

## BIRTHDAY SWIM

By Mary Fell

i.

I never trusted lake water to hold me up.  
Below lay grasping weeds, creatures to suck  
the blood of a girl like me, primordial muck.  
I swam as if my life depended on it.  
In my nightmares, tunnels of dark water ran.

The ocean was another story. Churning  
like an old washing machine, it swept the bottom  
clean. My feet touched sand. I felt at home  
in the maternal pull of tides, strength of breakers,  
salty taste of liquid where I first swam.

ii.

I started, green again, in Ireland,  
plunged in the ancestral pool.  
Meters unfamiliar, the chlorine strong,  
I stroked toward an elusive mile.  
That rhythm rocked the Coes Pond crib  
where I began, where I learned to breathe,  
to hold my breath, to turn.

iii.

The safety of the lane, the painted lines  
I follow, the end and the beginning clear.  
I go up, come back to where I started. Repeat.  
My fellow swimmers skim the surface, water  
striders. My element is earth,

but I'm courageous here, able to see bottom.  
In this liquid, fish don't rise to bite,  
no frogs croak or spawn. It's dead  
clean. Reassured, I breathe the chlorinated air,  
admire my vestigial scales.  
Now late September  
currents lap the shore, three quarters of a year gone by,  
three quarters of a mile. Nine months I've floated  
in the chemical brine. This is the day I was born.