VINTAGE

THE SWIMMING POOL LIBRARY

ALAN HOLLINGHURST

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About the Author

Alan Hollinghurst was born in 1954. He is the author of one of the most highly praised first novels to appear in the 1980s, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), and was selected as one of the Best Young British Novelists 1993. His second novel, *The Folding Star,* won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize. His most recent novel is *The Line of Beauty*.

BY ALAN HOLLINGHURST

Fiction

The Swimming-Pool Library
The Folding Star
The Spell
The Line of Beauty

Translation

Racine: *Bajazet*

‘This is a brave book. It doesn’t polemicize and it doesn’t apologize. It can only shock those who care or need to be shocked. Its picture of a certain kind of man’s world from which women are excluded is always truthful. If some find it unpleasant, then that is the nature of the truth’
Paul Bailey, *Observer*

‘Nothing less than a Proustian panorama of the genesis, mythology, manners and social status of the male homosexual in our post-Wildean century’
Stephen Pickles, *Tatler*

‘Beckwith is gay in both senses, homosexual and reckless . . . The year of the narrative is 1983, “the last summer of its kind there was ever to be”. Few novels in recent years have been better written and none I know of has been more intelligent’
Michael Wood, *Times Literary Supplement*

‘A novel of great richness – combining elements of an erotic detective story (and a particularly shocking denouement) with great wit and intelligence’
Gay Times

‘An erotic, erudite novel of considerable authority . . . the ultimate example of gay literature, a defiant demonstration of all the pink prose that has gone before it: Wilde, Forster, Firbank, White’
Time Out

‘Brings together two traditions in English fiction: the moral novel, as written by Jane Austen and E.M. Forster, and the decadent novel, as written by Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank’
Edmund White, *Sunday Times*

THE SWIMMING-POOL LIBRARY

Alan Hollinghurst

Epub ISBN: 9781409002260
Version 1.0
www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Vintage 2004

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in Great Britain by
Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1988

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10,
New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193,
South Africa

Random House UK Limited Reg. No. 954009

www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 09 946836 0

For Nicholas Clark
1959–1984

‘She reads at such a pace,’ she complained, ‘and when I asked her *where* she had learnt to read so quickly, she replied “On the screens at Cinemas.”’

The Flower Beneath the Foot

[1]

I came home on the last train. Opposite me sat a couple of London Transport maintenance men, one small, fifty, decrepit, the other a severely handsome black of about thirty-five. Heavy canvas bags were tilted against their boots, their overalls open above their vests in the stale heat of the Underground. They were about to start work! I looked at them with a kind of swimming, drunken wonder, amazed at the thought of their inverted lives, of how their occupation depended on our travel, but could only be pursued, I saw it now, when we were not travelling. As we went home and sank into unconsciousness gangs of these men, with lamps and blow-lamps, and long-handled ratchet spanners, moved out along the tunnels; and wagons, not made to carry passengers, freakishly functional, rolled slowly and clangorously forwards from sidings unknown to the commuter. Such lonely, invisible work must bring on strange thoughts; the men who walked through every tunnel of the labyrinth, tapping the rails, must feel such reassurance seeing the lights of others at last approaching, voices calling out their friendly, technical patter. The black was looking at his loosely cupped hands: he was very aloof, composed, with an air of massive, scarcely conscious competence – I felt more than respect, a kind of tenderness for him. I imagined his relief at getting home and taking his boots off and going to bed as the day brightened around the curtains and the noise of the streets built up outside. He turned his hands over and I saw the pale gold band of his wedding-ring.

All the gates but one at the station were closed and I, with two or three others, scuttled out as if being granted an

unusual concession. Then there were the ten minutes to walk home. The drink made it seem closer, so that next day I would not remember the walk at all. And the idea of Arthur, too, which I had suppressed to make it all the more exciting when I recalled it, must have driven me along at quite a lick.

I was getting a taste for black names, West Indian names; they were a kind of time-travel, the words people whispered to their pillows, doodled on their copy-book margins, cried out in passion when my grandfather was young. I used to think these Edwardian names were the denial of romance: Archibald, Ernest, Lionel, Hubert were laughably stolid; they bespoke personalities unflecked by sex or malice. Yet only this year I had been with boys called just those staid things; and they were not staid boys. Nor was Arthur. His name was perhaps the least likely ever to have been young: it evoked for me the sunless complexion, unaired suiting, steel-rimmed glasses of a ledger clerk in a vanished age. Or had done so, before I found my beautiful, cocky, sluttish Arthur – an Arthur it was impossible to imagine old. His smooth face, with its huge black eyes and sexily weak chin, was always crossed by the light and shade of uncertainty, and met your gaze with the rootless self-confidence of youth.

