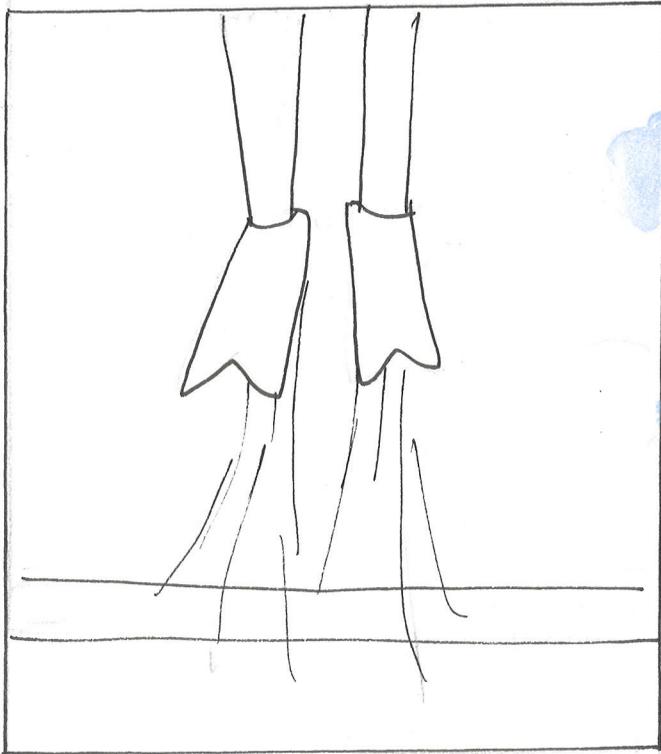
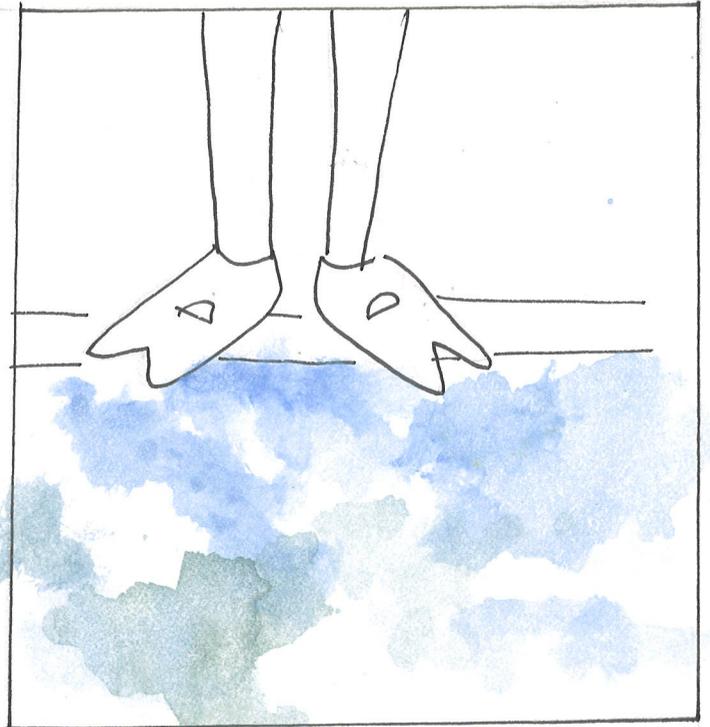
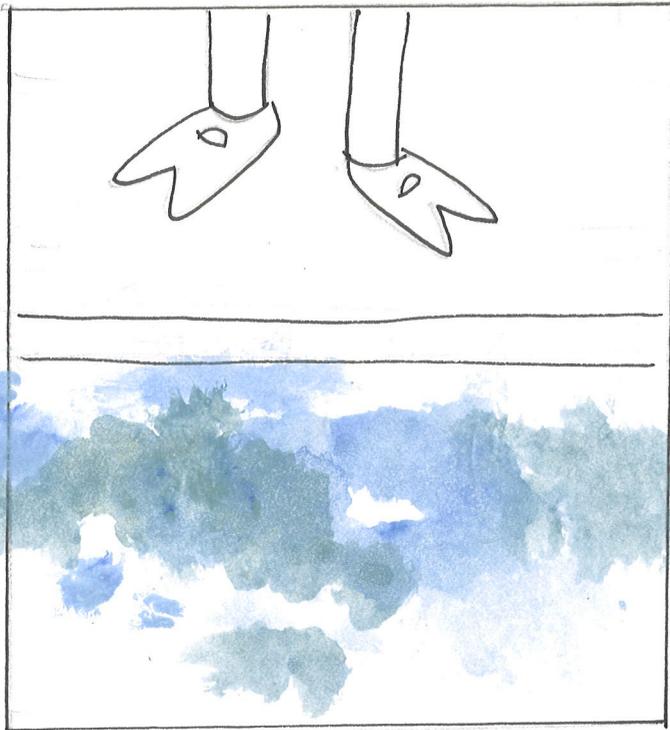


You got it, hun! Just hop in. Papa is right there.

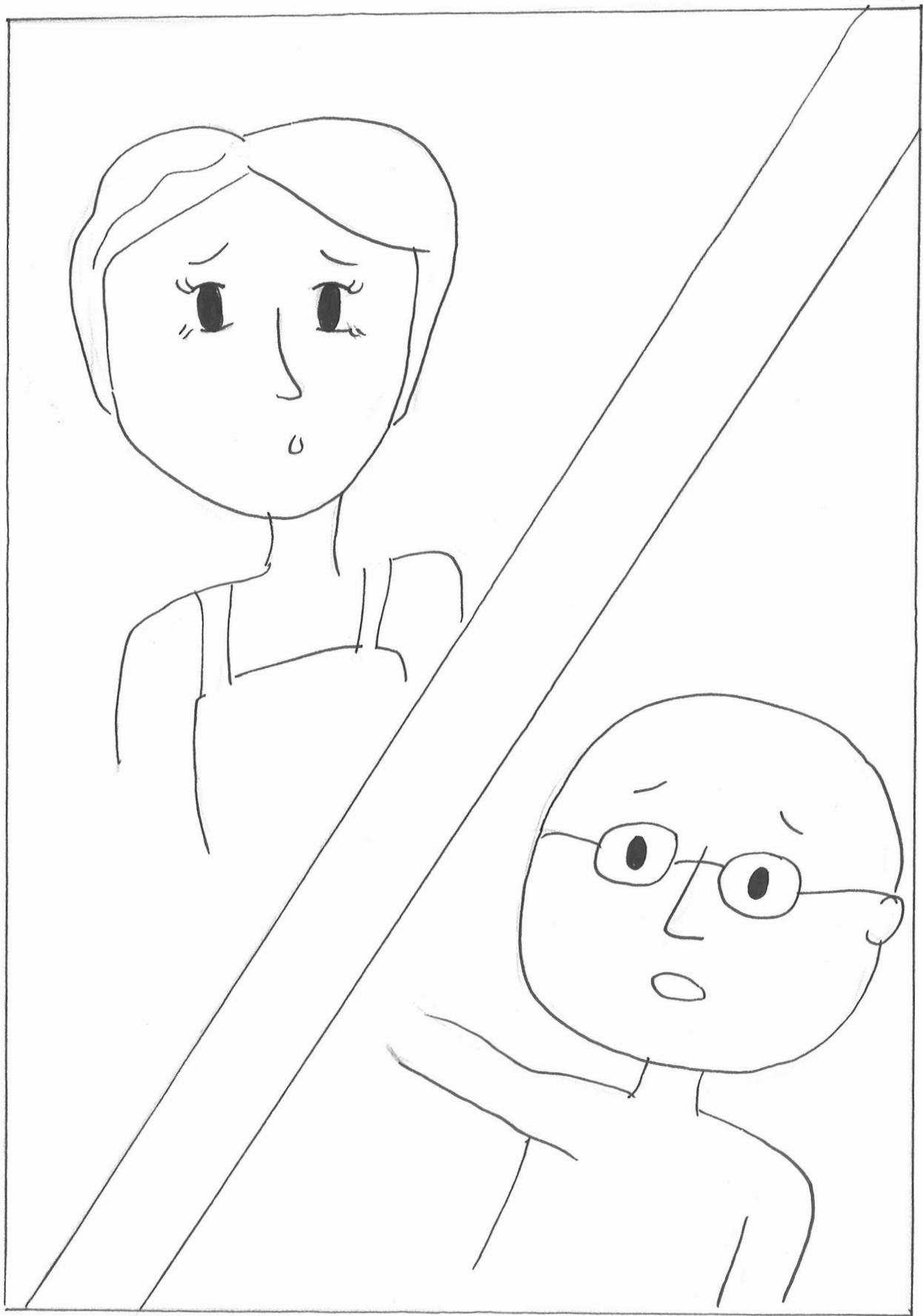


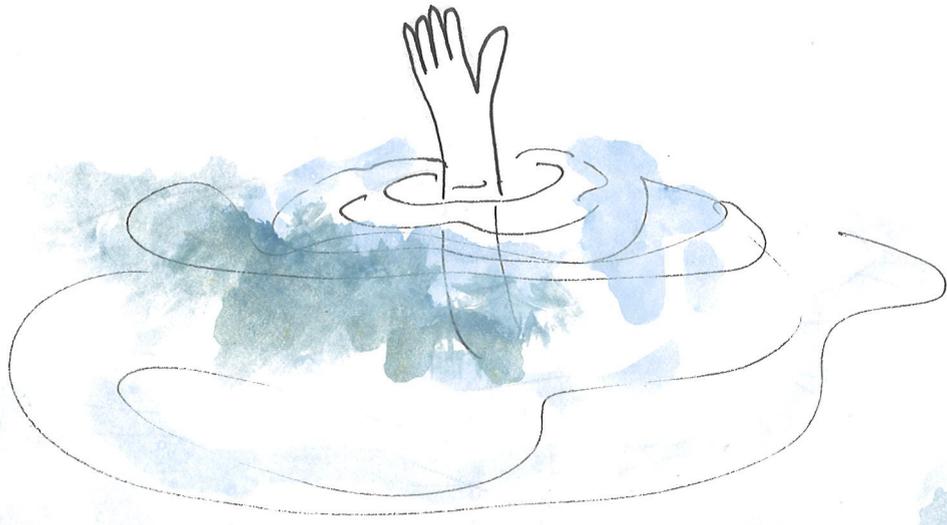


So I waddled to the edge of the pool.



And I looked at my parents and I jumped into the water.

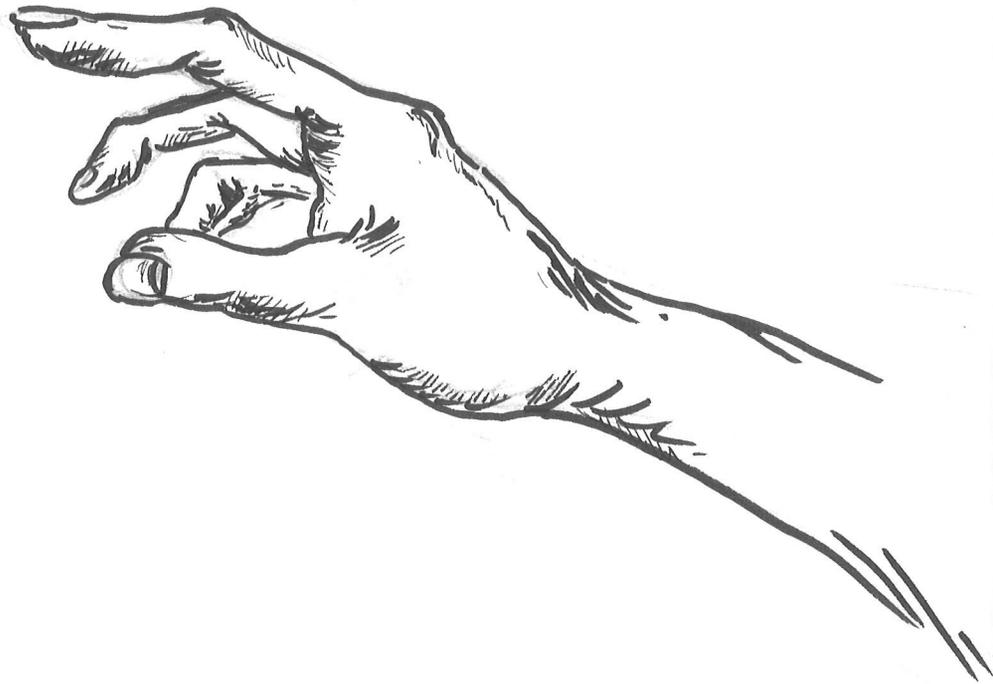
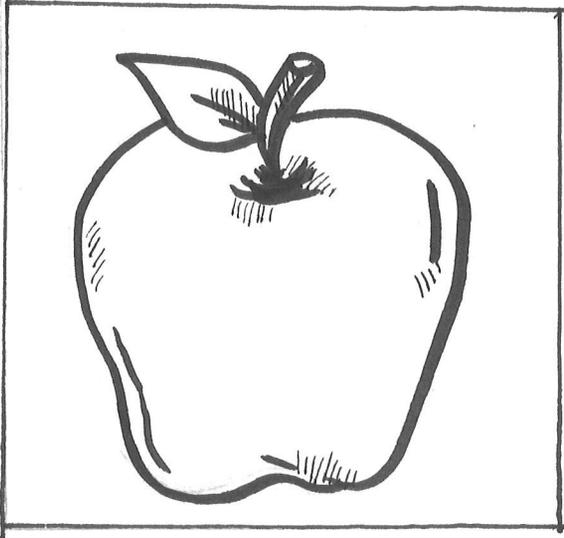


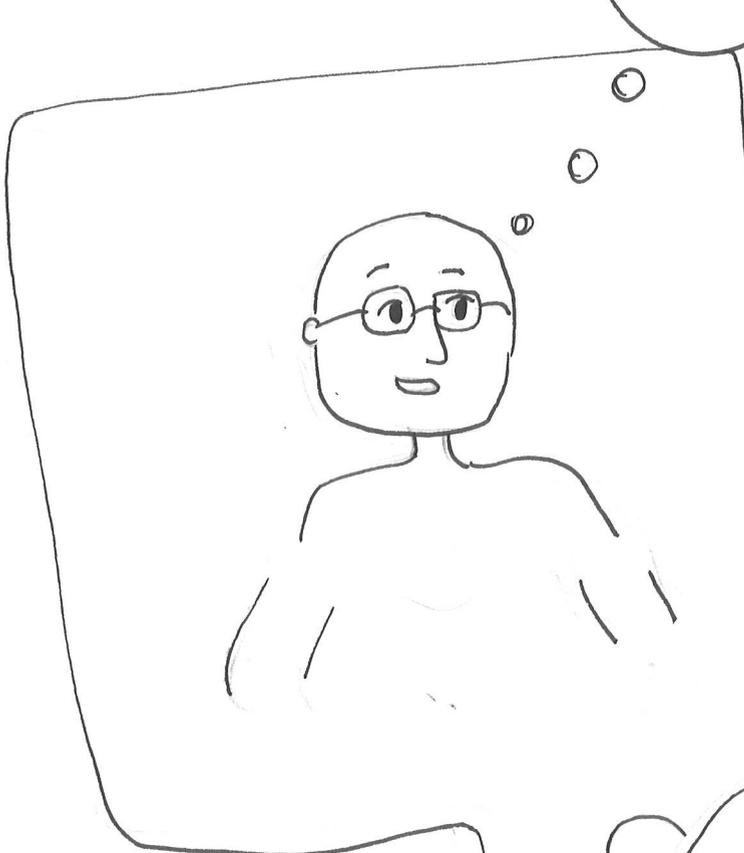


MY fears stayed under the water as  
I came up above the surface



# THE APPLE





My dad taught  
me how to swim.  
It was simple,  
he explained.

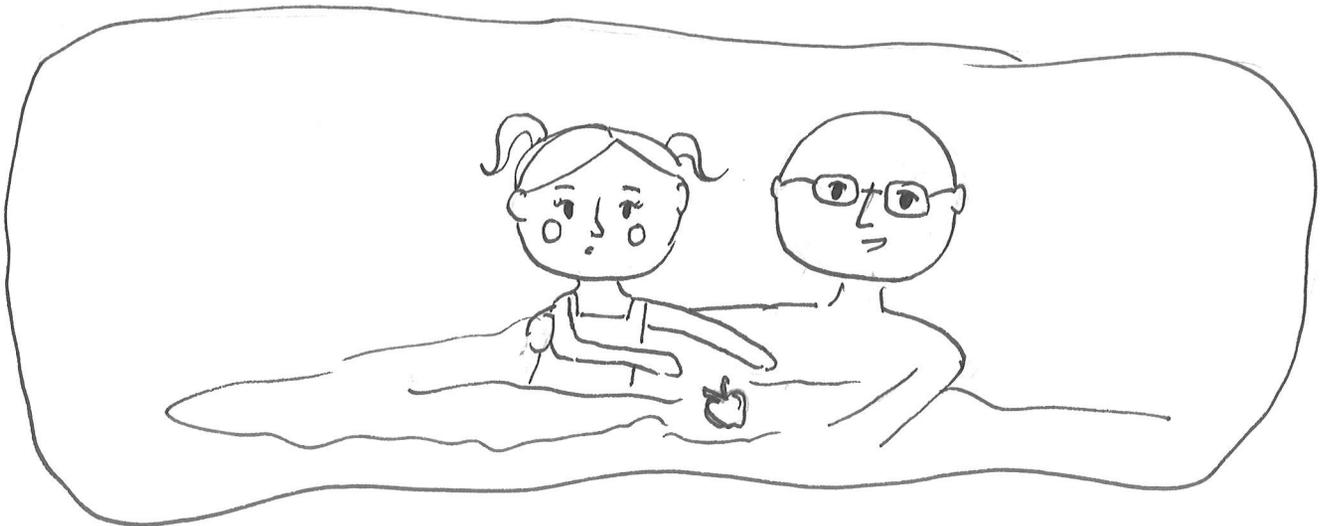
Reach  
for  
the  
apple.

Although I  
much preferred  
ice cream.  
I wanted to  
grab the  
apple. With the  
added bonus  
of reaching  
my papa's arms.

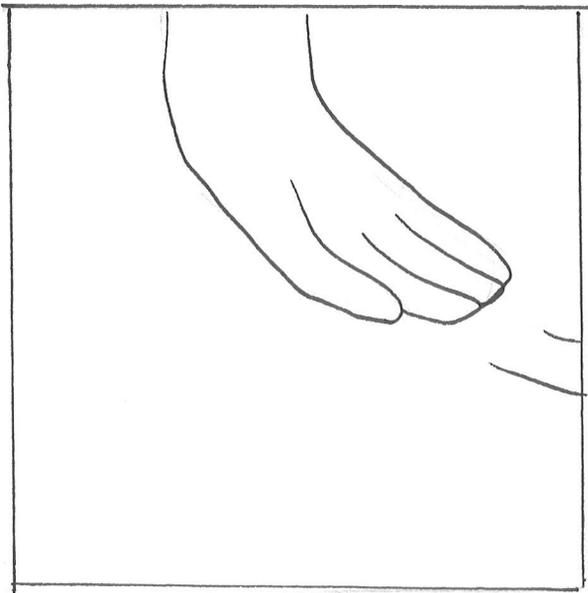
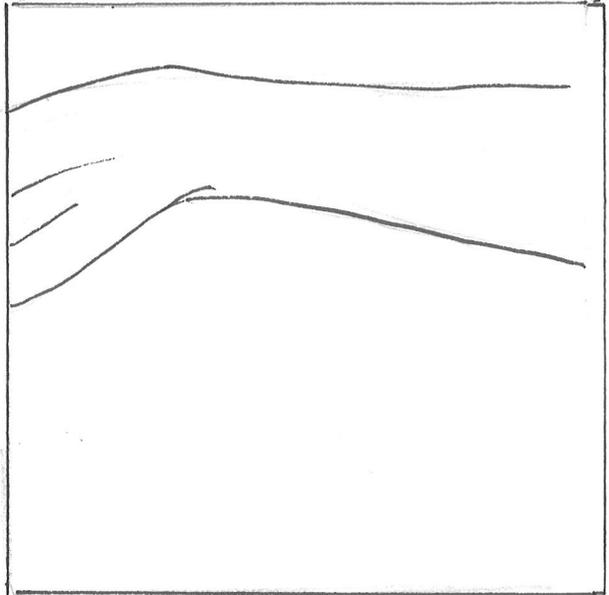
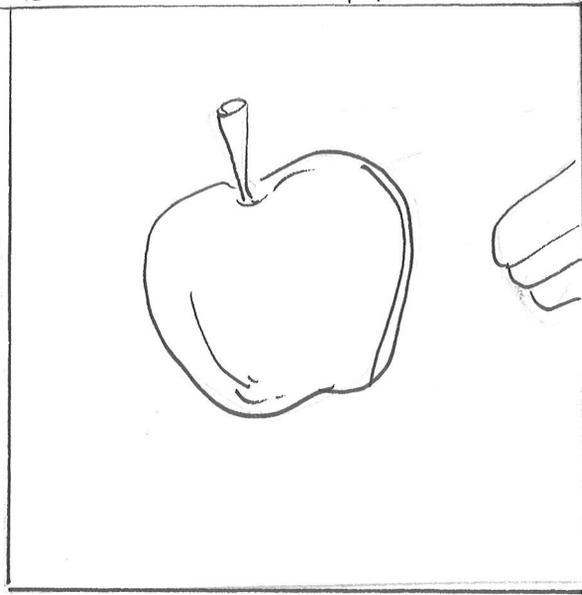




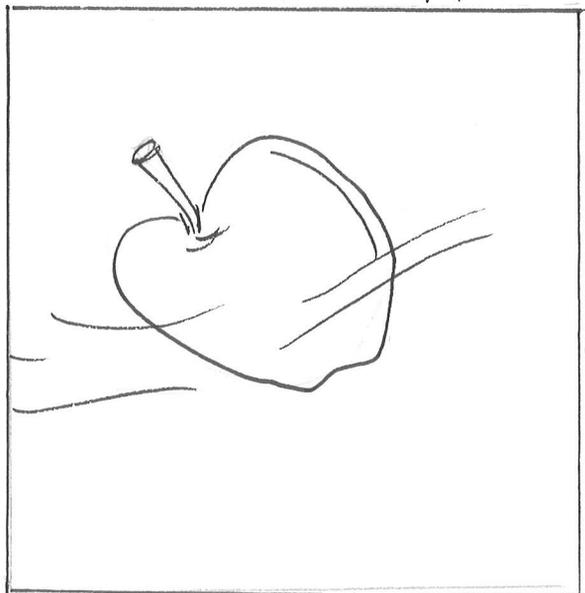
Those Olympic swimmers I watched on tv were just grabbing the apple. It made sense. It was simple. Natural even — a magnetic connection between the body and the apple. My arms moved through the water with grace. Working with the water, being guided by my Papa I kept reaching the apple



Grab the apple ...



... throw the apple



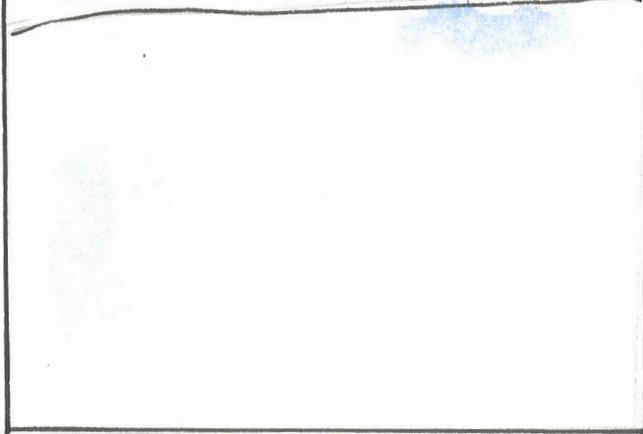


I GUESS THAT WAS  
MY FIRST SWIMMING  
LESSON: GRAB THE APPLE

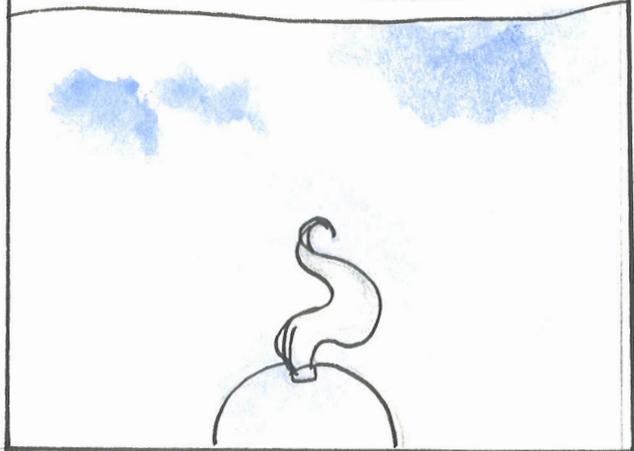
U  
n  
d  
E  
r



THE FEELING  
OF BEING  
UNDERWATER



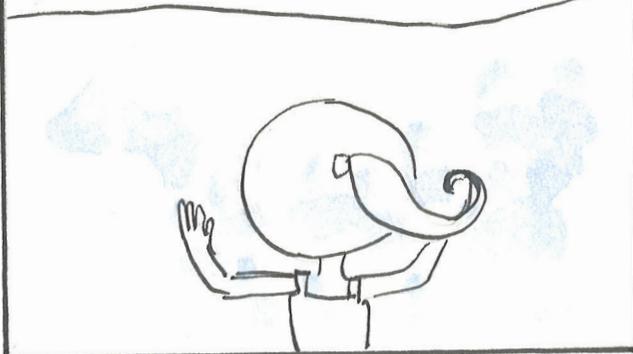
QUIET



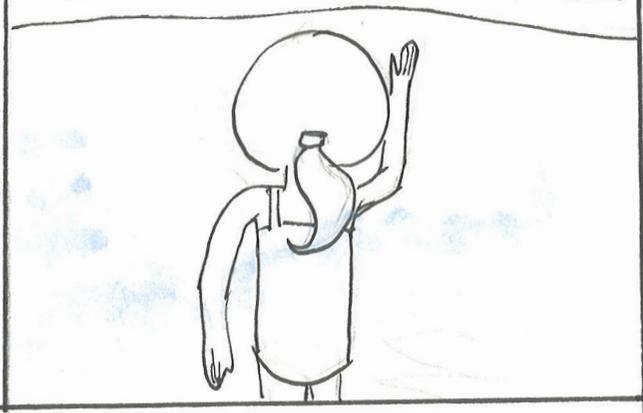
and

but

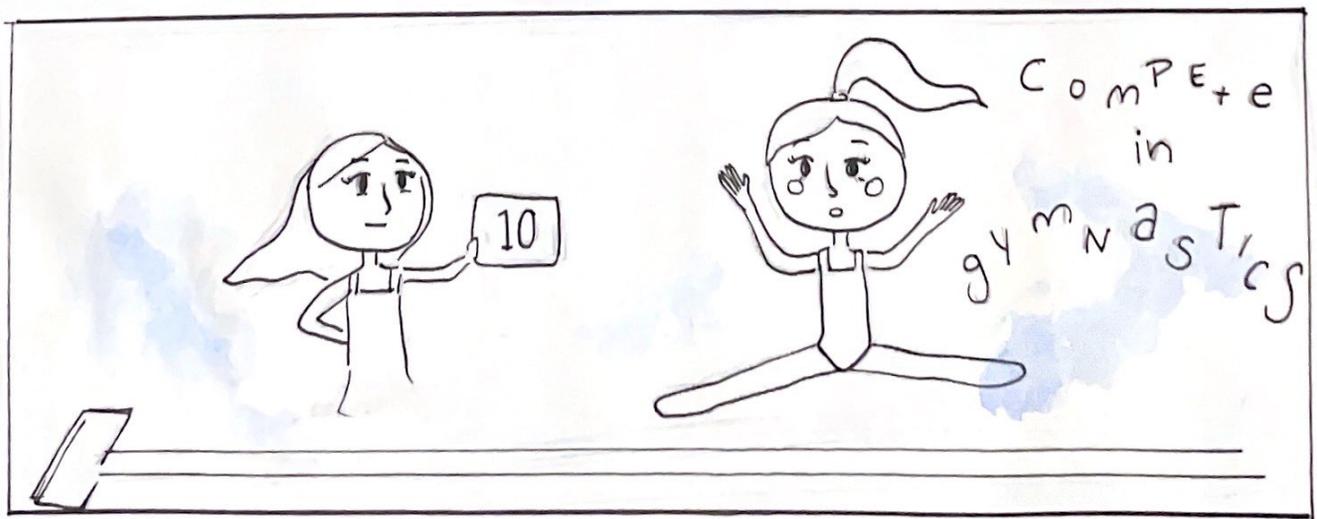
LIMITLESS

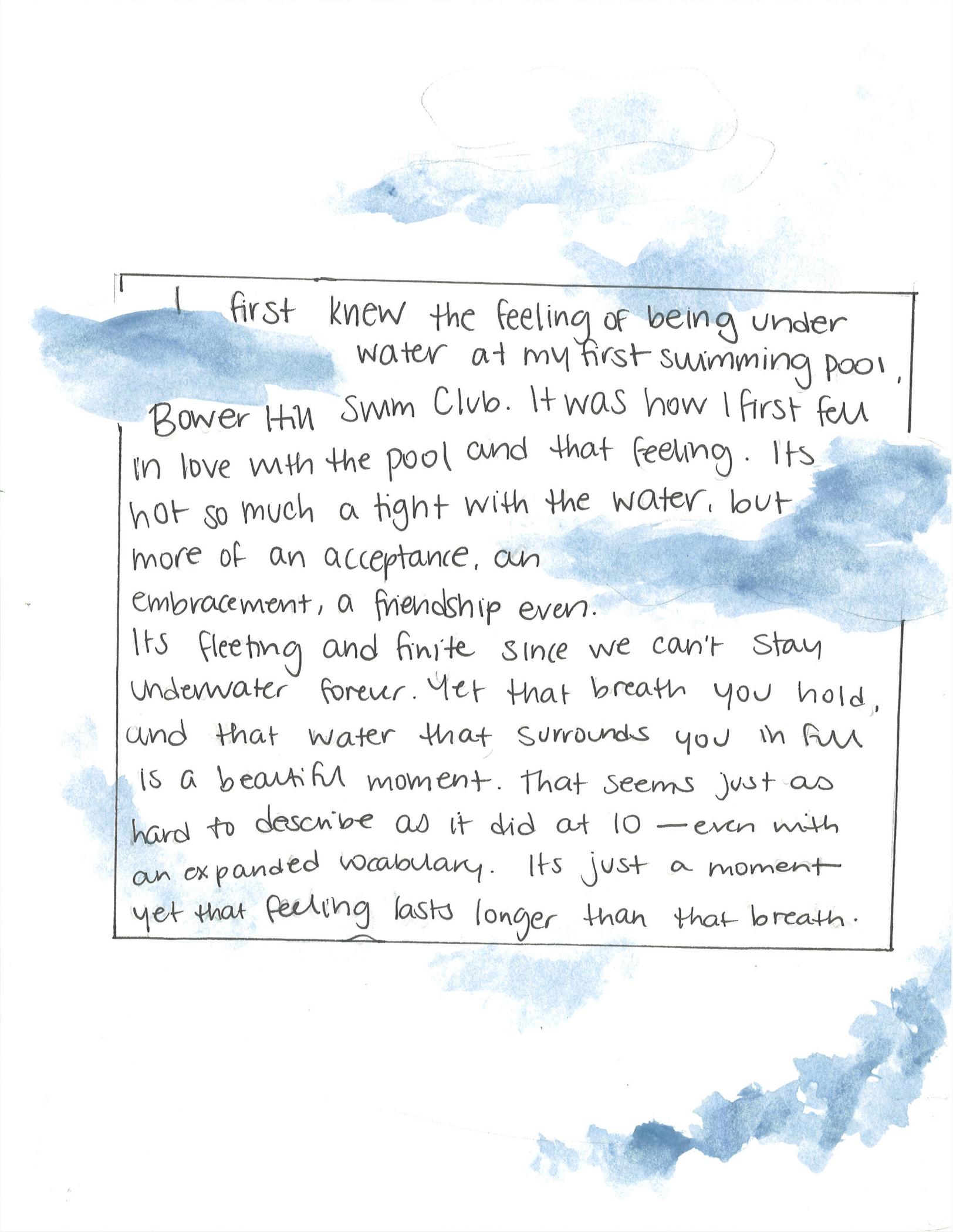


JUST A LOT  
SNAPSHOTS  
OF TIME



There's so much to do underwater

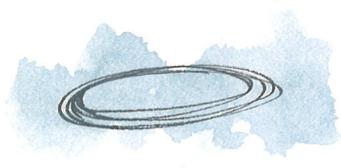
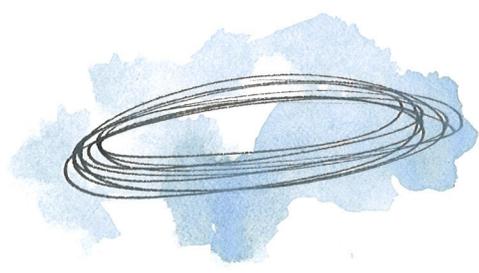
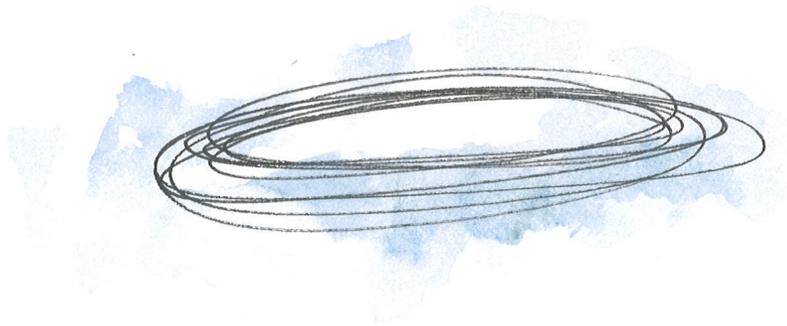


The page features several horizontal bands of light blue watercolor washes. The text is contained within a hand-drawn black rectangular border. The text is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

I first knew the feeling of being under water at my first swimming pool, Bower Hill Swm Club. It was how I first fell in love with the pool and that feeling. Its not so much a fight with the water, but more of an acceptance, an embracement, a friendship even. Its fleeting and finite since we can't stay underwater forever. Yet that breath you hold, and that water that surrounds you in full is a beautiful moment. That seems just as hard to describe as it did at 10 — even with an expanded vocabulary. Its just a moment yet that feeling lasts longer than that breath.



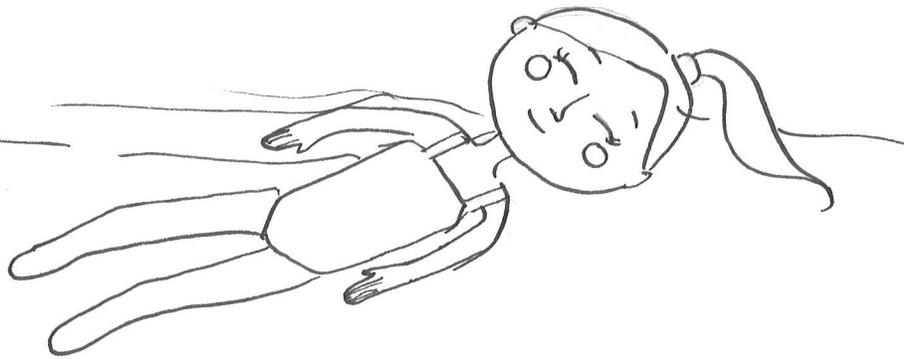
when it's just you  
+ the water

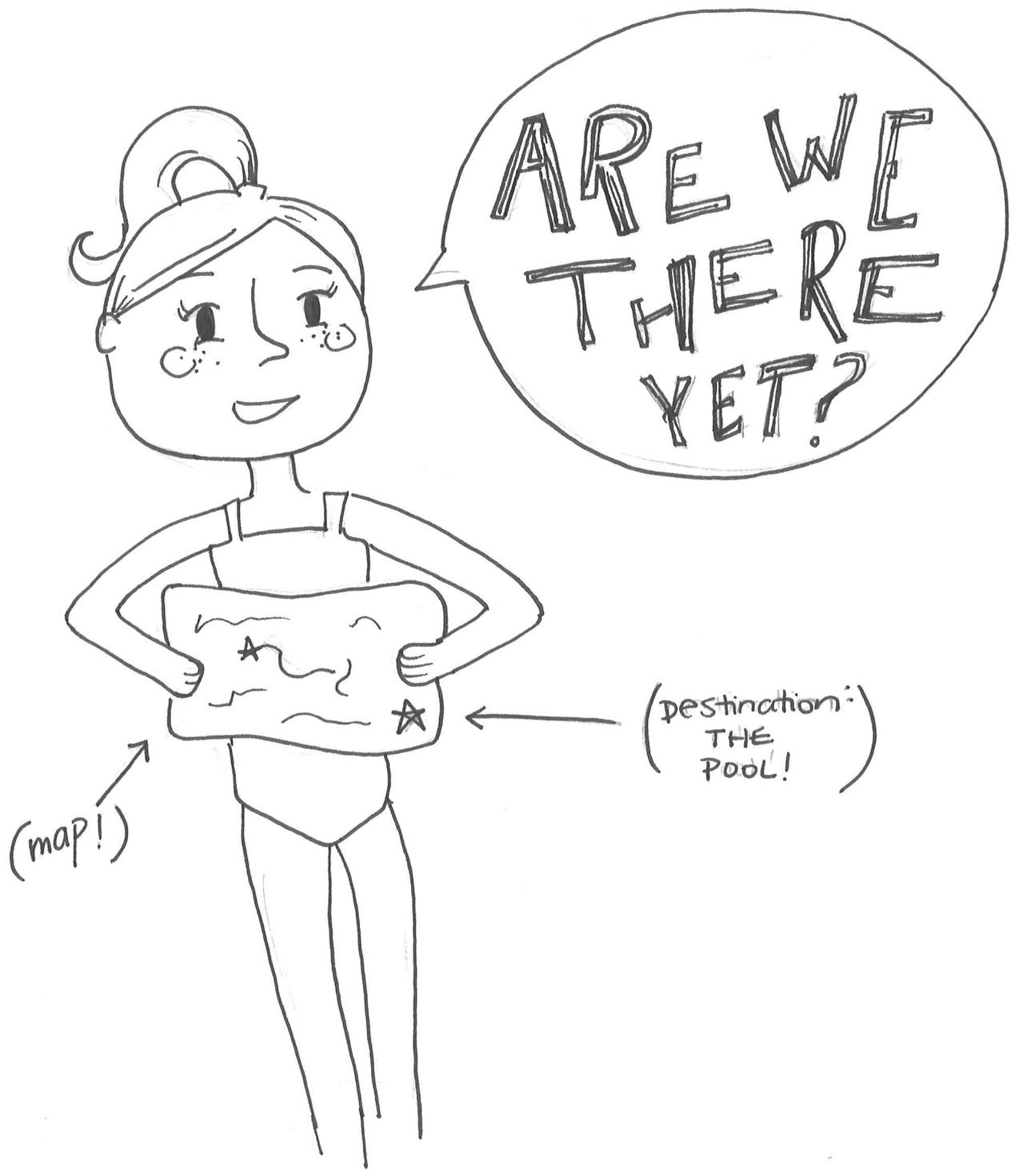


But you always  
come up above



A B O V E





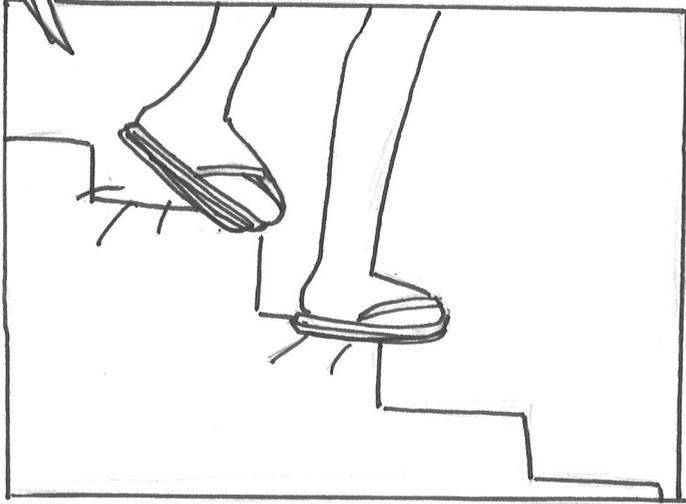
ARE WE  
THERE  
YET?

