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Plunging Down Under

Ian Smith (Monash University, Australia)

An immigrant in a land of swimmers who, sinuous, suntanned, at the outdoor pool – the baths – drip on towels over concrete, steaming between lazy plunges underwater, I have a problem. Pale, skinny but strong, I must master deep water or wither in shame, both terrifying thoughts. Most ten-year old English children can't swim. Australians, casually dolphinesque, plunge into happiness. I confess to my working sister who taught me to read, who can swim. She agrees we shall go when it is quiet and execute our plan.

Schoolwork is easy, fractions and friction, explorers and progress instead of kings and queens, bloodshed and plague. Arriving in winter I play football, win at monkey bar grappling, prove my worth receiving the strap with a smirk for laughing at larrikins' antics, so Australia – bonzer, you beaut, good-oh, suits this Pommie. Fair dinkum, mate.

My parents struggle, mother carping about Australia's backwardness in blue airmails to the post-war bleakness they fled, while my father, an outcast at work, becomes a bully at home. I already hate Pommie whingeing, their sorrowful bandaged past, their jealousy of my integration. I attend school, therefore fit in.

Cool, promise of a ripper morning, silvered pool just opened, my sister slips us over the side into the deep end, coaxing. Shivering, swivelling, I watch, listen for mates. Minutes of harsh whispering later I let go, sink, toe-touch bottom, dogpaddle, lungs in panic, break the surface gasping. Elated, I go again and again, further out each time. I can swim. More or less.

Now I must climb to the high board. Diving is for drawling bronzed gods, or lunatics, but I can jump. Schoolmates have arrived, including a girl whose mother's newspaper I deliver. They watch my frightful ascent. I hesitate when I look down, see my future looking up, know I must go, know I will.