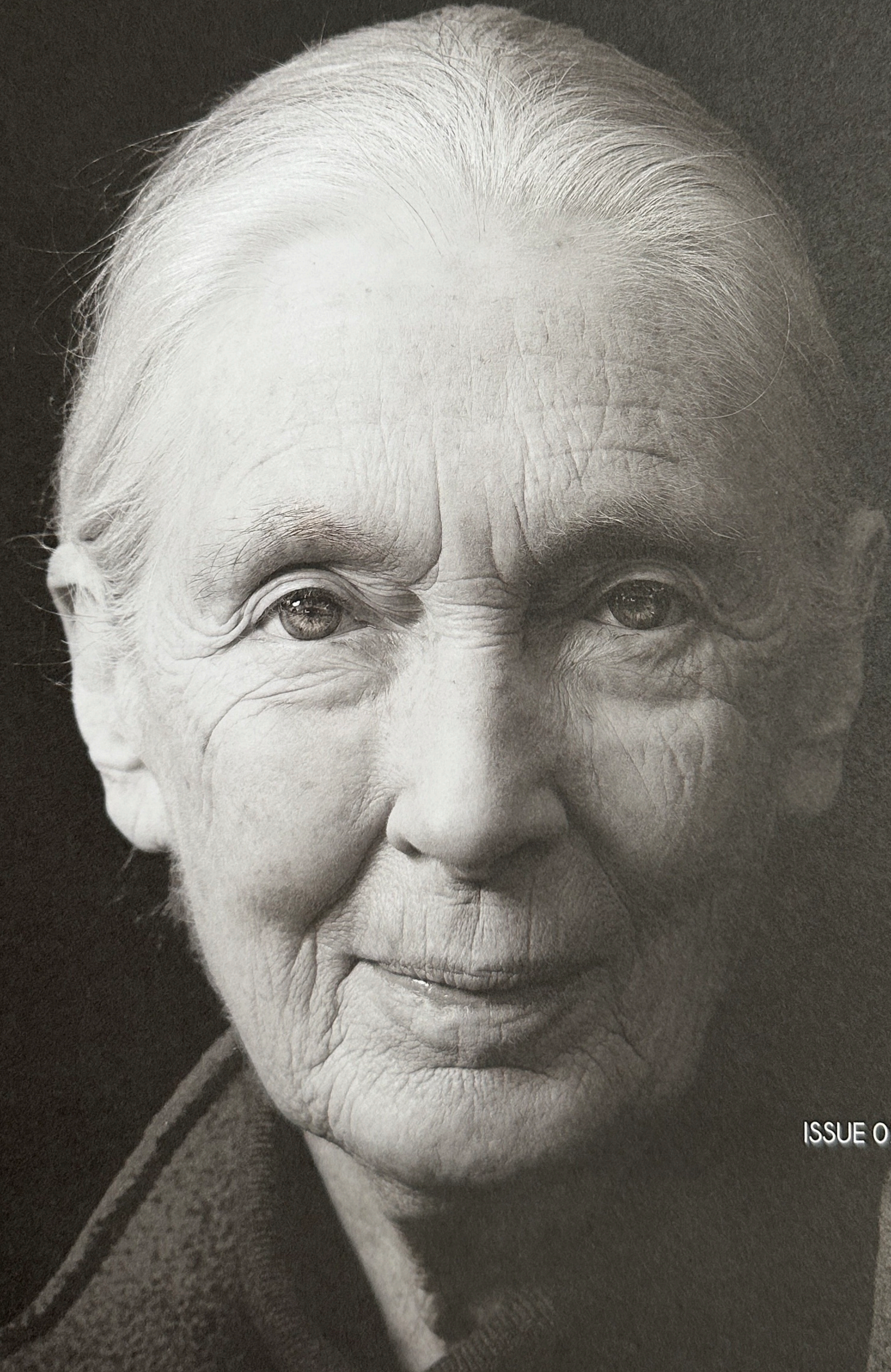


WILD WOMEN

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LET'S BE mermaids

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I was lying on the ground somewhere in Canada, my tail glinting in the sunlight. I thrust my fin up toward the blue sky, glancing at the women beside me. Their own tails—in shimmery shades of pink and green and purple—were also tilted up in a piscine salute to the sun. The day was baking down on me, and I noticed the other women had wisely placed their yoga mats in the shade. I pondered my tail's tightness and breathability in the heat. For the first time in my life, I found myself wondering if mermaids got yeast infections.