(map!)

(destination:  
THE  
POOL!)

MOM!

When are we going to the pool?!

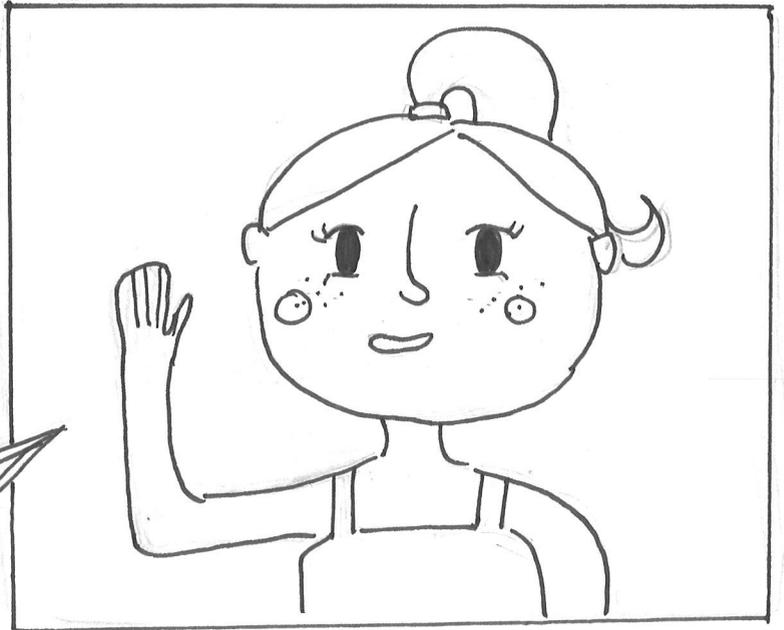
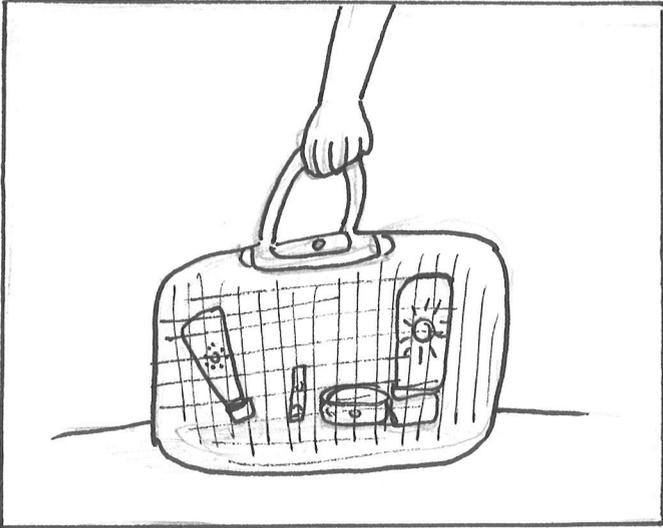
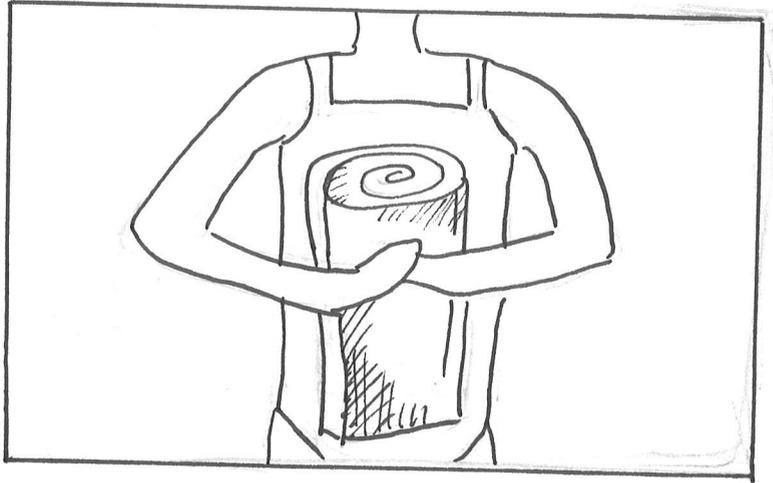


and your hat ...

Josephina, make sure you bring your Sunblock!

...

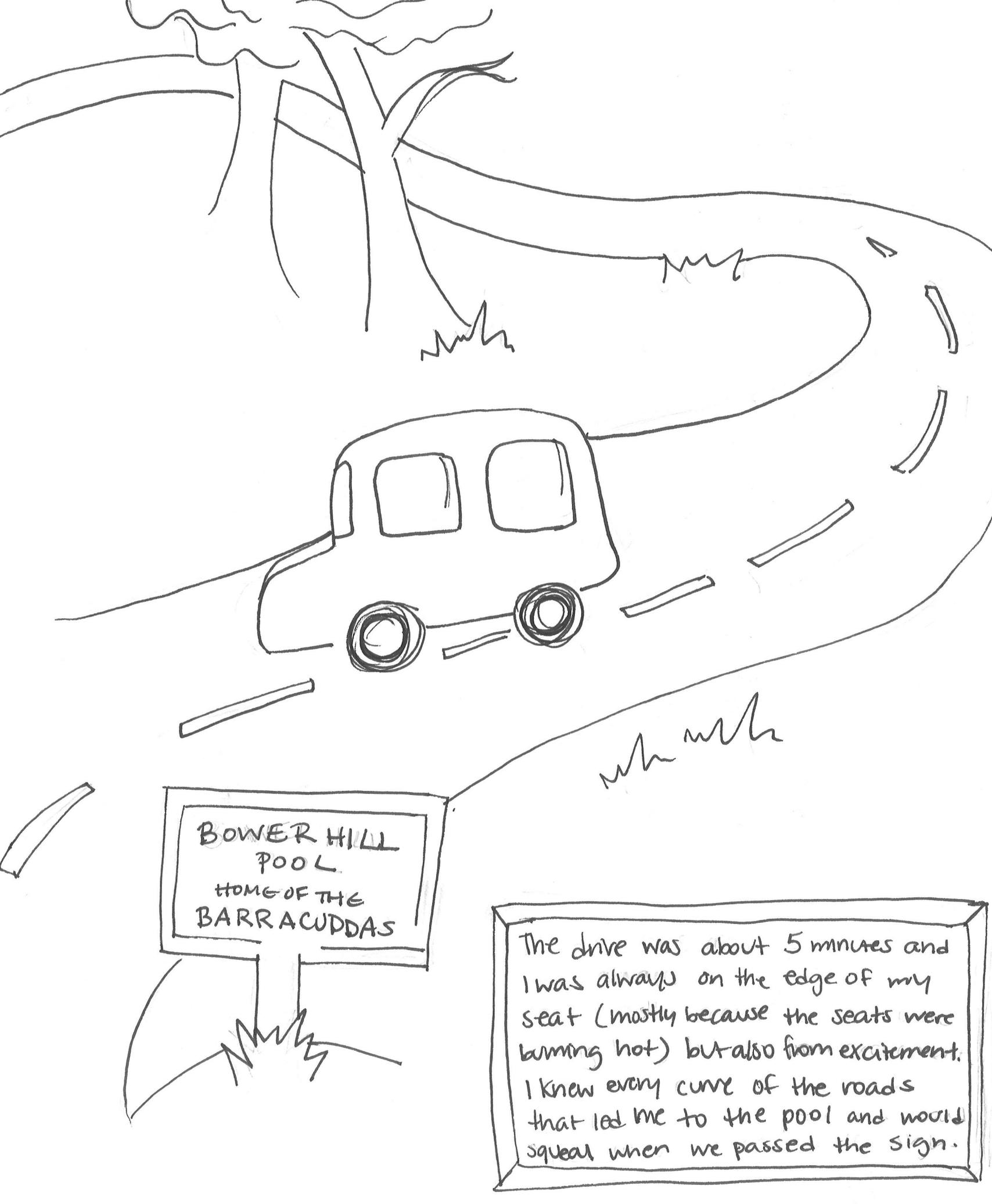
...also towel!



READY!

"HOP IN THE CAR!"





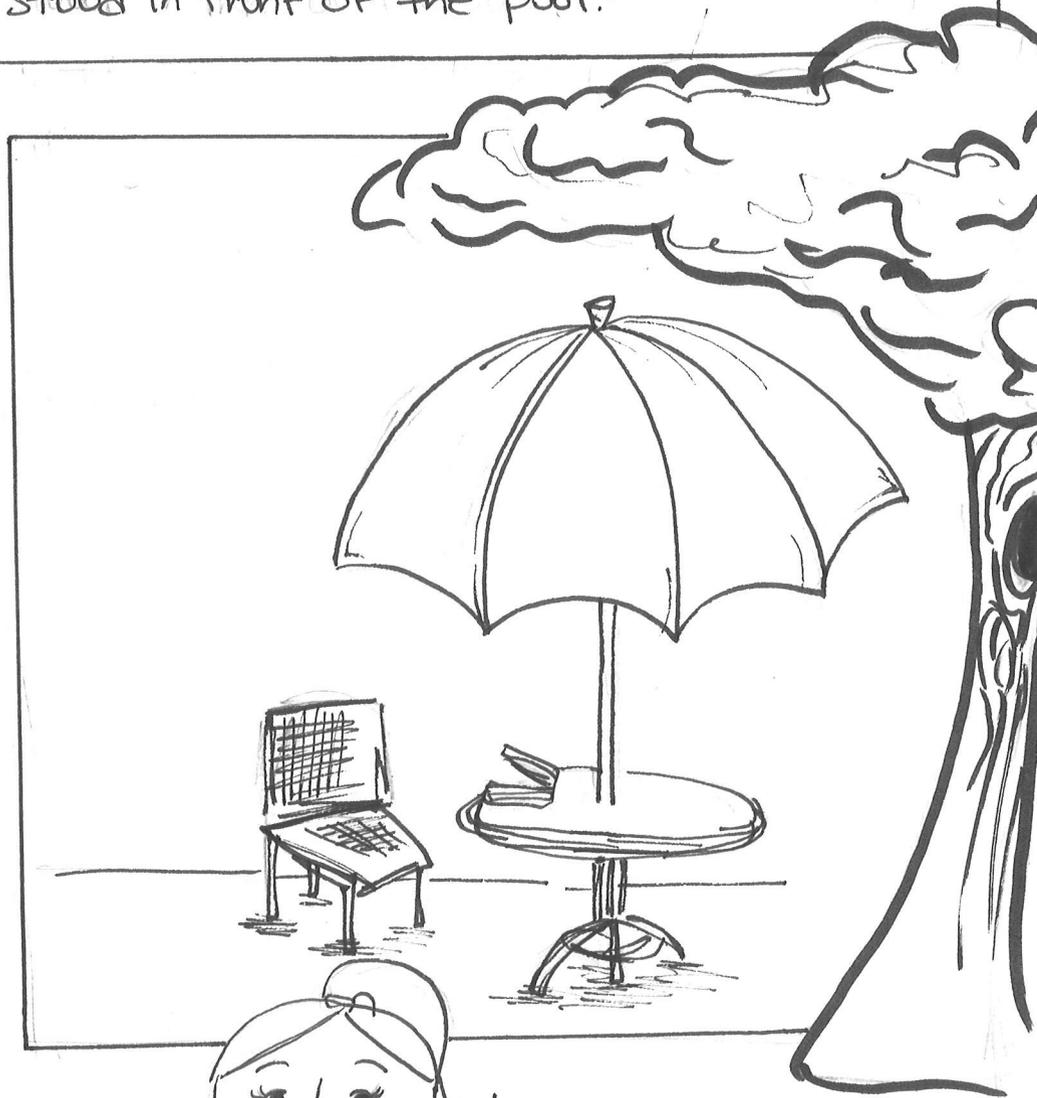
BOWER HILL  
POOL  
HOME OF THE  
BARRACUDAS

The drive was about 5 minutes and I was always on the edge of my seat (mostly because the seats were burning hot) but also from excitement. I knew every curve of the roads that led me to the pool and would squeal when we passed the sign.

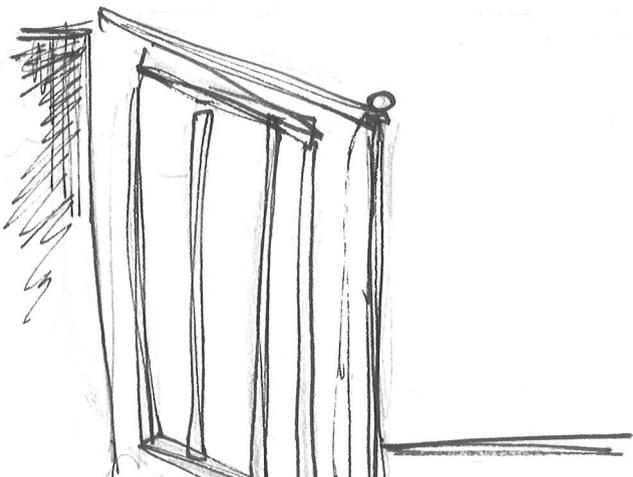


I ran down the hill from the parking lot to the old rickety gate that stood in front of the pool.

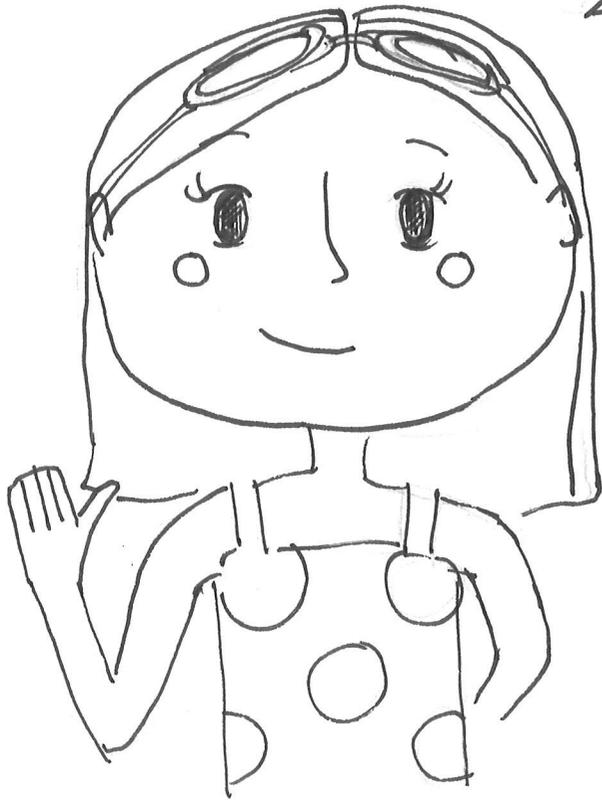
But right before the gate, a small table & chair sat. Someone would sit to welcome everyone. The people who sat there changed through the years, but I always loved the 'hi' and smile that greeted me.



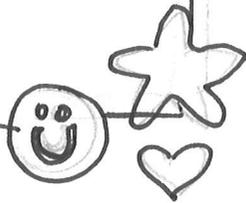
We're here finally!



# MEET: LAUREN

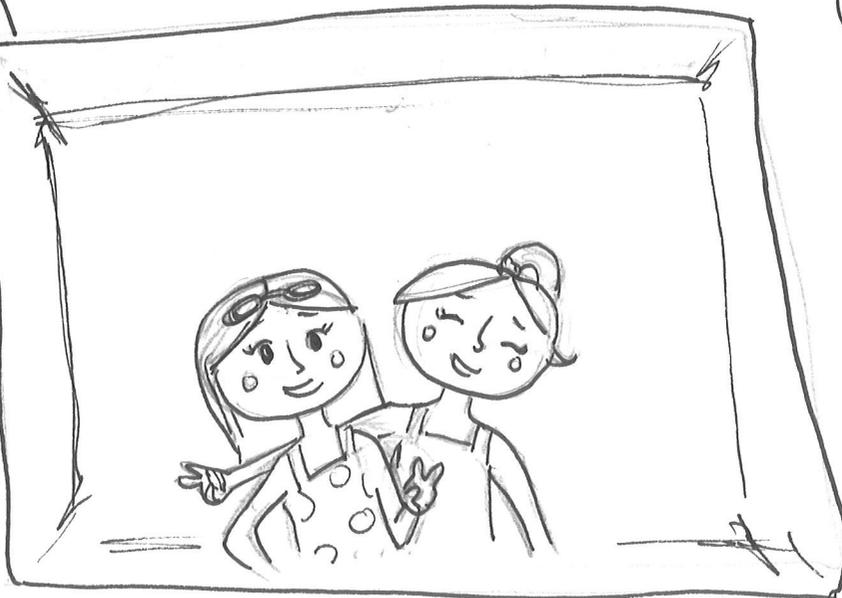
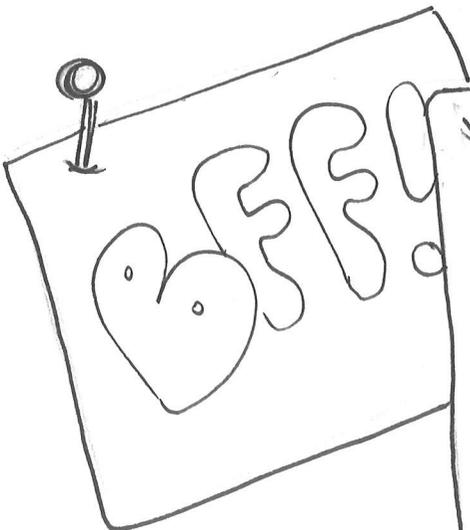


PROPERTY OF  
BOWER HILL



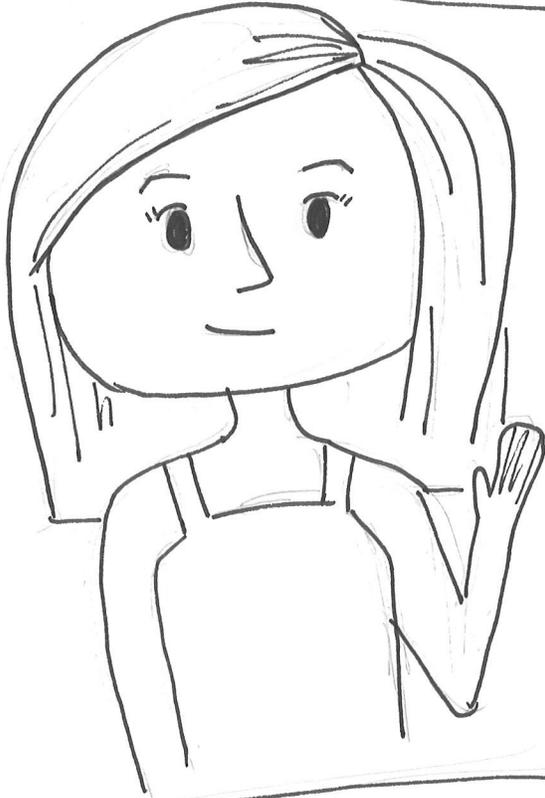
FAVORITE STROKE: Backstroke

FAVORITE SPOT @ BOWER HILL: Snack Bar



MEET

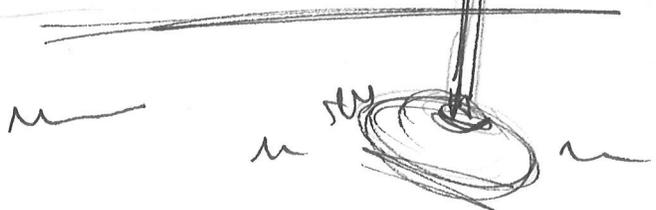
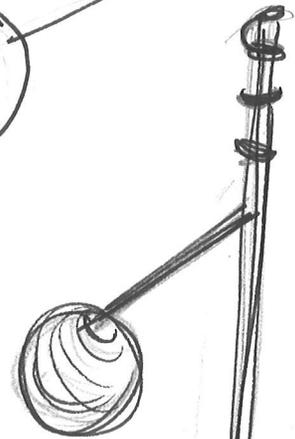
# NOEL



Favorite  
Stroke?  
BREASTSTROKE



Favorite  
Spot @ Boner Hill?  
TETHERBALL!!



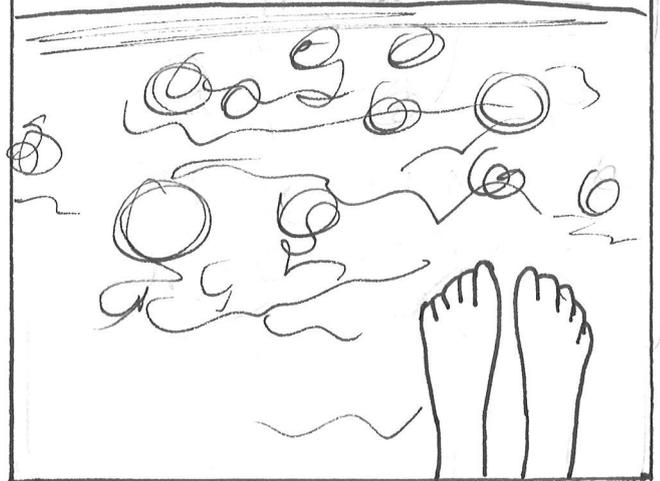


A  
Conversation  
between a  
swimmer &  
a lifeguard



That's  
her best  
handstand  
yet!

10/10  
Sophia!

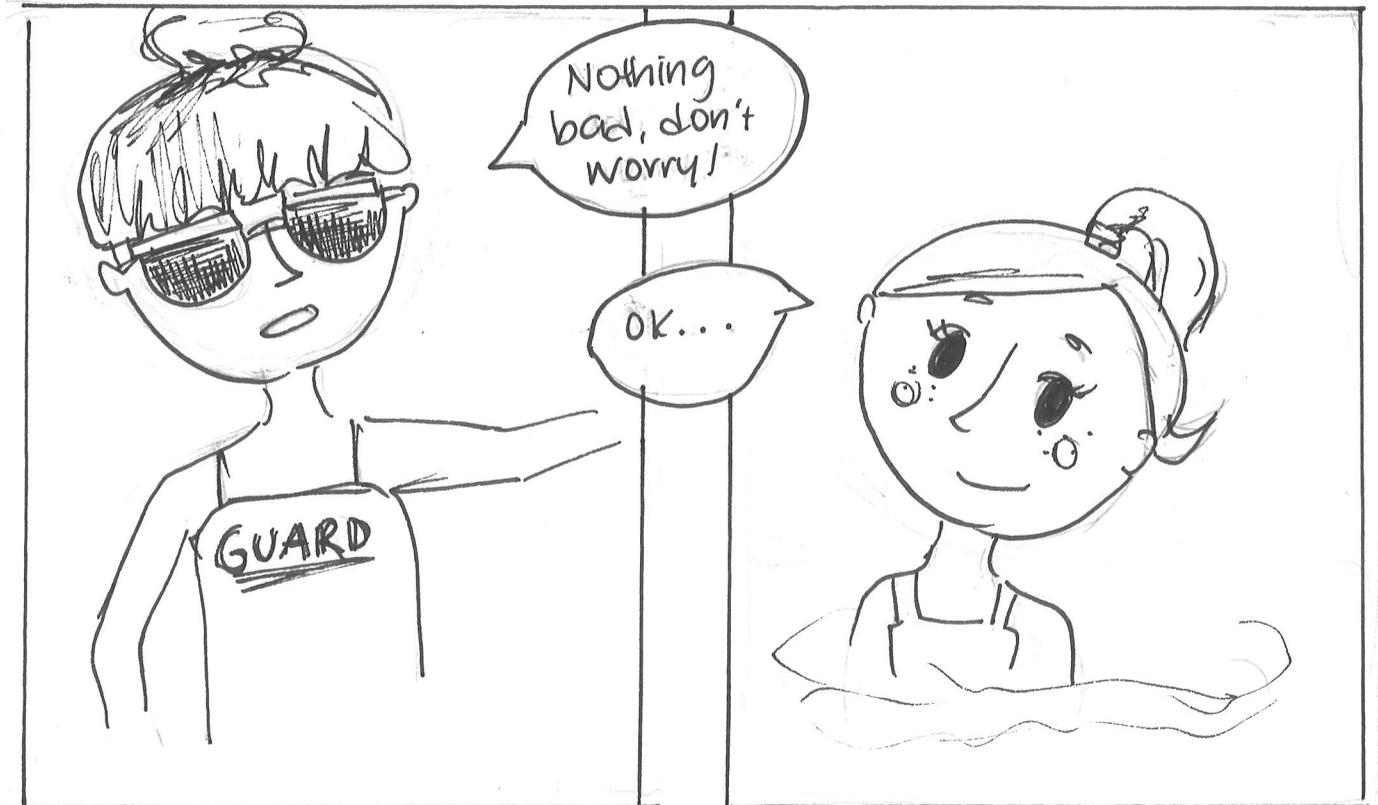
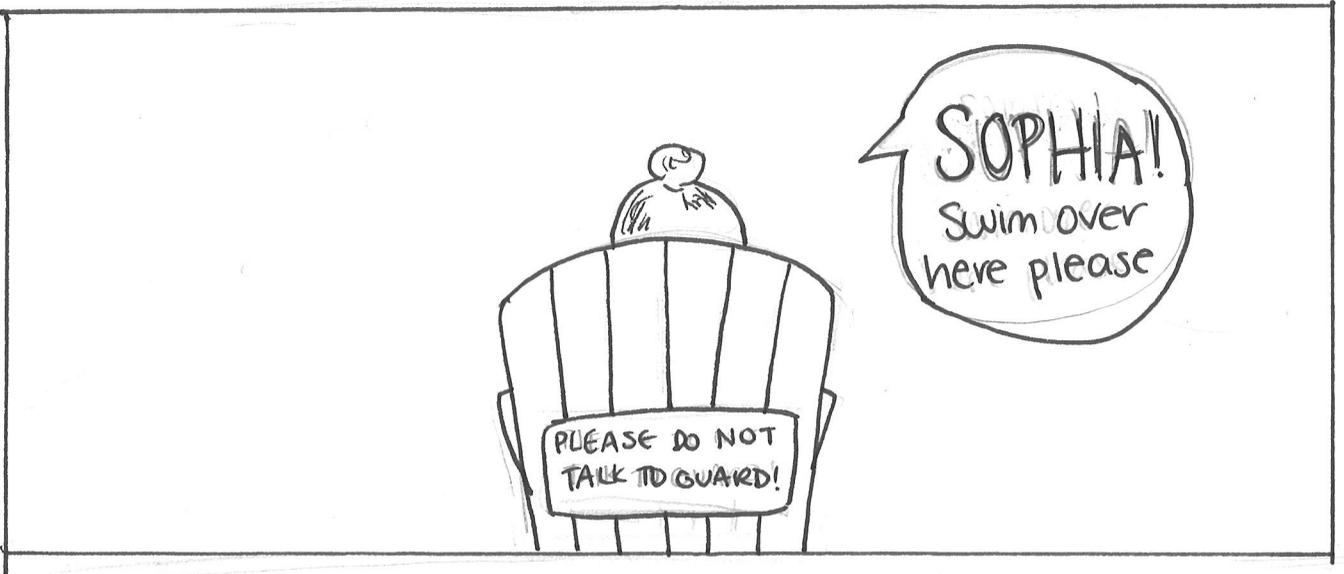


Thanks  
Guys, ok  
Lauren  
now  
you!



(whistle!)







You should really think about joining our swim team



I've never been on a team before, am I even good enough?

I think you'd do great and besides that's not what it's about, you'd be joining a team

Well Noel is on that team so it must be fun. Maybe even Lauren would join.

Of course it would be fun if your friends were on the team, but you'll also meet new people. Who knows you might even fall in love with swimming—Do it full year round...

Bssh I don't think I could ever swim outside of the summer. But thanks! I'll think about it.

HOW TO:

# LINE GYMNASTICS



Hi everyone today we'll teach you how to play line gymnastics with us. Now to play you'll need some friends who can hold their breath for a few seconds + some good underwater balance. Also a pool... Well obviously. Lauren here will bring us underwater with her.

Now lets take you down to see what's happening on the black line.

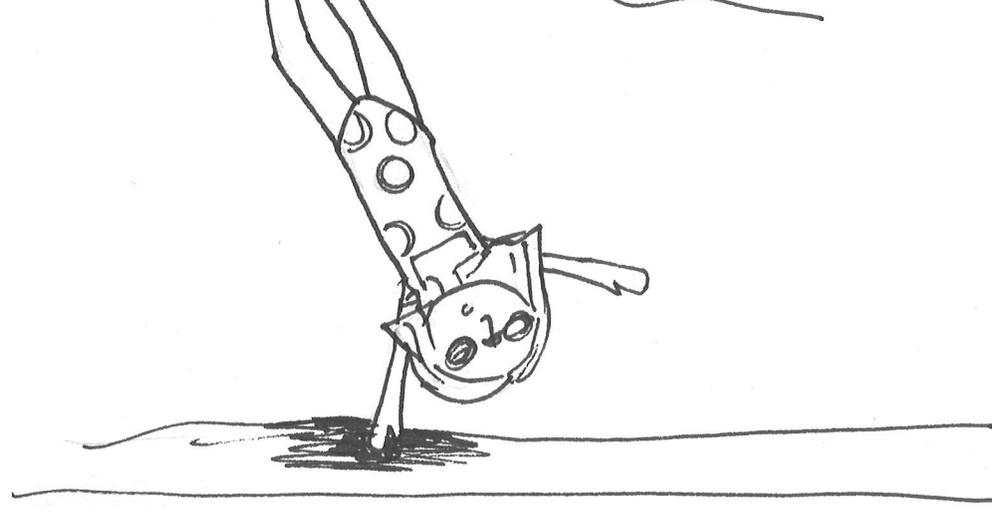
Hi everyone, I'll be competing today and will demonstrate some of my favorite moves



Here goes Lauren for her first go as she steps on the line



I take a breath and head to the bottom. My toes brush the ground and I am ready to begin.



There she goes folks  
A forward handstand  
that looks just  
slightly tipsy

It seems she  
is now doing a  
parachute move  
while hovering above  
the line

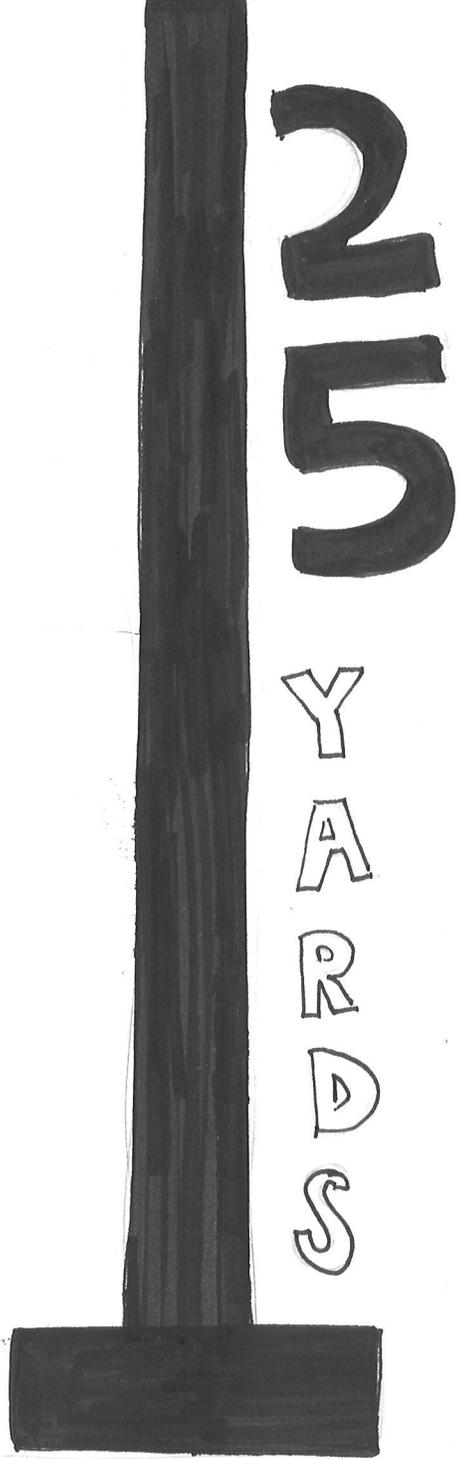


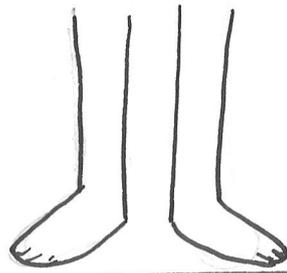
Impressive!

She strikes a  
pose! Now I wonder  
what the judges will  
say about her  
performance

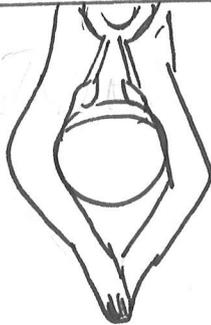
10! 10!



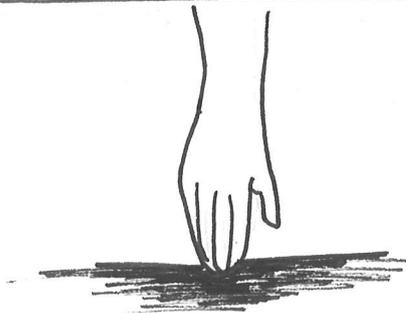




You line up behind the starting block. You are about to swim the 25 meter race. Just one lap from the wall your feet are touching to the other wall that's in the distance in front of you.



It's very simple, the notion of swimming wall to wall. And it passes in a blink of an eye. Just those 25 meters.



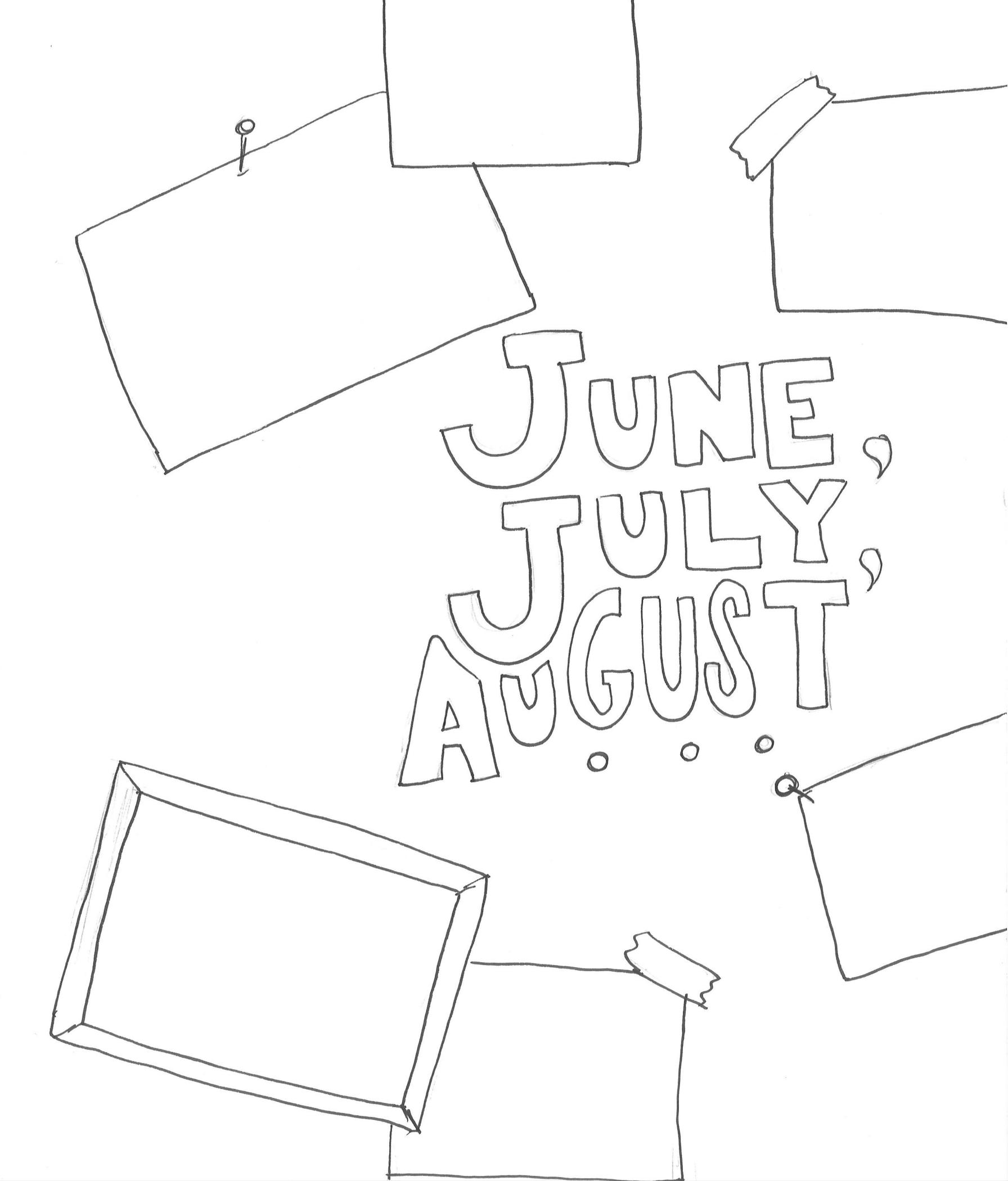
And again you touch the wall, now on the other side of the pool. You've done it, your first event in swimming.