Arthur was seventeen, and came from Stratford East. I had been out all that day, and when I was having dinner with my oldest friend James I nearly told him that I had this boy back home, but swallowed my words and glowed boozily with secret pleasure. James, besides, was a doctor, full of caution and common sense, and would have thought I was crazy to leave a virtual stranger in my home. In my stuffy, opinionated family, though, there was a stubborn tradition of trust, and I had perhaps absorbed from my mother the habit of testing servants and window-cleaners by exposing them to temptation. I took a slightly creepy pleasure in imagining Arthur in the flat alone, absorbing its

alien richness, looking at the pictures, concentrating of course on Whitehaven's photograph of me in my little swimming-trunks, the shadow across my eyes . . . I was unable to feel anxiety about those electrical goods which are the general currency of burglaries – and I doubted if the valuable discs (the Rattle *Tristan* among them) would be to Arthur's taste. He liked dance-music that was hot and cool – the kind that whipped and crooned across the dance-floor of the Shaft, where I had met him the night before.

He was watching television when I got in. The curtains were drawn, and he had dug out an old half-broken electric fire; it was extremely hot. He got up from his chair, smiling nervously. 'I was just watching TV,' he said. I took my jacket off, looking at him and surprised to find what he looked like. By remembering many times one or two of his details I had lost the overall hang of him. I wondered about all the work that must go into combing his hair into the narrow ridges that ran back from his forehead to the nape of his neck, where they ended in young tight pigtails, perhaps eight of them, only an inch long. I kissed him, my left hand sliding between his high, plump buttocks while with the other I stroked the back of his head. Oh, the ever-open softness of black lips; and the strange dryness of the knots of his pigtails, which crackled as I rolled them between my fingers, and seemed both dead and half-erect.

At about three I woke and needed a pee. Dull, half-conscious though I was, my heart thumped as I came back into the room and saw Arthur asleep in the gentle lamplight that fell across the pillows, one arm sticking out awkwardly from under the duvet, as if to shield his eyes. I sat down and slid in beside him, observing him carefully, hovering over his face and catching again the childish smell of his breath. As I turned the light out, I felt him roll towards me, his huge hands digging under me almost as if he wanted to carry me away. I embraced him, and he gripped me more tightly,

clung to me as if in danger. I murmured ‘Baby’ several times before I realised he was still asleep.

My life was in a strange way that summer, the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my *belle époque* – but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye. I wasn’t in work – oh, not a tale of hardship, or a victim of recession, not even, I hope, a part of a statistic. I had put myself out of work deliberately, or at least knowingly. I was beckoned on by having too much money, I belonged to that tiny proportion of the populace that indeed owns almost everything. I’d surrendered to the prospect of doing nothing, though it kept me busy enough.

For nearly two years I’d been on the staff of the Cubitt *Dictionary of Architecture*, a grandiose project afflicted by delay and bad feeling. Its editor was a friend of my Oxford tutor, who was worried at my drifting unopposed into the routine of bars and clubs, saw me swamped with unwholesome leisure, and put in a word – one of those mere suggestions which, touching a nerve of guilt, take the force of a command. And so I had found myself turning up each day at St James’s Square and sitting in a little back office, disguising my hangover as a kind of wincing, aesthetic abstraction, and knocking box-folders of research material into shape.

Volume One was to cover A to D, and I was allowed to work on some of the subjects that interested me most – the Adams, Lord Burlington, Colen Campbell. I edited the essays of repetitive pundits, was sent out to the British Library or Sir John Soane’s Museum to find plans and engravings; smaller subjects I was allowed to write up myself: I turned in an exemplary article on Coade Stone vases. But the Dictionary was a crackpot affair, a mismanaged business, an Escorial that turned into a Fonthill the longer we worked on it. I rang people up and there were parties from six till eight

– which meant going on, and then some drunken supper and then, as often as not, the Shaft and acts in which the influence of the orders, the dome, the portico, could scarcely be discerned.

