

I Have Not Drowned

The little girl is dreaming.

In her dream, she stands by the edge of the pool. Her swimsuit is tight around her hips, loose around her stomach, pinched over her shoulders. The air is heavy with the moisture of the warm water. The chlorine scent is comforting because she knows it means clean. The slap of feet on the deck, the splash of hands entering water, the slam of doors closing in the locker room all tell her that she is surrounded by people. She is many miles from being alone. The building hums: it's heated because it's cold outside. She's facing the tall, stained windows on the opposite wall of the pool. The sun is bright, and the silhouettes of trees are waving over cars and pedestrians. There is a city out there, and beyond it, a world.

But right now, she is here. She must focus. The little girl stands with her toes curled over the rough tile edge, arms up, ready to dive. The water looks smoother than glass. She takes a breath. Lunges. But of course she did it wrong, of course she did. There's a panic at the last second, her legs bend and come apart. In midair, she lifts her head, as if there's any hope of keeping it above water. The little girl tips sideways like a falling tree and crashes against that still surface.

As soon as she goes under, she knows she won't go back up. She fights and fights anyway. Flailing, gasping, choking, kicking, eyes open wide against the burn of chlorine. Her swimsuit loosens, but fills with water and weighs her down. Sounds change, and she's uncertain if the change is at the source of the sound or in her mind. Something must be wrong with her mind because it can't tell her body how to swim and because it looks like the surface of the water is perfectly still up there, like she had never touched it at all. It's like she's never touched anything at all. The little girl closes her eyes.

And all at once she is sitting up, eyes shut, still hyperventilating, hands at her throat, legs tangled up in each other. "It's okay," she tells herself. The sound passes through her jawbone to her own ears. "I have not drowned. I have not drowned. I have not drowned."

Only once her breathing has calmed and her heart slowed and her mind cleared does the little girl open her eyes. She may as well have left them shut—there is nothing to see. No dark, no light, no nebulae nor bits of stardust. She is not in a building nor in a room nor in a bed nor wearing clothes. She has no location because there are no locations. No one, nowhere, nothing exists outside of her mind. There is nothing left but her own hands trailing down her cheeks. She knows that this is not a dream.

The little girl has not drowned.

Everything else has.