DOWN  
THE  
BLACK  
LINE

ONE  
LAD

TO  
THE

OTHER SIDE  
TWENTY FIVE  
YARDS  
WALL  
WALL  
WINNERS



JUNE,  
JULY,  
AUGUST.

JUNE,  
JULY,  
AUGUST...

The months always slip by before you notice. The days are beautifully slow, although they run together now, but each day was its own adventure and memory encapsulated by the pool. June 21st, July 5th, August 13th...

Soon those three months feel into the divisions of years. I was 10 years old and then 11 after that as I swam through my perfect June July and Augusts.

JUNE  
JULY  
AUGUST

JUNE JULY AUGUST

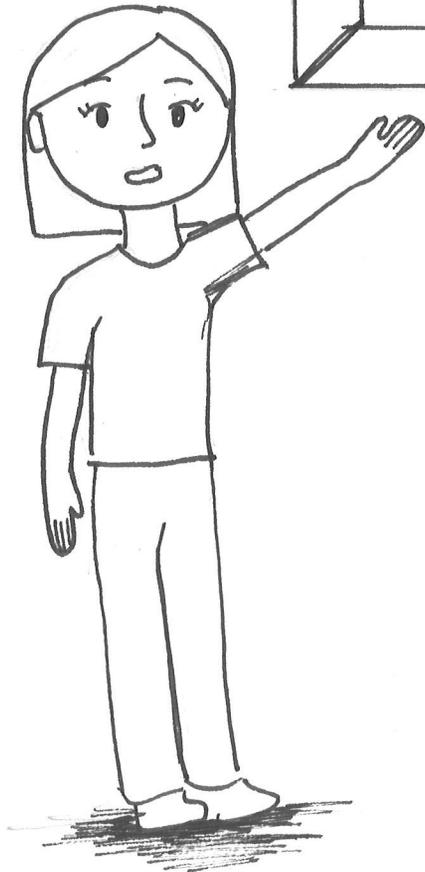
July 17th was my birthday and always marked the beginning of the end of the summer for me. It was bittersweet as it was another great year but also the end.

JUNE  
JULY  
AUGUST

I don't remember recognizing my last summer as being my last. I'm thankful for that as I never had to say a painful goodbye to the people I shared the pool with, and the place that spanned so much joy for me.

A BASIC SWIMMING LESSON...

THE  
FOUR  
STROKES



My favorite stroke  
(#best by far)



# F R E E S T Y L E

most common stroke,  
the first one you learn

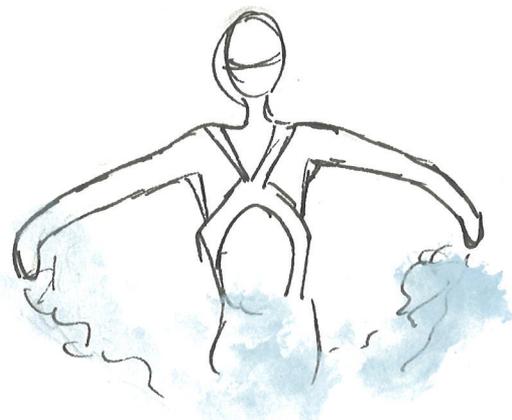
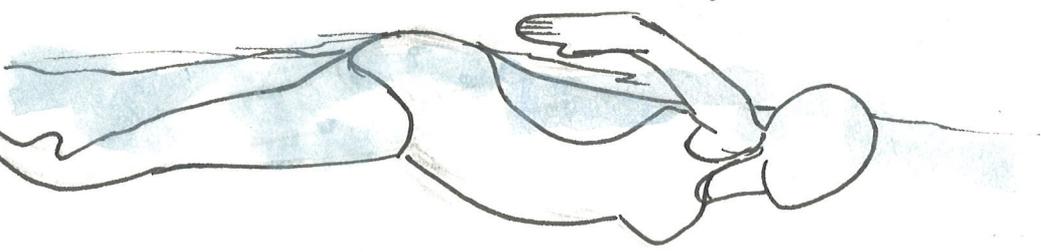
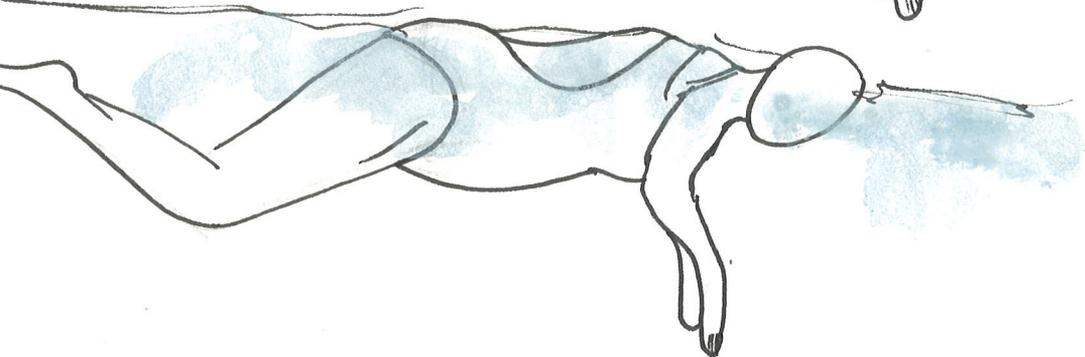
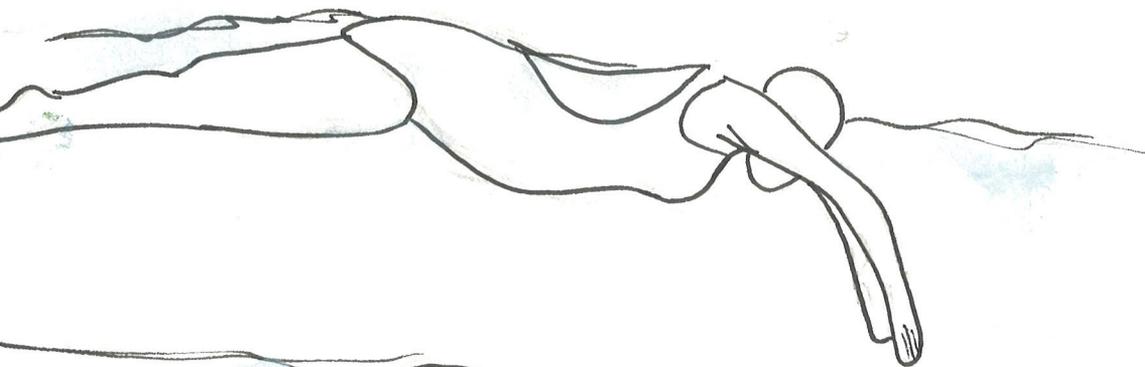
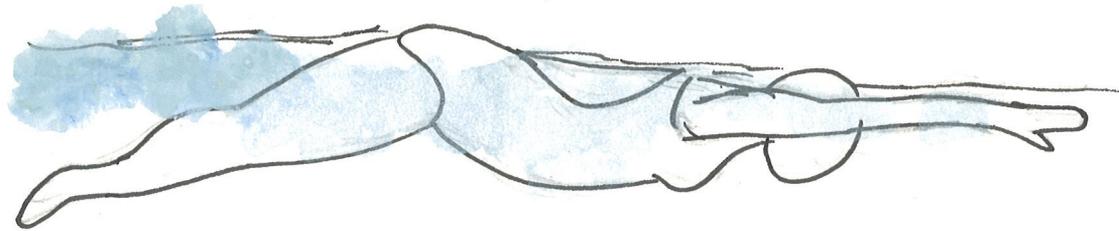
on your stomach,  
flutter kick,  
arms over the head  
and pulling through  
the water

it comes organically  
& feels comfortable



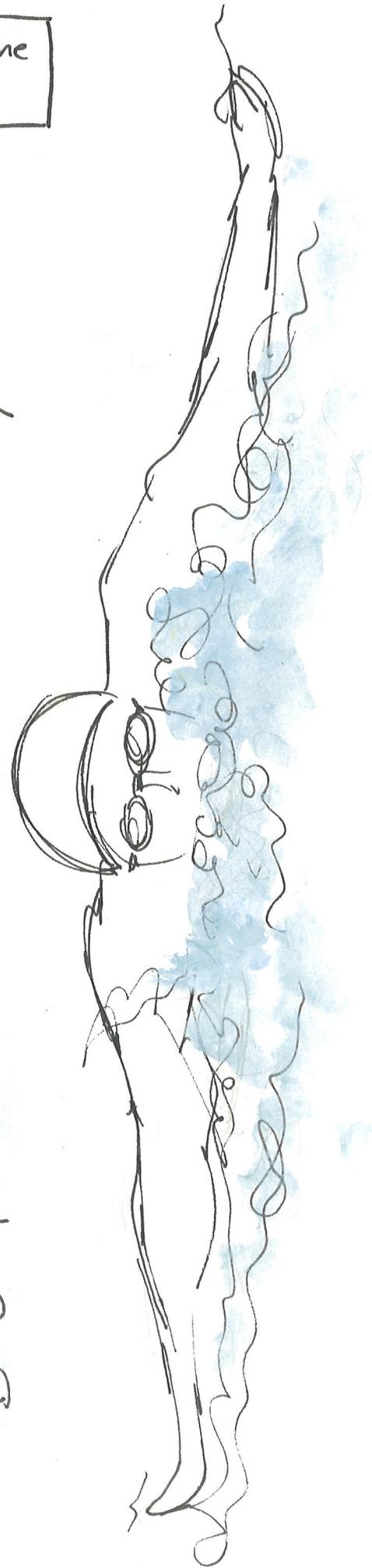
The most beautiful stroke. Arms sprawled, legs together. All working together.

The hardest on the body - torturous sometimes

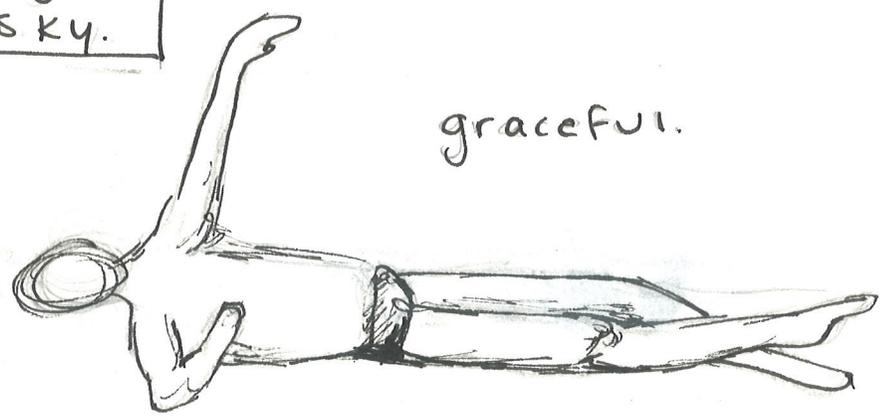


The most accurate name of a stroke - I've always thought.

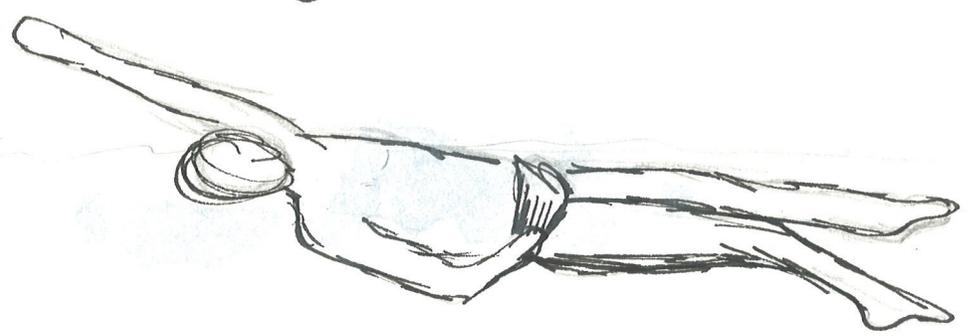
B  
O  
T  
T  
O  
M  
F  
L  
Y



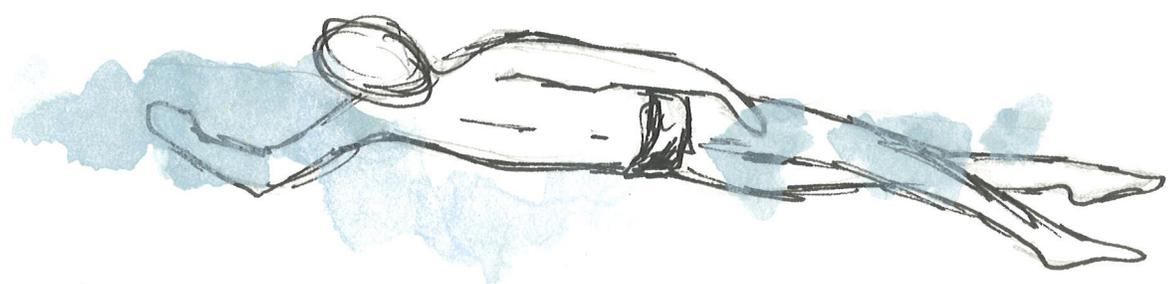
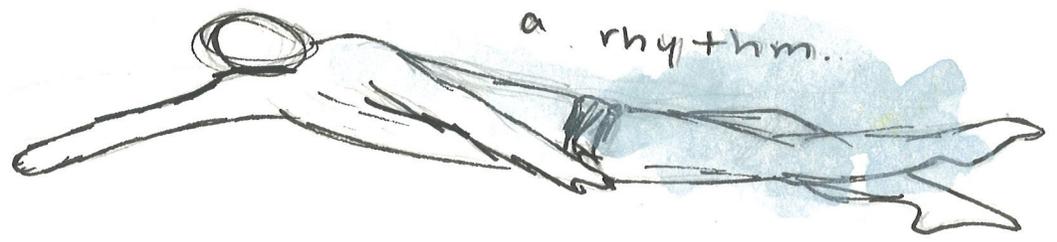
Opposite of freestyle. Rather than looking at the black line on the pool's bottom, looking at the ceiling or the sky.



graceful.



a rhythm.



My mom's stroke

BACK  
STROKE





The most confusing stroke

Its all about timing and power of the kick

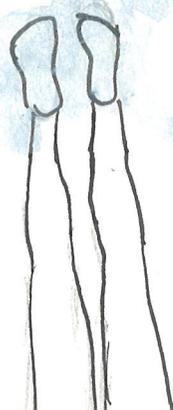
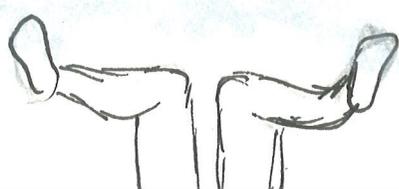
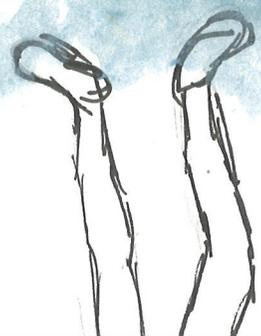


BREASTROKE



My least favorite and worst - by far

Kinda funny looking



THE

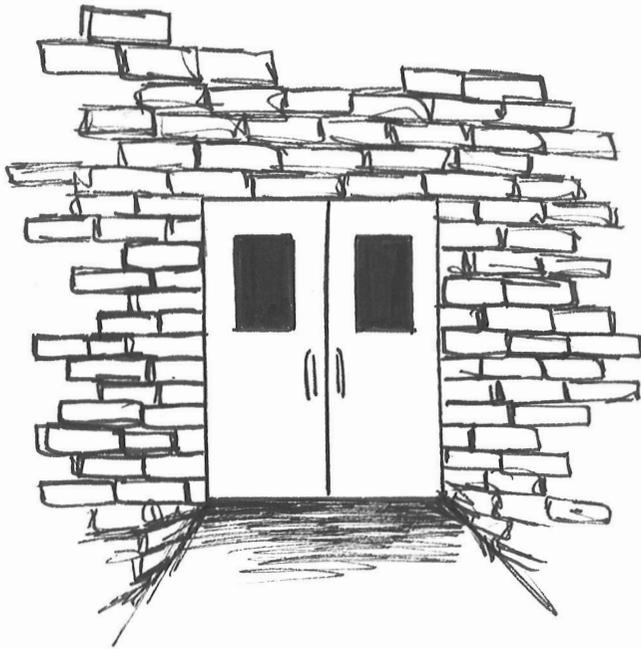
FIRST

DAY

OF

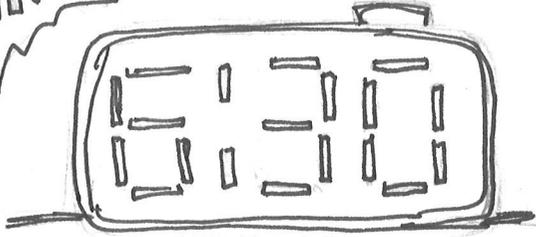
HIGH

SCHOOL



The first day of high school  
is like any other day.

UGH.



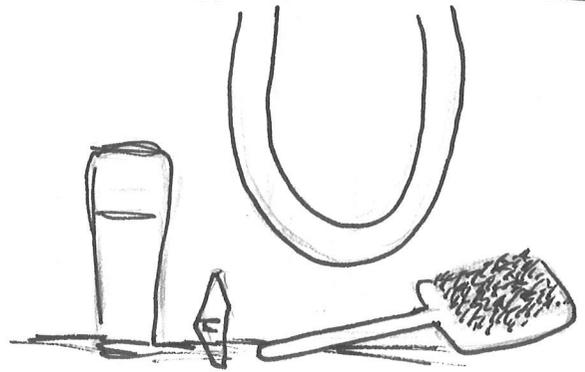
Well actually I couldn't sleep and  
kept checking the time while over-  
thinking exactly what was going to happen



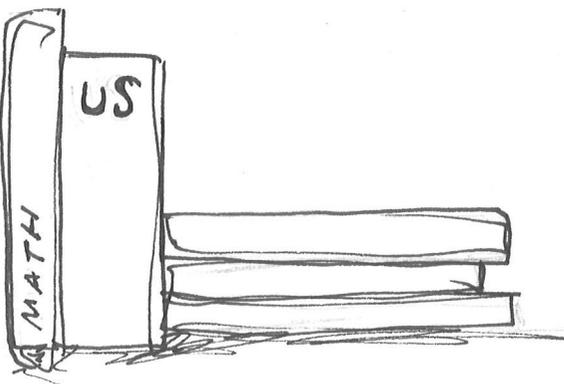
My clothes are all set out ready  
picked the night before



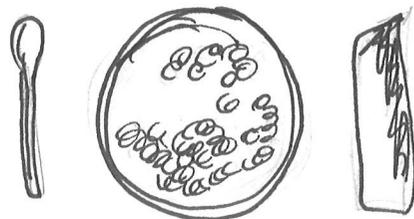
My deodorant, mascara, and  
hairbrush lay ready.



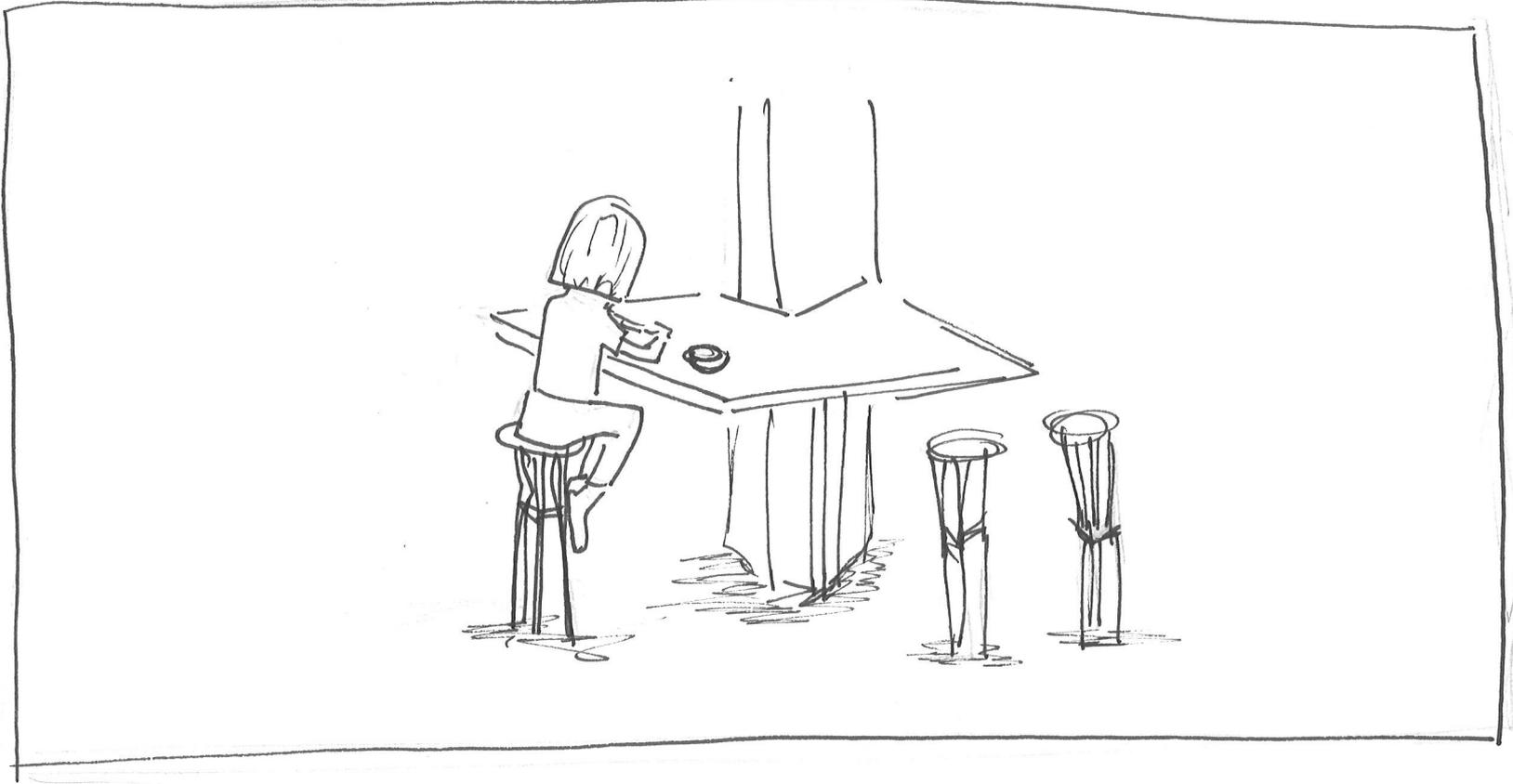
All my books ~~were~~ ready and  
labelled for my bookbag.



My cereal is already planned  
out and identical to my brother's.



I wake up and everything goes to plan. I'm ready 30 minutes early for my carpool with my cousins. This time is unaccounted for.



Unfortunately the time is being filled with thinking. Usually I think through everything I'm going to experience but I can't exactly do that.



THE

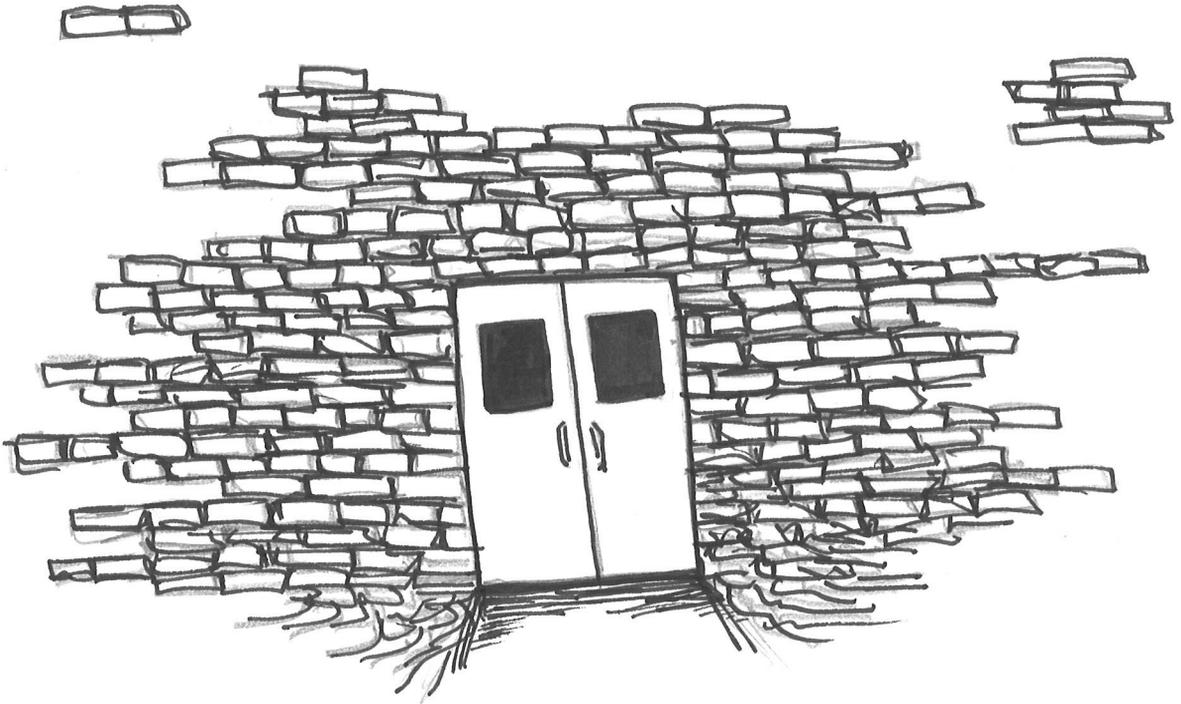
FIRST

DAY

OF

HIGH

SCHOOL.



I'VE  
SEEN

THOSE

DOORS

MY

WHOLE

LIFE

BUT

NEVER

KNOW

WHAT

WAS

BEHIND

THEN.

LUNCH  
TABLES

WHATS MY  
LOCKER NUMBER?

Where do  
I go.  
ROOM  
NUMBERS?

How will I know  
where to go...

FFFFF  
RRRRR  
IIIIII  
EEEEEE  
NNNNN  
DDDDDD  
SSSSSS

everyone  
is judging

WILL I BE  
ABLE TO  
SPEAK UP???

SENIORS  
JUNIORS  
SOPHOMORES  
FRESHMEN



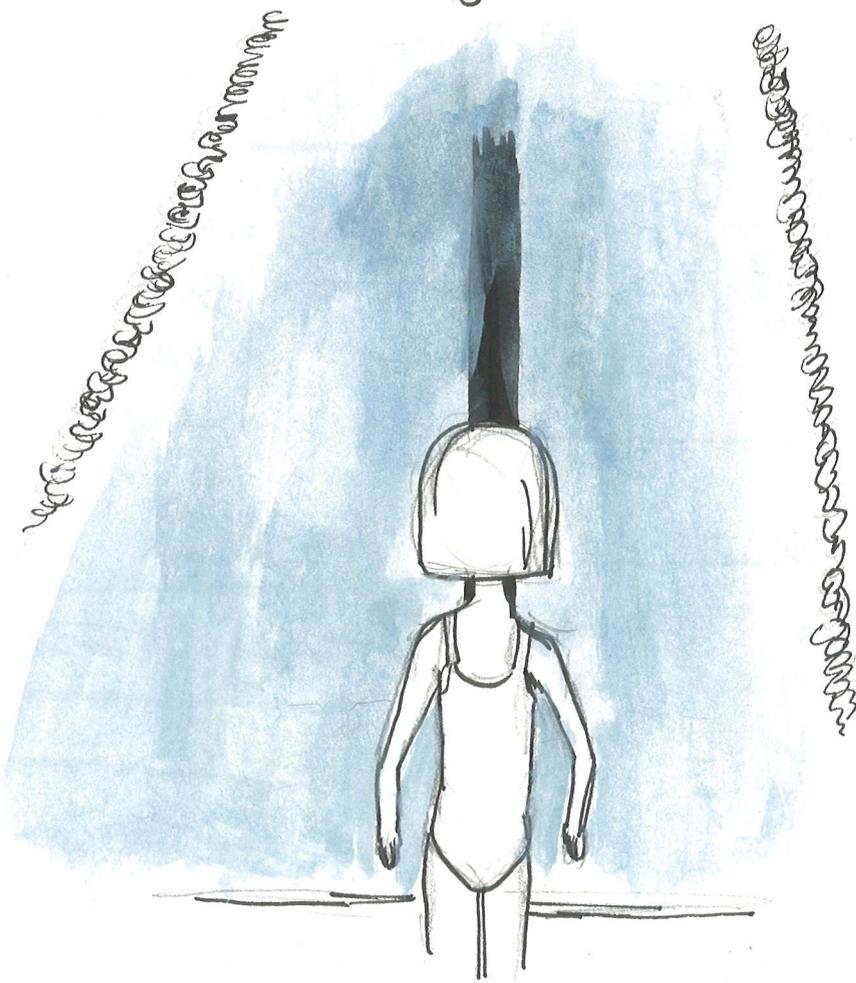
BUT AS THE DOORS BECAME CLOSER  
AS I APPROACHED THEM, THEY WERE  
LESS INTIMIDATING  
AND MORE REAL.  
THIS WAS IT  
WAS A HIGH-SC  
HODER. AND WITH  
THAT THERE WAS  
A TIME CLOCK THAT  
STARTED. FOUR MORE YEARS. OF MY  
HOME. OF MY SCHOOL. OF MY CHILDHOOD.  
IT WAS WEIRD AND DEFINITE ALMOST.  
BUT I STILL HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS  
BEYOND THOSE SCHOOL DOORS. OF WHOM  
I WOULD BECOME IN THERE. AND THEN  
WHOM I WOULD BE WHEN I LEFT THOSE  
DOORS FOR THE FINAL TIME. WELL THERE  
WAS ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT. I  
REMEMBER TAKING ONE BIG DEEP  
BREATH IN. AND THEN I MUST  
HAVE BREATHED OUT...

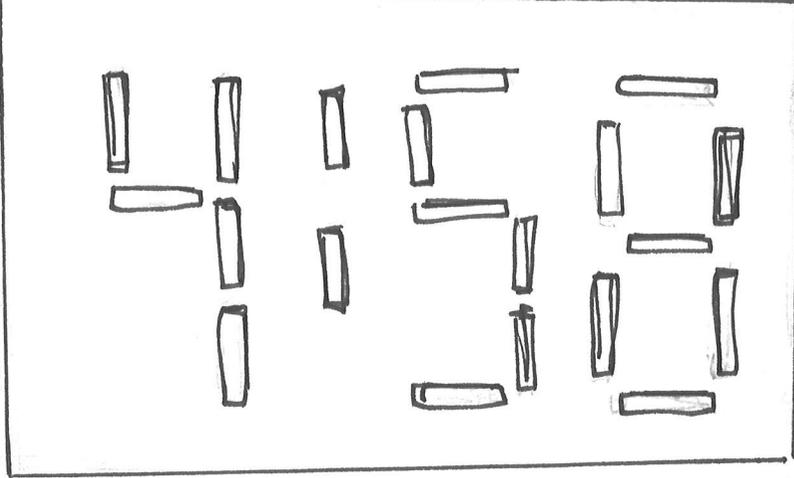
AND  
WALKED  
THROUGH  
THE  
DOORS.



THROUGH THE CHAOS OF HIGH SCHOOL

Swimming anchored me

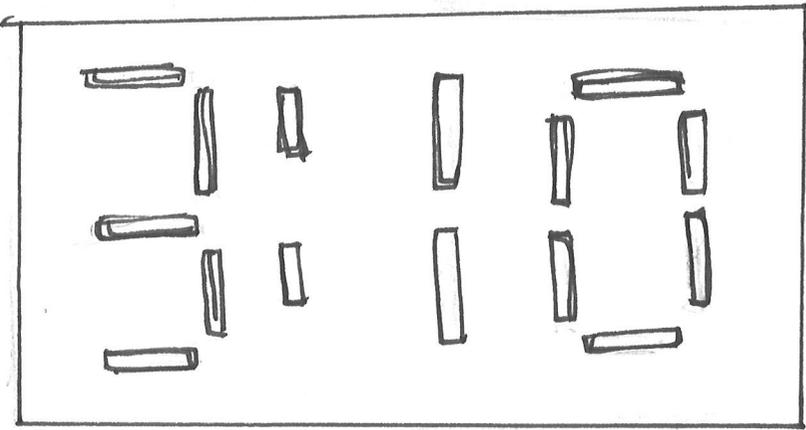




Monday Wednesday Friday

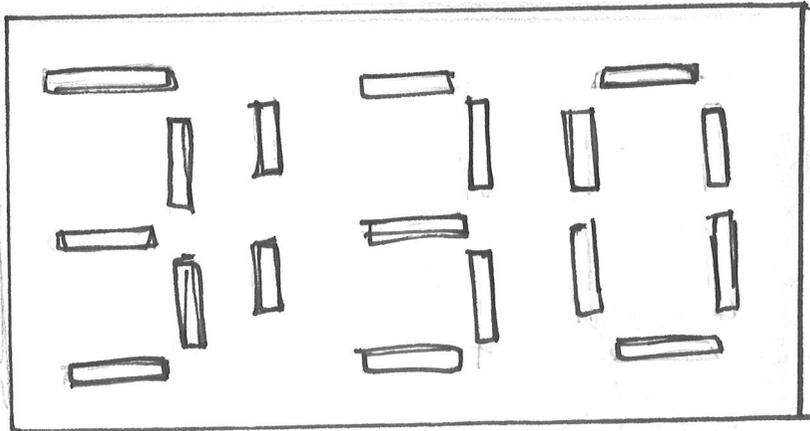
Wake up to lift in the weight room in the morning

PWS swim on Friday



Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday

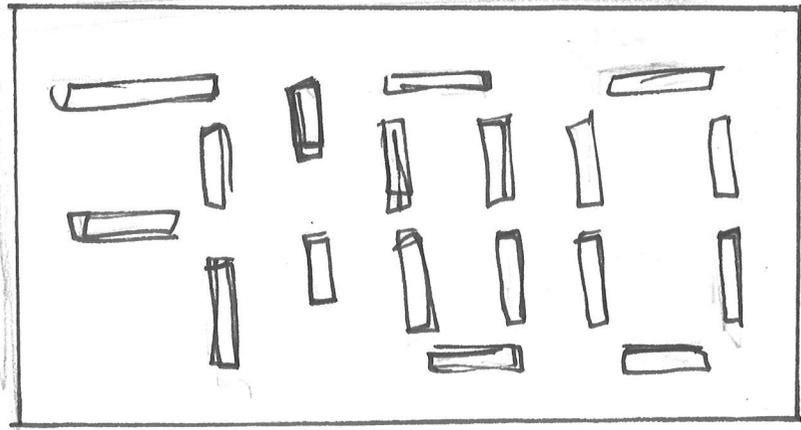
Be on pool deck!



M T W T H F

Be in the water

Potentially for second time that day

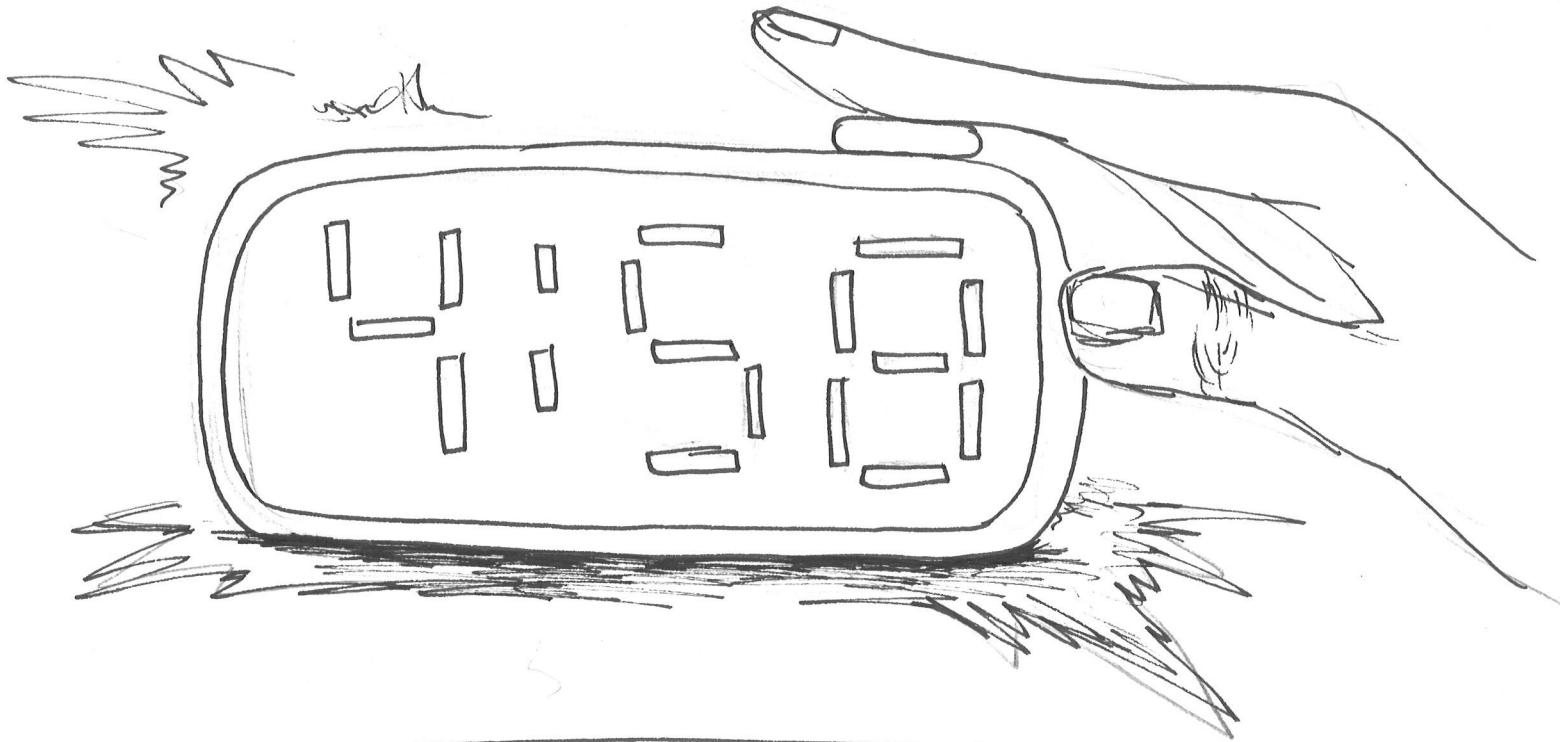


Saturday

See you again on the weekend

of course it sucked waking up that early. But I missed the morning practices no more than three times over my four years.

of course it was exhausting and challenging for my body and mind. But I liked the schedule and structure it gave me. It shaped me.



of course it felt like I spent my life at the pool, but I liked it. That's where my friends were and where I had fun. Even with the work.

of course I technically had a choice to go or not to go. But I didn't feel like I had a choice. I expected myself to go. And there was immediate guilt when I didn't—which was almost never.