Gail, the yoga instructor, called out to us to slowly lower our scales back to the earth. To close our eyes and breathe deeply. To imagine ourselves with gills.

There is something of a mermaid movement afoot. (A-fin?) Previously we seemed content as a culture to get our fish-woman fix from Disney cartoons. Or maybe the diehards among us have visited the magnificently kitschy show at Weeki Wachee Springs, where underwater performers sport tails for synchronized dances in large tanks. But it appears we have been yearning for more shell bra in our lives, as “mermaid schools” are now popping up in Canada, the United States, the Philippines, and Europe. These places teach water safety and freedive instruction, blah blah blah... but what they really do is give people a chance to go “mermaiding”: fulfilling the fantasy of slipping into a glittery fish torso and pretending they're Ariel for an afternoon.

If one needs further proof of our renewed love affair with mermaids, there is the recent news that Channing Tatum is set to star in a remake of *Splash*—with Magic Mike himself reprising the Darryl Hannah role. And let us not overlook the popularity of crocheted mermaid tail blankets. A wooly tail can be yours for \$19.99, making it much easier to feel like a mythical creature when sprawled on the couch watching Netflix and eating Doritos.

The myth of the “maiden of the sea” has had a hold on our imaginations for centuries. The ancient Greeks told stories of trident-wielding Triton, and much later, there were the stories of sirens luring sailors into troubled waters. (Of course. Has to be a woman's fault some dude can't read a

compass.) Even Christopher Columbus wrote of spotting mermaids on one of his voyages. (He scoffed that they weren't "half as beautiful as they are painted." Which likely was true, considering that what he was actually ogling was a manatee.)

But why the sudden mermaid renaissance? Has the ubiquity of the Starbucks logo cast some subliminal spell on our subconscious? Will unicorn classes be next? Will we gallop through fields with old paper towel tubes tied to our skulls? Or is there something particular about mermaids that has a hold on us right now?

"The ocean is the lifeblood of the planet, and the womb of all life where we emerged from eons ago," says Hannah Fraser, a professional freelance mermaid. "It is the great mother sea where all life lives symbiotically in harmony. Humans are reaching back to nature through the mermaid icon to rekindle that connection."

Hannah's job is just as fascinating as it sounds. The lithe Australian is a model and performance artist who would look perfectly at home perched atop a scallop shell, a la *The Birth of Venus*. Hannah handcrafts elaborate, magnificent tails, and performs at a variety of events: promotional parties, premieres, yachting events, and more. You need a mermaid, she's your gal.

She also travels the world shooting jaw-dropping videos of herself slow-dancing through the sea with manta rays, whales, and sharks, all while glammed out in her mermaid garb. The films are mesmerizing to watch, but their purpose isn't just to entertain: Hannah is a passionate environmentalist, and the main focus of her work is to bring awareness to the tremendous damage that has been done to the ocean.

"We have eaten over 90 percent of the large fish in the ocean in the last 50 years," Hannah says. "Scientists say that if we continue on at current estimates we will deplete the ocean ecosystem within the next 20 years. No ocean... no life on earth!"

While it's a safe bet we're all on board with no life on earth being a bad thing, there are likely still some who might roll their eyes at Hannah's brand of "activism." How is some chick floating around pretending to be a mermaid going to save the sea? Well, Hannah's piece "Manta's Last Dance," in which she performs a captivating kind of water ballet with a group of manta rays, was actually shown to UN delegates at the Convention for International Trade on Endangered Species (CITES). The result? Mantas were added to the endangered species list.

Her latest film, *Tears of a Mermaid*, is a documentary slated for 2017 release. It features behind-the-scenes footage of how Hannah and her team create their videos, and their tricky methods for working with the animals in their own environments. I for one am eager to see the film, because how on earth does she do all of this? Watching Hannah twirl with sharks makes me gasp, not so much because of the visuals, though they are striking, but more so because of her unbelievable badassery. She throws her body into dark water alongside 14-foot great white sharks. With no cage or safety gear. While wearing a tail. For most of us, this sounds like something from a tequila-induced nightmare. But for Hannah, it's a dream come true.

"Every day I get messages from people around the globe who say that they believed sharks and ocean animals were mindless killing machines out to eat them the second they entered the water, and once they see my videos it changed their perception of these creatures, and they felt motivated to protect and preserve them," she says. For her, this makes the danger involved well worth it.

