

PAST THE DROP-OFF

flash fiction

She is past the drop-off before she lets herself know it.

Behind her the dock is a thumbnail. Her mother is a color on the dock. The water under her went from green to the green that has no bottom, the cold coming up from somewhere her feet can't argue with, and she keeps her face down, because down is just water and up is how far is left, and she has decided not to look at how far is left.

Breathe on three. Reach, reach, breathe. Reach, reach, breathe. The raft was close when she pushed off and now it is a thing that will not get closer, it only sits there being far, white and flat and stupid in the sun, and the cold is in her wrists now, and her elbows, climbing, but the stroke still works, the stroke is hers, reach, reach —

her hand goes through where the water should hold her and finds nothing, and for one second the whole lake is under her, all of it, the miles of cold dark going straight down past the fish past the weeds past everything, and her heart climbs up into her ears —

breathe.

Reach. Reach. Breathe.

You are okay. You are okay. The raft is closer. It is. Don't look at your mother. Don't think about the bottom — the bottom is not a thing that wants you, the bottom is just far. Reach. The white is bigger now. She can see the ladder, the two rungs going down into the green, the rust on the bolts, and she swims at the rust like it is the only true thing.

And her fingers hit the metal.

Cold. Solid. Hers.

She hangs there with both hands and lets the lake be enormous behind her, and breathes, the whole sky going in and out of her, and she does not climb up yet. She just holds the ladder she swam to and feels her heart come back down out of her ears, knock by knock, to where it lives.

On the dock, far away, small, her mother has not moved. Her mother has been standing very still the entire time.