After I left Cubitts I felt hilarious relief at being no longer a cross between a professor and an office-boy – someone whose presence was explained as much by his name as by his interest in the arts. At the same time there was a slight sad missing of the slipshod office routine, the explanation over the first foul coffee of just where I'd taken whom, and what he was like in every particular. It was the sort of world that made you a character, and would happily, stodgily keep you one for life. And there was the subject too – the orders, the dome, the portico, the straight lines and the curved, which spoke to me, and meant more to me than they do to some.

I slipped away from Arthur next day and walked in the Park – it was perhaps the straight lines of its avenues that exerted some calming attraction over me. As a child, on visits to Marden, my grandfather's house, days had been marked by walks along the great beech ride which ran unswervingly for miles over hilly country and gave out at a ha-ha and a high empty field. Away to the left you could make out in winter the chicken-coops and outside privies of a village that had once been part of the estate. Then we turned round, and came home, my sister and I, spoilt by my grandparents, feeling decidedly noble and aloof. It was not until years later that I came to understand how recent and synthetic this nobility was – the house itself bought up cheap after the war, half ruined by use as an officers' training school, and then as a military hospital.

Today was one of those April days, still and overcast, that felt pregnant with some immense idea, and suggested, as I roamed across from one perspective to another, that this was merely a doldrums, and would last only until something else was ready to happen. Perhaps it was simply summer,

and the certainty of warmth, the world all out of doors, drinking in the open air. The trees were budding, and that odd inside-out logic was evolving whereby the Park, just at the time it becomes hot and popular, shuts itself off from the outside world of buildings and traffic with the shady density of its foliage. But I felt the threat too of some realisation about life, something obscurely disagreeable and perhaps deserved.

Though I didn't believe in such things, I was a perfect Gemini, a child of the ambiguous early summer, tugged between two versions of myself, one of them the hedonist and the other – a little in the background these days – an almost scholarly figure with a faintly puritanical set to the mouth. And there were deeper dichotomies, differing stories – one the 'account of myself', the sex-sharp little circuits of discos and pubs and cottages, the sheer crammed, single-minded repetition of my empty months; the other the 'romance of myself', which transformed all these mundanities with a protective glow, as if from my earliest days my destiny had indeed been charmed, so that I was both of the world and beyond its power, like the pantomime character Wordsworth describes, with 'Invisible' written on his chest.

At times my friend James became my other self, and told me off and tried to persuade me that I was not doing all I might. I was never good at being told off, and when he insisted that I should find a job, or even a man to settle down with, it was in so intimate and knowledgeable a way that I felt as if one half of me were accusing the other. It was from him, whom I loved more than anyone, that I most often heard the account of myself. He had even said lately in his diary that I was 'thoughtless' – he meant cruel, in the way I had thrown off a kid who had fallen for me and who irritated me to distraction; but then he got the idea into his head: does Will care about anybody? does Will ever really *think*? and so on and so forth. 'Of course I fucking think,' I

muttered, though he wasn’t there to hear me. And he gave a horrid little diagnosis: ‘Will becoming more and more brutal, more and more sentimental.’

I was certainly sentimental with Arthur, deeply sentimental and lightly brutal, at one moment caressingly attentive, the next glutting him with sex, mindlessly – thoughtlessly. It was the most beautiful thing I could imagine – all the more so for our knowledge that we could never make a go of it together. Even among the straight lines of the Park I wasn’t thinking straight – all the time I looped back to Arthur, was almost burdened by my need for him, and by the oppressive mildness of the day. The Park after all was only stilted countryside, its lake and trees inadequate reminders of those formative landscapes, the Yorkshire dales, the streams and watermeads of Winchester, whose influence was lost in the sexed immediacy of London life.

I found myself approaching the dismal Italianate garden at the head of the lake, a balustraded terrace with flagged paths surrounding four featureless pools, a half-hearted baroque fountain (now switched off) aimed at the Serpentine below, and on the outside, backing on to the Bayswater Road, a pavilion with a rippling red roof and benches spattered with bird droppings. Deadly as this place had always seemed to me, stony and phoney amid the English greenness of the Park, it was an unfailing attraction to visitors: loving couples, solitary duck-fanciers, large European and Middle Eastern family groups taking a slothful stroll from their apartments in Bayswater and Lancaster Gate. I sauntered across it, as much to confirm how I disliked it as anything else. Some desolate little boys played together more out of duty than pleasure. Queens of a certain age strolled pointedly up and down. The sky was uniformly grey, though a glare on the white frippery of the pavilion suggested a sun that might break through.