Hannah has always been drawn to mermaids. As a child she drew stick figures with tails, and crafted her own tail at the age of nine, with the help of her mom. This childhood creation later disintegrated in the water, but her mermaid dreams did not.

As one might expect, Hannah finds the public's renewed interest in mermaids pretty fantastic. "If mermaiding is a way for people to become connected to and care about the ocean, then it's a wonderful pathway to nature."



Listen, I told myself. You're a mermaid, got it? A real fucking mermaid. You are not an awkward hot dog trapped in a teal sausage casing, even though that is what you feel like at this moment. You. Are. A mermaid.

Gail called us out of our meditation, flashing the peaceful, ageless smile only possible when one is a yoga instructor who owns a B&B beside a lazy river. Holly called us over for a lunch break and some sangria. Darla nodded approvingly at the sweating pitcher of sangria, as did I. Transforming into a mermaid seemed like it might be a bit easier with a buzz on. However, the sandwiches—delicious and monstrously huge—had me imagining pulling my tail ever higher over my stomach. Perhaps to my chin. At this rate I would be a mer-worm for the photo shoot.

Lexy still seemed rather dazed from the mermaid yoga. She was staring off rather dreamily, and seemed as if she'd really lost herself for a bit in the fantasy under the sea.

"I felt like I could have stayed down there all day." She smiled. "It was great, eh?"

After lunch we piled into cars and headed to a nearby lake. Becoming a Canadian lake mermaid sounded a bit more sea monster-y than sea maiden-y to me, but I willed myself to take a note from Lexy and put my skepticism aside for the afternoon.

Holly let me borrow a rather magnificent gold shell bra, which I slipped on in the woods. As someone who tends to drift toward the tankini section of swimwear departments, the shells felt rather daring.

We perched on the rocks at the water's edge and struggled to ease our tails up our legs. The lake itself was stunning: wide and glittering blue, with tall pines on the distant shore. Even better, it was empty. There weren't any dudes in speedboats chugging Buds while staring quizzically at the five grown women in mermaid tails flailing on the slippery rocks.

Holly pulled out her camera and hovered over me. I immediately felt shy

and began tugging at the waistband of my tail. She rolled her eyes at me. "Don't worry about that. Listen, I want you to roll over onto your stomach. Put your tail up, and your tits out. That's it! Tail up and tits out!"

I did as instructed, and stared off into the blue water, trying to imagine I was scanning the shore for my lost sailor love. The wind rustled my hair, and I heard Lexie let out an approving "Ooooooh."

After the photos, Holly showed us how to ease our way into the water, and explained how to propel forward with the monofins, dipping down and swimming with our arms at our sides. The others were already laughing and paddling away by the time I managed to heave myself into the water. Pauline bobbed in front of me, her gray hair slicked to her scalp.

"The water feels wonderful!" I said.

"Yes. Just watch out for the frogs' eggs. Don't inhale them." She snapped a pair of goggles over her face before disappearing beneath the surface, leaving me to wonder if she was joking, or if a week from now I was going to stumble to the bathroom to blow my nose and discover thousands of Canadian tadpoles had spawned in my lungs.