4:58

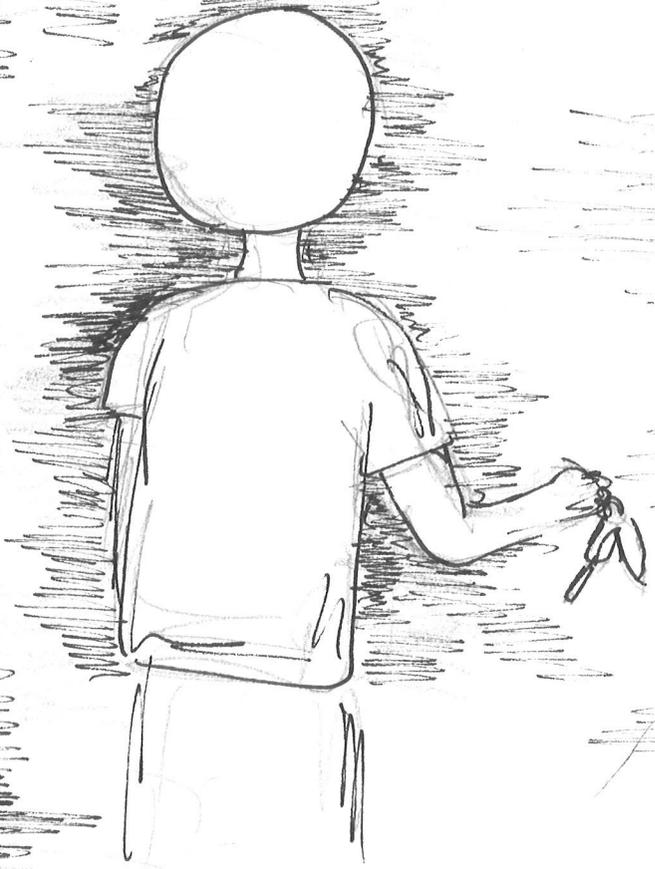
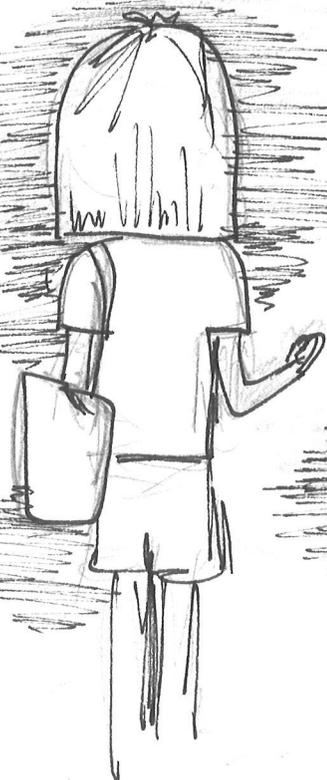
My papa always woke up to drive me for all of those years

ever since  
felt

PCD  
drive while I ate a granola bar  
half asleep

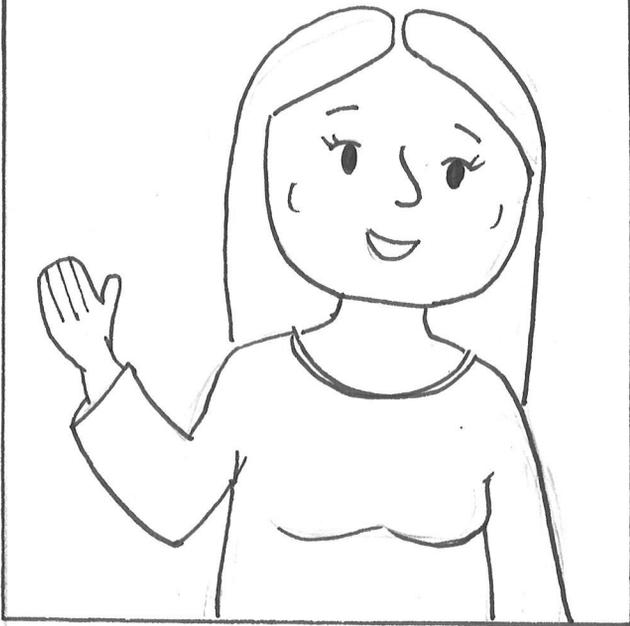
Although I was too tired to  
speak, I always

He was an anchor  
for me. every morning.  
every day.

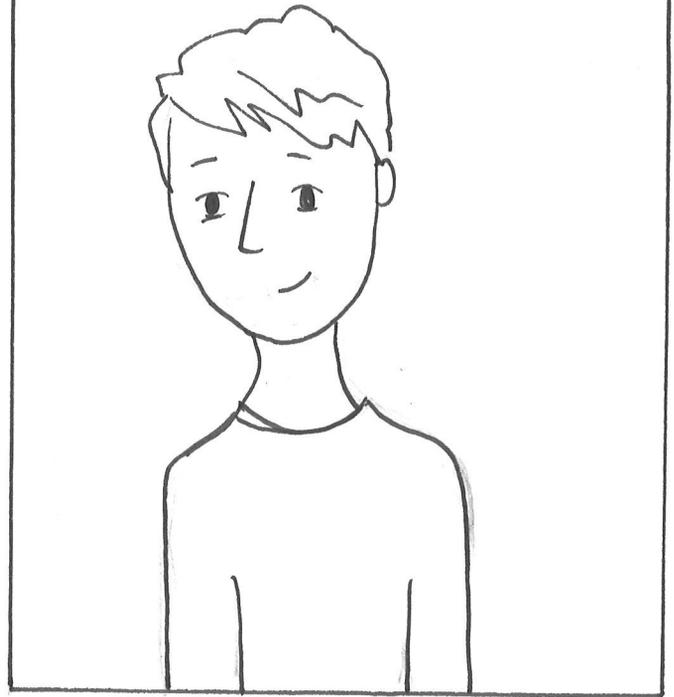


MAKE  
THE  
FRIENDSHIP  
BRACELETS

Lauren  
(you recognize her!)

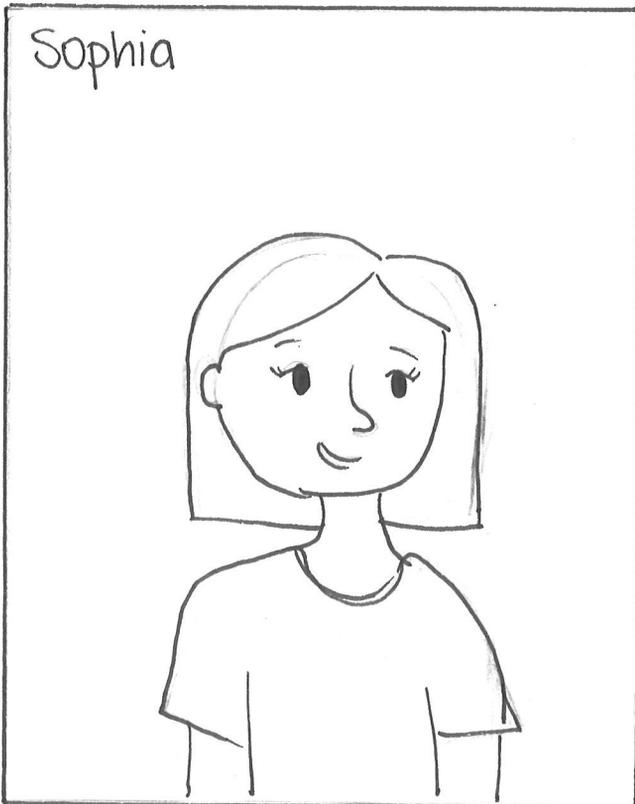


Joe



I have three great friends. We all swam together. We carpoled together. We ate in the cafeteria together. We giggled and cried together. We struggled and strived through high school together.

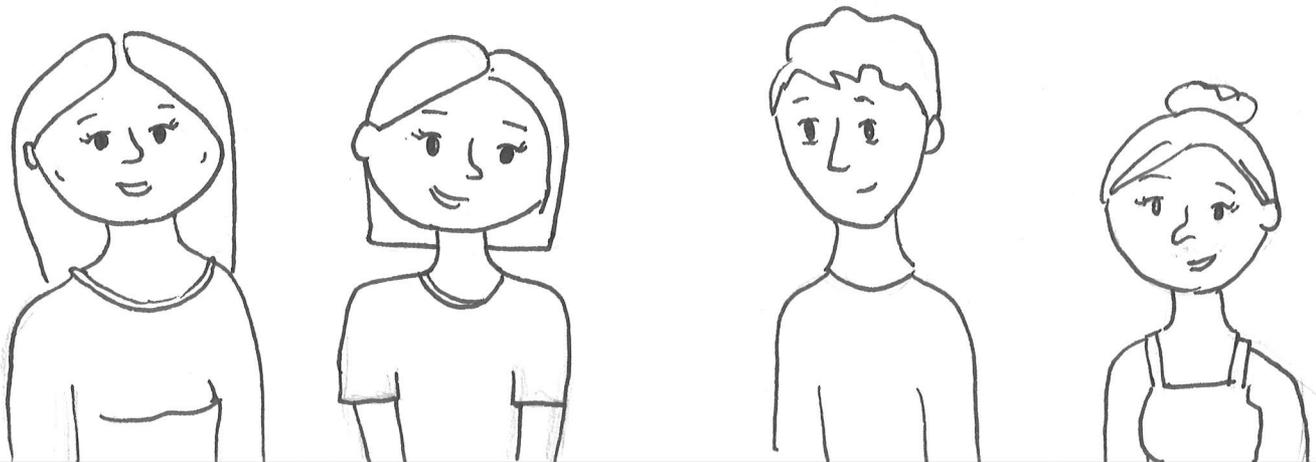
Sophia



Devon



We were all on our own paths.  
But we were lucky enough to have our  
paths intertwine in hallways and on  
pool decks. The happy coincidence of  
high school.

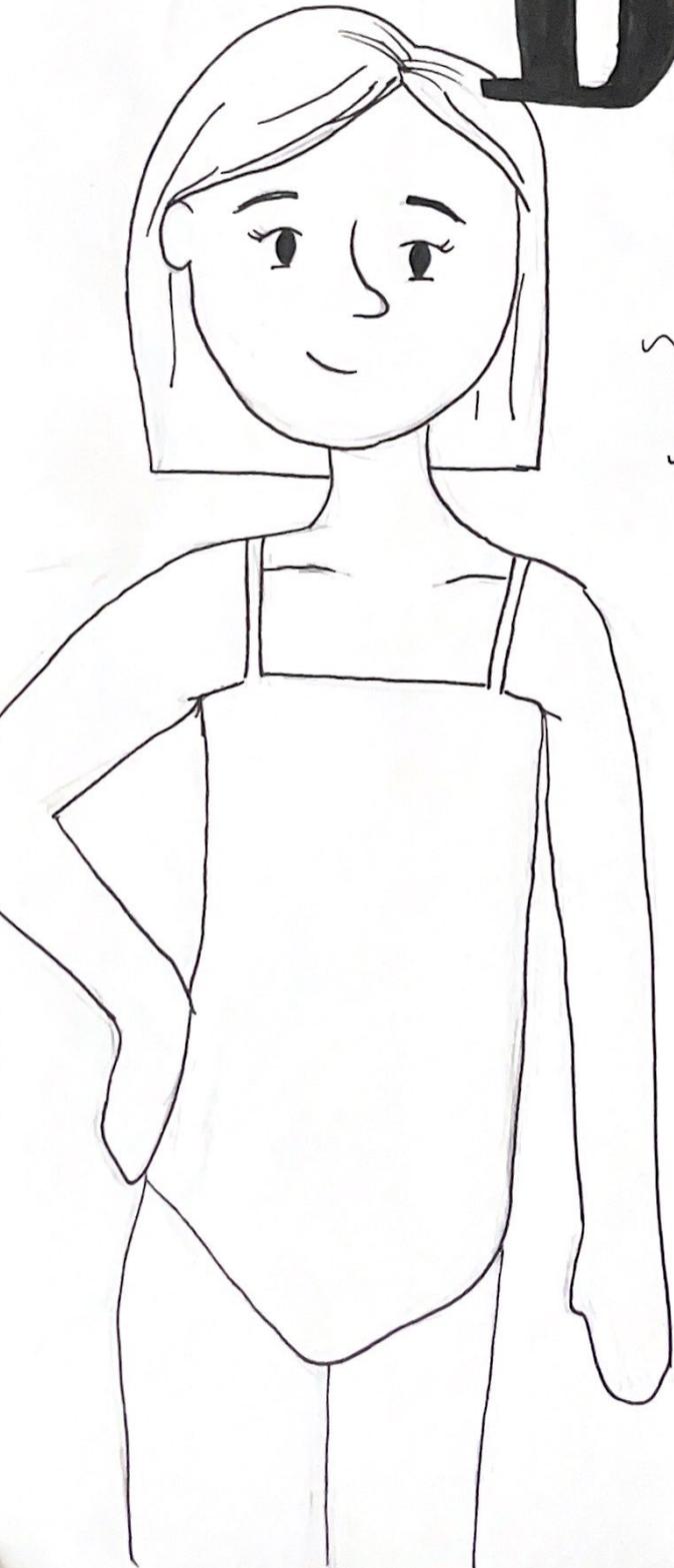


THE

# BODY

ISSUE

*scribbles*



S  
**Sophia!**  
IN HER OWN SKIN

*scribbles*

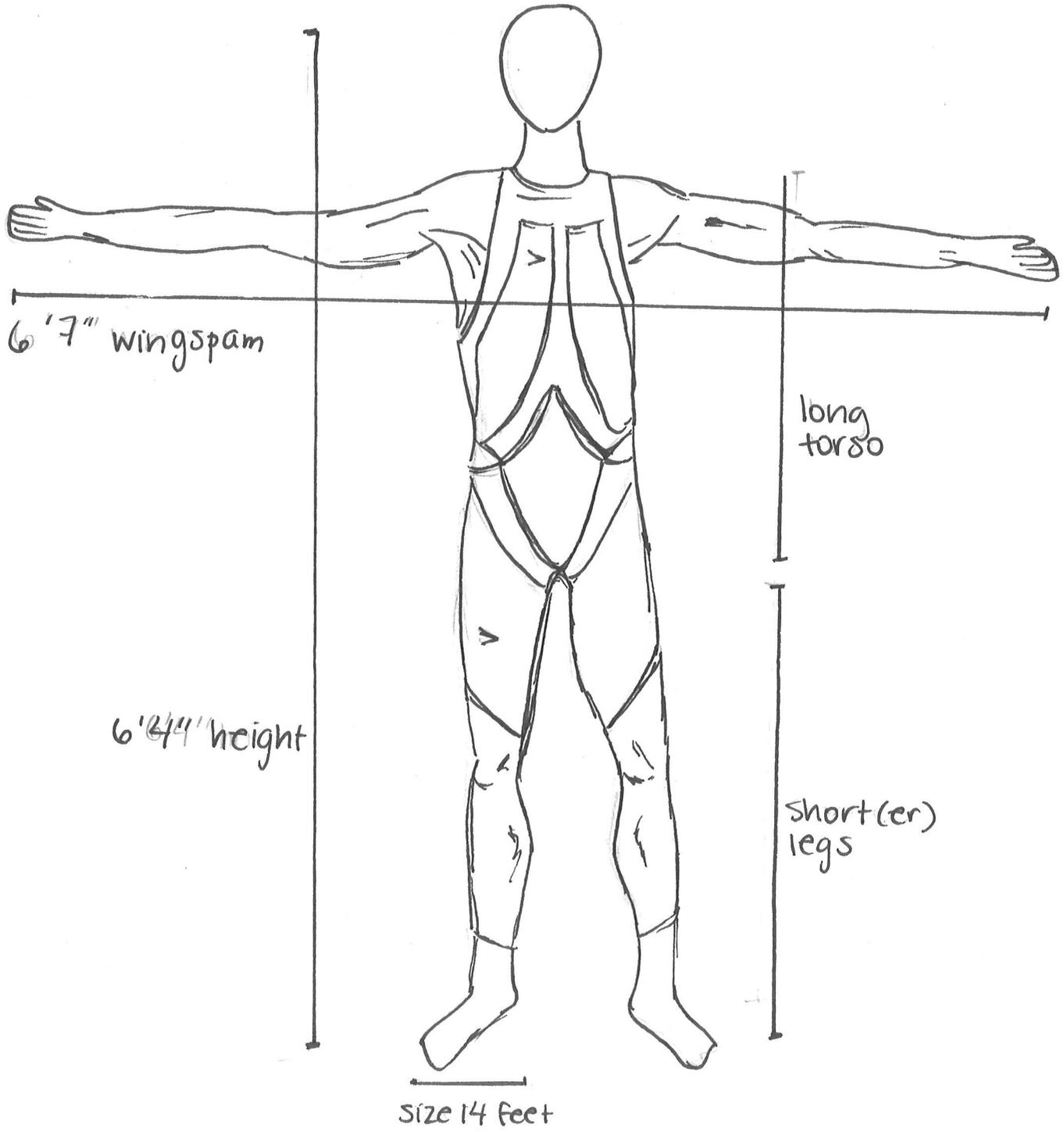
**PLUS!**

Michael  
Phelps  
deep dive

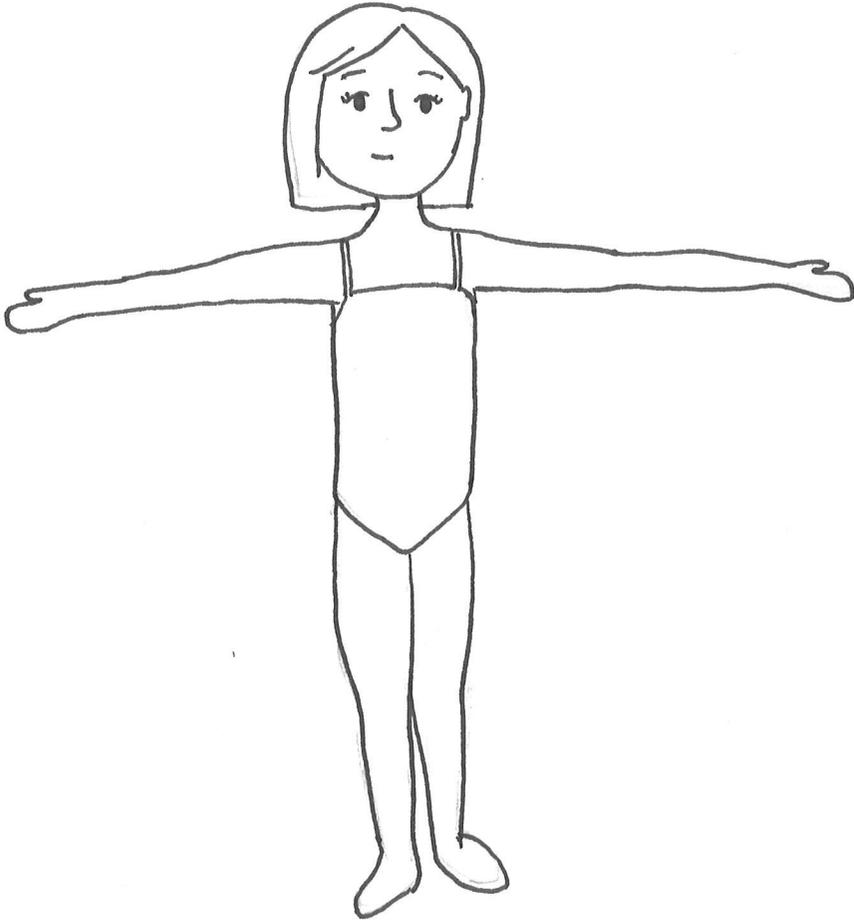
What is a swimmer body?

What body makes the ideal swimmer?

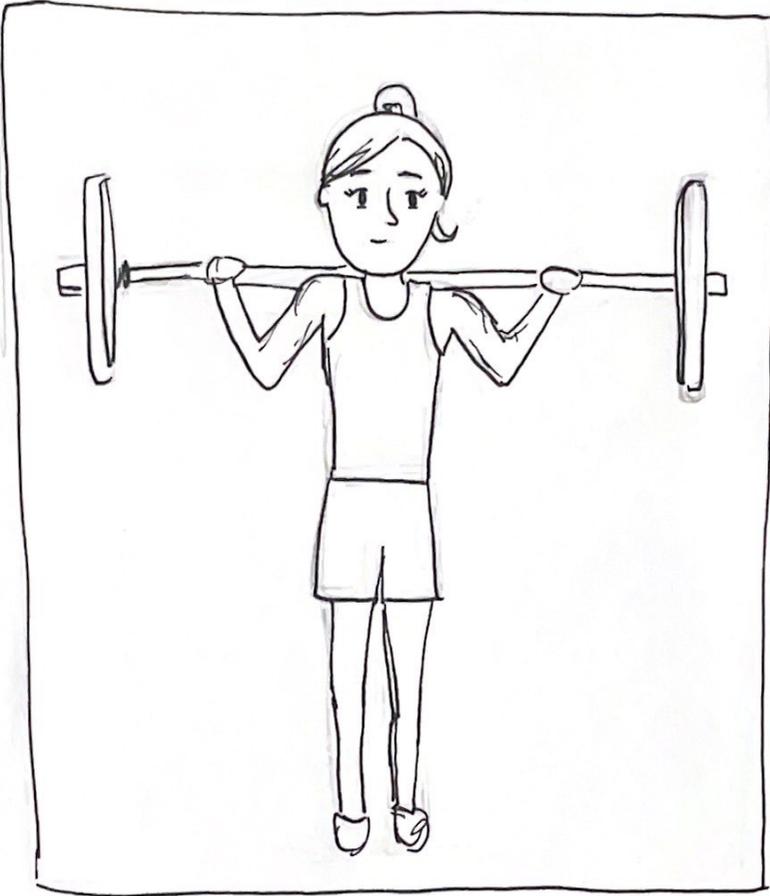
Let's look at Michael Phelps, the greatest swimmer of all time.



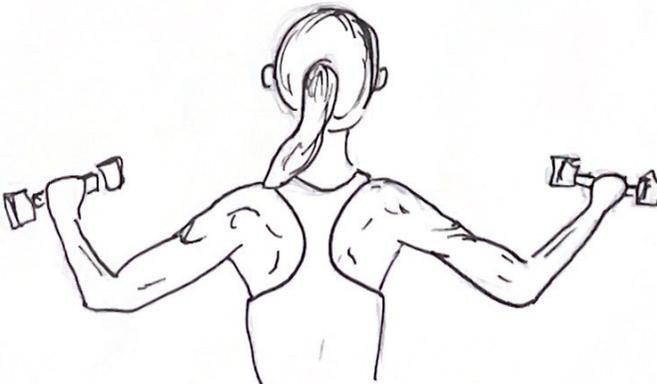
My body.

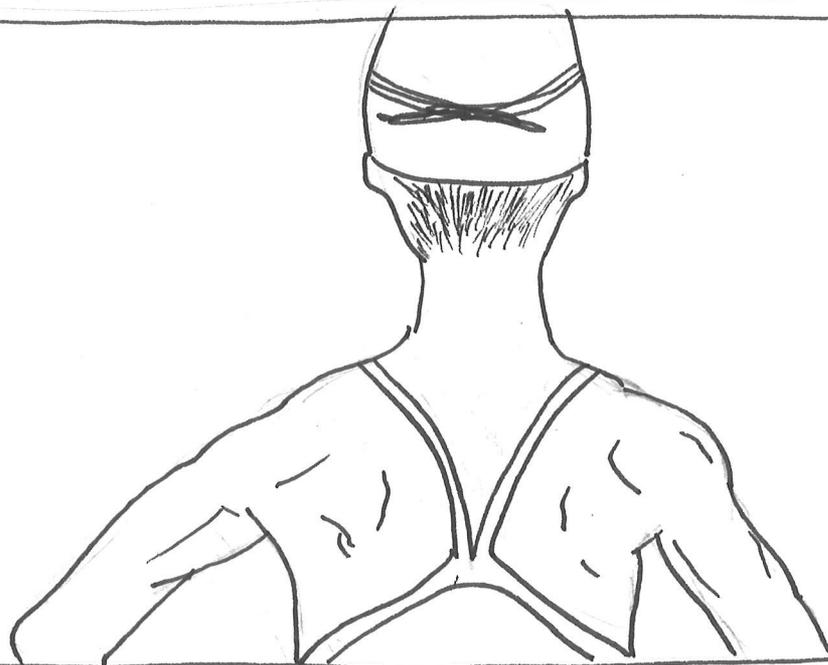


I have been lifting since I was in 8th grade



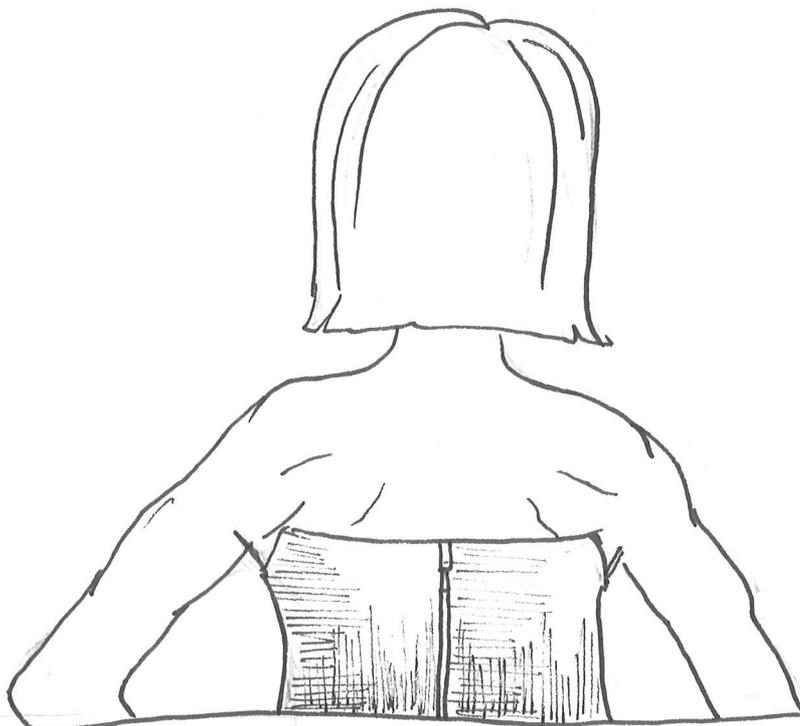
Cleans, squats, bench, lunges, rows, box jumps, curls, RDLs

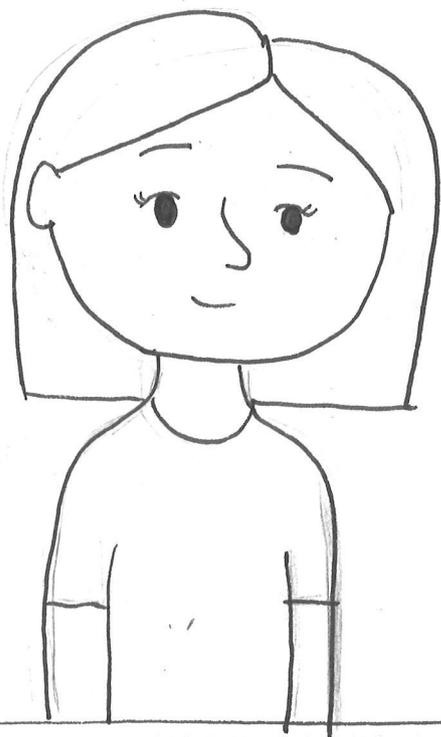




Swimmer shoulders. Since our bodies are pulling ourselves through the water — we rely on our shoulders heavily. And therefore our shoulders are heavy — and big.

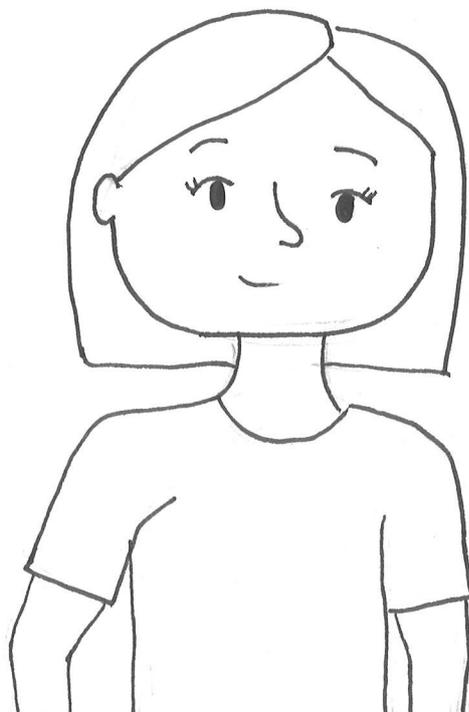
I first realized my shoulders were big my freshman year. Trying on homecoming dresses, my shoulders stuck out.





It wasn't necessarily bad, but it wasn't necessarily good. I didn't see women on magazines or girls in my school with wide shoulders like mine.

I realized quickly that I was just upset that swimming changed me. It shaped my body in its image. I made the choice to swim and lift and my shoulders grew.



I don't  
remember every  
lap, every race,  
every win.  
When I'm  
in the  
water  
I can't  
see the rest  
of the  
world.  
Partially due to  
the foggy  
goggles  
and partially due  
to the  
intense  
blanket  
of focus  
that covers my  
mind  
and centers  
on the  
black line  
under  
me.



This is the  
one  
exception  
of that.

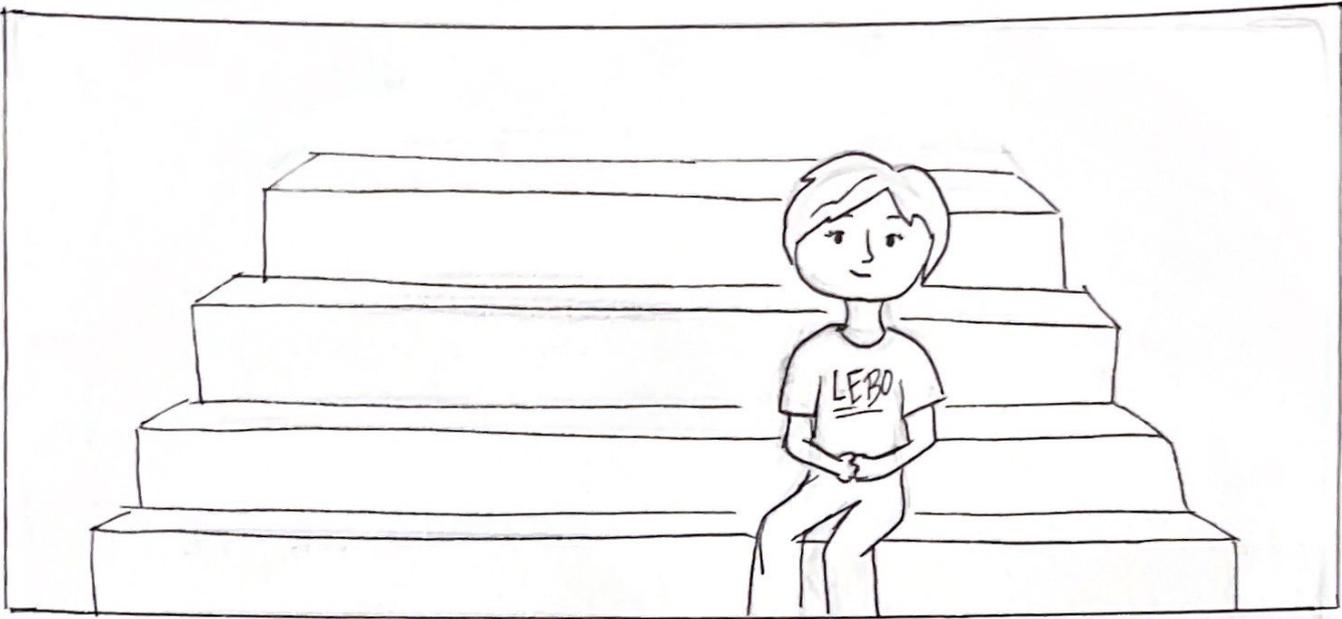
I was swimming the 500  
at a close meet against one of our high schools rivals

500 is 20 laps freestyle

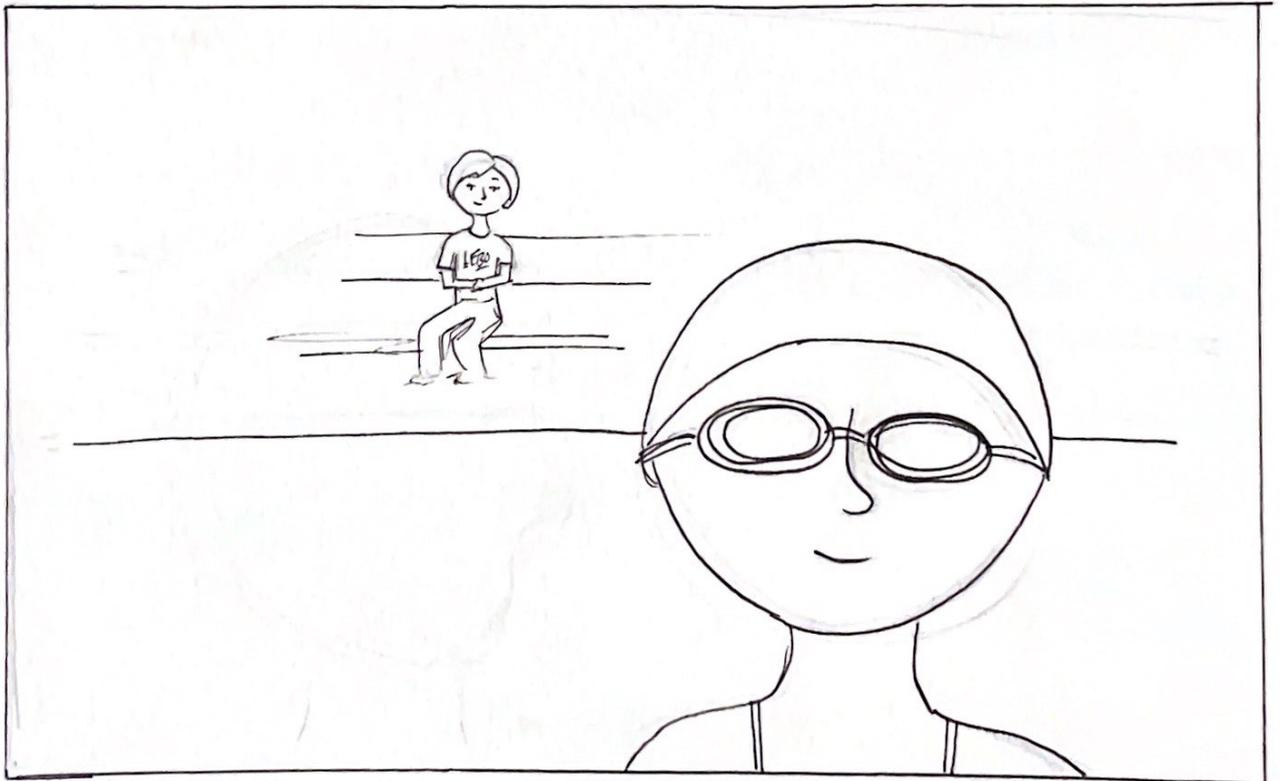
one  
two  
three  
four  
five  
six  
seven  
eight  
nine  
ten

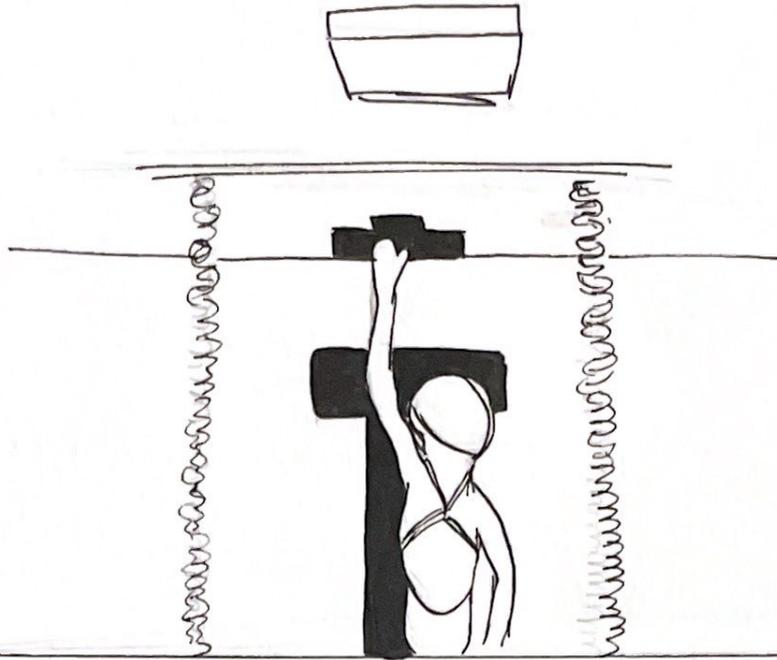
eleven  
twelve  
thirteen  
fourteen  
fifteen  
sixteen  
seventeen  
eighteen  
nineteen  
twenty

A little over 5 minutes

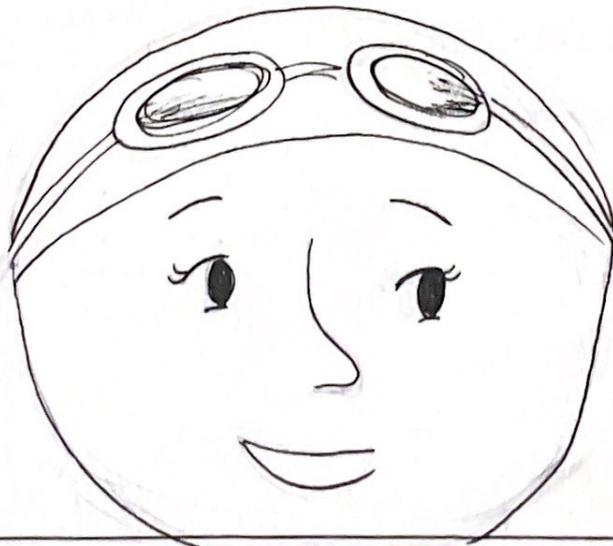


My mom is my cheerleader. She knows the sport inside and out. She knows the times. But she knows me. She knows I don't need two parents that double as coaches. She knows I need a cheerleader. So she sat in the stands and watched me swim.





