

Rachel Burns

This summer, I worked as a lifeguard for a tiny condo pool. Lifeguarding is all about watching, staring out at swimmers and floaters from behind huge bug-like sunglasses, opaque lenses shielding observer and observed alike from the twinges of self-consciousness. From beneath the crass sun and a green-and-white umbrella, I watched. I looked for unsafe situations, but I couldn't help noticing the people themselves.

There were babies being dipped in toe-by-toe, and toddlers taking their first doggie-paddling ventures into the water, protected by foam suits, tubes, water wings, anxious parents. Kids playing games of their own creation, with ever-evolving rules that changed as fast as they were broken. A little boy who would happily talk about anything and nothing to anyone or no one. The little girls who drew on the concrete with some kind of fallen, rotten berry or fruit: their doodles and initials proved to be indelible for weeks. The man who complained about the writing, and the easy-going couple who good-naturedly mocked him. A woman whose meaningless accusation and condemnation sent a thrill of power through her, apparent in the set of her jaw and the glint of her eye, the holier-than-thou tone of her voice.

There was the newly divorced woman, giddy with victory and freedom, happy to share her travel plans and her best recipe for chocolate cake. There were couples who looked at each other in a way that every glance was saturated with adoration, and couples who looked at each other with complacency and slight annoyance. There were tattoos distorted by loosening skin, eyes dimmed by loosening expectations, and some eyes fresh with hope. Big rowdy families, small quiet friendships, people who spent hours reading or napping, without saying a word. Human beings in all of their variations and permutations. And each and every one of them had a lifetime, and each and every one of them had a story.

There was an elderly woman who arrived first every morning: she swam leisurely laps of sidestroke

with the grace of a dancer, eyes closed, face tilted towards the sky.