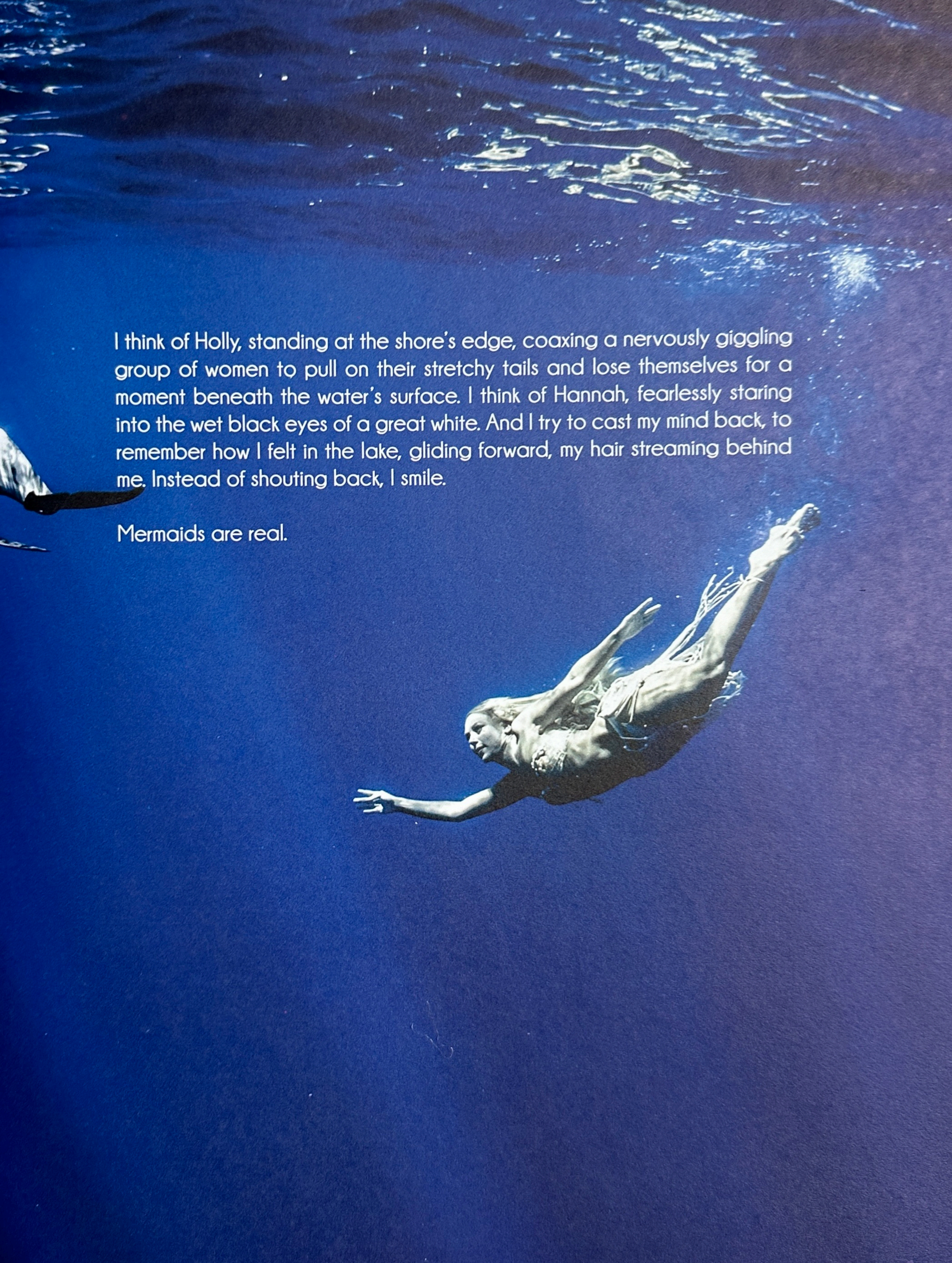
Fortunately, I did not know what frogs' eggs looked like, and so merely shrugged and dove down. Swimming in the tail was surprisingly easy. I glided through the water, my tail catching the light as I moved. I could hear the other women laughing and practicing thrusting their tails into the air behind them. But I felt very much in my own world as I moved through the lake. I felt silly, yes. But also... pretty. And feminine. And free. And about ten years old. I realized I was smiling underwater. No doubt sucking frogs' eggs through the cracks of my teeth, but oh well.

Later, Holly and I sat in a cabana, our damp hair on our shoulders, the wet tails hanging over the porch railing to dry. I asked her what she loved the most about mermaiding.



“It brings out your inner child. It’s an amazing thing... when you’re an adult, you’re supposed to be so proper. And that’s such bullshit. It’s so important to hold on to that sense of play. And you know, I think we all have inside of us something gorgeous and something beautiful,” she said. “To be a mermaid lets that beautiful, wild, sexy, strong, feminine creature come to life.”

Back on land in Brooklyn, I sweat through my mom uniform of a ball cap and T-shirt as I lug my son’s stroller over the bumpy sidewalk. Sidestepping garbage, I ease my way through a construction site, and someone shouts at me to “Move it!” I turn to shout back, and as I do, I spy the random bit of graffiti spray-painted onto some plywood. Just three words: “Mermaids are real.”



I think of Holly, standing at the shore's edge, coaxing a nervously giggling group of women to pull on their stretchy tails and lose themselves for a moment beneath the water's surface. I think of Hannah, fearlessly staring into the wet black eyes of a great white. And I try to cast my mind back, to remember how I felt in the lake, gliding forward, my hair streaming behind me. Instead of shouting back, I smile.

Mermaids are real.