I touched the wall and I knew exactly where my mom was sitting. I don't think I realized I broke the pool record. But I looked to the side. My mom in the stands — where I knew she would be — clapping and smiling. And my papa on the deck — where I knew he would be — jumping, suprisingly high. I looked up and smiled.





"Name" \_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_



"Name" \_\_\_\_\_

# The End of School



"Name" \_\_\_\_\_

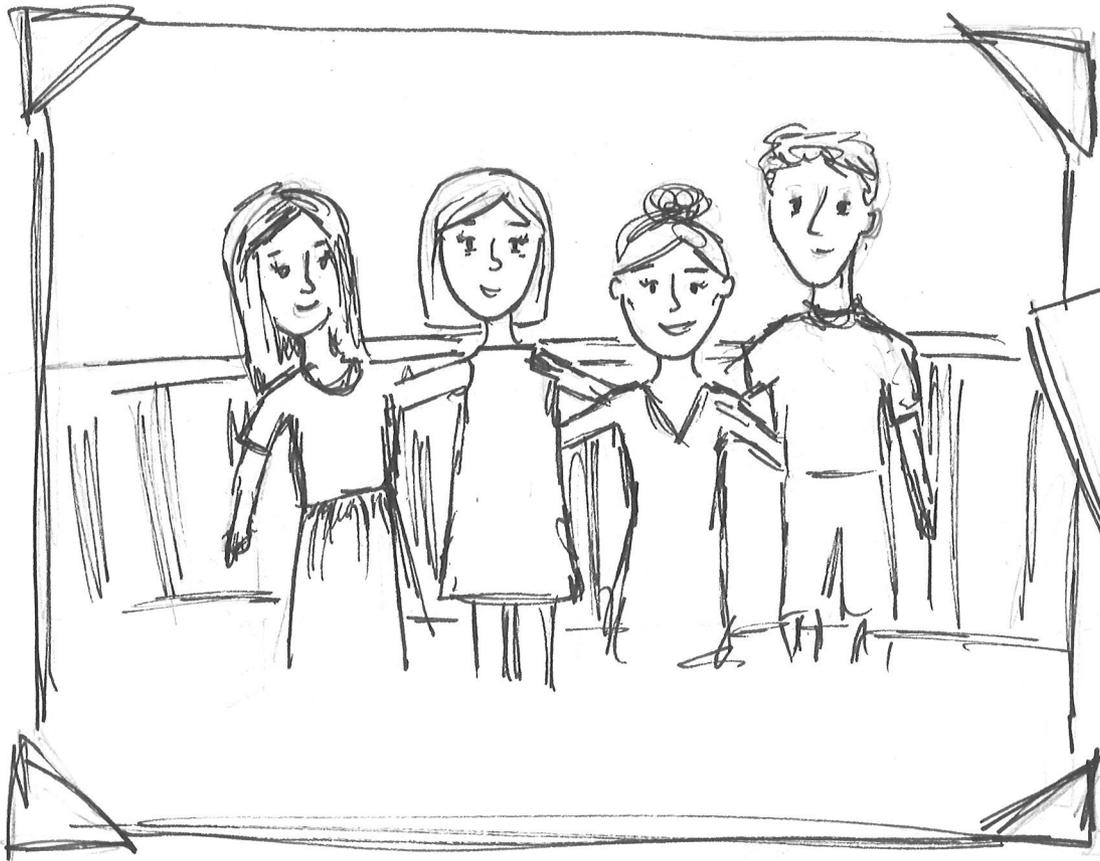


\_\_\_\_\_



\_\_\_\_\_

It's an inexplicable feeling  
when your high school years are ending



SENIOR  
BOATRIDE

It's happy and exciting

then sad and terrifying

LAST  
FIRST  
DAY OF HS!

You're building towards the  
end of something you've  
known for your whole  
life. A definite every day.





LAST  
LAST DAY

What lies beyond the walls of high school will be different - I think its the unknown.

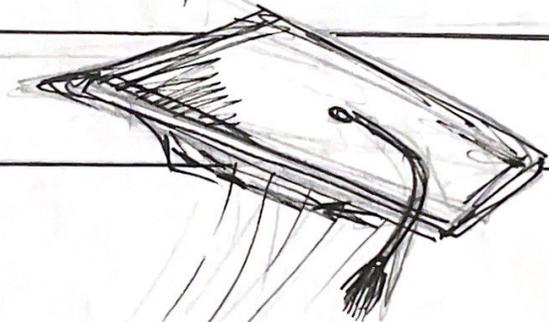
PROM!





(Glad. and love)

Yet through those emotions, you simply throw off your flimsy cap



Are you going to swim  
in college? can you?

What's next?

WHAT ARE YOU DOING  
AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?

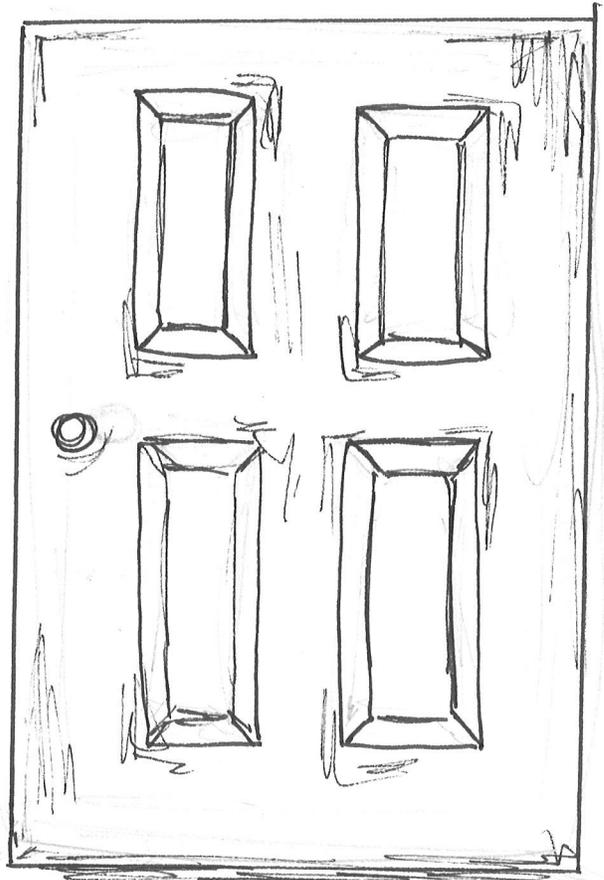
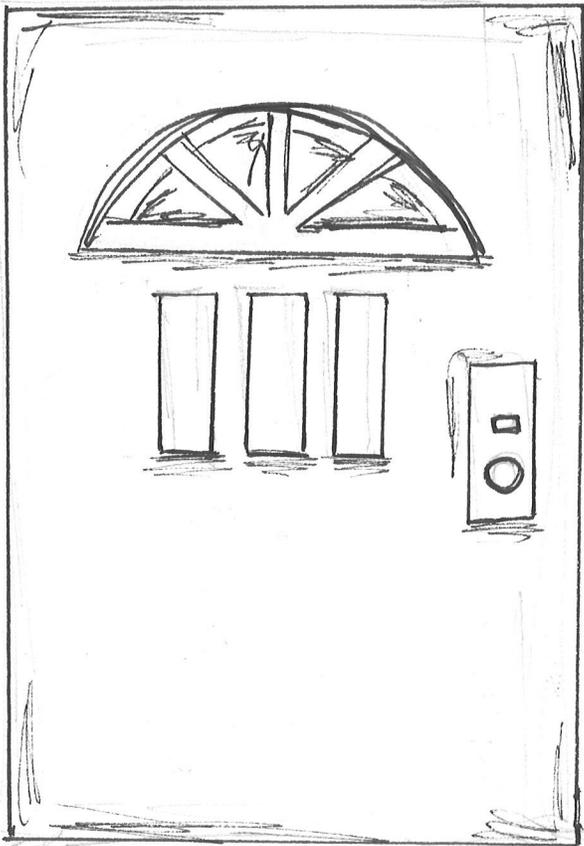
HAVE YOU COMMITTED YET?

D1?

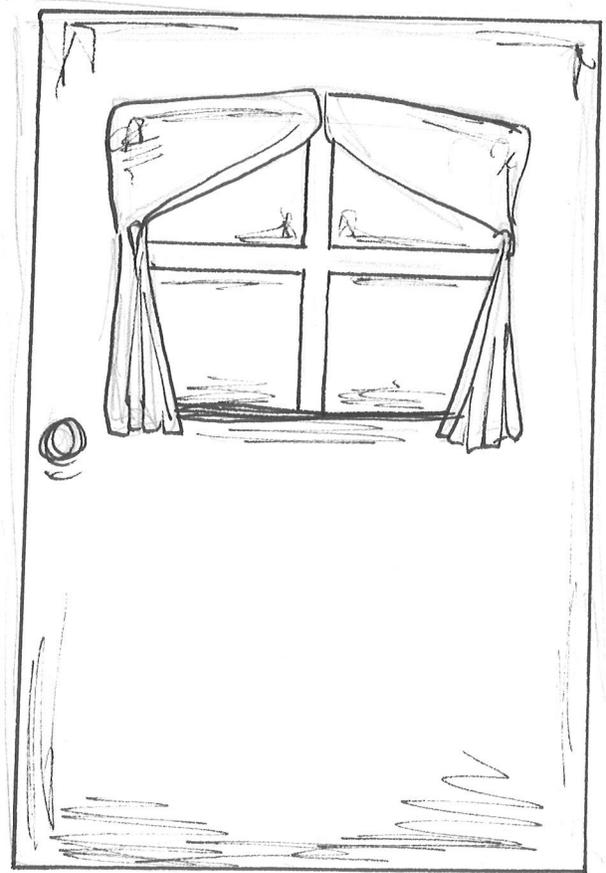
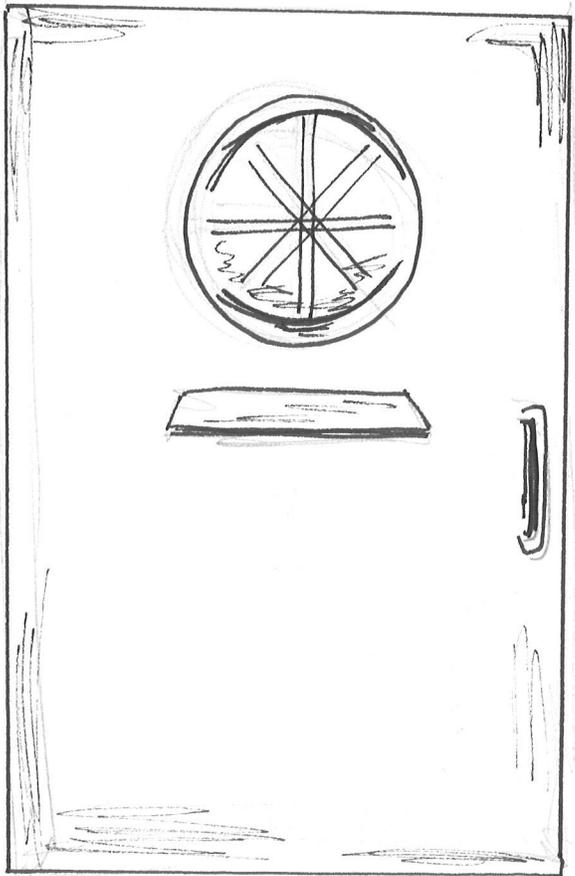
staying close  
to home?

THE  
QUESTION

When are  
you going  
to decide?



F  
D O O R S  
R



good academics

OPTION #1

up and coming team.

State school. Cost efficient.



Pretty campus.

A quad!

Too big?

I liked it right? It seemed good on paper. But the culture...



I didn't fit with the people. At all. Is this what college is? Do I have to change?

OPTION #2

close w/coach

the team is great

only womens team though...

city campus

Its an ok campus

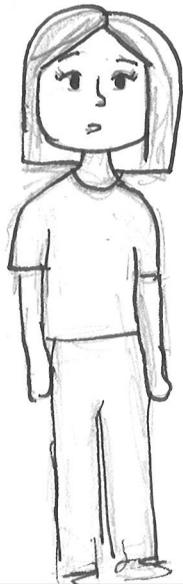
Very cost efficient!

so. close. to. home.  
15 minutes exactly

is that good?

is that bad?

It feels so safe



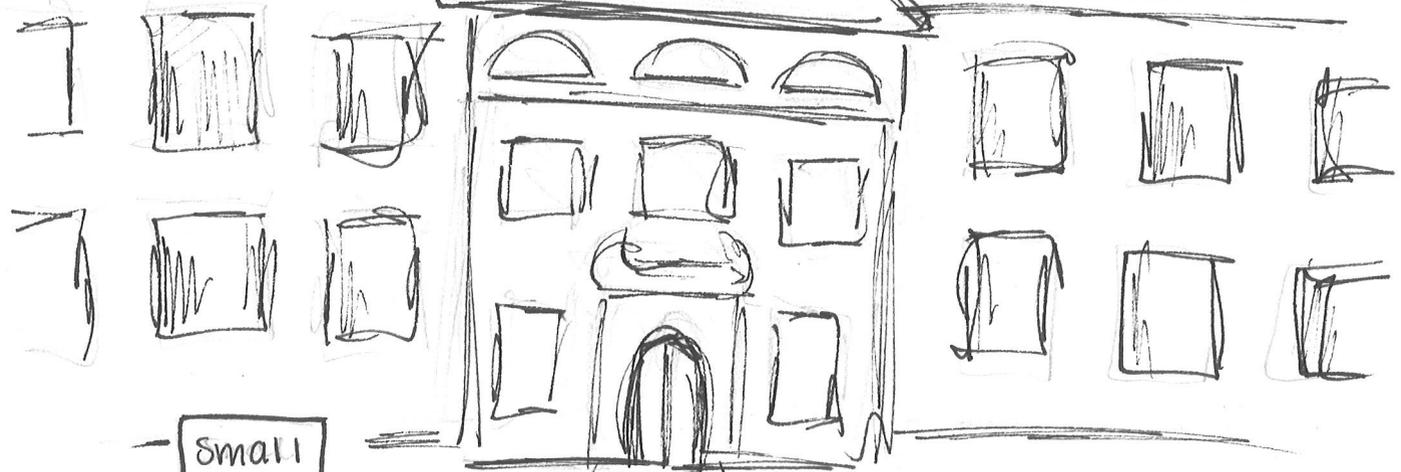
OPTION #3



Is this the right fit?

great team  
well kinda?

pretty campus

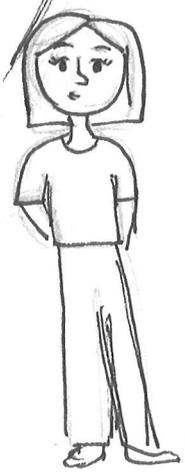


small

close-knit

toosmall?

Fantastic academic opportunities



'good' distance  
from home

OPTION #4

So so so expensive

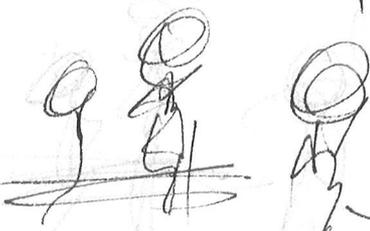
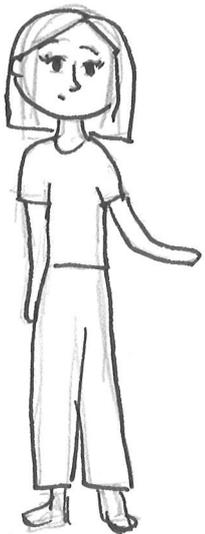
campus is awesome

Awesome location in a city

Very far from home

I love the team

Lots of cool geographical opportunities



PROS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

PROS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

CONS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

CONS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

PROS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

PROS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

CONS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

CONS:  
~~~~~  
~~~~~

THE  
TALK  
PT 1



I think you should really consider this local school, you'd be so close to home!

I know I'd love to be

home but I think I need to leave this bubble.

I totally get that, just consider it as a legitimate option. Keep your options open!

I will, there's just so many things I don't love about it but I'll be open.

Good! That's all I'm saying. I just want the best for you, hon. Make it the best process for you. I'm here to support you no matter what.

I was so upset at the tears streaming down my face. I was spewing my thoughts to my mom frantically. I felt so hopeless that I was convinced I had to start the process over. All those months felt so wasted and I felt like it was a failure. Like I failed.



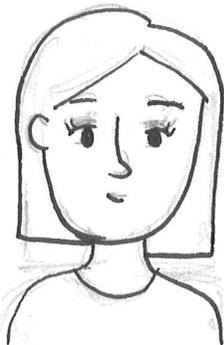
I brought up this conversation to my mom years later. She didn't remember the hopelessness in my voice or the failure, I swore, took up all the space in the car. And around it.

There were so many questions that I didn't have the answers to

Women-only team? I've never experienced that

A religious school doesn't seem like the right fit

IDK



# BIG

How big is too big?

or

How small is too small?

small

Does it matter?

## Close to HOME? How close?

I'm a homebody I love being home

But I need to leave and grow right?

15 minutes away???

☺ ☹

? City? ?

or college town? ?



WHAT DO I WANT??

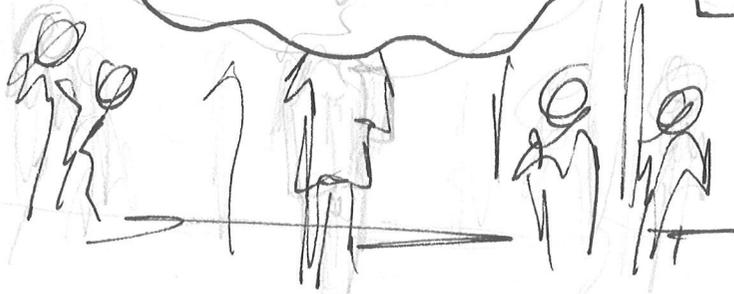
? Washington DC ?

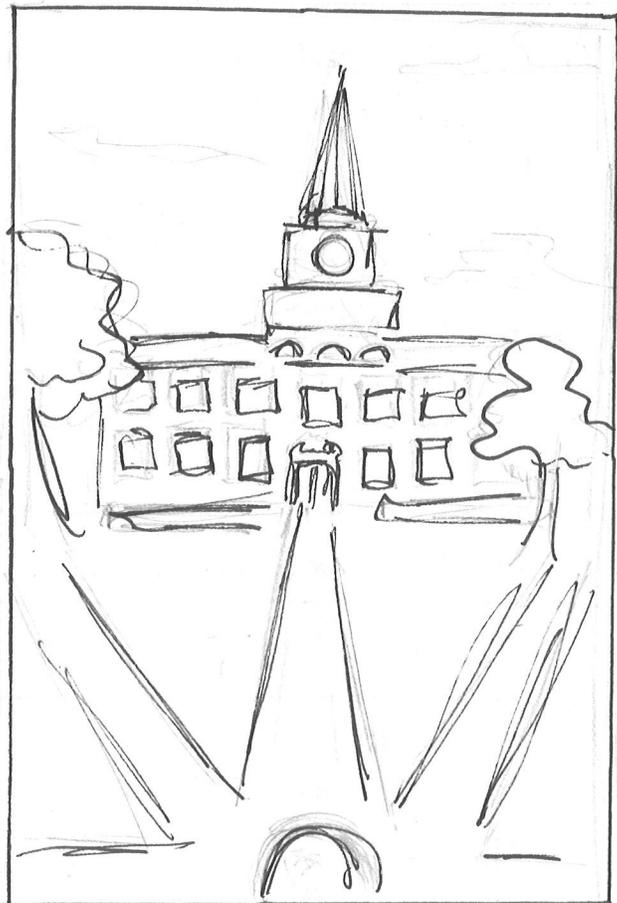
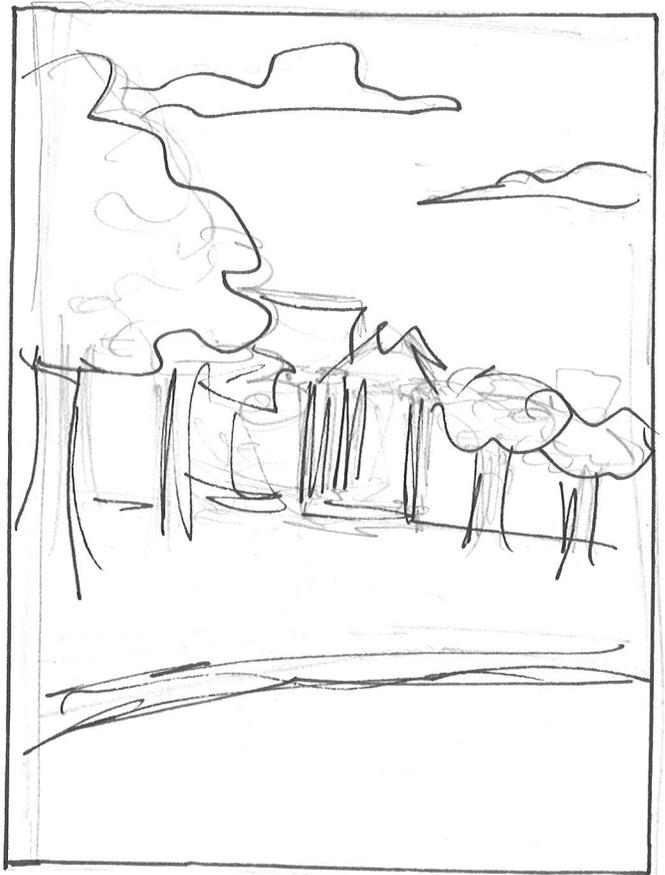
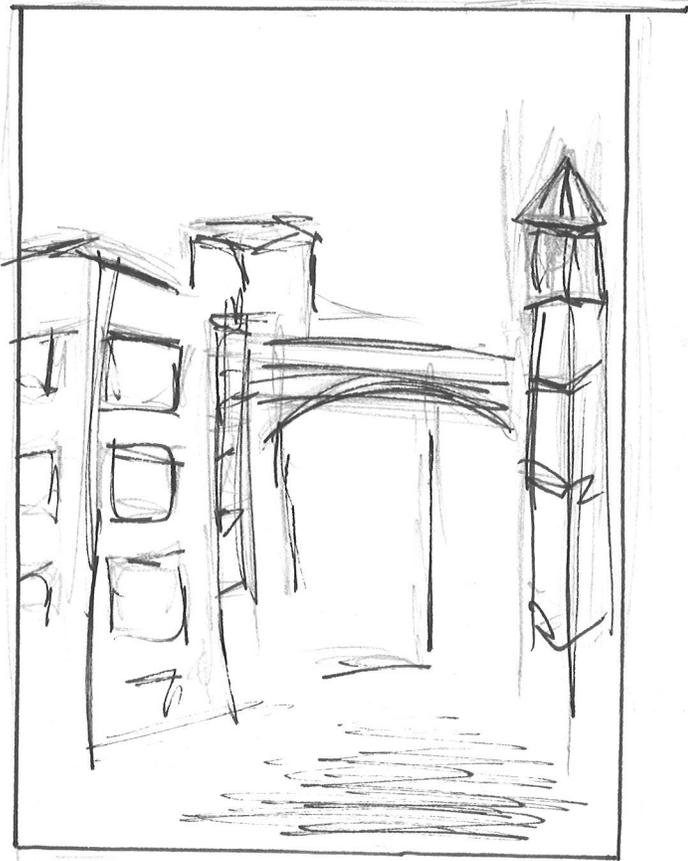
? rural PA ?

? Stay in Pittsburgh? ?

It was the future question...

It determined everything I thought, so it took over everything





NO clear decision

Voices TO DO

What's the RIGHT FIT

WILL I FIT

WHAT TO DO WHAT

X ? ? ?

DO NOT START OVER

DONT KNOW

\$\$\$

Who do I listen to

SCHOOL

#1

Where???"HAVE YOU DECIDED YET" oh?

TOO MUCH PRESSURE

HOW CLOSE DO I WANT TO BE

SCHOOL

#2

what do I decide

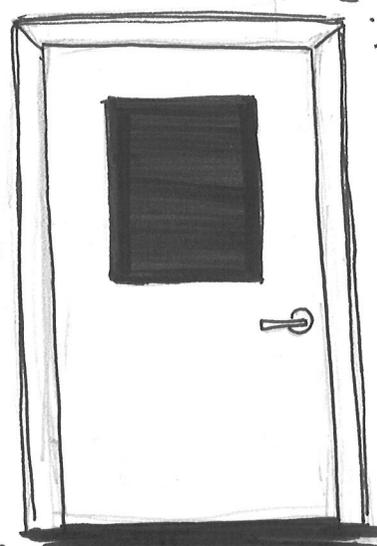
Why doesn't it feel perfect, shouldn't it feel perfect

SCHOOL

#3

SCHOOL

#4



Where will I succeed

where do I FIT

PLEASE CAN I JUST WITH THE BE DONE WITH THE PROCESS

COMMIT.

I've never been this indecisive before. why now. idk. idk. idk.?

you can always transfer...

"there's clearly a right choice" PICK.

just pick

EVERYONE ELSE KNOWS WHAT TO DO.

YOU should pick X" BE !! REASONABLE

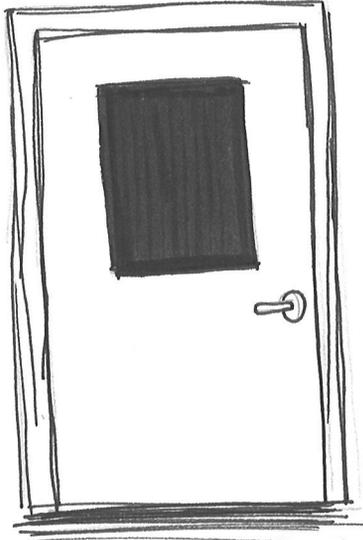
senior year

be done be done be done

I BREATHE IN.

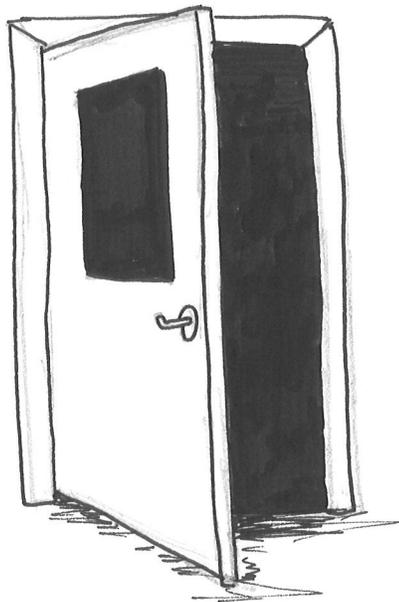
" OK

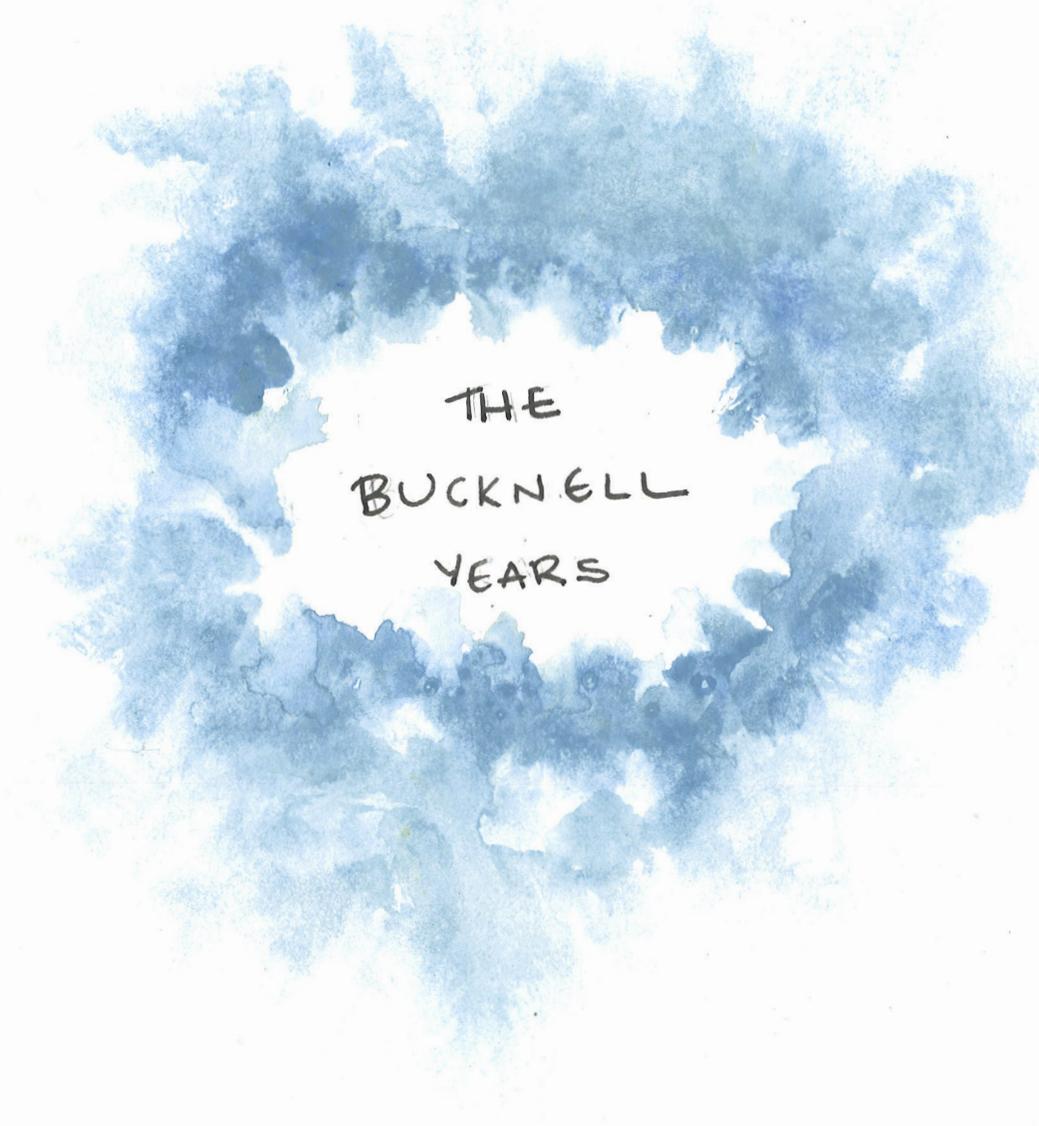
I'VE



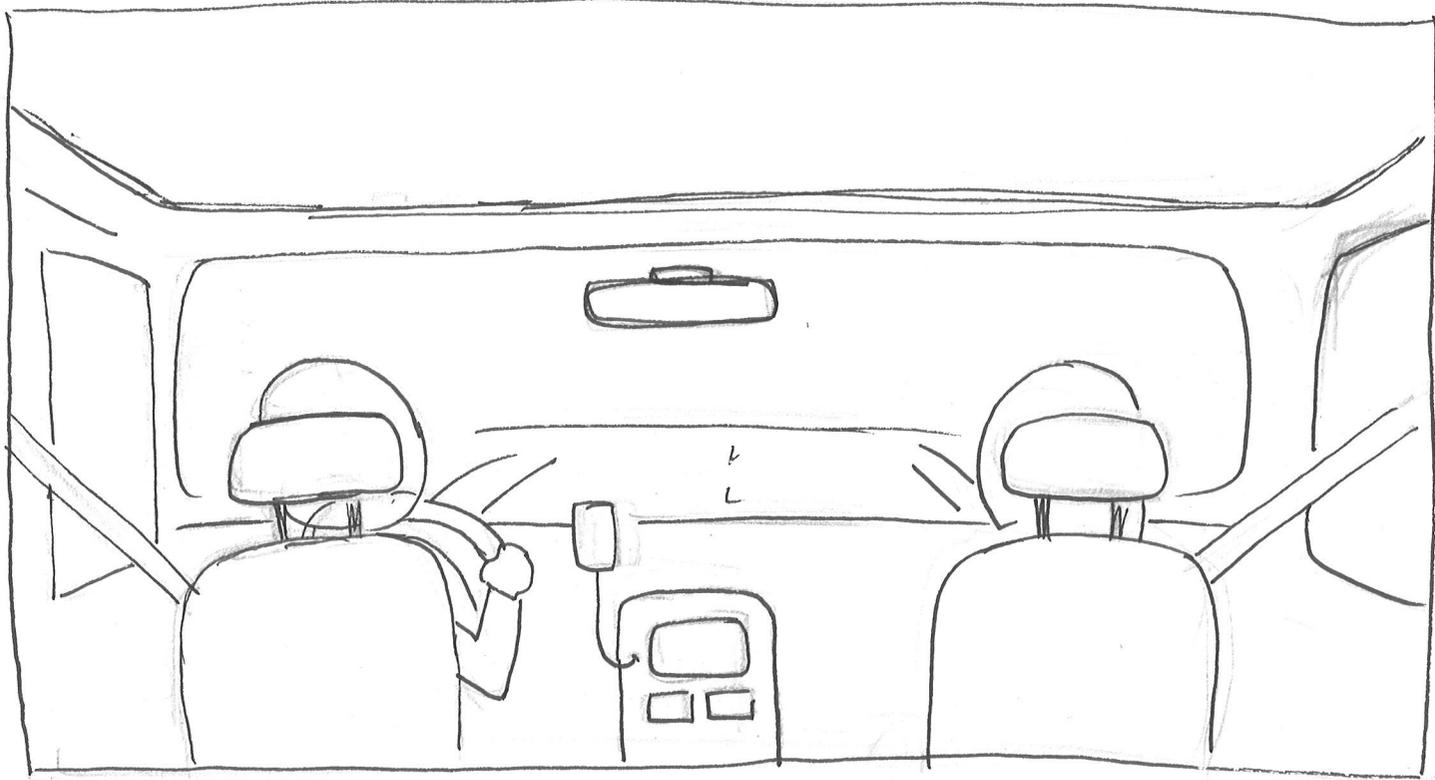
DECIDED"

I BREATHE OUT.

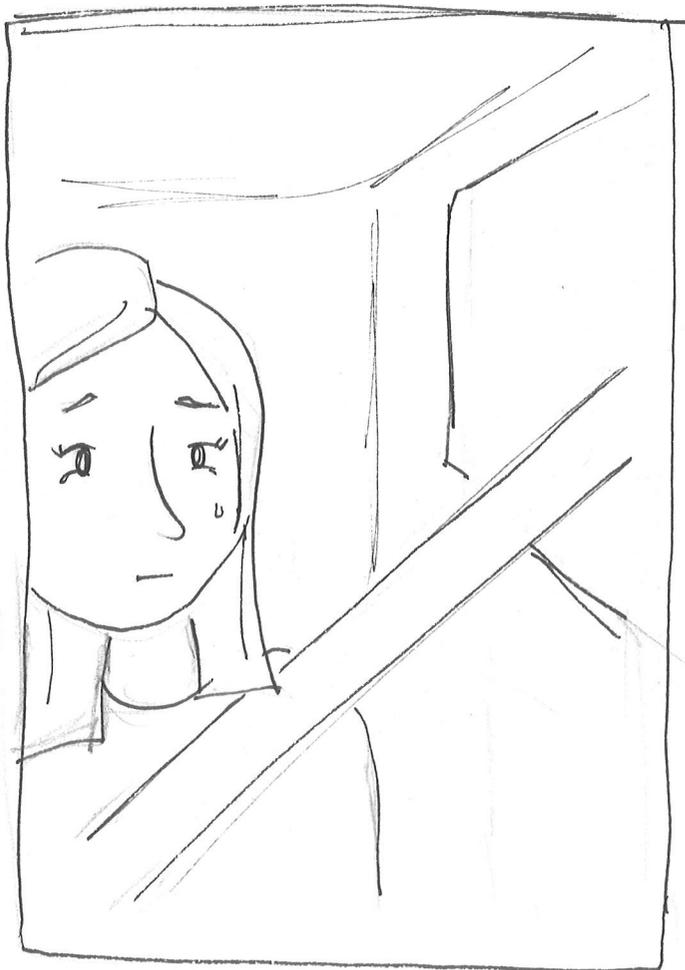




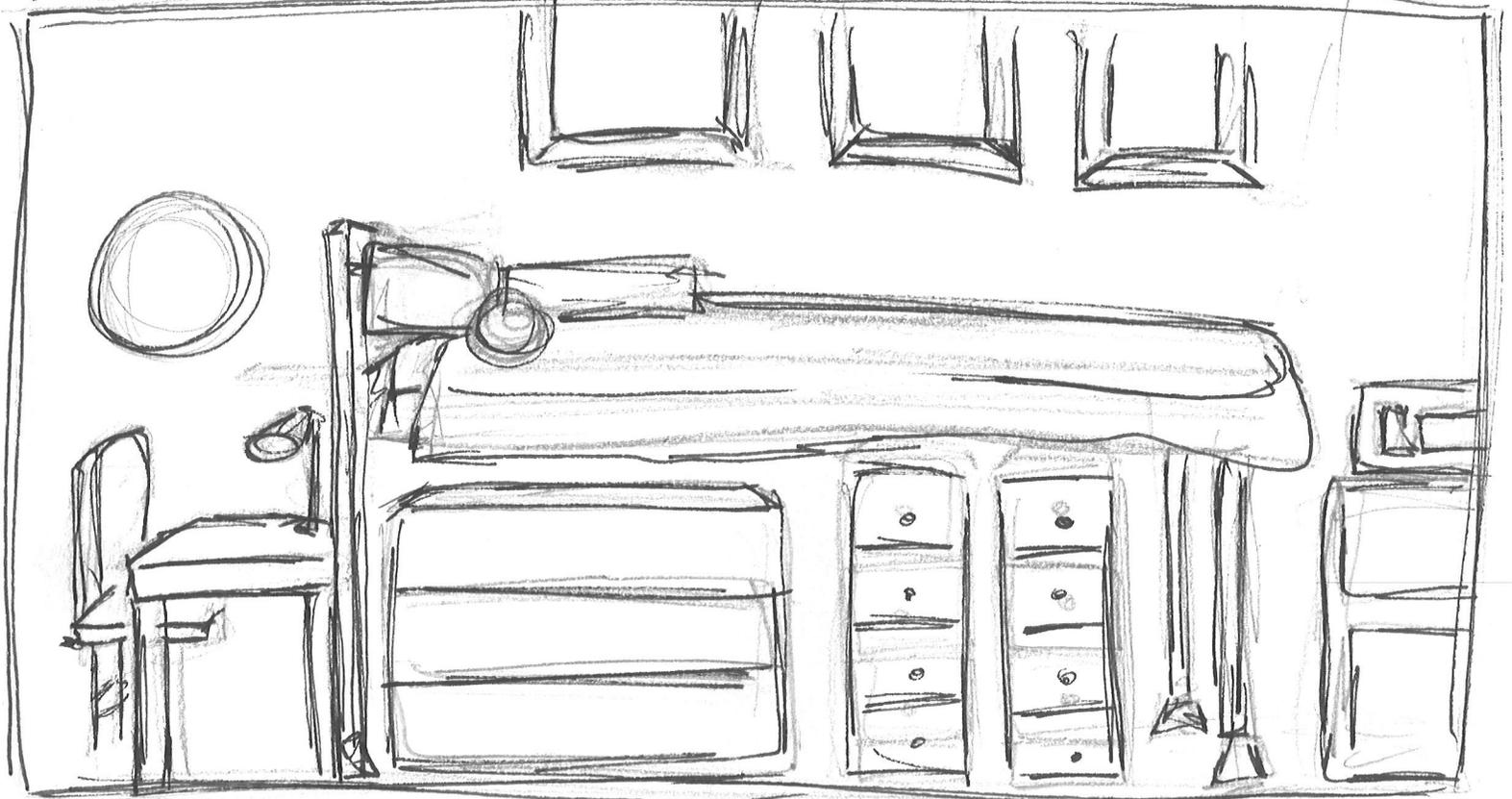
THE  
BUCKNELL  
YEARS



Driving to Bucknell. Leaving from home. To start my freshman year.



