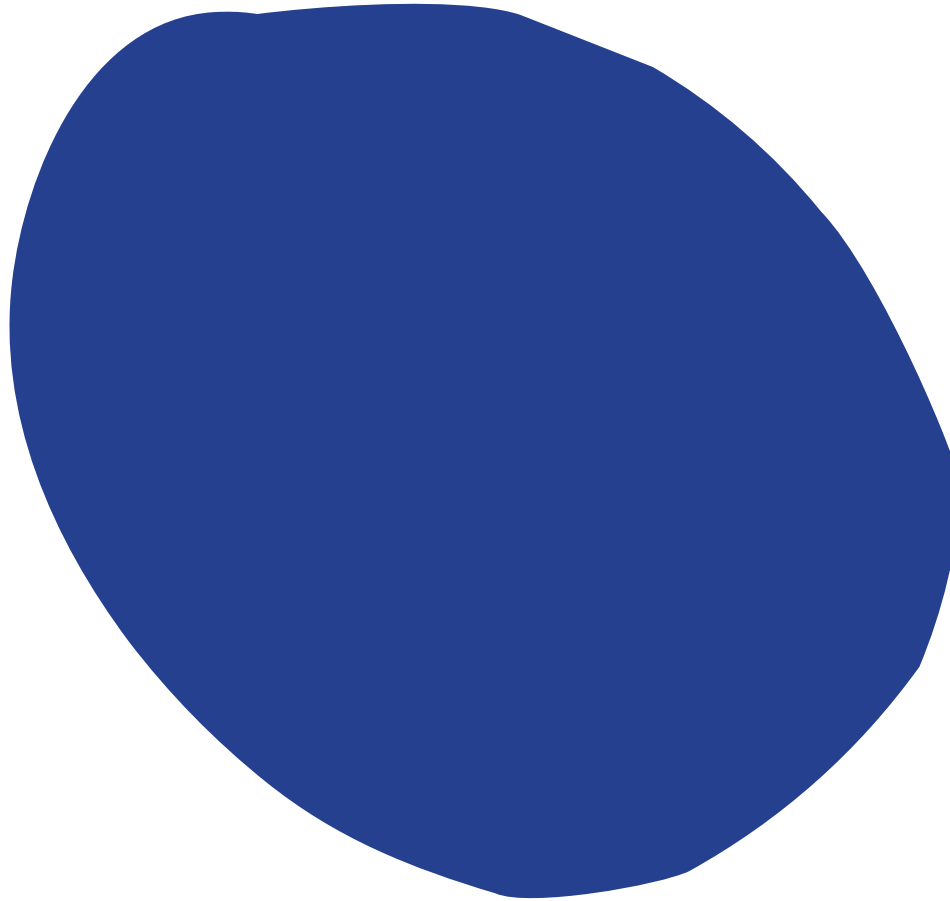


**sawim**

*on avascular necrosis and the  
swimming pools of France*



**It was one of those moments you dread** and almost start to expect when you are in your fifties: the doctor sits you down, looks at you, and says, "You have a disease". In February, while making dinner after a long, cold walk in slushy Chicago snow, my left leg gives out from under me. Bam. When I get up, I discover that the pain in my left hip is so unbearable that I can't walk. The next morning I crawl to the door of my apartment and scoot down the three flights of carpeted stairs with borrowed crutches in my left hand. I leave the emergency room hours later with a prescription for Motrin, 600 mg, and a doctor's note excusing me from work for a week.

Months pass, no diagnosis, no explanation. Some days all is normal, some days I walk in pain with a limp all day. I've cut out jogging, walking, yoga, and biking. Nothing shows up on the X-ray, doctors see nothing on the MRI. Finally, I insist on an appointment with an orthopedic surgeon named Dr. Ho. He chats with me, listens to my symptoms, looks at the MRI, sits down next to me, and says, still smiling,

**"You have avascular necrosis."**

***I know "necrosis" means "death" in Greek.***

I once spent hours on the Internet reading about necrotizing fasciitis, otherwise known as flesh-eating disease, after I saw someone whose body had been partly devoured by it on Oprah. My disease is nowhere nearly as bad: my left hip is dying (thus the "necrosis" due to lack of blood flow to the bone. Dr. Ho recommends that I stay off my feet as much as possible. This presents a problem. I am leaving in only a month for France. I will be visiting Paris — lots of walking — and then heading to the city of Besançon to visit a friend. "Better take some crutches, your hip may collapse," croons Dr. Ho. I ignore the image of my hip collapsing and proceed to the next thing on my mind: how I can stay in shape while eating my way through France. "Swim," says Dr. Ho.

