

## FISH OUT OF WATER

The boy entered the booming vault of the swimming pool. The light was tinted blue by his goggles. He liked them tight and today he needed reassurance because last time was not a good experience. Now he came to think of it, this was a bad idea altogether. He turned back to the changing room but now the teacher was coming so the boy followed the rest of the boys and sat down by the pool.

Not that he didn't like the water. Sometimes he felt he'd been born a fish. He looked out at the pool, which he had never seen completely empty before. The surface shone and whispered to him. *Come in. I'll hold you close.* He shut his eyes and imagined sinking into the muffled embrace of the water. Only his slow-moving limbs and a stream of tiny bubbles spiraling from his mouth.

In the top corner of the building, a speaker burst into life. The music drilled a hole in his brain. He flapped his arms to get rid of the noise then remembered to clamp his hands over his ears. Someone poked his arm. He looked up and saw a man with a clipboard, mouthing words. There was a jagged scar under his chin like he had once been speared. Something whirred in the boy's belly. He took his hands away from his ears.

Name! shouted the man.

Daniel John McCallion! The name unfurled around him, tail thrashing like a stingray.

The man squatted down and looked him in the eye to try and psych him out. I'm the coach, he said. It's important that you listen to me carefully.

Beyond the coach, a lifeguard was unravelling ropes. He threw them into the pool, and they slapped the surface, making the water plug in the drains.

*No way, lengths again!* Why were they never allowed to swim free? He felt the band around his head tighten.

Poseidon is the god of the sea, he said to the coach. If you make him angry, he will bring on a terrible storm.

The coach frowned. What? Don't be silly, Daniel.

He needed to tell the coach that some things were beyond your control. But down at the end of the row, two of the others had started a carry-on and were pushing each other around. The coach bit something black between his teeth and the air was split by a piercing shriek. The boy streaked across the poolside and flopped into the water, sinking to the bottom then pulling back the water in wide strokes. He could swim for miles; he had been practicing all summer.

When he came to the surface all was quiet. He reached the far end, then turned and saw the row of red faces. His teacher was there, and the coach. The boys from the unit, sniggering and staring. He heard his name and hesitated before ducking under. If only he could find the place where Amphitrite hid, a cave in the dark depths. If it hadn't been for Delphinus, Poseidon would never have found her. With a crash of his tail he looped down to the deepest point. He

hovered, waiting. At last it came, and not a moment too soon. The gush over his gills brought oxygen thrilling to his brain. He took in all he could, remembering how good it felt. They could never get him down here.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow in the water. Something sharp scraped his body and with a flash of silver he darted off again. there were two of them, circling. They grabbed at either end of him, head and tail, and brought him thrashing to the surface. They hauled him to the edge and rolled him onto the poolside where he flipped and gasped, his tail slamming the tiles, leaving an imprint of translucent scales.

Jesus. The coach was dripping wet, his trainers squelching on the plastic floor.

Through one blurry eye, the fish looked up at him.

The coach turned to the teacher. You know what this means, don't you?

The teacher nodded and bent down, placing a hand on the fish's body.

Daniel, he said. This is a disgrace.

But the fish was tired now, too tired to move a muscle. He flopped to the side and looked at the blue water, glinting and rippling beyond his reach.

What was the use?