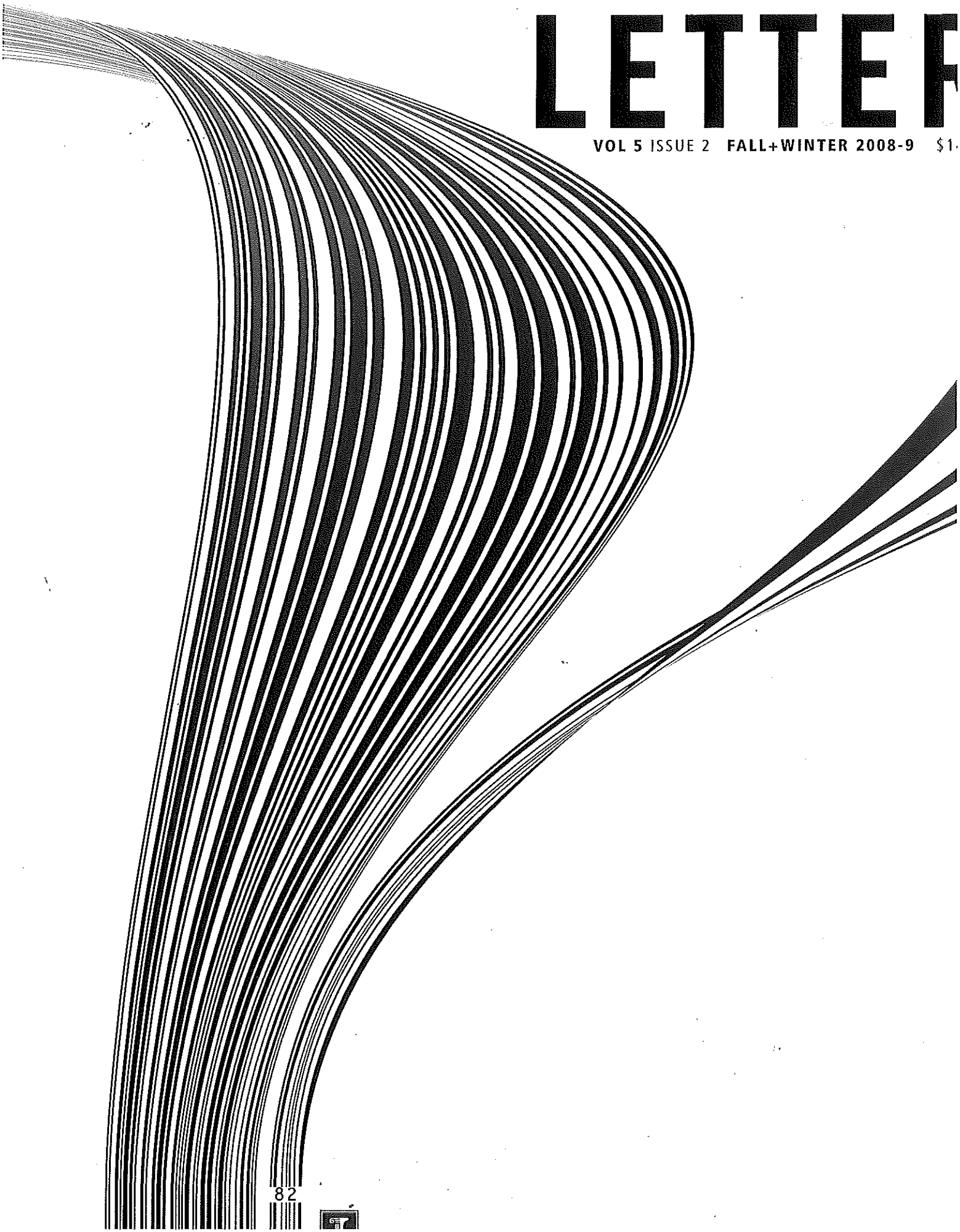

LETTER

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"It's Synch-Redible!!!" reads the sign outside the YWCA in Troy, New York, a modern, airy anomaly of a building in this hunched, soot-darkened beggar of a town. It is the U.S. Synchronized Swimming Association Regional Finals.

Inside, arrayed across the center of the lobby in an improvised barricade, are tables anchored by friends and family of the Troy Synchro Maids selling baked goods and juice boxes, proffering clipboards to new registrants, frantically lettering and posting stern signs (*"No Knoxing in Lobby!!! Swimmers ONLY on Deck!!! That means YOU!"*).

