

I shiver as I pull my jumper over my head and expose my pale and soft arms to the spring air. In the past few years I have swum all through the bitter winter, no matter how unwelcoming the thought had been from the comfort of my warm bed. The result had almost always been worth it; the exhilaration of powering through the mist that enveloped the warm skin of the water, my body quickly adapting to the shift in temperature and becoming one with the familiar liquid. I'd also always revelled in the benefit of swimming at a time reserved for the truly committed; no fighting for space in the lanes or dodging the obligatory flipper adorned swimmer. There was always a stillness and quiet to that time of the year. Now there is also stillness and quiet, although for markedly different reasons. Myself and 20 other Melbournians look at the water from which we have been kept for nearly 100 days. We've all fought hard to get here; with so few freedoms, this one is huge. I will later be told that 15,000 of us are trying to book a swim every day. I don't yet know how lucky I am to have won this spot.

Each lane declares a different speed: SLOW, MEDIUM, FAST. I stretch an aqua swim cap over my now absurdly long hair and pause before committing to a lane speed. Will I be any faster than 'slow' after all this time? The lifeguard sees my moment of hesitation and jokes "I wouldn't worry too much; no one is going particularly fast". I realise that my self-consciousness is uniquely un-unique; every person here is facing the same lack of swim-fitness. We may have done other things, we may have run, skipped, lifted, yoga-ed, stretched, but none of us have swum. We're all wondering if it will still be there.

I take a breath and remove the cloth mask that covers my mouth and nose. I breathe in the chlorine wafting from the water. I've driven past these walls and anxiously tried to peek in hoping to catch a glimpse of my beloved pool. Now I stand on the edge, staring at the famous 'AQUA PROFONDA' that adorns the wall at the other end of the pool and I feel like I'm home. A rare moment of nakedness as I realise there are more uncovered mouths in this one small area than I've seen in months. I can give a small smile and it will be seen without having to worry whether or not my eyes are conveying the smile hidden behind the mask. I sit on the edge of my chosen lane (trusty 'ol medium), put on my goggles and slip into the blue tinted liquid. My body immediately tingles with the thrill of being in a body of water again. *Everything will be okay.*

I take one more look around me before submerging myself. One arm in front of the other, breathe to the left, stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe to the right. The muscles in my arms surge and pull me forwards and it's almost like I've never been away. I feel like I could swim for hours. There's something about the trip to the deep end of the pool that has always thrilled me. The way it dips down, the tiles of the bottom mirroring the coming depth by becoming a darker shade of blue at the halfway point. For some reason it's always made me wonder what it looks like empty. There's something sad about an empty pool; it makes me think of the end of civilisation - this distinctly created space that expires so quickly without maintenance. I approach the depths of the dark blue and feel uncontrollably free. For 100 days we haven't been allowed to go further than 5km, there have been curfews and strict time limits on being outdoors, I haven't been able to hug my loved ones for six months. Life has been more regimented than I have ever known it to be. And I am lucky, every day I remind myself of that, these are small prices to pay given the stakes. But suddenly, here I am floating in the balmy depths of a public swimming pool and all of those restrictions fade away.

I take one last breath at the end of the pool before tumbling forward and launching myself off the wall. When I first learnt to tumble turn I would squeeze my eyes shut, despite my goggles, as if by closing my eyes I could prevent the water from entering some unwanted opening. Once I recognised what I was doing I opened my eyes and realised I'd been missing one of the most magical parts of the swim experience. The world spinning in a mess of bubbles, the sun glinting through the blurry lid of the water as I turn in slow motion. The deep end also allowing for a deeper dive, time to slowly and deeply observe the world around me before I have to come to the surface for air.

I'm allowed 45 minutes. That gives the staff 15 minutes to sanitise everywhere the 20 of us have been before allowing in the next 20 lucky Melbournians. So often in the past I'd quickly swum a kilometre or two before jumping out and rushing onto something else. This time is different. *Time* is different now. Everything is slower, whether we like it or not. In this moment, I savour every precious minute of my 45. In my final minute I take off my cap and goggles; as naked and as unencumbered as society allows and swim long slow breaststroke along the bottom of the pool, my hair billowing behind me. *Remember this feeling.*

A voice booms over the loudspeaker that the swim time has finished. We all shiver as we change next to the pool. No more gendered bathrooms and warm showers and leisurely dressing times. This is quick, public and fumbling. But we're all smiling. We all recognise in ourselves, and in each other, the altered state that comes from a return to water.