I was turning to leave when I spotted a lone Arab boy wandering along, hands in the pockets of his anorak, fairly unremarkable, yet with something about him which made me feel I must have him. I was convinced that he had noticed me, and I felt a delicious surplus of lust and satisfaction at the idea of fucking him while another boy waited for me at home.

To test him out I dawdled off behind the pavilion to where some public lavatories, over-frequented by lonely middle-aged men, are tucked into the ivy-covered, pine-darkened bank of the main road. I went down the tiled steps between the tiled walls, and a hygienic, surprisingly sweet smell surrounded me. It was all very clean, and at several of the stalls under the burnished copper pipes (to which someone must attach all their pride), men were standing, raincoats shrouding from the innocent visitor or the suspicious policeman their hour-long footlings. I felt a faint revulsion – not disapproval, but a fear of one day being like that. Their heads seemed grey and loveless to me as they turned in automatic anticipation. What long investment they made for what paltry returns . . . Did they nod to one another, the old hands, as they took up their positions, day by day, alongside each other in whatever station in their underground cycle of conveniences they had reached? Did anything ever happen, did they, despairing of whatever it was they sought, which could surely never be sex, but at most a glimpse of something memorable, ever make do with each other? I felt certain they didn’t; they were engaged, in a silently agreed silence, in looking out endlessly for something they couldn’t have. I was not shy but too proud and priggish to take up my place among them, and it was with only a moment’s hesitation that I resolved not to do so.

I walked to the far end of the room, where the washbasins were, and looking in the mirror above them, commanded a view back along the whole enfilade of urinals and cabins to the door. I would only allow a minute or so for the Arab boy,

if he hadn’t come by then I would go, perhaps follow him to wherever he had gone, if he was still in sight. I affected to look at myself in the mirror, ran a hand over my short fair hair, did catch myself looking terribly excited, a gash of pink along my cheekbones, my mouth tense. There were footsteps on the stairs outside, but slow and heavy, and accompanied by short-winded singing, wordless and baritonal. Clearly not my boy. Disappointment was mixed, I realised, with a kind of relief, and I ran my hands unconsciously under the taps, switching quickly between the cold and the very hot hot. An elderly man had appeared behind me and, still tootling away in a manner that suggested all was right with the world, advanced to the urinals where he stood leaning forward, propping himself with a hand that grasped the copper pipe in front of him, and smiling sociably to the disgruntled looking fellow on his right. I turned round in search of the towel, and as I yanked it down and it gave out its reluctant click, the elderly newcomer said ‘Oh deary me’ in a speculative sort of way, and half fell forward, still gripping the pipe, while his feet, taking the stress from the new angle, slewed round and across the raised step on which he and the others were standing. Now half turned towards me, he lost his footing completely and slid down heavily, his head coming to rest on the porcelain buttress at the side of the stall, while his substantial, tweed-clad figure sprawled across the damp tile floor. From his fly, his surprisingly long, silky penis still protruded. He wore a self-chastising expression, as if he had just realised he had forgotten to do something very important. There was a slight foam about his lips, his facial expression became strangely fixed, his cheeks genuinely bluish in colour.

The man who had been at the adjacent place said ‘Oh my Christ’ and hurried out. All along the rank of urinals there was a hasty doing-up of flies, and faces that spoke both of

concern and of a sense that they had been caught, turned in my direction.

I instantly pictured James, as he had described himself, kneeling over corpses on long train journeys, as a doctor honour-bound to attempt to resuscitate them, long after hope was gone. I also fleetingly saw the Arab boy, wandering off under the budding trees, and thought that if I'd never succumbed to this fantasy, I wouldn't be in this fix now. Still, I thought I knew what to do, partly from involuntary recall of life-saving classes by the swimming-pool at school, and I immediately knelt beside the old man, and punched him hard in the chest. The three other men stood by, undergoing an ashamed transition from loiterers to well-wishers in a few seconds.

'He didn't hang about, he knew the old bill'd do for him, soon as look at him,' said one of them, in reference, apparently, to their companion who had fled.

'Shouldn't you loosen his collar?' said another man, apologetic and well spoken.