"Didn't I tell you," Irene mutters archly. "These are the pushiest moms in the Northeast Region." She beckons five members of our Cambridge team of eight past the check-in tables, waving her finger at the entrance to the locker room, just in case they've failed to notice the aqua-blue arrows labeled "Locker Room" taped to the mustard-yellow cement walls like some demented Andy Warhol installation. "Don't worry, ladies. I'll handle the registration," she calls to their backs.

Around us in the lobby, small clusters of girls are bending, stretching, raising, swooping, and folding and pumping their arms. As they walk through their choreography, each portion of their limbs—upper arm, forearm, wrist, hand, fingers—moves independently, locked in a tight dance not with the rest of the arm but with the hands, wrists, elbows of the girls on either side. Abstractly gazing at some distant point, their faces calm and still, the girls snake sideward in an expansive S. They fan out into diagonal lines slicing through the cooler-and-gym-bag-littered terrain. They form circles and shuffle towards the center, their hands waving and elbows bowing.

"So you'll check the kids in?" I ask Irene.

"Oh, you bet I'll check the kids in," she answers with a ferocity I cannot parse. I just know that I'd rather not be near it.

"Okay, so I'll go help them get ready," I mumble, though help is the one thing I cannot offer now that the driving is done. Food funds, early morning and late night transportation, and of course noisy clapping and cheering—these I can provide. But help? I am a drowning woman, useless in the sea of sequins, bobby pins, scoop necks, lipstick, waterproof mascara, combs, and frantic calls for hair care and costume repair that I know will greet me in the locker room.

Still, I go in, startled as always by the moist aromatic blend of chlorine, mildew, and shampoo that rolls out like fog as I open the door. I love being in the kids' locker room, where the energy is tangible. Some of the girls are long and sleek, others compact and densely muscled; some have smooth skin, more have pimples blemishing their cheeks, upper lips, and shoulders. But in contrast to the locker room at the gym I frequent after work, nobody here has wrinkles, sags, folds, or puckers. I see none of the soft, rounded bellies, not even a hint of the loose or parchment-like flesh that I know encloses their mothers.

My fifteen-year-old daughter Layla and her friend Suzanne, Irene's daughter, are engaged in animated, if oblique conversation, one that seems to me to rather studiously draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the girls on other teams.

"She's cool," Layla says.

"Who?" Suzanne asks.

"His mother."

"Whose?"

"The dude's."

"Why?"

"She's just awesome."

Pulling a large plastic mixing bowl and an envelope of Knox Gelatin out of my gym bag, I follow arrows labeled *"Knoxing"* to a corner of the room marked by still more signage instructing me to *"Get your Hot Water HERE."* Hand-drawn block arrows point downward from the *"HERE"* to three teapots plugged into a single extension cord, with a small but impatient line of mothers waiting their turn.

"Knoxing" is the sticky, laborious process of applying liquefied gelatin to the brushed and tightly pulled-back hair of the swimmers. As the gelatin cools, it creates an almost impermeable helmet that keeps the hair in place. It usually takes my daughter a few of days' worth of showers to get the gelatin out, but when she does, her hair is incredibly thick and lustrous.

I can Knox about as well as I can paint a wall. Fortunately, Knoxing requires about the same degree of fine motor coordination, so nobody objects when I pitch in for this phase of the meet preparation. Later, before the routines begin, the girls will need more sophisticated help positioning their sequined tiaras and drilling through their hair with the tips of several bobby pins to hold the headpieces in place. But for the figures portion of the meet, which is already underway for the younger age cohort, they all wear simple black bathing suits and white caps worn high, stretched over stiffly Knoxed buns. When coupled with the goggles perched on foreheads like a second pair of eyes, they make the swimmers look like big-brained aliens.

I wish the girls luck, give my alien a loud smack of a kiss on the cheek—an act that would normally be mortifying but is not only allowed but expected in the synchro subculture—and head out to the poolside bleachers.

I have little trouble finding the other mothers from our team. With the exception of Irene, we are all back row sitters. Like the slouching tall girls in junior high, when we don't feel invisible we feel conspicuous. Five consecutive years of always coming in at the bottom of the pack, augmented by a healthy dose of snobbery, have led us to believe that we will never penetrate the Synchro Mom in-crowd, with its immaculate bakers, pert costumers, junior figures judges, and cheerful chauffeurs. So instead we tend to ignore them, creating a bunker in the bleachers not with the usual array of coolers, but from stacks of books and sections from the Sunday *New York Times.*

And our kids' proudly glum attitude mirrors—or maybe fuels—our own. While the Aqualinas and the Water Lilies wear team warm-up leggings and tee shirts and jackets and head bands in perky pink, blue, and yellow, Cambridge Synchro wear jeans and black and white jackets with a large, blunt "CS" emblazoned on the back.

