

DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

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I see a hairless boy splash by me,
 Jumping from the side of the pool
 In a tight bundle and the water sprays
I think, "Cancer," with a sigh.
Then I see his father break the surface of the water
 For a gasp of breath, his hairless head
 Glistens with chlorinated drops.
I think, "Alopecia," with relief.
Then I see the little girl, wisps of blond scattered,
 Her mother swooshes her float in semi-circles
 Wet brown hair rippling while cheering on her son.
The little girl watches her mother with shining but glazed eyes.
 Her bloated face surrenders to return
 her mother's frequent, but tired smiles.
Their story immediately gels together in my imagination
 As I admire their togetherness out of the
 corner of my eye.
A little girl with cancer,
 a brother and a father who shave their head in solidarity
 A mother holding it all together.
I look at my own daughter, a chubby one-year-old,
 as she smacks her hand against the water
 and looks shocked when drops hit her face.
I squeeze her tighter,
 as if a stronger, firmer hold
 could be a shield against the beast of cancer.
But she squirms away, pushing toward freedom in the open pool.

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