I tugged at the knot of the tie, and with some difficulty undid the stiff top button.

'He mustn't swallow his tongue,' explained the same man, as I repeated my chest punchings. I turned to the head, and carefully lowered it, though it was heavy and slipped within its thin, silvery hair. 'Check the mouth for obstructions,' I heard the man say – and, as it were, echoing from the tiled walls, the voice of the instructor at school. I remembered how in these exercises we were only allowed to exhale alongside the supposed casualty's head, rather than apply our lips to his, and the alternate relief and disappointment this occasioned, according to who one's partner was.

'I'll go for an ambulance,' said the man who had not yet spoken, but waited a while more before doing so.

'Yeah, he'll get an ambulance,' the first man commented after he had left. He was well up on the other people's behaviour.

The patient had no false teeth and his tongue seemed to be in the right place. Stooping down, so that his inert shoulder pressed against my knee, I gripped his nose with two fingers and, inhaling deeply, sealed my lips over his. I saw with a turn of the head his chest swell, and as he expired the air his colour undoubtedly changed. I realised I had not checked in the first place that his heart had stopped beating, and had ignorantly acted on a hunch that had turned out to be correct. I breathed into his mouth again – a strange sensation, intimate and yet symbolic, tasting his lips in an impersonal and disinterested way. Then I massaged his chest, with deep, almost offensive pressure, one hand on top of the other; and already he had come back to life.

It had all been so rapid and inevitable that it was only when he was breathing regularly and we had laid him down on a coat and done up his fly that I felt shaken by a surge of delayed elation. I raced up the steps into mild sunshine and hung around waiting for the ambulance, unable to stop grinning, my hands trembling. Even so, it was too soon to understand. I told myself that I had scooped someone back from the threshold of death, but that seemed incommensurate with the simple routine I had followed, the vital little drill retained from childhood along with all the more complex knowledge that would never prove so useful – convection, sonata form, the names of birds in Latin and French.

The Corinthian Club in Great Russell Street is the masterpiece of the architect Frank Orme, whom I once met at my grandfather’s. I remember he carried on in a pompous and incongruous way, having recently, and as if by mistake, been awarded a knighthood. Even as a child I saw him as a fraud and a hotchpotch, and I was delighted, when I joined the Club and learned that he had designed it, to discover just the same qualities in his architecture. Like Orme himself, the edifice is both mean and self-important; a

paradox emphasised by the modest resources of the Club in the 1930s and its conflicting aspiration to civic grandeur. As you walk along the pavement you look down through the railings into an area where steam issues from the ventilators and half-open top-lights of changing-rooms and kitchens; you hear the slam of large institutional cooking trays, the hiss of showers, the inane confidence of radio disc-jockeys. The ground floor has a severe manner, the Portland stone punctuated by green-painted metal-framed windows; but at the centre it gathers to a curvaceous, broken-pedimented doorway surmounted by two finely developed figures – one pensively Negroid, the other inspiredly Caucasian – who hold between them a banner with the device ‘Men Of All Nations’. Before answering this call, step across the street and look up at the floors above. You see more clearly that it is a steel-framed building, tarted up with niches and pilasters like some bald fact inexpertly disguised. At the far corner there is a tremendous upheaving of cartouches and volutes crowned by a cupola like that of some immense Midland Bank. Finances and inspiration seem to have been exhausted by this, however, and alongside, above the main cornice of the building, rises a two-storey mansard attic, containing the cheap accommodation the Club provides in the cheapest possible form of building. On the little projecting dormers of the lower attic floor the occupants of the upper put out their bottles of milk to keep cool, or spread swimming things to dry, despite the danger of pigeons.

Inside, the Club is mildly derelict in mood, crowded at certain times, and then oddly deserted, like a school. In the entrance hall in the evening people are always going to and from meetings, or signing each other up for volleyball teams or fitness classes. In the hall the worlds of the hotel above, and the club below, meet. I would always take the downward stair, its handrail tingling with static electricity,

and turn along the underground corridor to the gym, the weights room and the dowdy magnificence of the pool.