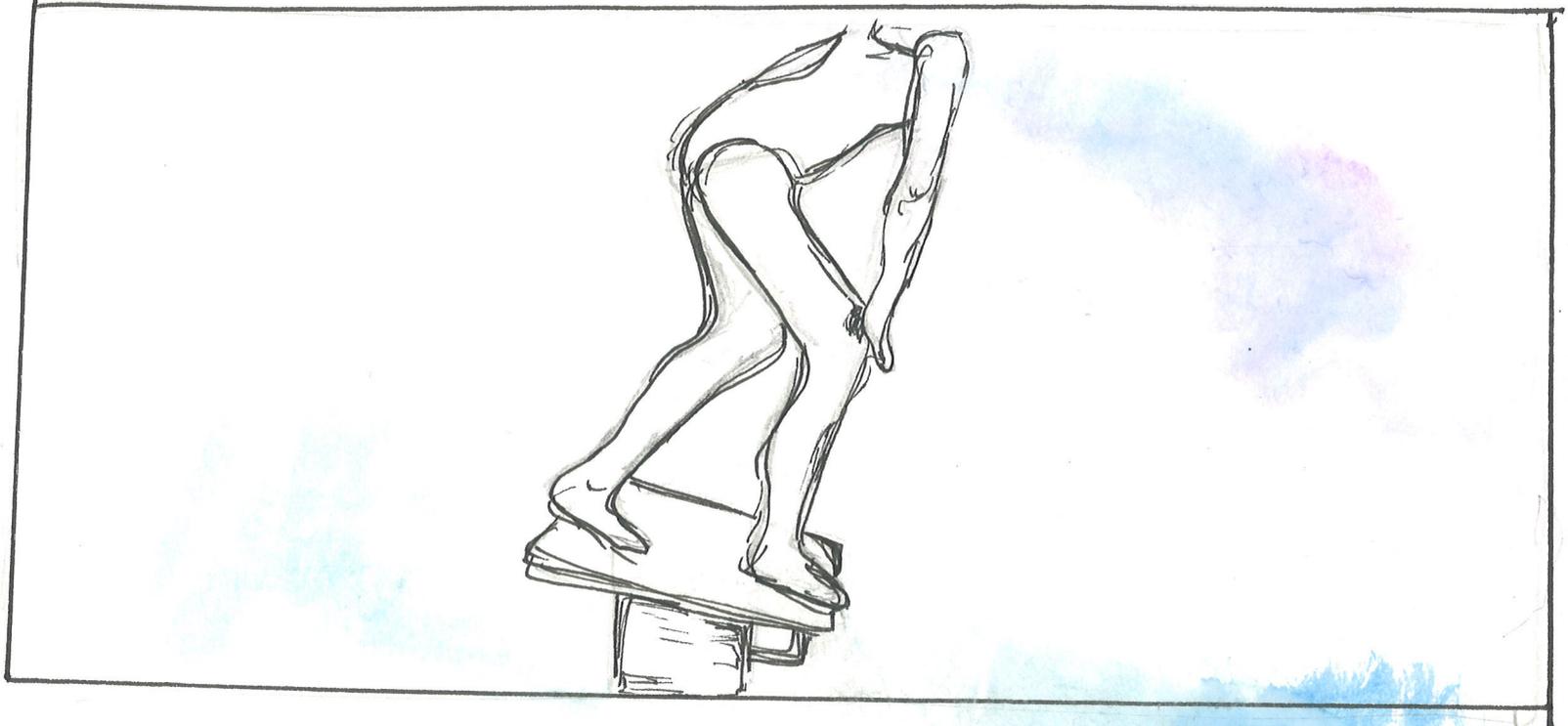
I could not stop crying.  
It felt like I was saying  
goodbye to everything  
I've ever known and  
loved and felt safe with.  
And was trading it in  
for a big question mark.  
My home was no  
longer my home, I  
thought to myself.



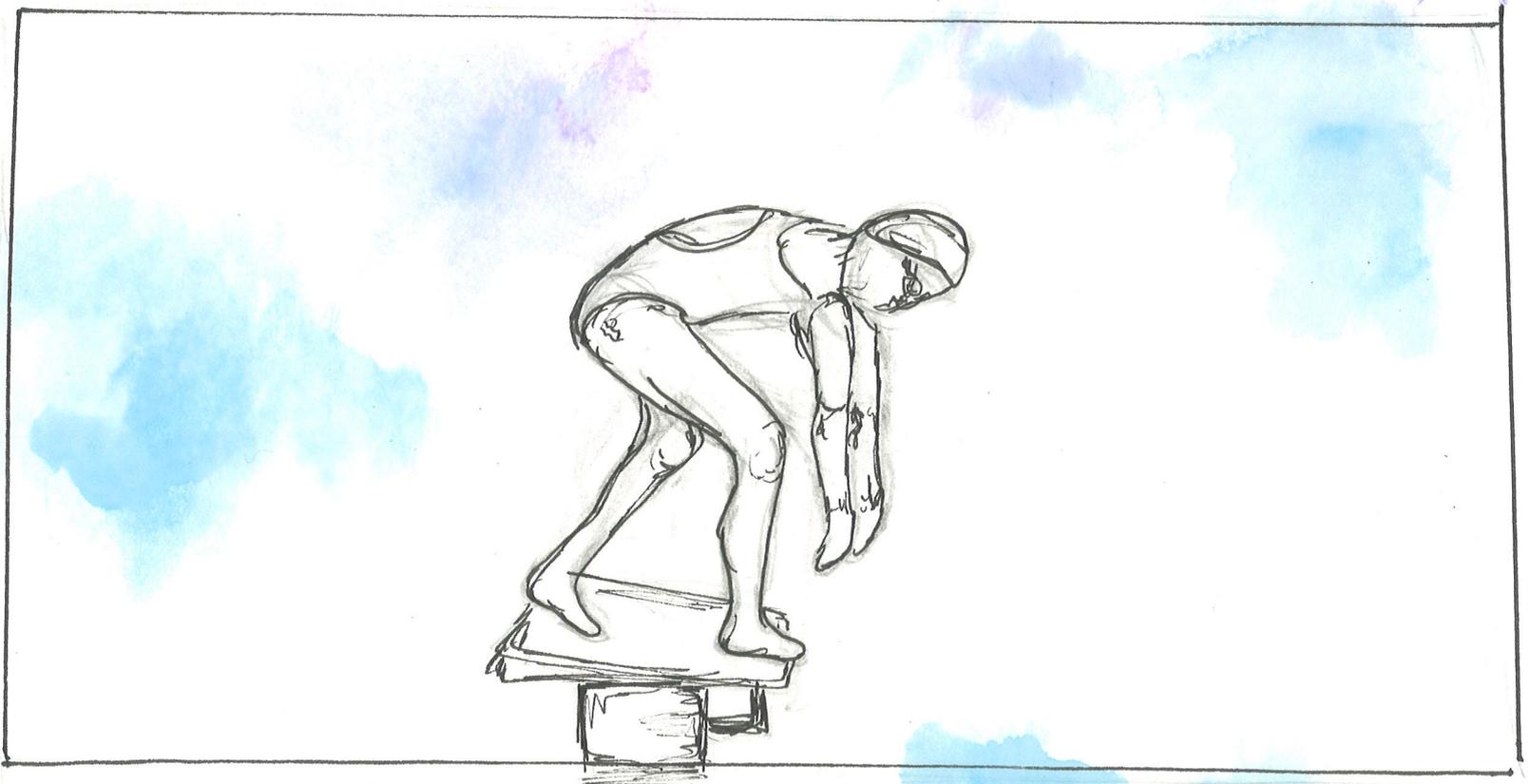
And then I was moving into my dorm room. And suddenly it became cluttered and full and new and homey and small.

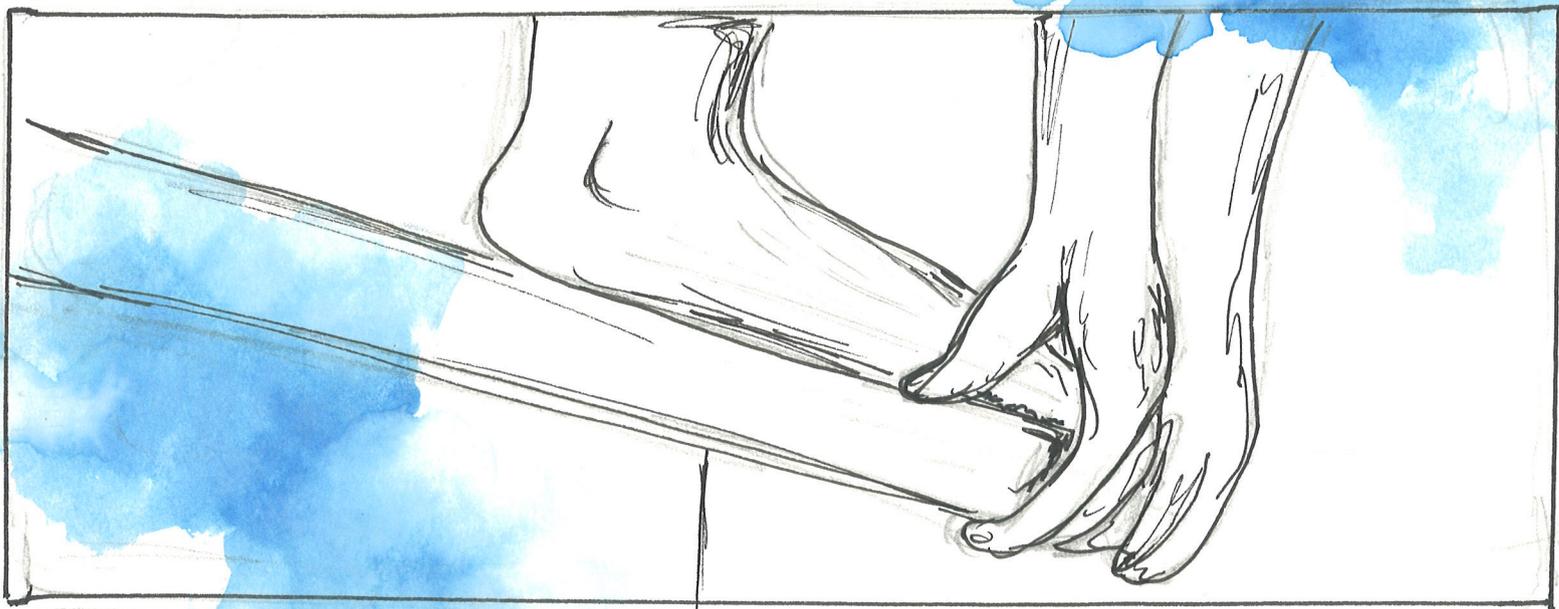


And then I was in class, learning a new language, a new system, reading a new book, needing new people.

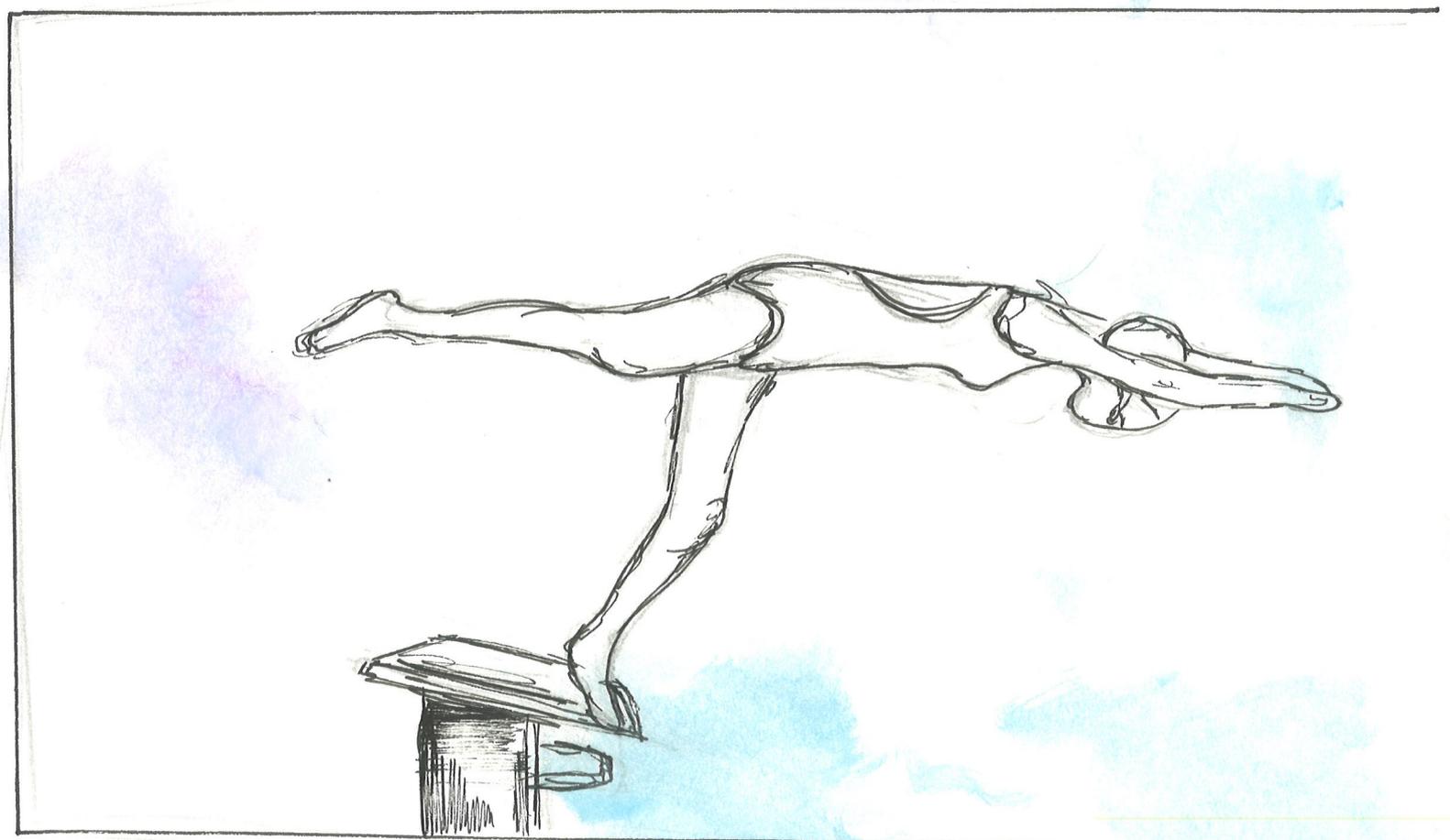


THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE THE SAME THING DIFFERENTLY. IT FEELS NEW. A NEW PLACE. FOR A NEW TEAM. WITH NEW PEOPLE. NEW CHAPTER IN AN OLD BOOK.





THE GRIP OF THE SWIM BLOCK IS FAMILIAR. ITS ROUGH AND UNINVITING BUT I'M USED TO THE SCRATCH AND THE ANTICIPATED SURGE. MY HANDS FIND THEIR PLACE, AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE.

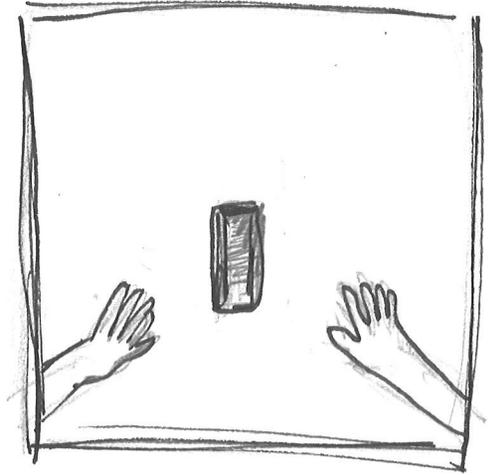
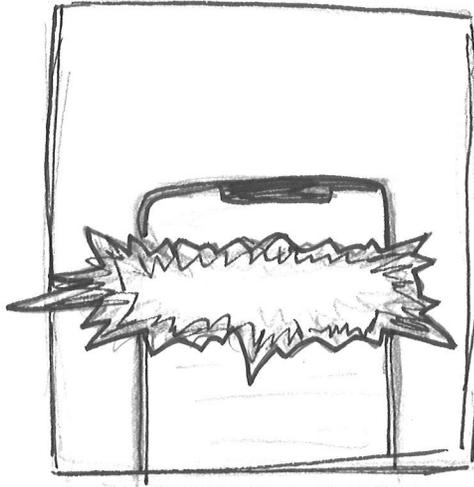
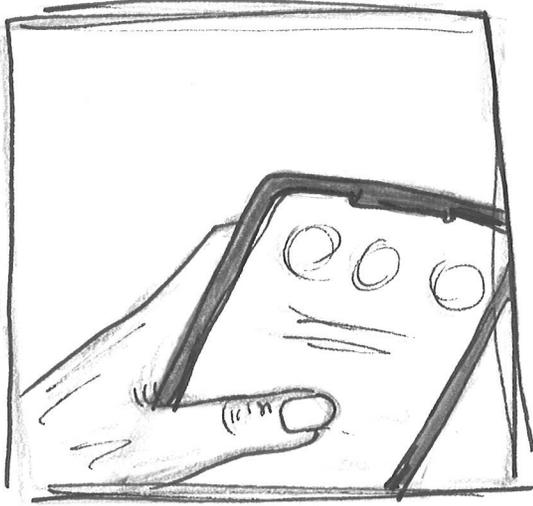


ANOTHER  
TUESDAY

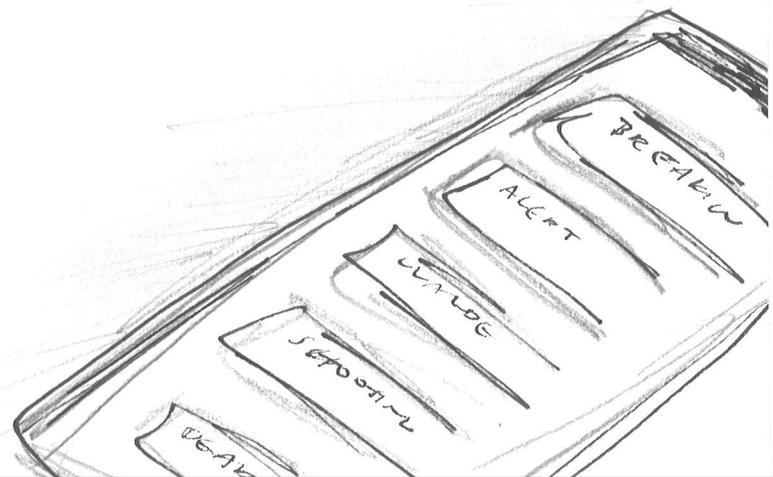
IN

AMERICA





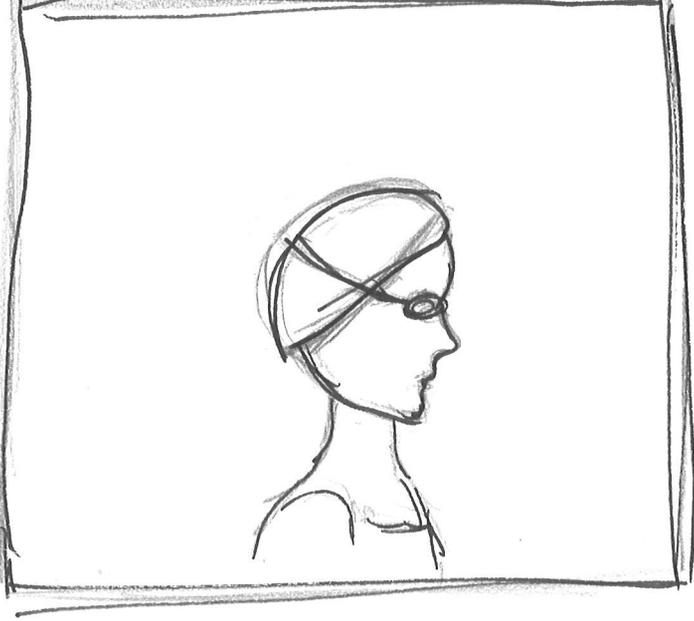
BREAKING NEWS: SCHOOL SHOOTING IN  
ULVADE, TX



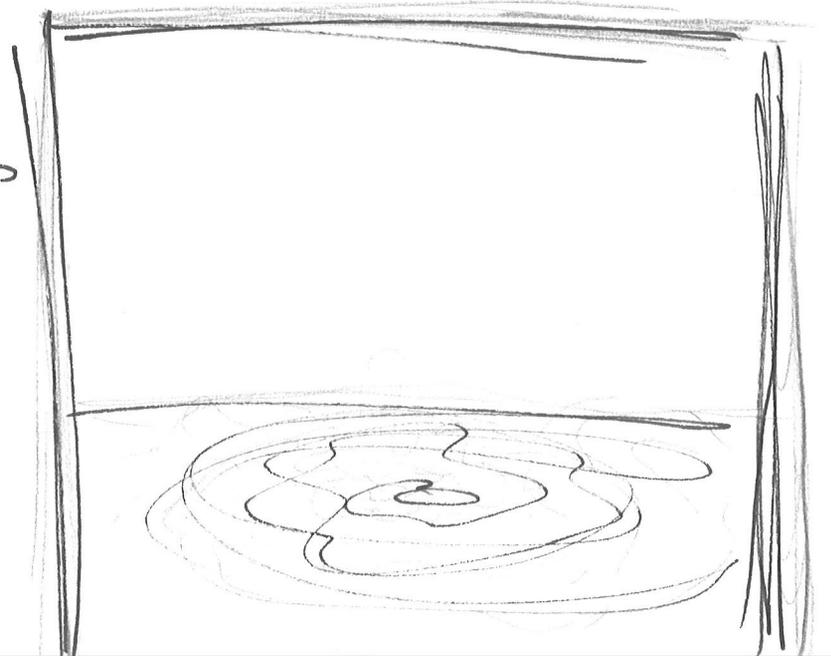
Time to swim.

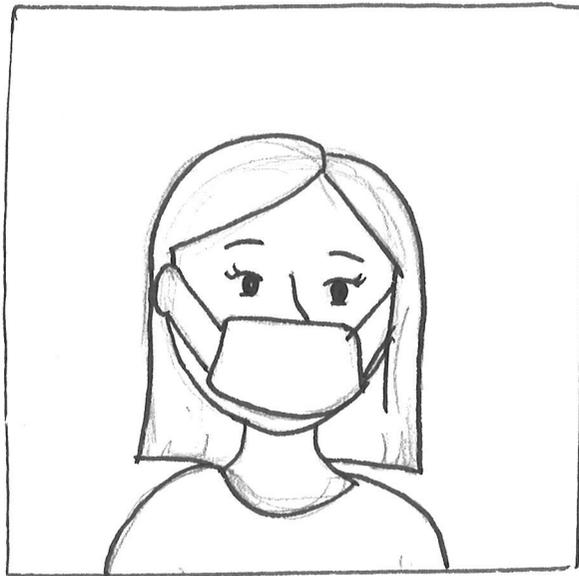


Usually swimming is there to help me forget and tune out the rest of the world.



BUT the world cannot and should not be tuned out today. I swim with thoughts today. I swim with tears fogging my goggles. Hopelessness surrounds me in the water.





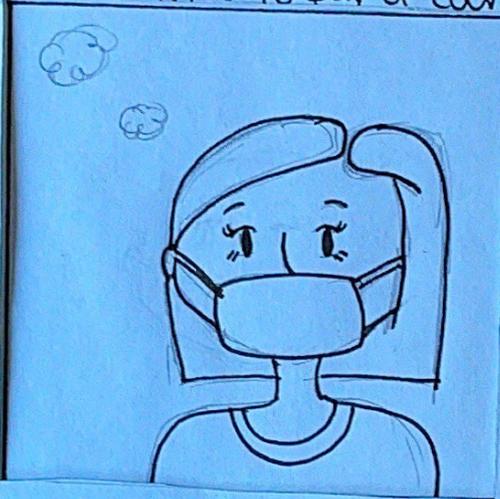
P A N D E M I C

IN THE YEAR OF 2020 everyone had their LIVES put on PAUSE by a DEADLY DISEASE sweeping the WORLD. The things you did DAY-TO-DAY became IMPOSSIBLE. we stayed in our houses to quarantine without a foreseeable END in sight.

Everyone knew someone who was effected. YES, you read that right: EVERY SINGLE PERSON. It felt inescapable since it was all around you. The news, the grocery store, all social media was flooded and you were constantly IN THE EYE OF THE STORM. It was OVERWHELMING although you were also always underwhelmed. There weren't a lot of ANSWERS and the uncertainty was RISING. Everyday was the SAME but with MOUNTING FEAR.

Those [tiny little things] that you did in a day which made you HAPPY were STOPPED a small price to pay of course. But as the weeks kept passing by you grew AFRAID and STUNTED.

PESSIMISTIC questions and through your mind: end? WILL life normal? affect next? why? And of that we all had



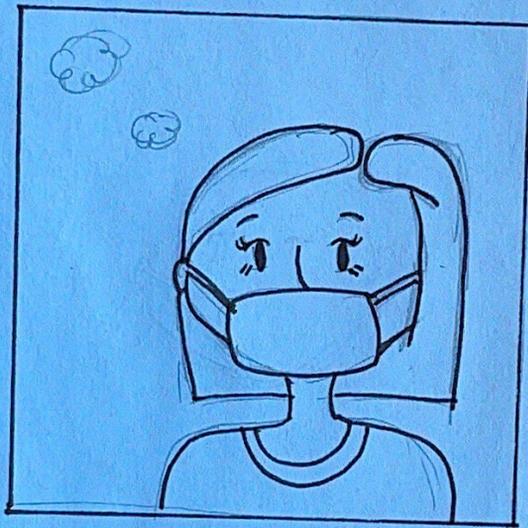
uncertainty ran WHEN will this every go back to who will this just dont understand course the question to ask ourselves:

AM I DOING OK?

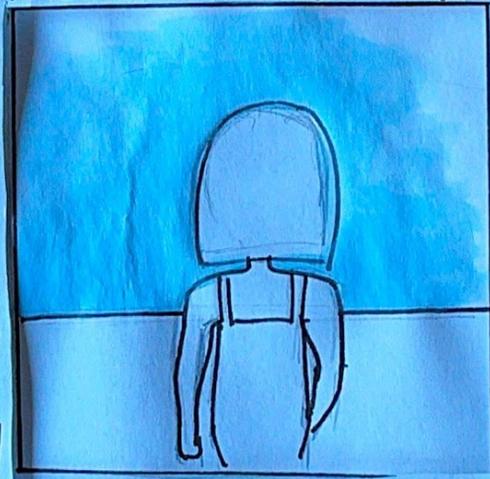
That question is hard to ask others, and even more yourself. Doing "OK" was a changing definition as everything around us was changing. A lot of the time, if I was really

HONEST with myself, a lot of the TIME I really wasn't fully admitted it to myself. It was really hard to be ok. And a lesson I LEARNED from the PANIDEMIC:

ITS OK TO NOT BE OK.

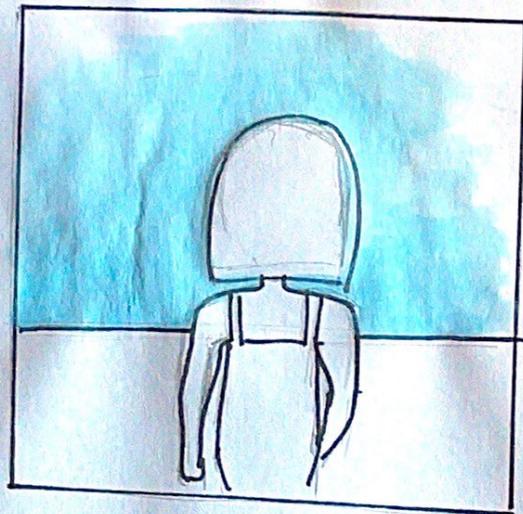


It was ~~NOT~~ the SAME. It was lonely. It was unmotivating. And I did not LIKE it for the very FIRST TIME. The team was divided. There only you in the lane & you are ALONE. Somehow everyone felt alone. Everything I LOVED about swimming was BROKEN and different. The TEAM was unrecognizable. The thing that I clung to through the many months of quarantine was not there in the end. I felt that I was going to be ok because this was the LIGHT at the END OF THE TUNNEL. Of course I was fortunate to be there at all, I kept reminding myself. But steadily my and LOVE for dedining to a had been BEFORE. want & longing that was SCARY. everything the changed. I really



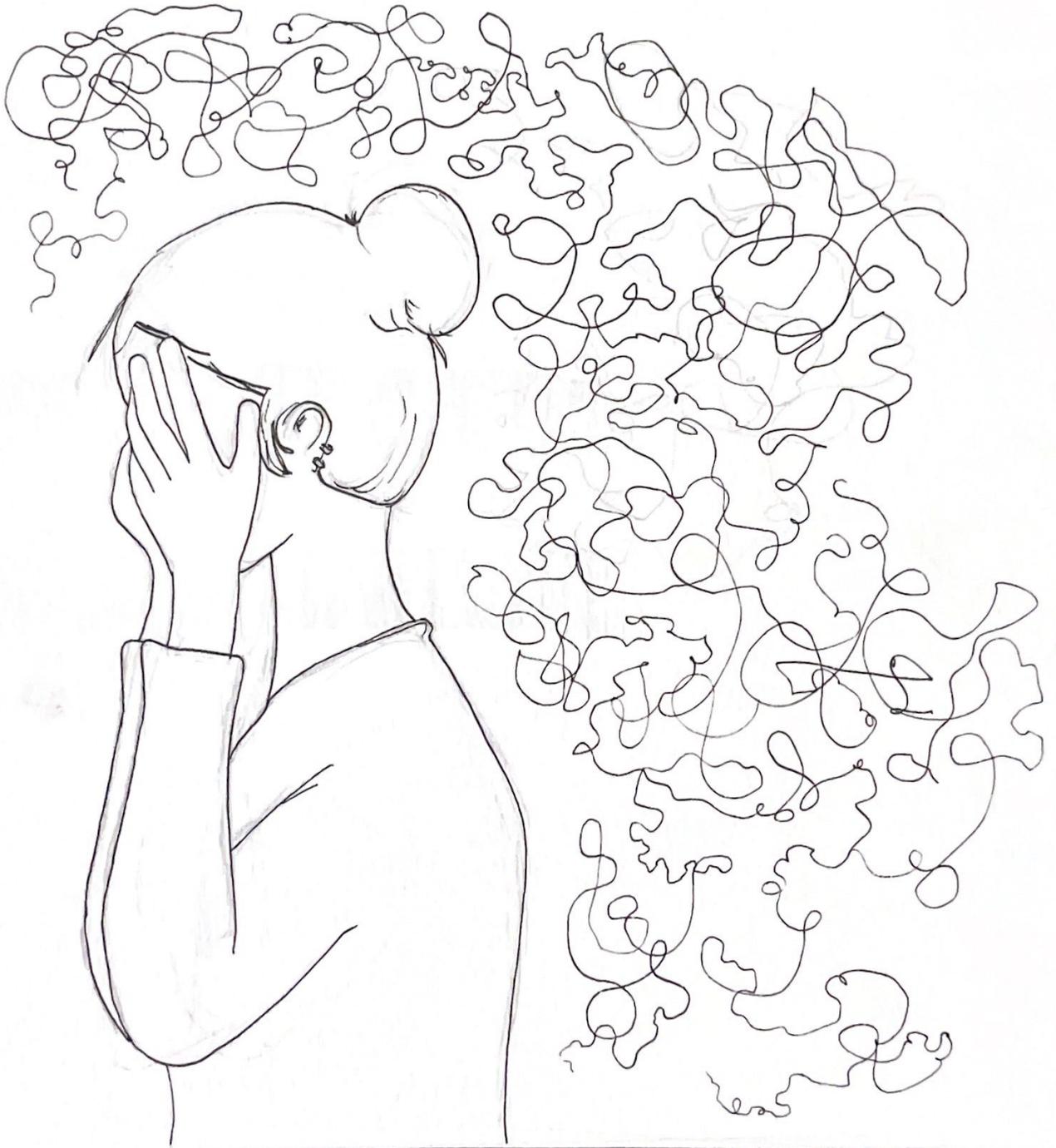
OPTIMISM  
swimming was point it never I had no. to swim. on top of PANDEMIC never thought

IT WOULD TAKE MY LOVE FOR SWIMMING. I felt angry at myself for letting it. I thought it was in my control yet it seemed I had no control at all. And that was terrifying. All of us were TRYING to remember that love for swimming and the team. Although the MEMORY still sits with us, that feeling feels distant. Like everything and everyone, this PANDEMIC forces change. It seems LOOKING BACK will not make it ok. WE must push forward to create a new happiness to be okay and find new LOVE in, for, & by yourself.



I N T E R L U D E . . .

There were some points while writing this memoir where it felt like it was pointless to tell my story it wasn't grand or awesome or tragic or extraordinary. It was just a story about my love of swimming.



And there were times when I didn't love swimming in the moment, but I had to draw like I did. Sometimes it felt like I was so removed from the version of me on the page. She became different than me.

I DONT HAVE  
ANY WORDS FOR  
THIS SECTION .

HERE'S THE MEMORY.

I remember the moments vividly. Yet the moments made up days which feel like a blur. Only in the aftermath of my aunt's passing can a memory defy understanding

I got a call from my dad



I was on the way to an away swim meet, a few hours away. After the meet it was Thanksgiving break. It was snowing.

I begged my parents to let me miss the meet to go to Philadelphia to be with my aunt and family.

I was assured that my dad will drive us into Philly after the meet. My team will be there for me. I will be there for my team.

My Aunt Michelle, my mom's sister, was in hospice care at her home.

My mom was there, by her side, I was assured.

Our team got to the pool a day early, to beat the snow. snow. snow.

