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## The Swimming Pool at Villa Grimaldi

Santiago, Chile

Beyond the gate where the convoys spilled their cargo of blindfolded prisoners, and the cells too narrow to lie down, and the rooms where electricity convulsed the body strapped across the grill until the bones would break, and the parking lot where interrogators rolled pickup trucks over the legs of subversives who would not talk, and the tower where the condemned listened through the wall for the song of another inmate on the morning of execution, there is a swimming pool at Villa Grimaldi.

Here the guards and officers would gather families for barbeques. The interrogator coached his son: *Kick your feet. Turn your head to breathe.*The torturer's hands braced the belly of his daughter, learning to float, flailing at her lesson.

Here the splash of children, eyes red from too much chlorine, would rise to reach the inmates in the tower. The secret police paraded women from the cells at poolside, saying to them: *Dance for me.* Here the host served chocolate cookies and Coke on ice to the prisoner who let the names of comrades bleed down his chin, and the prisoner who refused to speak a word stopped breathing in the water, facedown at the end of a rope.

When a dissident pulled by the hair from a vat of urine and feces cried out for God, and the cry pelted the leaves, the swimmers plunged below the surface, touching the bottom of a soundless blue world. From the ladder at the edge of the pool they could watch the prisoners marching blindfolded across the landscape, one hand on the shoulder of the next, on their way

to the afternoon meal and back again. The neighbors hung bedsheets on the windows to keep the ghosts away.

There is a swimming pool at the heart of Villa Grimaldi, white steps, white tiles, where human beings would dive and paddle till what was human in them had dissolved forever, vanished like the prisoners thrown from helicopters into the ocean by the secret police, their bellies slit so the bodies could not float.