

While You Try to Float (Sestina)

by Julie Cummings

You told me once, like a bedtime story,
about the silence just before drowning—
how it haunted every body of water
you ever stood beside, unable to swim,
feet sunk in sand, eyes on the shore,
torso too heavy to even try to float.

You said you never learned how to float.
There was no one to tell you a story
that didn't end at the edge of the shore,
no voice cutting through the pull of drowning.
All that time growing up near water—
and still you stayed dry, afraid to swim.

Children around you would laugh and swim,
would vanish beneath the surface, float
like leaves, like light skimming the water.
But you kept your own quiet story,
a breath held too long, almost drowning,
watching the tide sneak up the shore.

I saw you once, alone at the shore,
your gaze fixed far beyond where swimmers swim.
You weren't there to play, but to remember drowning,
the way your chest ached when trying to float.
I never asked again for the whole story—
only stayed, close, knee-deep in water.

We never speak plainly near water.
We only listen to the hush of the shore,
like it might whisper the rest of your story.
I don't need to know why you can't swim.
I just stand with you when you try to float,
your breath shallow with the thought of drowning.

So tell me again—not the drowning,
but the feeling right before, when the water
rose, and you still believed you could float.
Let the foam write it out on the shore.
I'll stay here while you learn to swim,
or simply to carry the story.

A story that begins not with drowning, but with shore.
That never needs water to teach how to swim—
Only silence and the story, to hold you while you float.