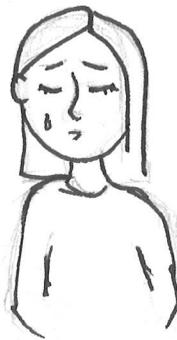
\*NOISE\*

BREATHE

IT'S OK IT'S OK

DON'T CRY

\*LAUGHING\*

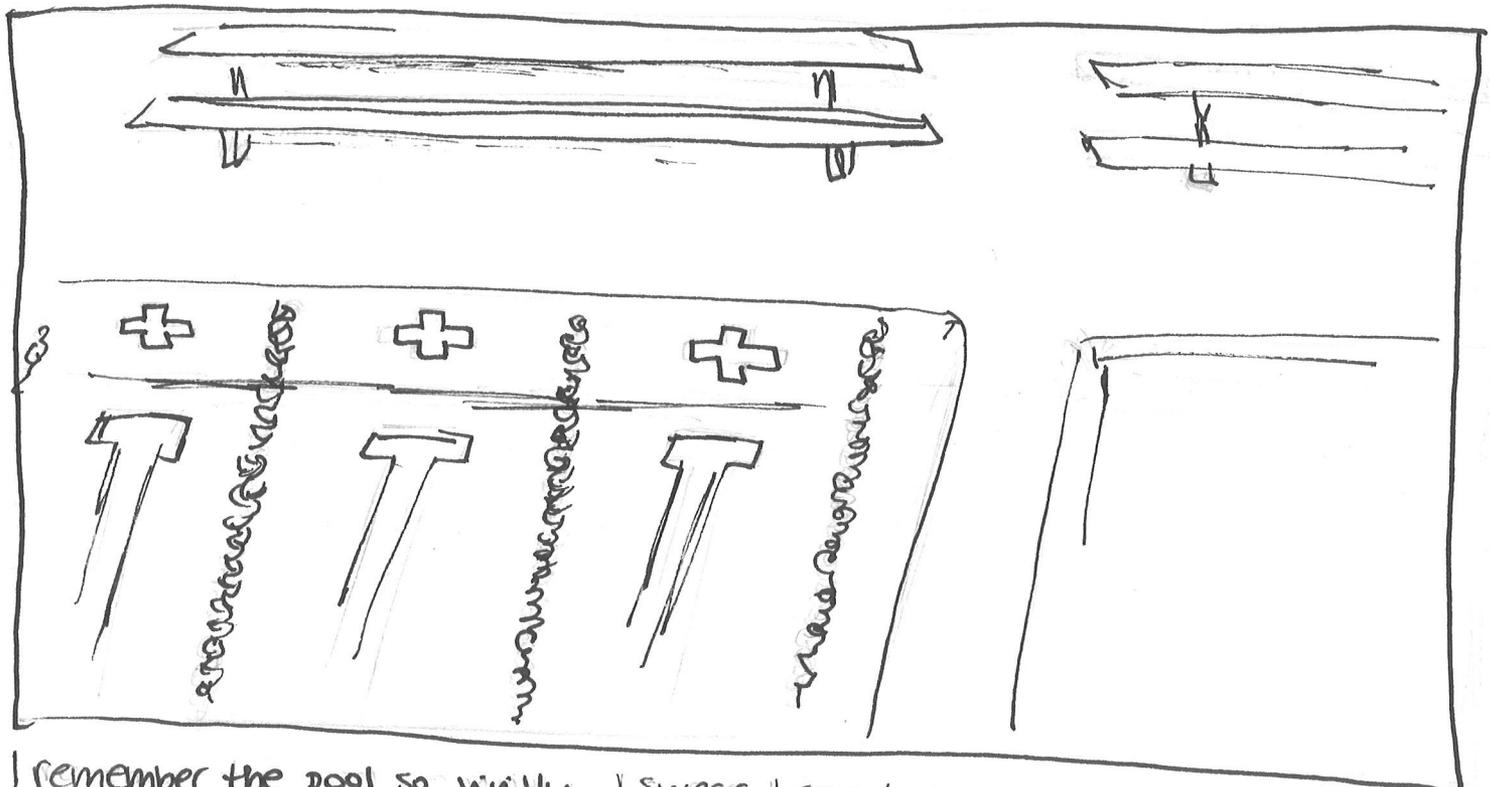


STOP CRYING

JUST MAKE IT TWO DAYS

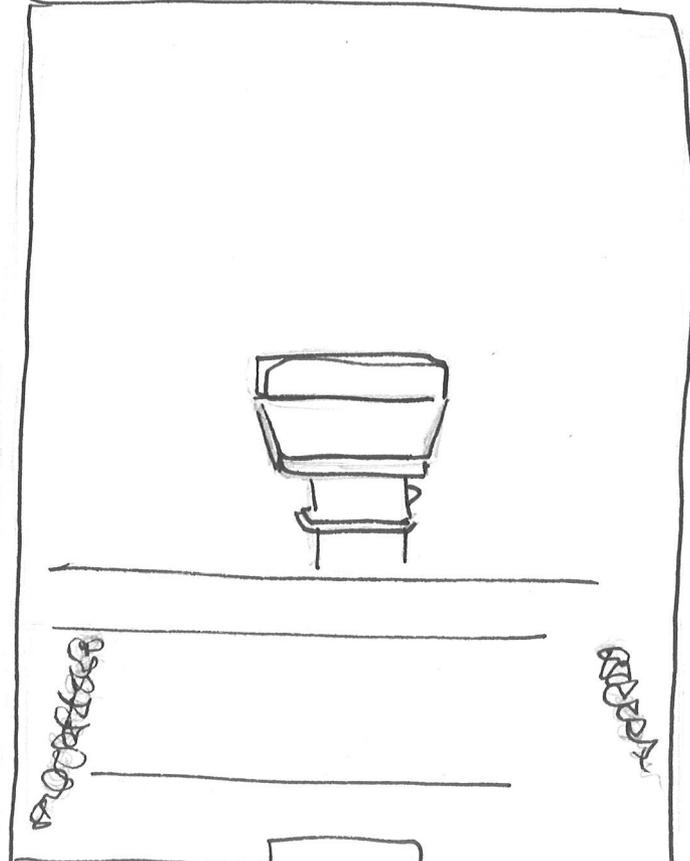
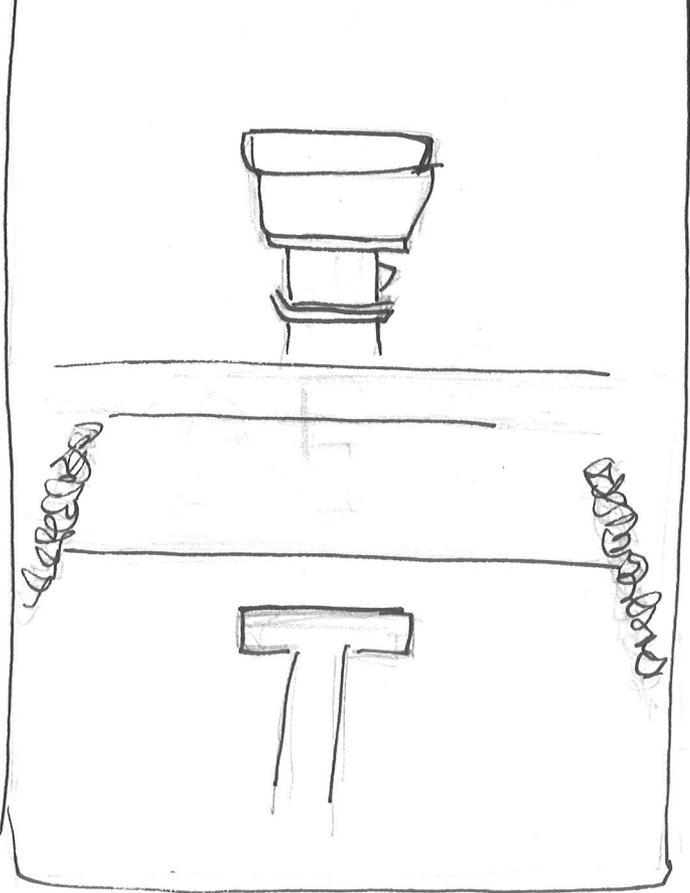
REMEMBER WHISPERING

TO MYSELF



I remember the pool so vividly. I swear I can taste the type of chlorine variant in the air. I remember walking down the bulkhead in the middle of the pool with puffy ~~eyes~~ and cold hands.

It was the night before the meet and I was on the wall in-between sets with my friends



I was behind the blocks and breaking down, uncontrollably crying. I just couldn't stop thinking.



I was in the shower at the hotel bawling so hard I had to grasp the hand rail to steady myself.

The water endlessly poured on my hair, plastering it to my face. running down my body trying to shield it. It graciously swept away my tears and melded them to the familiarity of the water.

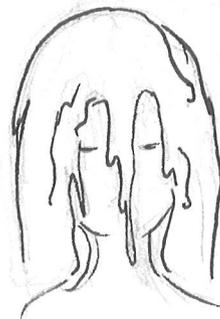
It felt like the water drowned my soul for a minute.

I turned off the water and kept my eyes closed. Not yet ready to open them.

I shuffled out of the bathroom and hearing genuine worry from my teammates.

I called my mom and said that I love her and to tell my Aunt Michelle that I love her.

I ran out of tears so I layed in bed until tomorrow came.



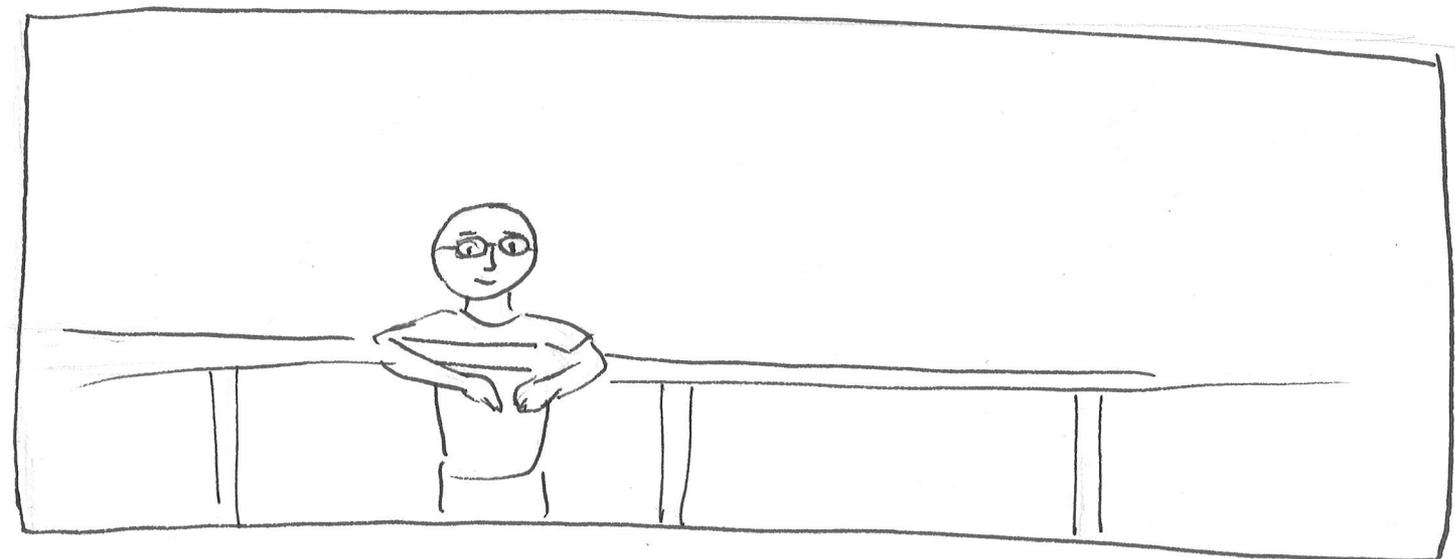
My Aunt Michelle was the strongest person I have ever known. She was so strong that she wore her heart on her sleeve in every aspect of her life. She used this love to boost and care for everyone important to her - always before herself. She was lightning in a bottle. But that's the terrible thing about lightning - its extraordinariness is gone far too soon. My Aunt Michelle will never be defined by her battle with cancer, but rather as a daughter, sister, explorer, teacher, mother, aunt and lover of life. She taught me from a very young age to find love in my life. She was so proud of me finding that love in swimming. Aunt Michelle was joy, and she will be remembered painted with her joy.



I will never forget that next day.

The day of the meet.

The day my Aunt Michelle passed.



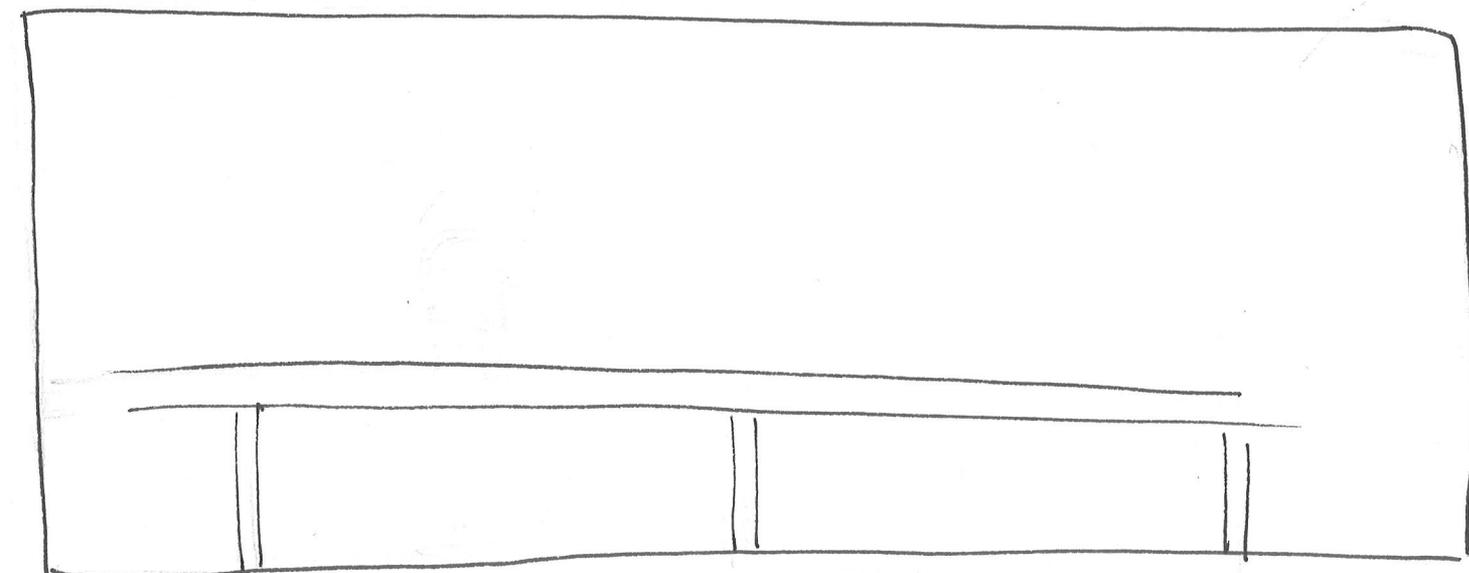
I remember seeing my dad in the stands. He never did miss a meet.

I remember he said, "Just have fun"

I remember I said, "I'll try"

So I swam.

I swam well.



I remember not seeing my dad in his original spot.

I remember seeing him outside the windows taking a call

I remember my heart dropping.

I remember knowing right then.

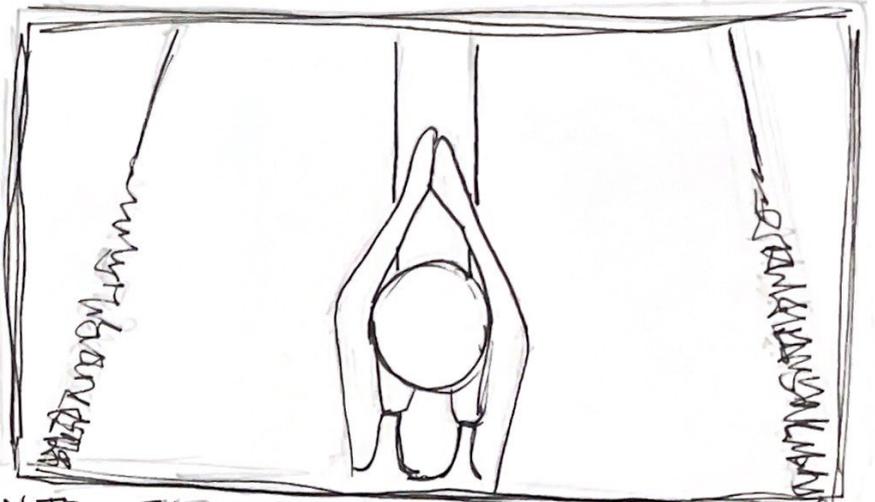
I remember I had to go swim my last event.

COUNT  
DOWN  
?

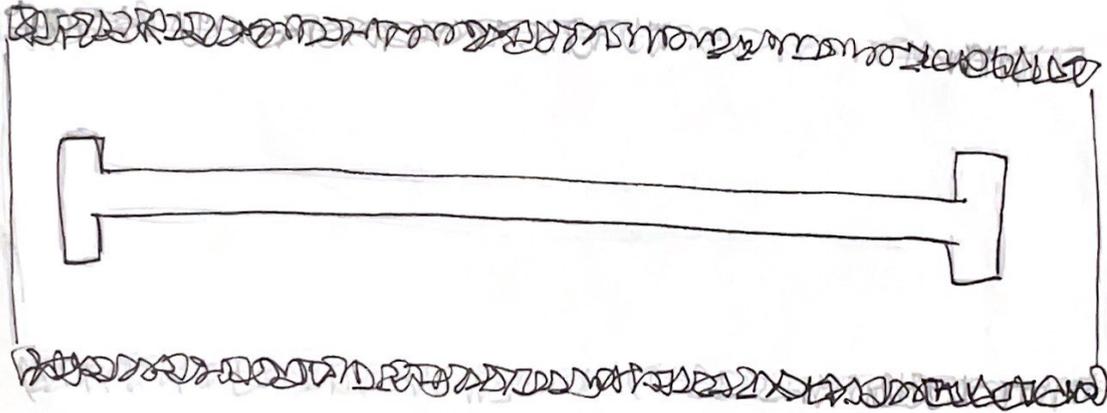
# 3

WEEKS

I  
D  
I  
V  
E



INTO THE WATER LIKE NORMAL...



ITS  
JUST  
ANOTHER  
JUMP.

I  
DO  
IT  
EVERY  
DAY  
AND  
I'LL  
DO  
IT

TOMORROW  
AND THE NEXT

BUT  
WHY DOES  
IT FEEL SO  
DIFFERENT?



I want  
to  
make it  
clear,  
I'm not  
sad.  
Its  
just you  
know  
different



I  
DONT  
WANT  
TO  
THINK  
ABOUT  
THE  
END  
Now

UP  
AND  
DOWN

SO  
I  
JUST  
SWIM

WEEKS

1 week

1 week

7 days

1 week

I won't cry  
I'm not sad

I just won't  
be a swimmer  
anymore

My Identity

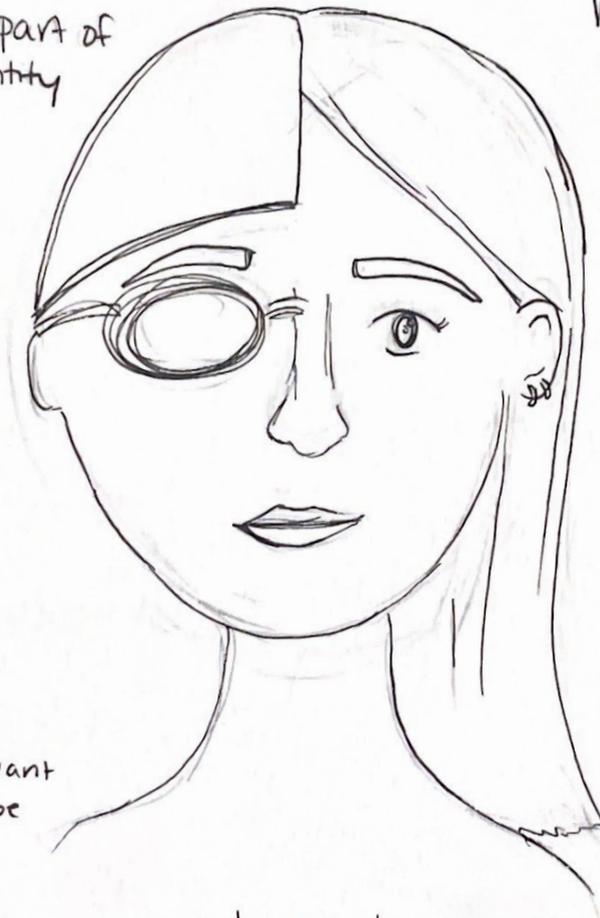
7 days

is it a part of  
my identity

I'll be fine

I'm more  
than that

what  
happens  
when it's over



1 week

Am I numb  
or do I not  
care

1 week

I want  
it to be  
done

7 days and its  
done

I can do  
it

I don't want  
it to be done

It doesn't matter  
what I want

I have done it

I am doing it

1 week

7 days



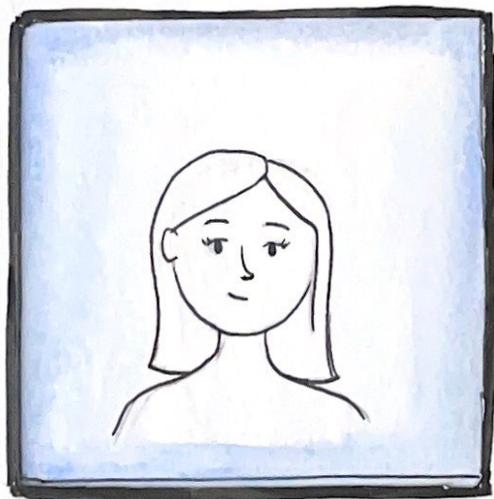
ITS  
DONE.

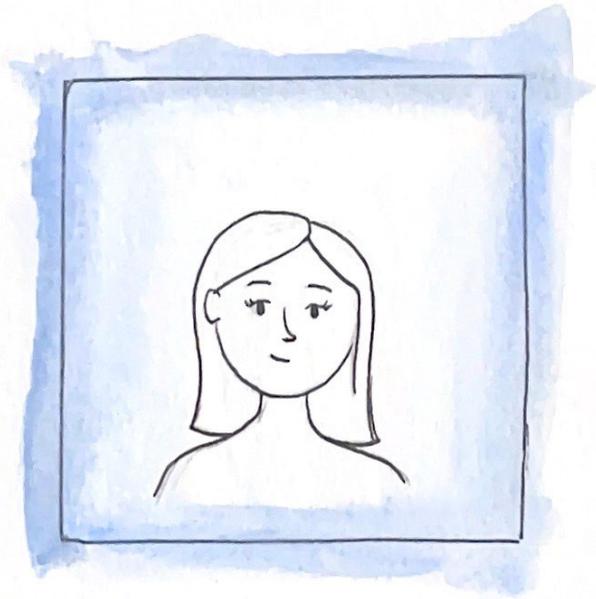
Hi, it's me, Sophia, the memoirist writing this right now. Hi.

My story isn't done, my memoir isn't finished.

But I have to finish this chapter.

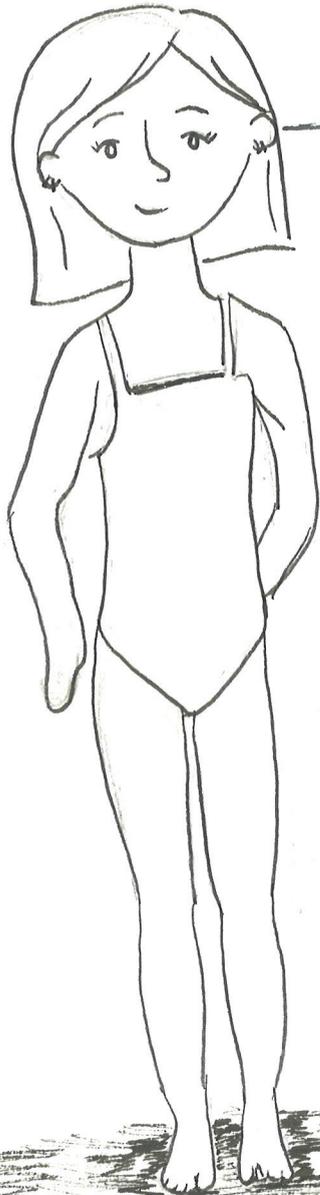
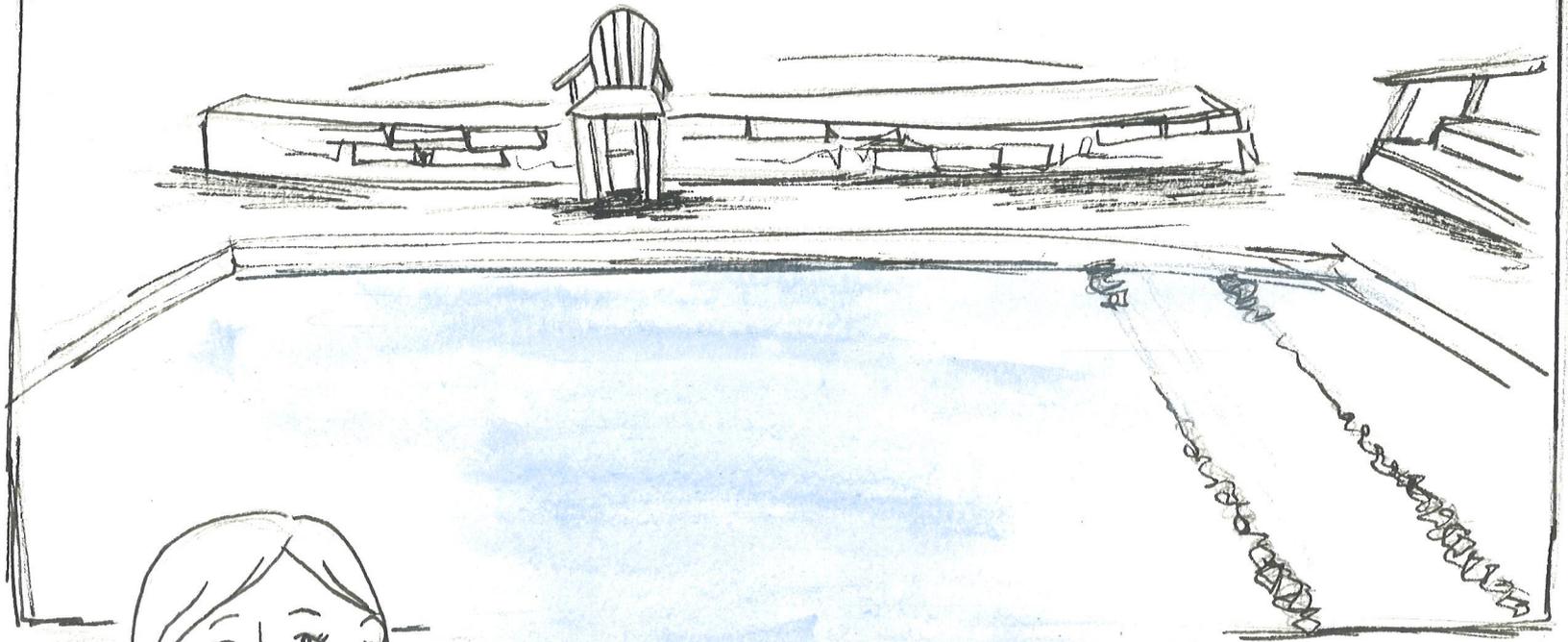
So onto its possibilities,





I dip  
my feet in the  
water again and feel  
at home.  
Just the smallest  
step.  
Only a dip.  
The beginning.





I return to Bower Hill the  
place where I fell in love  
with swimming. Maybe  
I can find that simple joy again here

AND  
MAYBE  
I

CAN  
PASS  
IT  
ON.

JUST  
LIKE  
MY

PARENTS  
PASSED

IF  
TO  
ME,  
TO

SHARE

MY  
LOVE  
OF

SWIMMING.

TO  
SHARE  
MY

SWIMMING  
LESSONS

## I. The First Splash

In my first semester at Bucknell, I enrolled in English 101: Banned Books, taught by Professor Jeremy Chow. This class introduced me to the graphic genre: we read Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. Our class was then invited to take inspiration from the genre and pen our own Autbio-Graphic in short form. Although I did not know it at the time, this one-page project became the foundation of my love and exploration of the graphic genre and the spark of my own graphic memoir, *Swimming Lessons*, which I have worked on every semester since.

My Autbio-Graphic [Figure 1] from the initial class project illustrates my daily routine as a collegiate athlete: from waking up in the morning to diving in the swimming pool later in the afternoon. The lack of color, the straight lines, and the mind bubbles highlight the feeling of tension and stress in the morning. This is contrasted by the energy as I dive into the water to swim, which is met with a pop of color, abstract lines, and movement from my character. In my reflection, which accompanied the piece, I discussed my choices to use an ink pen, sparse color, and distinct line work—many of the stylistic choices I have adapted into *Swimming Lessons*.

My introduction to the graphic genre by both reading and creating demonstrates the holistic dynamic I am applying to this creative-scholarly thesis. To further understand the genre, I have engaged scholarship on the styles, themes, and popularity of the graphic genre, especially as a field of critical inquiry that has exploded in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> This work has established the legitimacy of the graphic genre in literary studies, embraced the haziness of its “graphic

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<sup>1</sup> See Gretchen Schwarz (2006) to show the genre's increase in libraries and pointedly at the younger audience.

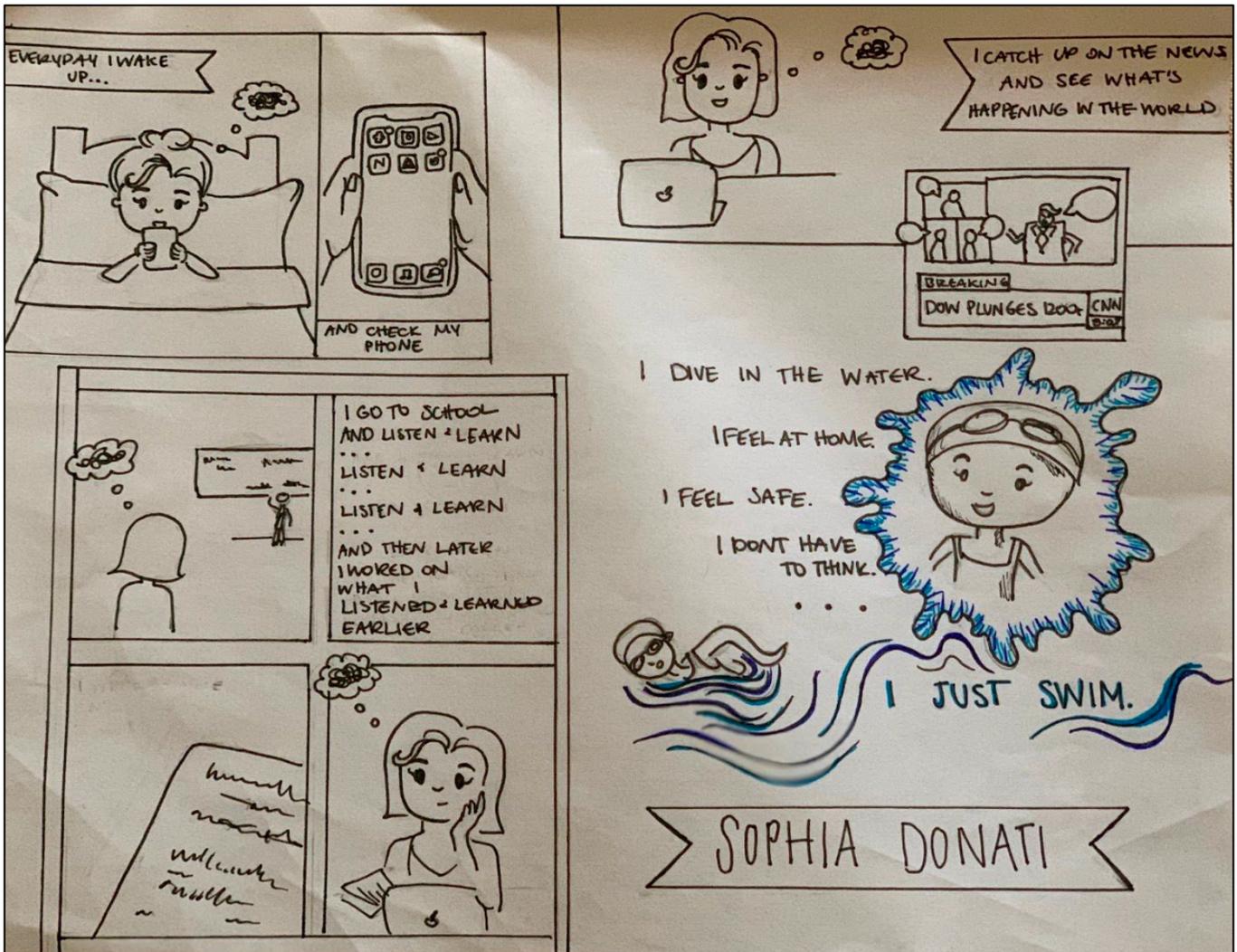


Figure 1: Autbio-Graphic (2019)

novel” definitions, and amplified *Maus*<sup>2</sup> and *Fun Home* as canonical texts in the genre.<sup>3</sup> While Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey have offered a modern definition of the “graphic novel” and its form, content, and publication format, what continues to escape the attention is what the “graphic memoir” as its own genre encapsulates.<sup>4</sup>

This component of my thesis is an analytical reflection that synthesizes my understanding of the graphic genre through a variety of graphic texts and my own work in *Swimming Lessons*. I will first dive into the anchor of my memoir—the love of sport. The spotlight on this theme allows a close analytical and reflective reading of *Swimming Lessons* as well as the graphic memoir, Tillie Walden’s *Spinning*. By examining the intersection of sport and graphic in these two explanatory pages, I establish the foundations of memory and its intersection with graphic memoir. This will lead to a larger conversation about the graphic genre and its definitions. After this foundation, I turn to analytical and reflective readings of four graphic memoirs, including *Swimming Lessons*, which will serve as a consistent point of reference. Throughout the close readings, I examine memory and its transfixion in the graphic memoir. In doing so I take on the roles of scholar, reader, and memoirist which prompt me to reflect on these respective perspectives. This piece of my thesis is significant as it frames my graphic memoir, *Swimming Lessons*, through both analytical and reflective lenses to establish itself within the larger graphic memoir genre.

## II. Love of Sport in the Graphic Memoir

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<sup>2</sup> I will not touch on *Maus* further in my thesis, due to the limits of my lens, but it is a pivotal and foundational text for the graphic memoir genre.

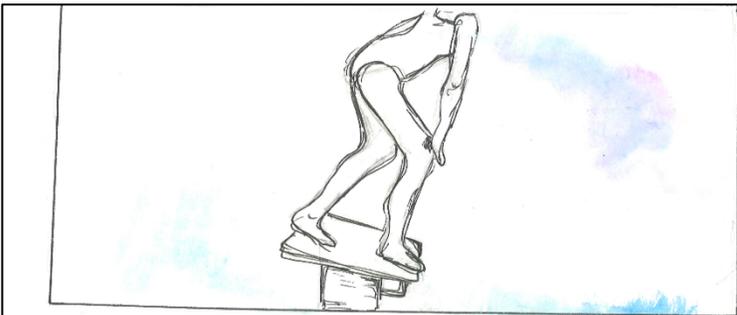
<sup>3</sup> On legitimacy see Jan Baetens (2018); on haziness of definition see Kathryn Hansen (2012); and on lack of scholarship see Michael Chaney (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Jan Baetens & Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015) 7-22.

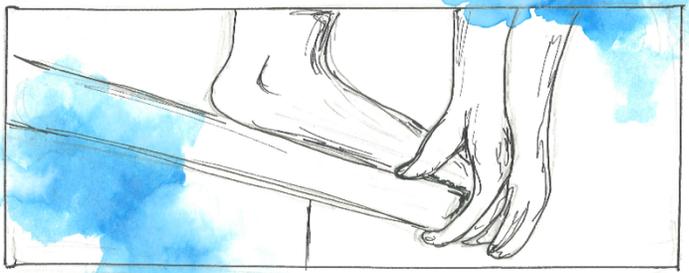
*Swimming Lessons* explores my life experiences through the unwavering presence of the swimming pools around me. *Swimming Lessons* is a love story between me and the water—a love tested and faulted at times, but a love that I carry with me long after I have left the pool. My character evolves through three main stages, as seen through the transition in pools. She is running down the hill under the summer sun to the community pool at ten years old: the Bower Hill Years. She is opening the doors to her high school and waving timidly to her father and coach: the High School Years. She is walking on her own and reflecting on her years of swimming: the Bucknell Years. The shift in body composition, tone, and truth of memory marks each section.

Figure 2 is an excerpt from the Bucknell Years section when I first arrive at the Bucknell pool. It details the feeling of returning to the starting block—a constant in every pool, the beginning of a race—to center myself in the midst of overwhelming novelty. The six squares over the two pages represent the sense of familiarity for the reader to mirror the symbol of the starting block. In between the images of my character on the block stand two exclusively text squares. Contrasting the pages prior, the words stand in stark capitalization. The choice of capital letters marks the certainty in the words as if etched in stone. They stand in the middle of the page and are centered between the images. The character's body movements are synched with the words on the page and highlight how they both iterate a sense of importance.

The figures on the page again contrast the previous sections of *Swimming Lessons*. They are also sure of themselves in a similar way to the text. The college iteration of Sophia is the most proportional and realistic in stature. She is much closer to the truth of reality, as she is the closest in my authorial memory. The turn to proportionality highlights the character's physical and emotional growth. These pages do not show her face or facial emotion as the face is cropped



THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE THE SAME THING DIFFERENTLY. IT FEELS NEW. A NEW PLACE. FOR A NEW TEAM. WITH NEW PEOPLE. NEW CHAPTER IN AN OLD BOOK.



THE GRIP OF THE SWIM BLOCK IS FAMILIAR. ITS ROUGH AND UNINVITING BUT I'M USED TO THE SCRATCH AND THE ANTICIPATED SURGE. MY HANDS FIND THEIR PLACE, AS THEY ALWAYS HAVE.

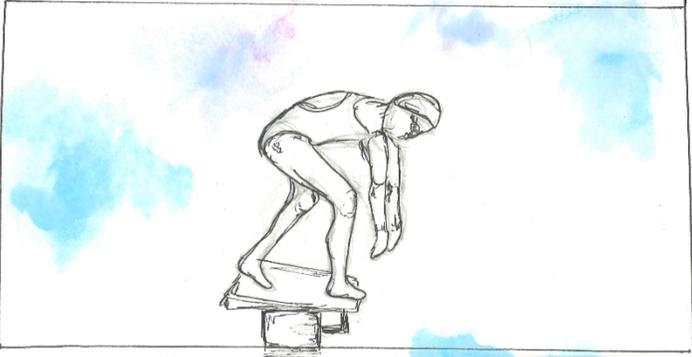


Figure 2: Excerpt from the "Bucknell Years" in Swimming Lessons

out of focus from the top two squares. This choice allows attention to settle on the body and its relationship with the block—muscle memory overtaking the need to emote. Swimming block and body form a union that does not break throughout these two pages. The relationship between the two highlights the reliability of swimming for my character. While the pages surrounding this section detail the overwhelming feelings that accompany adjusting to college, these pages frame a metaphoric anchor.

Apart from the squares and their content, the eye of the reader sticks to the watercolor swishes of blue and purple over the pages. The colors refuse to be bound by the straight lines of the squares—rather passing through all dimensions of the page by even curling its edges. The watercolors bring in texture, energy, and life. The capitalization, straight lines, precision of the body, and the addition of color complicate the moment. As much as the narrative tone is decisive and the symbol of the block is cemented, the colors washing over the pages bring attention to the fact that this moment is a memory. As memory, the watercolors age the moment by texturizing the wrinkles and imperfections of the piece. The colors' liveliness and defiance highlight the essence of swimming seeping into moments of crisis and security. Swimming is both an ironic anchor and an act of fun. This memory is framed in a serious tone, but as a memoirist who knows the next chapters of life, it felt important to sprinkle in color to highlight the naivete of the moment. The addition of the colors additionally creates an agency of the watercolors which ebb and flow on their page with little control from my hand. It's as if both the water and I know where to fall on these pages, again cementing the relationship of anchor—while also allowing the feeling of perspective to reach the surface.

Tillie Walden's *Spinning* is a pivotal text in my understanding of the graphic memoir genre. Many of Walden's themes connect to my own graphic memoir, *Swimming Lessons*; her

coming-of-age arc, her development in the context of a sport, and her intense feelings about her sport spill out into her own coming of age. *Spinning*, Walden's 2017 graphic memoir, explores young Tillie's life in the ice rink, finding her peace with the sport and her identity along the way. *Spinning* represents a growing fascination in the graphic genre with memoir and its developed reflection of self. Walden's tone throughout is complex as she bares her inner thoughts outright. Her competitiveness, drive, underlying resentment of her sport, and loneliness are present not only in her narrative but in her images.