"We came up with our team slogan," Layla told me one night after practice a few weeks earlier. *"We're Cambridge Synchro. We have lives."*

It was Irene who enthusiastically endorsed the black-and-white motif. At the time I thought it was because she felt confident that at any given meet, at least half the parents would inadvertently wear the team colors. Or perhaps it was because—when I first met her—she took pride and talked at great length about what it meant to be a white woman married to a black man. But now that I know her better, I've come to believe that the black-and-white is just a visible representation of how she thinks.

"Tom wanted to come today," she says, plunking herself down beside me. "Can you believe the audacity of that son of a bitch?"

"Oh, so I guess the reconciliation talks didn't go so well."

"Reconciliation?" she snorts. "I can't believe I waited this long to kick the bastard out!"

"So did he admit to having an affair?"

"He didn't deny it. No, he just tried to turn the whole conversation around and blame me for being, I don't know, too 'self-involved' or something. Self-involved, as if I'm the one gallivanting off to conferences and religious retreats and he's the one holding down the fort with an ADD son and a daughter enrolled in every extracurricular activity under the sun."

"How is Suzanne taking it?" I ask, not wanting to get drawn into Tom-bashing, especially since on the few occasions I met him, he always impressed me as a quiet and serene man, in contrast to his loudly and perpetually put-upon wife.

"She doesn't want to talk about it," Irene answers with a hint of disappointment.

"Well maybe she just doesn't want to talk about it with you," I say, then hasten to add, "or Tom. At least not yet." Suzanne is a lovely girl—not just beautiful, but poised, funny, and devoted to her friends.

"I know," Irene answers. "I'm giving her space. And I'm sure she's talking to her friends about it...just like all of you are talking about it..." She casts a sidelong, inquisitive glance my way, but I'm not about to share the little that Layla's told me about Suzanne's ambivalent feelings of anger at her father's frequent absences and almost allergic annoyance in her mother's presence. And I'm certainly not going to acknowledge the other moms' tacit sympathy for Tom that Irene has obviously picked up on.

I don't have to respond, though, because Suzanne, Layla, and two other girls from their team are now lined up in a queue, waiting to go before the table of judges whose backs are directly in front of us, and perform the third of four required technical figures.

"Which figure is this?" I ask.

"Ballet leg. If we don't all get at least seven's on this, there's something seriously wrong, either with the girls or the judges."

Camille, probably the best and most elegant of the Cambridge Synchro swimmers, stretches out on her back, lying flat as a fallen leaf on the surface of the water. Holding one leg straight, she raises her other leg straight up and perpendicular to her body, toes pointed gracefully. She holds the pose for about five seconds, then just as she's about to release it, her hips, which have been supported by a frantic stationary sculling of her hands underwater, dip below the surface.

"Damn!" Irene exclaims. "That'll cost her at least a point."

Camille ends the pose, treads water, flashes a pained and perfunctory smile at the judges, then moves on to the next station.

A volunteer—undoubtedly the little sister of one of the swimmers—calls out the scores that the three judges have held up. "Six-one, Six-three, Six-one," she recites, her voice remarkably clear and loud above the din. A second volunteer records them in a ledger book that will eventually be transcribed into a database designed specifically for scoring synchronized swimming meets.

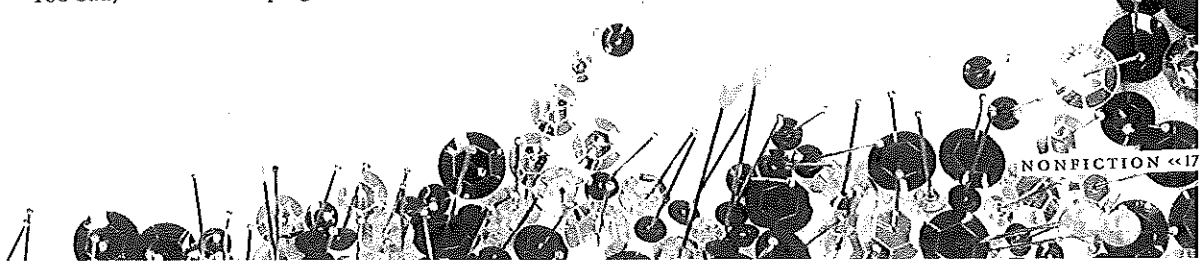
"Okay, that's pretty good," I say. "Do you know any of the judges?"

"The blonde over there who should have let her hair turn gray about ten years ago? That's Dotty. She's on the national board, so she has to be fair. I don't know the other two—I don't think they're coaches. I bet they're moms from Manchester or Troy or New Haven. I swear, practically every parent on those three teams has been through at least Level One certification."