It was a place I loved, a gloomy and functional underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality. Boys, from the age of seventeen, could go there to work on their bodies in the stagnant, aphrodisiac air of the weights room. As you got older, it grew dearer, but quite a few men of advanced years, members since youth and displaying the drooping relics of toned-up pectorals, still paid the price and tottered in to cast an appreciative eye at the showering youngsters. 'With brother clubs in all the major cities of the world,' their names and dates incised in marble beneath the founder's bust in the hall, the large core of men who worked out daily were always supplemented by visitors needing a dip or a game of squash or to find a friend. More than once I had ended up in a bedroom of the hotel above with a man I had smiled at in the showers.

The Corry proved the benefit of smiling in general. A sweet, dull man smiled at me there on my first day, talked to me, showed me what was what. I was still an undergraduate then, and a trifle nervous, anticipating, with confused dread and longing, scenes of grim machismo and institutionalised vice. Bill Hawkins, a pillar of the place, I subsequently discovered, fortyish, with the broad belt and sexless underbelly of the heavy weight-lifter, had simply extended camaraderie to a newcomer.

'Hallo, Will,' he said to me now as I entered the changing-room and he came back, grunting and staring from a monster workout.

'Hi, Bill,' I replied. 'How're you doing?' It was our inevitable exchange, in which some vestige of a joke seemed to reside, our having the same name yet, by the difference of a letter, each being called something altogether different.

'Haven't seen you for a bit,' he said.

'No, I seem to have had quite a lot on,' I hinted.

‘Glad to hear it, Will,’ he replied, following me round the little maze of banked lockers. I found one that was free, slung my bag into it, and began to undress. Bill stood by me, amicable, massive, flushed, his head and shoulders still rinsed with sweat. There was a kind of handsomeness lost in his heavy, square face. He sat down on the bench, where he could politely talk while also watching me take my clothes off. It was typical of his behaviour, discreet, but not prurient: his was the old-fashioned ethos of a male community, delighting in men, but always respectful and fraternal. I knew he would never ask a personal question.

‘That boy Phil’s coming on well,’ he said. ‘Very nice definition. Said he was a bit loose after being off for a spell, but I should say he’d put on a centimetre or two this week alone.’ Phil, I knew, was a lad he had a bit of a soft spot for; I’d seen him hanging around to count for him when he was on the machines, and because Phil was genuinely interested in his own body Bill was always able to engage him in earnest analyses of methods and results. I could see, too, that Phil, who was shy and stocky, might be a tricky proposition, and sensed some resistance in him to Bill’s cheery and paternal chatter across the crowded shower room.

‘Phil’s all very well,’ I suggested, ‘but he’s the plump type: he’ll always have to work hard.’ I pulled off my T-shirt and Bill shook his head.

‘I’d like to see you do some more work,’ he said with a sucking in of his breath. ‘You’ve got the makings of something really choice.’ I looked down, as it were modestly, at my lean torso, the smooth, tight tits, the little fuse of hair running down to my belt.

The swimming-pool at the Corry is reached down a spiral staircase from the changing-rooms. It is the most subterraneous zone of the Club, its high coffered ceiling supporting the floor of the gym above. Corinthian pillars at each corner are an allusion to ancient Rome, and you half

expect to see the towel-girt figures of Charlton Heston and Tony Curtis deep in senatorial conspiracy. Instead, a bored attendant paces around the narrow mosaic border of the pool in flip-flops. The water comes to within an inch or so of the margin, and any waves run over the floor, which glistens and, being uneven, holds little cold puddles. Some regulation, I suspect, stipulates how many turns around the pool the attendant must take each hour, for he combines his vigilance with relaxing in the spectators' seats and reading a book; after a longish spell of this he will then trot around the pool for a minute or two as if to make up his ration. I have never known, or known of, any occasion on which his services were needed.

The lighting of this dingy, dignified underground bath is not in keeping with its décor. Originally, old photographs show, branched neo-classical lampadaries spread a broad glare over the water, whilst at the corners shell-shaped cups threw an orangey glow upwards on to the grandiose mouldings of the ceiling. Until lately you could buy in the foyer upstairs a postcard, dating from not long after the war, showing white young men in the voluminous, mildly obscene, unelasticated swimming drawers of yore, about to jump in, and the sleek heads of those who had already done so dotted down the crowded lanes. On the back it said 'The Corinthian Club, London: The Swimming Baths (25 yards). Founded in 1864, the present fine building, housing a gymnasium, social rooms, and 200 bedrooms for young men, dates from 1935.' (James had immediately seen that this caption should be read with the clipped, optimistic tone of a Pathé news announcer.) In the recent past, however, coinciding with the outlay on a few tins of brown gloss paint, and the filling in of some of the cracks which continuous small subsidence and shifting of the ground brought about, the pool lighting had been redesigned. Away with the wholesome brightness of Sir Frank's original conception, and in with a suggestive gloom, blond pools of light contrasting