*“Swim.”*

## PISCINE PONTOISE

The Piscine Pontoise was designed in 1934 by architect Lucien Pollet, who also designed the recently renovated and no longer public Piscine Molitor. The Piscine Molitor now caters to the rich and famous. In order to swim in the Piscine Molitor you have to

belong to le club, which is described in English on their website as follows: "the exclusive private club brings together all those (who can pay) who are seeking an alternative to the frenzy of the city (and its brown people), an alternative abode where an ideal art of living in Paris can be cultivated" (emphasis and parentheses my own). I am grateful that Lucien Pollet's other art déco chef d'oeuvre, the Piscine Pontoise, is still open to the public, to those of us who, for various reasons, do not necessarily cultivate an art of living, but simply aim for a well-balanced breakfast, followed by a good shit, a bit of leisure time, and some affordable aerobic exercise.

**i have the  
distinct feeling  
that i will not  
be cultivating  
the art of living  
at the piscine  
pontoise.**

I pay my four euros and enter. The roof is magnificent: a delicate, airy web of glass and iron, similar to the Parisian Arcades, those ancestors of today's shopping malls. The ground floor houses the pool. The two floors above the pool have a protective white railing and behind it rows of bright blue doors, one after another. I take a step into this national monument, exalted by the architecture, ready for a swim, and hear someone shouting. The voice is shouting at me, telling me to take off my pink flip flops before I step through the ditch filled with dirty water, the threshold which, at all French pools, marks the transition from land to water. I follow the *indications* in search of a locker room, but can't find one. I politely ask a fellow swimmer, a sister, a comrade, where the locker room is, and she shrieks at me in a heavy Eastern European accent: "The blue door! The blue door!" I have the distinct feeling that I will not be cultivating the art of living at the Piscine Pontoise.

# finally, i meet my savior:

*a fellow who carries the keys to the blue doors.*

One would expect a handsome French man with his package neatly tucked into his (blue) speedo, but no — here at the Piscine Pontoise, this man wears baggy gym shorts and a grey tee shirt. He has an identification card hanging around his neck, along with a silver whistle, perhaps for whistling at people who don't take their flip-flops off when walking through the water ditch. He is very pale, completely hairless, has three teeth, and seems ageless in an eerie, almost supernatural way. He could be forty, sixty, or one hundred: his translucent, papery skin simply defies age. He addresses me with "*ma petite dame*" — "ma petite dame" being a term that Frenchmen use when they wish to be charmingly condescending toward women. "Ah, ma petite dame! You are new here!" I acquiesce, feeling this ancient key carrier will help me if I eat humble pie. He seems kindly enough and certainly more willing to help than my comrade, that bitch Natasha. "It is simple. You choose a door. Then you memorize its number. You change in there and leave all of your belongings. Then, you shut the door and it locks automatically behind you. Finally, when you are finished, you find one of us and we let you back in". The Cartesian logic is flawless; I am even a bit surprised that he does not begin his last sentence with "ergo".

*the cartesian logic  
is flawless.*

My door is number 1649 and I come up with a mnemonic device: age I got my driver's license plus miner 49er. I open the door and notice two things. One, it has a one-foot gap at the bottom, so that anyone could easily enter without a key

man and take anything. Two, each door has a hole in it, three inches in diameter, located at eye-level. Yes — each blue door at the Piscine Pontoise has a fairly sizeable peephole, thereby adding a voyeuristic quality to this Latin Quarter pool. In terms of brain function, the peephole itself might represent the left side of the brain (literary studies, film studies, psychoanalysis), whereas remembering the number of your own door-with-the-peep-hole requires the more logical right side of the brain. In other words, the blue doors of the Piscine Pontoise in the Latin Quarter serve as a metonymy for the whole of human experience.

1. "*Vieux coquin*" here means "horny old man", though *coquin* can also mean anything from "rascal" to "scoundrel" to "mischievous scamp," depending on the context.

2. "*Nenni ma foi*" is old French for "No fucking way!"