"Isn't that the training you and Joan went for?"

"Yeah, but we qualified too late to be judges for this meet."

"Too bad," I murmur, hoping to avoid the reprimand that I know is coming next.



"I know you all think I'm overly involved, but the fact is that if more of us went for training, we'd have a better chance of stacking the judges' tables the way these other teams do, not to cheat, of course, but just to make sure things stay fair."

She's right, of course, but the truth is that I just don't care enough to invest precious hours that way. Neither does Pat, Camille's mom, who sits calmly behind us with one eye on the swimmers, one on the Spanish papers she's reading, and none on the competently dancing hands in her lap that are knitting a sweater for her beloved dog. In fact, other than Irene and Joan, whose loopy lack of self-consciousness enables her to try to engage the Manchester and Nashua mothers in conversations about how chaos theory manifests itself even in the most perfectly executed combination spin, none of us is passionately interested in our daughters' sport.

"This is Irene's surrogate job," Pat had observed at the last parents' meeting as we waited for her to finish haranguing the coach about team discipline and call the meeting to order. "In fact, I can't imagine Irene doing any other job."

"But she did. She used to be a high-level marketing exec," I murmured back. "For some big fashion or fragrance house." And when I looked at her hair, a blowzy black mass with a dramatic, Sontag-like wave of white in the front, I could imagine how she might have once cut a striking figure.

"Well maybe she ought to try going back to work," Pat answered. "Suzanne would certainly welcome it."

"So would Tom, I'm sure. It sure beats alimony." At the sound of her estranged husband's name, Irene looked up sharply and in my direction.

"Busted," Pat whispered.

And now as I look at the other Cambridge parents behind us, I realize that not only do all of us but Irene have jobs, but most of us have intact marriages too. We do, in short, have other things to do with our time.

"And no, this isn't about me," Irene continues. "I think the girls would feel more supported if more of us got certified as judges."

"You may be right," I answer equivocally. To this day I remember how much I hated it when my mother was a substitute teacher in my third-grade class. Would Layla feel any differently if I was sitting impassively with my scorecards, judging not just her but, even worse, her friends?

We get up and walk to the other side of the pool so we can see the kids do their Front Walkovers. This is a tougher figure than Ballet Leg, requiring the swimmer to start out vertical, head down, and completely submerged. Suzanne pauses now in a perfect, upside-down split, then achingly slowly, still submerged, raises one leg up and over. It's bizarrely exquisite, seeing these apparently disembodied legs do their brief dance, and Suzanne's excellent score reflect her form.

"Congratulations," I say, patting Irene briefly on the back. "She was gorgeous."

And for just a moment Irene's mouth relaxes. "She was, wasn't she?"

Layla is next, and while her shorter legs create a less graceful tableau, the irrepressible smile on her face as she pops up to the surface shows that she knows she nailed it. Her pride in herself is delightful, and in this moment I not only forgive but embrace all those sports clichés about personal bests and it being the effort that counts.

Then their teammate Stephanie comes up and mid-figure, loses her vertical alignment. Like the Tower of Pisa, her upright leg tilts in an awkward and unintended bow toward the

judges, then makes an unsightly splash as it joins her other leg in the water. She doesn't wait to hear her scores ("Four-eight, Four-seven, Four-eight"). Mortified, she swims quickly to the ladder and climbs out of the pool. Figures scores will get factored into overall team scores, so her performance has already hurt them. But Suzanne and Layla have waited for her, and immediately enclose her in a hug. I am, as usual, touched by these adolescent girls' kindness toward one another.

"We've got to get the girls ready for the team routines," Irene announces. "They're up third."

She practically trots off, indifferent to perils of the wet deck, moving remarkably briskly for someone with chronic fatigue syndrome.

"More like selective fatigue syndrome," Layla had archly observed to me a few weeks earlier. "Honestly, Suzanne does the cooking and shopping, her brother does the yard work—I really don't know what Irene does besides get on Suzanne's case for not doing enough." In one of those less-than-lustrous mother-daughter bonding moments, I answered with a complicit shrug.

Inside the locker room, chaos prevails. Rolled up wet black bathing suits drape the benches and floors like stationary eels, while it is the girls who are writhing and wriggling their way into bathing suits that broadcast the theme of their routines. The members of one team, adorned in suits with a dense green foliage pattern, are now painting small whiskers on their faces with eyeliner. Clearly we're going to hear something from *The Lion King* at least once today. The Synchro Maids wear royal blue velour suits with sequined epaulets on the shoulders and bronze buttons down the front. Will it be the *1812 Overture*? Or maybe a Michael Jackson song?