with surrounding shadow. Small, weak spots let into the ceiling now give vestigial illumination, like that in cinemas, over the surrounding walkway, and throw the figures loitering or recovering at either end into silhouette, making them look black. Blacks themselves become almost invisible in the bath, the navy blue tiles, once cheery, now making it impossible to see, even with goggles, for more than a few feet under water. The luminous whiteness of the traditional swimming-pool is perversely avoided here: the swimmers loom up and down unaware of each other, crossing sometimes in the soft cones of brightness.

All this makes the pool seem remote from the rest of the world, but the impression is lessened by the PA system which interrupts its continuous relay of music – insipid pop on weekdays, classical on Sundays – to call members to the phone or to reception. It is the camp voice of Michael that one normally hears, wringing the wildest insinuations out of words such as *guest* and *occupant.* Those who know his ways greet each announcement with a delight unshared by the novice; in my first week at the club the disdainful announcement that ‘Mr Beckwith has a man in reception’ had brought a round of silly laughter as I walked, blushing, from the gym.

And the pool is a busy place. Except for certain mournful periods – early afternoons, Sunday evenings – there is a crowd: friends are racing, practised divers arch into the water making barely a splash, the agile avoid the slow, groups sit in a dripping line on the edge, feet flicking the water, cocks shrunken by the cold sticking up comically in their trunks. Miles of serious swimming are wound up in those twenty-five yards each day, and though some dally between lengths, of most you see only the heave of breaststrokers’ backs, the misted goggles and gasping, half-averted mouths of crawlers, the incessant cleaving movements of their arms, and the bubbling wakes of their feet.

I went to swim most days, sometimes after exercises on the mats in the gym or a shortish turn in the weights room. It was a bizarre occupation, numbing and yet satisfying. I swam fast, alternating crawl and breaststroke, with a length of butterfly every ten. My mind would count its daily fifty lengths as automatically as a photocopier; and at the same time it would wander. Absorbed in thought I barely noticed the half-hour – one unfaltering span of pure physical exercise – elapse. This evening I thought of Arthur a lot, running real and projected conversations through my mind as I tumble-turned from length into length through the cool, gloomy water. A week had gone by since we'd met, a week spent in bed, or trailing naked from bedroom to bathroom to kitchen; sleeping at irregular times, getting drunk, watching movies on the video. I was engrossed in him.

He was still strange to me, though, and much less predictable than I was. Perhaps he felt stifled in the flat. After hours of languid vacancy he would spring up and run from room to room, tapping door-frames and chair-backs as he went. Sometimes he ploughed through the stations on the hi-fi till he found some music to dance to, and would swarm around wearing nothing but my school straw hat, or a towel which he flirted about or shook like a fetish. I wasn't allowed to join in these dances: like the little circuits through the flat they had a secret, child's logic of their own, and to come near was to risk being kicked or jabbed by his swinging limbs. Then he would give up and fall recklessly on top of me on the sofa, panting in my face, kissing me, full of clumsy humour and longing.

We were so close that I was disturbed every time he span off into his own world: the sudden detachment, a spell broken, a faint fear of losing him altogether. On occasion he would laugh very loudly at something mildly funny, and keep on laughing as he slapped himself and pointed at my puzzled, cross expression. I couldn't understand where this laughter came from; it seemed to me some new nihilistic

teen thing I was already too old for. I had seen kids in Oxford Street or on Tottenham Court Road laughing in the same cold, painful, helpless way.

In the end I would go out of the room and after a few moments he would follow me, suddenly silent. He would approach me intently, licking whatever part of me he came to first. Then he was no longer the dead soul from the amusement arcade or the windswept corner, and I had the infinitely touching sense of him quite apart from the crowd, slipping off to clubs and bars in pursuit of his own romantic destiny. I was moved by his singleness, and then wanted to smother it in sex and possessiveness.

