

# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## Diva Swimmer

*Liz Morrish*

Have you ever contemplated a part of your body and thought it looks like your mother's? For me it's the legs. The older I get, the more they look like hers. Thin below – spaghetti legs – and then full, muscular thighs rising on endless femurs up to narrow, unwomanly hips. The stomach is flatter though. Thank God. She looked like a swimmer too, and she taught me how to dominate the water, soar with it, leave the earth behind, and inhabit another gravity.

You can tell, actually, who's going to cut it in the water. Look at this guy, for instance. Hey Mister Schlub do you think you belong in this lane? It says "fast" – do you really think you're fast? Can we even see a pectoral muscle in that chest? So, you think I'm going to let you swim in here with me? OK, let's see how long you last. He hangs in the water, his body almost perpendicular beneath the surface. There's no speed in him, no strength. His splayed fingers claw at the water. He doesn't know how to make his limbs coordinate like a set of levers to make him surge down the pool like me. I elongate in the water as if I'm on a rack. My swimming was designed by Isaac Newton: power equals force times velocity. If I concentrate hard enough I can pitch every muscle with precisely the degree of force, tension, and angle I need to augment the pull. My stroke feels like the perfect conservation of motion. My right hand penetrates the surface, thumb first to engage the catch. Then the torque as I turn my fingertips down to bring more purchase on the water. Recruit latissimus dorsi at this point, and rest the upper arm as the hand sweeps in a figure of eight underneath me. Next bring triceps onstage. Hello triceps! Your job is to get this arm out of the water before it loses momentum, swings too far back and causes drag. Elbow first, out of the water, and seamlessly pass the load on to deltoid, keeping the arm close to the ear. I turn my face slightly to drink air from the pocket between my armpit and the bow-wave now drowning Mister Schlub. He shrinks deferentially as this machine scythes past, leaving him blinded by the soda-siphon of my fluttering feet.

My body talks to those bathers, and theirs talk to me. You see, there's a difference between swimmers and bathers. Bathers scull along in the water looking as if they may as well be ambling along the bath side. Look at Miss Blonde Thong getting in here. All slap and suntan. Wears a bikini that disappears into the dimpled cellulite of her bronzed buttocks. She moves without effort, coiffed head periscoping ahead of her like some aquatic meerkat. I can't restrain the urge to intimidate her, and so tumble turning, I rear out of the water and dolphiniate down the pool with an undulating butterfly. She screws up her

eyes as the wash buffets her and darkens her ponytail. She's a goner. Off to the hot-tub before five lengths are done.

Next in is Competition. She looks promising. Heavy built girl – chubby, but good arms – deltoids fanned by a skein of striated muscle – and narrow hips. She's confident as she walks to the poolside, scanning for a clear lane. I stop, breathing hard at the pool end, taking her in, waiting to see how she casts off, willing her to take me on. Please, please, race me. Obliging she vaults into a fast, but graceless, freestyle. She windmills through the water, this girl, with as much style as a food mixer. Slyly, I wait for her to turn, and then I launch the challenge – only one of us will walk out of this pool the conqueror. She's a stroke ahead of me, but I pull hard and I'm even with her as we turn. I throw my legs over my head, taking care to leave my hands flat on the surface. My head rises up between them, my body describing an arc, my hands reaching to cup the water. I dip my left foot, tighten the rectus muscle on the right side of my waist, and level out ahead of her. She's seen me and now she wants her space back. We're in an arms race, a marine slugfest of pumping legs and thrusting egos. Ten lengths, and I laugh imperiously as I feel her dropping back. But she isn't letting go, she's not ready to stop and let me have my victory. You sucker! This is how I like my victims, and how I like to play with them. I slow a little and let her feel she's keeping pace with me. Then gradually, I let my speed increase until I feel my body extend, my head dip and with every muscle spindle and joint receptor I factor how to step up the pace. She's dead in the water, but it was good while it lasted. Competition is soon a whole length behind me and shipping water like a holed sloop. How old is she, I wonder? Twenty-two? Could be my daughter. Wassup kid – gonna let granny beat you up in the pool?

I was never better in the pool than I am now. I wonder how long this will last, the energy, the physical confidence, the sense of supremacy in the water. The feeling that I can cleave through anything, beyond anybody. That my chest can open up, and my heart can swell and my adrenaline levels rise to saturation. But then I rejoin humility in the changing room – are those my flabby underarms, pendulous breasts, veiny ankles, or are they my mother's? Competition snaps on her briefs over her firm, fat butt, raises her eyebrows and flashes me her youthful tits. In your face, Bitch.