Walden uses color, the blurriness of faces, and the blank page to demonstrate her tone and develop her character, as Figure 3 models. The color palette of yellow and purple draws a contrast between day and night, positivity and negativity, and demonstrates her mixed emotions toward skating. Yellow is used minimally and in contrast to dark purple which paints most of the book. The sparks of yellow act as a ray of light to emphasize a spark of joy in Tillie, rather than the indifferent tone of the dark purple. When her name is asked by a new coach, she answers with a glimmer of hope not through dialogue but through image. Throughout the squares, the pictorial lens zooms out, and the details of Tillie and her coach's face blur. The perception change and the vagueness of their body features allow the attention to focus on another, potentially stronger aspect of Tillie's entire identity—her figure skating. Her body position changes throughout the squares with less detail, but still enough definition for the reader to understand her reserved tone. Once she makes it to the ice, on the last square, her body regains details in the drawing, enough for the reader to discern the changing tone. The composition of details and the building sequence of her getting on the ice are also pronounced with the starkness of the blank, white page. The blankness of the page is masterfully utilized by Walden. It both represents the ice she skates on and the air she breathes as well as the symbolic freedom that she

grasps in the ending square. Walden's choice not to include text or dialogue in this square adds to the tonal shift of the last square. As Tillie breathes, the reader, in parallel, understands the difference in the character and her connection to skating. It does not require the shimmer of color since her body, the ice, and her breath give enough.

Walden's tone is raw and honest as she demonstrates the complex line of love and hate that is bound up in sport during a time of great self-discovery. The tone that encompasses the images shows the breadth of the graphic memoir. Walden's visual illustrations pick up where the text cannot paint the full image as the story flourishes in the graphic form. *Swimming Lessons* joins in this feat, also using the power of the image to create an illustration. The love of sport shines through both texts as a pivotal connection between image and form, body and movement.

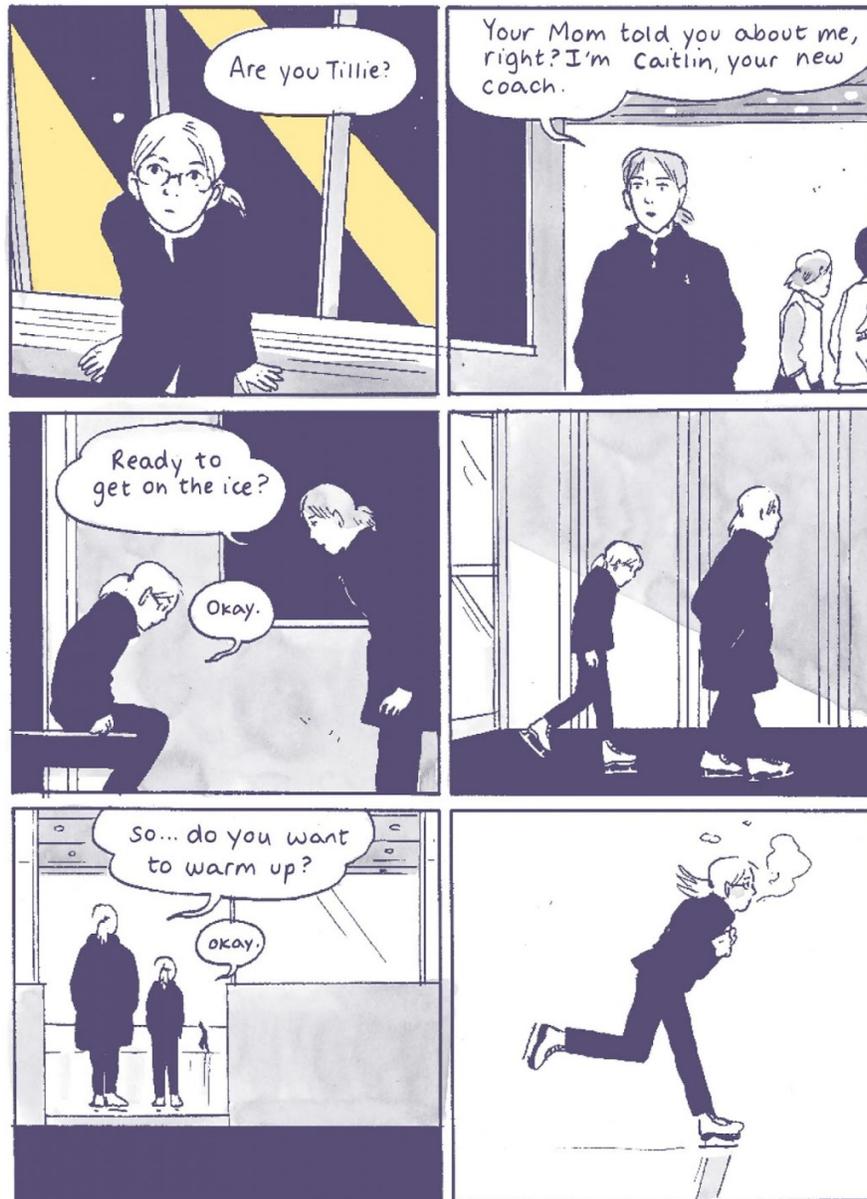


Figure 3: Excerpt from Tillie Walden's *Spinning* (2017)

### III. Diving into the Graphic Genre

Both *Swimming Lessons* and *Spinning* are graphic memoirs, and their differentiation from graphic novels is pivotal to understanding the memoir's essence. The "graphic novel" is consistently the catch-all term to describe texts in the graphic genre. Comic books, manga series, graphic memoirs, and graphic adaptations are blindly thrown into "graphic novel."<sup>5</sup> However, this term is misleading and does not align with the established use of the novel in literary studies, as novels are solely fictitious and often assume long-form prose. Therefore in my thesis, I avoid this term and embrace the broadness of the "graphic genre" and the "graphic narrative." In doing so, I correctly frame the texts explored as not being pieces of fiction, thus demonstrating how the term "graphic novel" does not abide by readerly expectations of the traditional novel. These texts are "graphic memoirs," similar to traditional literary memoirs, which are autobiographical texts that lean on the memories and experiences of the author/illustrator. I define *Swimming Lessons* as a graphic memoir, rather than a graphic novel since it is based on my experiences and memories and not fiction. The texts that I reference do not always self-define as graphic memoirs, but all, I argue, fit into that subsection of the graphic genre since they are autobiographical and detail the authors' memories and experiences.

In recent decades, graphic narratives have gained mass attention and popularity. With modern generations possessing and relying on a higher visual literacy, the graphic form matches this visual interest to discover the memoirs of others alike and different from the reader—corresponding with the rise of popularity and attention to the genre in the past decades.<sup>6</sup> This visual curiosity of readers is met with the influx of authors, illustrators, and storytellers turning

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noy's, "History in the graphic novel." (2002) explains the global evolution from comic books to graphic novels in both terminology and in form. Their writings also highlight the overlap.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Hoover (2012) builds on Gretchen Schwartz (2007) to highlight the intersection between visual and media literacies and graphic novels.

to the genre to tell their intimate and diverse stories. Within this genre, there is a distinct ability to experiment with style, structure, and tone—both in the text, but also specifically in the images. The images of the story represent a unique hybridization of media and art forms that are a dismantling of “high and low” art frontiers (Baetens 29). The images do not need to be objectively great works of ‘high’ art to create a successful graphic narrative. Often the illustrations are a ‘hybridization’ of ‘high and low’ art, which are appealing due to their refusal of perfection. These images of disproportion, comic style, and other ‘low’ art signifiers present familiarity to the reader. Similarly, much like the world of the reader, images and text allow the author/illustrator to create a full worldscape for the reader to dive into. Through the graphic form, authors have immense creative liberty to tell their stories, and coupled with the rise in popularity, they have an eager audience of readers drawn by the current landscape.

By embracing the blurriness and broadness of the genre, the graphic memoir embraces different styles and stories. Baetens writes, “Graphic [narratives] try to avoid all genres that fall prey to...thematic and stylistic streamlining. Graphic [narratives] either ‘deconstruct’ existing formulaic genres...or they explore new genres never within reach of the comics” (Baetens 35). The lack of streamlining and rigid formulation allows creative freedom for the author/illustrator to create a world without strict generic rules. This notion of limitless opportunities is captured in Carolyn Kyler’s likening of the graphic memoir to a map: “Graphic memoirs both contain maps and are themselves maps, creating connections in multiple dimensions between author and narrator, between characters, and between worlds” (Kyler 4). The complex layers of the graphic memoir as a map highlight the possibilities that the memoirist has in exploring their story. The dimensions that result from the hand of the author/illustrator are multifaceted and offer a different perspective to each reader. Similarly, Tillie Walden’s *Spinning*, Marjane Satrapi’s

*Persepolis*, Robin Ha's *Almost American Girl*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* are examples of women embracing and experimenting with the graphic memoir which I explore later in this analysis. All of these texts provide very different forms of storytelling that highlight the limitless opportunities of word and image on the shared page.

The graphic memoir portrays a full memory to the reader differently, as the graphic form fills in a gap that can tackle the visual cues of trauma, sexuality, and other themes. David Herman emphasizes this ability when describing "how graphic narratives deploy word-image combinations to tell the story of a self's becoming, thereby inviting readers to engage in particular methods of worldmaking" (Herman 231). The graphic narrative can capture a moment by immersing the reader in the world of images as if they can feel the texture of the chair, and the world of text as if they could hear the sarcasm in the character's tone. The graphic memoir provides opportunities for both the writer/illustrator and the reader to completely fall into the world of the author's experiences.

At the core of any graphic memoir is the author's framing in reflecting and exploring their narrative. Authors who write and illustrate memoirs, both graphic and textual, focus on "the shown over the summed, the found over the known, the recent over the historical, the emotional over the reasoned" (Larson 22). As Larson suggests, to commit to a memoir is to recapture the spark of the moment, shown as it is frozen in time: what was found at the moment, not what was known in the future. The grit of the present in the memory, rather than the distance the memoirist occupies. And potentially most difficult, the embrace of the emotional in that exact second rather than the hindsight of reason. Yet expanding from Larson's limited point, the memoir awards fluidity and movement of memory, not limited to both complete reflection or complete immersion. In this framing, the process of a memoir is a choice to reckon with one's own

memory through intimacy. The individuality that is embedded into a memoir, as Larson highlights, is a choice to unleash vulnerability while facing self-reflection and judgment by readers. Self-discovery and recollection of memory drive the story and reaction of the audience, therefore representing the core of the memoir.

Memory is a difficult fluid entity that presents a consistent challenge to its author at all stages of life—and to put that complexity onto a graphic page exponentially increases this difficulty. Therefore, the process of discovering the self in the graphic narrative requires the author to use all of their tools in the graphic genre to build a world that dives into the complexity and shortcomings of memory. The reader must follow suit and allow themselves to be thrust into the author's world to understand the illustrated self-character. There is no clear formula for the genre and its sister, the comics genre, which is often referred to as a “gutter medium”— a pun that highlights the style's visual gutters between its images, but also the freedom the genre holds in its style and storytelling.<sup>7</sup> This highlights the “open-endedness within the text itself that enables multiple and even contradictory interpretations of the narrative” (Naghibi 165). The ‘open-endedness’ is especially useful when discussing memories of trauma, childhood, or personal nature. The analytical component of this thesis seeks to explore the dynamic between shaping the ‘self’ through memory and its successful intersection with graphic memoirs, specifically examples of modern narratives by women writers and illustrators. In the following sections, I further break down the topics of memory, the graphic memoir genre, and the young-adult audience.

#### **IV. Under the Surface of Memory in Graphic Form**

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<sup>7</sup> The topic of the ‘gutter’ is highly debated in the comic genre landscape. This paper's usage of the ‘gutter medium’ does not touch on the conflict, but for further foundational literary criticism on the comic ‘gutter’ see Chase Gregory (2012).

The graphic memoir takes its connection to memory further as it unveils the author's version of truth pictorially as well as textually. In using this genre, the memoirist must confront the memory's image to present it to the reader. In doing so, the question of truth and its uncovering is reckoned.<sup>8</sup> To be honest and truthful in telling one's story is an expectation of the genre, yet writing and drawing an authentic memory is nearly impossible. Returning to the notion of the graphic memoir as a map, Kyler writes, "The author is mapped onto a narrator and the author's life mapped onto the narrative told by the memoir. The younger self is mapped onto the narrative told by the memoir... These mappings show both the connections between different items in the author's life and the gap between life and narrative" (Kyler 13). The dimensions of the memoir's mapping are complex and reliant on each other. The truth of the author is no longer the truth of the narrator, as they exist in different points of memory. The past is reflected on but analyzed differently depending on who holds the map. Kyler's mention of 'the gap' highlights how the process of demystifying past memories to the setting of the present requires reflection from the author. The act of remembering causes alterations to the events and emotions of the memory. The notion that remembrance is neatly shelved in storage is utterly false.<sup>9</sup> Memories are "constantly refashioned" by age and experience, mostly by the brain's storing and retrieval mechanisms, but also due to the present demands of the rememberer (Larson 46). Therefore to engage with memory is an act of the present where remembrance engages a new truth.

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<sup>8</sup> In Conway's (2005) study of memory and the self, they use an approach termed the 'self-memory system' (SMS). The SMS consists of the working self and the autobiographical memory knowledge base. These components can operate separately, but when in tandem, they work to form specific autobiographical memories. This is flushed out in further psychological studies on memory, but the essence of truth in memory for this research is reliant on Conway's connection between the working self and the autobiographical base is crucial to understanding the complexities of truth.

<sup>9</sup> For further information on this point: Jonides, Lacey, Nee (2005).

The trickiness of memory and reflection make the memoir a personal battle for the author. In trying to find the string of narrative, the author addresses the feelings even in the most difficult and personal memories. Specifically in coming-of-age memoirs, the author must confront the lingering loss of childhood innocence from the harsh eyes of an adult. In confronting memory “to connect is to resolve...No doubt the adult’s closure salvaged the child’s wound” (Larson 56). This dynamic of the closure from the adult’s hand is present in one of the graphic genre’s most canonical texts, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis* tells the story of Satrapi growing up and coming-of-age in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. From growing older and further apart from the reality of the memories, her reflection of these memories is somewhat warped. The ten-year-old Satrapi’s authentic experience is undoubtedly diluted by the revisitation of adult Satrapi, yet by recapturing the emotions and feelings of the moment the sense of memory is not lost, but is rather shaped by her memoir.

In this excerpt from *Persepolis*, [Figure 4] Satrapi details the experience of wearing a veil at a young age. By using the image and dialogue, she understands and emphasizes the gap in memory. She does this by attempting to place herself in the body of her 10-year-old self, as seen in the physical characteristics of her character, and by using dialogue believable of girls in this context. Although these were most likely not the exact quotes from her peers, Satrapi successfully captures the aura of emotion and the hints of humor that fill in the memory gap and create a map for the reader to follow. Nabizadeh has noted the vagueness of Satrapi’s memory style: “Rather than seeking to represent the past through a photographic likeness, Satrapi’s visual style allows the reader to project their identification with the text precisely through its simplicity” (Nabizadeh 157).



Figure 4: Excerpt from Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* (2007)

Satrapi does not force memory to fit into perfection and notices some advantages to these methods. By not engaging in hyper-realism, Satrapi humanizes the characters by allowing them the freedom to take on the shape of any reader. As a memoirist, she chooses exactly how she frames her memories, deciding to make them accessible or highly specific, therefore shaping her memory around her memoir. She addresses revisiting and transforming memory through her narrative which uses a present voice detailing her experience at ten. The interplay of word and image embraces the complexities of memory to engage both the truth of the past experience and the present reflection—the truth that the memoirist elects.

These pitfalls of memory are extremely present in forming the narrative throughout *Swimming Lessons*. As the text is divided into three sections of time, each component has a distinctly different relationship to memory. The Bower Hill years are the furthest away from my present reality, and therefore their memories are fuzzier and less exact than the recollections of High School and Bucknell. But there are many exceptions to this linear memory process as I remember some moments in extreme clarity from Bower Hill and have trouble deciphering more recent memories which are clouded in emotions or infringed on with different perspectives. The latter was explored in the moment during High School, [Figure 5] when I looked back on a memory very differently from the person I shared the memory with.

The moment happens immediately after I visited Bucknell on a recruiting trip. As seen in Figure 5, I was upset on the way home and was consumed by thoughts of failure and fear. I remember this scene distinctly, even being able to recall some of the loudest thoughts that stayed with me as I drew this page almost four years later. When I was discussing this scene with my mom, the other character pictured here, she remembered the moment differently.



My mom does not exactly recall the desperateness in my composure. She does remember my tears and my thoughts of starting over, but not identically.

The page represents the contrast in this moment's map of memory. Returning to Kyler's understanding of memory in a memoir, "The author is mapped onto a narrator and the author's life mapped onto the narrative told by the memoir" (Kyler 13). The warping of memory is through the hands of the author, narrator, and character—an intersection that is imperfect and not streamlined in the slightest. At this moment, the character Sophia is the closest to the nutshell of remembrance. She sits in the car with her thoughts circulating as seen in the physical wrap of the words around her. The narrator exists more outside of the memory's walls and understands the tension of the memory being influenced by another's perspective. Text blocks act as an explicit separation between the narrator's reflection of the memory and the character's action at the moment, as it is not yet a memory for her. The author is present in the entirety of the page, as I chose, as the memoirist, to include this memory strung together with both voices of the character and the narrator.

## **V. The Graphic Memoir's Lane**

The relationship between the memoir genre and the graphic form has combined the reflection demanded of the memoir and the transparency of the graphic. In the memoir style, as touched on earlier with the concept of memory, the memoirist's exploration of authenticity and truth is pivotal to the piece. Rebecca McClanahan positions the image of the Russian nesting doll as the power of the memoirist: "The first figure, the largest one that holds the others, is the Author. The second, locked inside the Author, is the Guide. The third, locked inside the Guide, is the Other" (McClanahan 129). Although all three of these figures are inside of the author, they all have individual autonomy and differences. Memory flows between all of them to create the

memoir, but the same memories are captured differently. The author is the one writing the words of their memoir. The guide talks for the author on the page but is not the author. And the other is the memoir's core subject, usually a younger version of the author. McClanahan ends this metaphor by stating, "Much of a memoir's power lies in the conversation among these three figures, and in how artfully their distinct personalities interact" (McClanahan 131). The distinction between the three selves is successful when they establish their separateness, then also converse among themselves. Larson pulls on this conflict further: "The process of the memoirist is to dig into her personae and inauthenticity, where the lies and myths are seeded and grow so that she can tell the story of how those lies and myths have buried her sympathies and core self" (Larson 89). The goal of the self-reflection, or the digging as Larson terms it, is not to find the pure truth of memory, but rather to find how the self has protected itself to hide its authentic core. The notion that 'lies and myths' are inherently a part of our defense against revealing our truth highlights the deep layers of self that the memoirist must dig through. The principle that the memoirist is perfectly mirroring themselves on the page is fundamentally incorrect. In the memoir, the persona is the conception of the author's self from the author's mind and hand—fundamentally different from the actual author. The persona and the memoirist work 'with and against' each other, but never in exact tandem, and they acknowledge each other's presence.

The past is what the memoir is obsessed with but the past is not the world the memoirist lives in. "The reason I want to write about the past is that the past houses a person who is not me, a faux me, a me who relinquished some intrinsic authenticity to become I" (Larson 87). This excerpt highlights the blurriness between the persona and the present author. They are inextricably linked in all but in the workings of time. With this crucial difference, the memoirist

holds reality above the ‘faux me,’ and strips the authenticity that the past self once had. This dynamic of the memoirist, the ‘I,’ versus the persona, the ‘faux me’ is no better seen than in the graphic form. The author/illustrator must draw the world of their past experiences and illustrate their vision of themselves on the page. This confrontation of the two selves is undeniable when one sees themselves, their old self, on the page.

One of the most well-known graphic memoirs, which model this conflict between character and memoirist, is Alison Bechdel’s tragicomedy, *Fun Home*. Her book is one of the most widely known graphic memoirs and has focused the spotlight on women and queer writers/illustrators. Bechdel uses the graphic form to demonstrate her complex and often conflicting memories of her father through her upbringing and her explorations of sexuality; the subject matter has also led to a notable ban across the country.<sup>10</sup> In analyzing *Fun Home*, Julia Watson highlights “That splitting of self into observer and observed is redoubled in autographics, where the dual media of words and drawing, and their segmentation into boxes, panels, and pages, offer multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection” (Watson 28). The ‘redoubling’ as Watson describes, requires a harsher hand by the memoirist who must face their memories by exploring them on the page through both word and image.

Bechdel addresses the split of self that the memoir requires explicitly in the beginning of her second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?* Less than a decade after the publication of the critically acclaimed *Fun Home*, Bechdel published *Are You My Mother?* and focuses the lens on her mother. In doing so, she recalls telling her mother that she was writing a memoir that details

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Lemberg (2008) expands on the characters of *Fun Home* further.



Figure 6: Excerpt from Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (2012)

her father's life. In Figure 6, at the start of *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel equates telling her mother of the memoir to coming out as gay and getting her period.

The memoir as a plot device is a key part of her character's narrative which dismantles the separation of the character on the page and the memoirist writing the story. The different perspectives of Bechdel in the dialogue bubbles versus in the text blocks highlight the complexity of the self in the memoir. The graphic form's flexibility in reading patterns (left and right, up and down) is used by Bechdel on this page. If the viewer was to read the text blocks from top to bottom by only glancing at the images, they would read a different Bechdel than if the viewer were just to read the speech bubbles of the Bechdel in the images. These two versions of Bechdel are distinct in time and in purpose. The character driving on the interstate and playing out the future conversation with her mother is living prior to the creation of her first memoir, *Fun Home*. The second version of Bechdel reflects on the limits of the text block, examining how she will start her second memoir about her mother. Yet both of these versions of Bechdel are unaware of what the reader knows—that this is one of the first pages of *Are You My Mother?* And in between these two narratives, Bechdel reaches the point of transcendence that combines all elements of self in the memoir.

In Figure 6, Bechdel explains she felt the need to write and illustrate *Fun Home* for her to move forward in life—to give her father a funeral, to tell the truth. This purpose is linked to one of Larson's points, "The reason I want to write about the past is that the past houses a person who is not me..." (Larson 87). In the middle square, she acknowledges both separation and comparison of herself in the midst of mourning her father and herself in the moment of driving, pronouncing herself a memoirist. The power of the memoir, for Bechdel, is when she recognizes that she needs to reflect on her past self to better understand her present self. Her character

saying, “Uhh...It’s just something I need to do” (Bechdel 6) highlights the importance of understanding the past version of herself, and for Bechdel, a large part of her story is mirrored through her father. The clarity of her memoir about her father is not continued in the memoir about her mother, as she writes in the present to the reader. Bechdel explains that “it has no real beginning” in the text block. Not only is Bechdel’s relationship with her father and mother different, but in writing the second she has already experienced the power of the first memoir and is reflecting on that process. This dimensional reading of the memoir that Bechdel does on these pages combines Kyler’s mapping theory and McClanahan’s image of the nesting dolls. Bechdel’s two memoirs and her understanding of her relationship with the memoir, as seen on this page excerpt, positions the graphic memoir as a tool of self-discovery and reflection.

Similar to Bechdel, the action of writing a memoir became a pivotal part of my story in *Swimming Lessons*. As I was reading so many different graphic memoirs of authors/illustrators telling their important and beautiful stories, it was difficult to legitimately view my work amongst and in conversation with them. In Figure 7, my college-aged character is covering her face with the entirety of her hands and the viewer is only allowed to see her side profile. As if the face was insignificant and unnecessary since my character did not even see the reason why her story should be seen. She is not centered and the image is off-balance, mirroring the character’s emotions and tone. The character is battling with the abstract lines and squiggles that overwhelm the page’s composition. Those lines represent confusion and imperfection as they feel sloppy and inexact. Yet the lines are related to the character on the page since their sisters make up the character they are next to. They are also related to the words in the text block above and beneath their image. There is conflict between the top and bottom texts as the first claims *Swimming*

There were some points while writing this memoir where it felt like it was pointless to tell my story it wasn't grand or awesome or tragic or extraordinary. It was just a story about my love of swimming.



And there were times when I didn't love swimming in the moment, but I had to draw like I did. Sometimes it felt like I was so removed from the version of me on the page. She became different than me.

Figure 7: Excerpt from the "Bucknell Years" in *Swimming Lessons*

*Lessons* as a love story between myself and swimming while the second complicates that love.

This excerpt highlights my understanding of the graphic memoir as an exploration of self and the interactions between my different selves. Bechdel and I come to this conclusion in different ways, but we reach it once we explore the lure of the memoir.

## VI. Splashing the Young Adult Genre

Although memory and the memoir were at the heart of my focus, a large number of the graphic memoirs I read and studied were also classified in the young adult (YA) genre, similarly *Swimming Lessons* is both a part of the memoir and YA genres. The young adult (YA) genre knows its audience and preserves the intimacy of the story for that audience—much like the graphic genre. The YA audience has arguably always been present in literary audiences, but the genre that caters to them is specific. A part of the definition includes, “[YA literature] describe[s] initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels—like all fine literature—address the entire spectrum of life” (Carlsen). As Carlsen coins it, the ‘initiation into the adult world’ captures a moment where the impending access to adulthood is both terrifying and riveting. The not-yet-adult and not-quite-child betweenness is embraced by YA audiences who can relate to the growing pains of life. Although generally surrounding a teenager’s life, there is a universality in the YA narratives. A period of finding oneself and realizing the reality of one’s world can be related throughout the ‘entire spectrum of life.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The term “bildungsroman” is closely tied to the YA genre, and is translated from German to mean the “novel of formation” (Boes 230). It is a flexible subgenre, but in most bildungsroman narratives, “The protagonist wanders in search of love, social justice, or the meaning of life, and on the journey to discovery he or she faces conflict with self, family, and society” (Schwartz & Crenshaw 13). This corresponds with the foundation of the YA genre, and provides an intersection point for the graphic memoir to lean into, as most memoirs explore some sense of the bildungsroman themes.

A difference between children's and YA literature is in the growth of the character's relationship with the reality around them. Trites highlights this pivotal contrast,

The basic difference between a children's and an adolescent novel lies not so much in how the protagonist grows—even though the gradations of growth do help us better understand the nature of the genre—but with the very determined way that YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between society and the individual rather than focusing on self and self-discovery as children's literature does (Trites 20).

Since both children's and YA books demonstrate the growth of character, the key difference is the character's development through outside forces testing them. Trites' word choice of 'interrogate' highlights the confrontations that the YA character must face in their world. The protagonist's crucial relationship is the society they interact with—as it shapes every other relationship they have, most interestingly with themselves. When the main character is challenged by the limitations of their power, it affects how they treat their best friend, their view of the school they attend, and their self-confidence. Through this interrogation of social constructions, their character's growth becomes more complex and nuanced.

Robin Ha's *Almost American Girl: An Illustrated Memoir* highlights this dynamic of a main character facing adversity through major life changes and growing from it—highlighting the connection between YA and graphic memoir. Ha's teenage character faces many changes in her daily life from moving from South Korea to the United States in her formative years. At this moment in the text, Ha attends a comic drawing class: she highlights her excitement to show off her piece and then quickly realizes the talent of her peers. This discovery threatens her confidence as the competition of others dulls her sense of self-worth. In the middle square on the



Figure 8: Excerpt from Robin Ha's *Almost American Girl* (2020)

first row, the illustration is flooded with color and bolded font that reads ‘Ready to show off!’ and highlights Ha’s confidence in her work. This is contrasted with the dullness and lack of color in the next two squares where another student shows their work. The bottom square of the page is overwhelmed with the other student’s work and encircles the young Ha. Although not one of the bigger challenges of Ha’s narrative, this scene [Figure 8] acts as a way that the outside world is pressuring Ha’s self-identity. It seems childish to the reader that Ha would believe her work to be far superior to everyone else’s, yet at the moment, as portrayed by her stark facial expression and the overwhelming position of the graphic squares, it’s believably challenging for her. A YA audience would undoubtedly feel this moment of difficulty and relate to a time when the world stomped over them too.

The YA string of connection and relatability that Ha masterfully touches on is prevalent in many parts of *Swimming Lessons*, even when my character is not seen on the page. The example from Figure 10 highlights the YA vein that flows throughout the High School section and my character’s recognition of shifting power dynamics. These three pages detail the end of my college recruiting process. Building from the excerpt in Figure 5 which details my hopelessness in the process, these pages again play off my character's thoughts at this moment. The first page highlights my character’s inner thoughts and fears combined with the outside voices and pressures I felt that surrounded me. In all three stands the door which represents my future directly in the center of the page. The door is mysterious, yet formidable, with a touch of darkness bringing negative connotations along with it. The reader knows as much about the door as my character does in this moment—next to nothing.

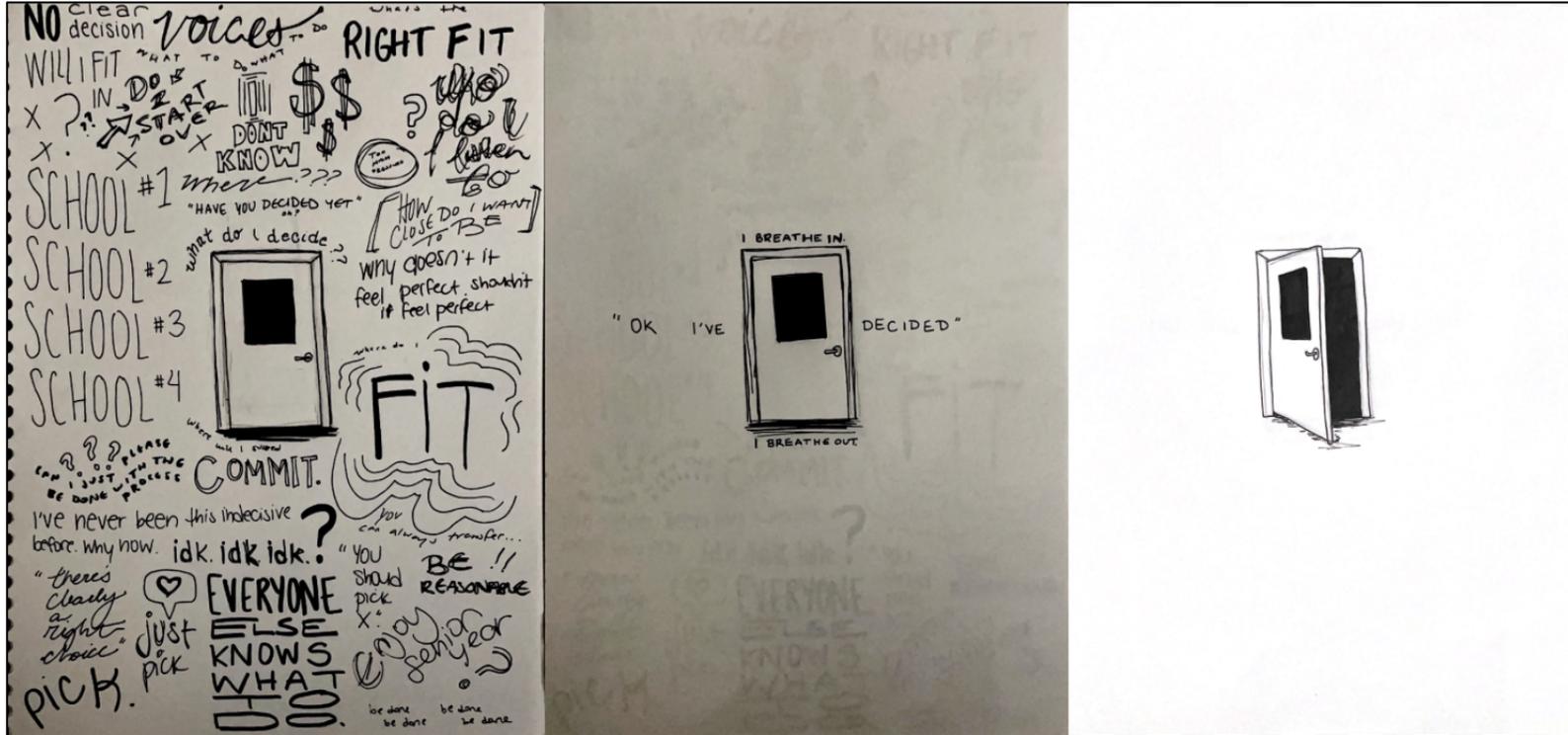


Figure 9: Three-paged excerpt from the "High School Years" in Swimming Lessons

At this moment, my character is somewhat powerless, as she is not even seen on the page. As Trites observes, “YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between society and the individual rather than focusing on self and self-discovery” (Trites 20). The door is more powerful than my character at this moment, and even though my character might not have known that at the moment—I as the memoirist, know that now. This is represented on the second page when my words dance around the mirror, not in direct focus or attention, but slotted next to the unmovable door. My words frame the door as if making peace with the fact that the power between myself and the ‘social constructions’ are not one and the same. Although this reads somewhat pessimistically, it is true to the shift in perspective between myself and the world, as it is no longer just *my* world. The last page can be read in many different ways. The door is there, and it stands alone. But the door is open. And I think that captures the magic of the young adult genre. To truly see the world around and its overwhelming power, but rather than running from that recognition of power, choosing to embrace where I stand in the world and keep pushing toward the next chapter.

## VII. A Final Lap

In this reflective analytical essay, I opened the door to highlight the limitless world of graphic memoirs. This universe allows memories to be adapted and tested, explored and denied, and everything in between. The memoir genre can flourish in both word and image form, and create the world of the memoirist so deeply that both the author and the reader can get lost in it. The graphic memoir’s intersection with the young-adult genre gifts new characters with relatable stories, again immersing the reader in their guide’s eyes. The excerpts in *Spinning*, *Persepolis*, *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?*, and *Almost-American Girl* offer a taste of their author’s worlds and their ability to meld the graphic memoir genre to their own purpose. In this piece of my

thesis, I pronounce *Swimming Lessons* as a part of the conversation in the graphic memoir genre, as it is a genre that embraces all stories and authors. The graphic memoir genre opened the door of possibilities for me as a reader, scholar, author/illustrator, and memoirist. It is with all these roles that I contribute to it.

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## Artist Statement

There are many versions of myself in the pages of *Swimming Lessons*. Every time I draw my character on the page, she is different. Her hand might be slightly smaller or her hair part is moved, but she is uniquely individual from the next page's character. She is also a testament to who I was, as the memoirist, at that exact moment. She is an extension of the hand that created her. Early on in the process, if I was feeling particularly confident that day it reflected in how I drew my character: less hesitation in the lines, more concreteness in her facial expressions. But as I continued with my memoir, my art seemed to take on a life of its own.

Its life stemmed from the blankness of the white page met with my black ink and dashes of watercolor. I chose black ink due to its presence of finality on the page. The black pen replaced my pencil marks' hesitation to make the character or setting confidently take up the page. The ink's resolve sometimes pushed on strictness, in contrast to the tone of the Bower Hill years—therefore watercolor was added. When I used watercolor, it was the final step in my artistic process, and it was the product of much thought. Watercolor is used sparingly, I decided early on, and when used it symbolizes the heart of *Swimming Lessons*: that initial spark of joy from the swimming pool. The watercolor does not follow the bounds of the black ink line. It ebbs and flows, as it is an extension of the subject matter itself. In the later sections, watercolor is used triumphantly and minimally, tonally signaling the ebb and flow of my love for swimming.

Along with the iterations of watercolor, it is easy to mark three versions of my character, the “Bower Hill” Sophia, the “High School” Sophia, and the “Bucknell” Sophia. The youngest iteration is the most cartoonish, with bug eyes, an oversized head, and a minimized body form. The “High School” Sophia's head is shrunken down and the lines of her body make a more

realistic form. The oldest version approaches physical proportionality and strips away the comic veil. I first started the memoir with drawing the “Bower Hill” Sophia since I was comfortable with that style and could avoid the difficulty of realism. My growth in confidence and skills are evident through “Bucknell” Sophia, as it is my latest and most developed work. Although these three Sophias are thematically different, there are actually a hundred versions of Sophia throughout *Swimming Lessons*.

Apart from my medium and character style, many fonts, motifs, and dimensions form each moment of *Swimming Lessons*. Fonts are an intersection between the two parts of the graphic genre—word and image. Playing with fonts felt as if I took full advantage of this relationship. The choice of different fonts worked in many sections to portray the overwhelming overthinking of my character. In this way, fonts became a motif in themselves, similar to the motif of doors used throughout the High School sections and Bucknell years. Doors were extremely fun to play with since they complicated the transition between chapters and sections of memory. Appearing that my memories could stand alone and be closed off, yet running opposite to the narrative. Lastly, I wanted to draw attention to the use of dimensions in *Swimming Lessons*, namely in the Bucknell years during the pandemic and the end of swimming pages. The cut-out in the center of the page to reveal my character and blankness worked to add a layer of complexity for the reader. My character was existing with all of these thoughts and pressures around her, but when you turned the page you just saw her alone with a mask on. These moments stand out to me as the building blocks of the memoir, pieces carefully crafted to work together to create *Swimming Lessons*.

One of the many rewarding aspects of this thesis and the creation of *Swimming Lessons* were weekly conversations with Professor Chow. It was a way of getting outside myself, both in

my head and on the page, to truly look at what I presented that week. Over the course of four years, some weeks I hated the work I produced, but by talking through it with my mentor I was able to see the work through a more holistic lens. I certainly struggled with feelings of insignificance, imposter syndrome, and inauthenticity, but rather than let those halt the story, I weaved them in.

And at the heart of *Swimming Lessons*, fittingly, is the anchor of swimming. I was on the swim team, hopping in the pool six out of the seven days a week, sometimes twice a day while creating this project. I describe *Swimming Lessons* as a love letter to swimming since it is founded on my relationship with the water and its constancy throughout my life. Much like any love narrative, there have been countless ups and downs which can be seen on the pages. But at its core is a love that has pushed me and shaped me and taught me, through all of its forms, through all of its avatars, through all of its moments. The act of swimming and the act of creating *Swimming Lessons* melded into something very similar at the end of this. They both have let me grow and uncover myself. I am deeply proud of *Swimming Lessons*, as like swimming, it is an extension of myself. I leave this project knowing that I have not drawn my last page for *Swimming Lessons* and I have not swum my last lap of swimming. A new chapter awaits me.