He was most out of hand when we drank. Before he met me he had got through his evenings on a few Cokes and cans of beer, or whatever the men – terrible, he made them sound, as he nostalgically described them – bought for him as they chatted him up. Now he was exposed daily to my raw intake of wine, whisky and champagne. Whisky he sipped at suspiciously, and still had not got an adult taste for; but wine he loved, and he put back champagne as if it were lager, with awful belches and chuckles after each glass. Then his priority was to keep me informed of his condition: ‘I’m a wee bit tipsy, William,’ he would say almost at once. Then, ‘Will? Will? You could call me pissed.’ And a glass or two later, ‘Man, I am wrecked, man.’ It was when he grew quiet and gazed into the air, muttering ‘Drunk again’ as if in recollection of a mother chiding a father, that he was liable to change. As we hugged and nosed around each other, he would push me to arm’s length and look me in the eye while he repeated something I had said. Odd words seemed to amuse or offend him, and he gave urchin imitations of my speech. ‘Arse-hale,’ he would drawl. ‘Get orf my arse-hale.’ Or if we were nattering in the kitchen as I woozily knocked up some supper, he would interrupt what I was saying and dance about shouting ‘No, no, no – listen, no – “cunt-stabulareh,”’ and double up with laughter.

Sometimes I laughed graciously too, and did even posher imitations of his mimicry, knowing no one was listening. Sometimes I caught him and gave him what he was asking for.

So, the last couple of days, I had been closer with the booze, and it was all the nicer to have him loosened up but not cantering out of control. We had never been better together. Even so, the relief of being in the water again was intense; when he had made a phone call in the morning and said he'd go away for a day something inside me asserted 'That's right.' I lent him a shirt, perhaps I gave it to him – pink silk, it suited his blackness as much as it did my fairness – kissed him chastely, told him to come back when he wanted, and, when he had gone, went round opening windows (it was a coldish spring day). I put clean linen on the bed; and could hardly wait for night-time and getting in there for a good sleep all by myself. I kept stretching out my arms and legs, like one of those queeny Sons of the Morning in a Blake engraving.

After a while I took this further, and slammed through a set of pull-ups, press-ups and sit-ups – and then ached for the pool. So self-enclosed had my life been for the preceding week – broken only by five-minute trips to the local shop for cereals, tins and papers – that I looked on the public crowding the Underground platform with the apprehension and surprise that people feel on leaving hospital.

I came up dripping and panting from the pool to the changing-room. As I pushed open the swing door with its steamed-up little window designed, like those in restaurants, to prevent hurrying people from knocking each other flat, I heard the hiss of the crowded showers, and felt the warm, dense atmosphere of the place in my throat and on my skin. I sauntered along between the two files of hot jots whose spray danced up off the black tiles, shifting or suddenly cutting off as the men, naked or in their trunks, edged about, soaped a foot raised against the wall, gave

their stomachs resounding smacks, or turned, as the doors to the outside world thwacked open, to see what beauty had arrived. Exchanging short greetings with a couple of chaps I scarcely knew, I chose a vacant position between a pale, ravaged looking youth with tattoos snaking up his arms and a huge dark brown man, six foot eight tall at a guess, very round and heavy, with an enormous childish face and not a hair on his head – or, I soon found, anywhere on his body. His sleek, heavy cock, cushioned on a tight, crinkled scrotum, stuck out from beneath a roll of fat. He was soaping himself vigorously, leaving a silky smear over his smooth, plump expanses of back and belly; and with cheery unselfconsciousness singing as he went about it. I nodded to him, as if to say that I could see he was happy enough, then, and he grinned back in a way that suggested a fond, exuberant disposition. I felt that he might stroke me as a golem does some little girl who trusts him, or inadvertently crush me to death. I set down my soap box and shampoo, let the water drum on my shoulders, and looked about.

At the Corry the men undress at their lockers, and then bring their towels to the duckboarded place at the end of the shower room. Often those who have swum still have their trunks on and some stud may allow a mocking minute of tension before the languid unknotting of the drawstring, and the peeling down of the tiny garment, freeing the cock and balls in one of the most mundane and heartstopping moments there is. An American guy, I thought, was doing this just now on the other side of the room; square and trim he stood breathing heavily and luxuriating under the water before turning his back and loosening his glittering briefs to reveal a firm hairless ass, milky white between the sun or sunbed-tanned zones of his back and thighs. I still had my really absurdly tiny black trunks on, and felt my cock protesting against their constraint, thickening up, and aching as it did so after the pounding it had lately been taking.