In the Cambridge Synchro corner of the room, our girls are suiting up for their first two routines. Camille is applying scarlet lipstick to match her off-the-shoulder red suit, and with three bobby pins protruding from her mouth and two in each hand, Irene is affixing a fan-like headpiece to Natasha, Camille's duet partner in a *Bolero-Flamenco* medley. Meanwhile, Layla and the other four girls swimming the Team routine are wearing dramatic black suits with a finely stitched white profile of a man in a mask across their chests and plastic white gardenias clamped into their rigid hair. The costumes are remarkably subtle, almost elegant, here in this riot of sequins and rouge, and they are all the handiwork of Irene. She is an undeniably talented seamstress, and I remember her telling me that before she had kids and stopped working, she'd studied design and made the fabric art that still hangs from the slightly dingy walls of her suburban duplex. That experience shows now. All of the moms have come in to help and with calm and focus, Irene issues instructions and corrections to her bumbling but well- intentioned pit crew. Here, in the pungent climate of chlorine and nerves, she is the cool captain.

In minutes we are done and, not daring to smear their makeup, offer the girls vampy air kisses. Back in the bleachers, we put our reading materials back into their canvas bags. It's show time.

The Aqualinas stride out to one end of the pool, a vision in pink, and strike a pose of forced insolence, chins on hands, elbows resting on each others' backs. The opening chords of the overture to *Grease* blare out and bounce back from the cement walls, the girls toss aside their pom-poms, and one after another, dive into the pool. First one girl disappears under the water's surface, then the next and the next, and after the fifth has submerged comes the long pause and strangled anticipation as all the parents on deck hold their breaths, waiting for the girls to surface. And then as Olivia Newton-John spits out the first perky syllables of "Summer Nights," the Aqualinas burst out of the water in almost perfect unison, hands waving over heads, and the crowd dutifully cheers.

These girls are good, skimming across the surface on their sides, their top legs bent so that their heels nestle into their thighs while their gaudily painted fingers make meaningless but highly coordinated circles and swoops through the air. Their form is impeccable, their timing excellent, their choreography predictable, but with enough startlingly difficult moves thrown in to cause Irene to loudly complain, "There goes whatever shot we had at second place. They were flawless, and they'll get an artistic merit point on reputation alone."

"Geez, I didn't know we had a shot at second place."

She glares at me and my glib mouth, and Joan wags a mocking finger at me as Irene turns back to face the pool.

The next team, from Middletown, Connecticut, is fairly new to the synchro world and the one team we can generally count on as being worse than us. They don't disappoint, as with stout good cheer they stutter and splash their way through a souped-up version of the theme from *Chariots of Fire*.

And now out come our girls: Layla, Stephanie, Jen B., Jen M., and Suzanne. I see them at the locker room door holding hands, exchanging whispered words of encouragement and absolute, unwavering solidarity. They call each other "hon," these girls, and when they often express their preference for each other's company over that of the skulking, desperate boys around them, it's not just bravado. They line up at pool's edge, stiff and proud, and as a muddle of strings belches the opening notes of the overture to *Phantom of the Opera*, I feel my throat tighten and my eyes well up with tears.

They dive in together, and after what feels like an hour, they surface together, forced smiles on their faces, and lay out, their feet and hands linked in the shape of a slightly deformed starfish. Now comes a brisk and energetic series of porpoises and barracudas, kip twirls and foot-first sculls in tempo with the increasingly manic music. The girls pause. As their legs frantically tread below the surface, their hands—first left, then right—slowly reach up and draw down as if they are pulling themselves up an invisible rope, and they rise exquisitely up out of the water until their torsos are completely exposed.

Suddenly, with all the lack of subtlety only Andrew Lloyd Weber can offer, there's a dramatic silence. Then come the faint but torrid strains of "The Music of the Night." The girls drop their arms, sink, and form a chain of intertwined legs and shoulders. Quietly, gracefully, they glide across the pool, but I see how their chests are heaving from the effort of the past four minutes. Winded and tired, they dive once more, and I know that they are arranging themselves in a tight circle, linking arms, and emptying their lungs to stay submerged for the final lift. The music builds to a sobbing crescendo, and as her teammates pool their remaining strength to push her upward, Suzanne triumphantly emerges straight up from the water until she seems to stand on its surface, arms rapturously open, like the bride atop a wedding cake.

The music abruptly stops and we, the Cambridge Synchro moms, leap to our feet cheering and clapping for our miraculous children who have lifted not just Suzanne, but all of us.

Irene's fist pumps the air and she turns to me, eyes blazing defiantly. And then as she cranes to hear the technical scores, I understand. For once in her life, *she* wants to be the judge.