

Junior Division, Prose

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**Sink or Swim (an excerpt)**

I will not give up. I cannot. I kick and beat and breathe until my whole body is aching and screaming at me to succumb, to allow the waves to enclose over my head for good, to fall into the deep, deadly embrace that welcomes me. But I won't. *I won't*, I repeat to myself with every stroke. *I won't. I won't. I won't.* I push forward with everything I have, breathe, push through the exhaustion, breathe, and push even harder. However, as I come up for breath once again, I can see that the shore hasn't moved, and then the water is streaming into my mouth and nose and I splutter and spit and it's all I can do to stay afloat. As I tread water and snort the last dregs of salty liquid out of my sinuses, I admit it to myself: I cannot make it to the shore. I am too tired, too weak. I am not good enough or strong enough, and I never will be. I finally lie back in the water, accepting my defeat and praying for a swift end. *Drowning isn't the most awful way to go, I suppose. At least it will be over soon.* As I float there, I feel the storm that's been threatening to come finally break. A drizzle quickly becomes a torrent, and I can feel the rain pounding down on me. My tears mingle with the drops that splatter onto my face and stream down my cheeks. I let everything crash down around me and I barely notice the water as the overpowering waves of emotion consume me. I have never and will never succeed at anything. I am useless. I try and I try and I try, until that is all I am good for. Working tirelessly, but never with anything to show for it. I will never beat my ocean. I will never see what is on the other side of this madness. Maybe if I had clung harder to those oars, I would have made it. Maybe if as soon as I saw that beach approaching me, I had run as fast as I could in the opposite direction, then this ocean would never have caught me. Maybe if I had stayed in the boat I would have eventually drifted to shore. Maybe if I had just been better....

My eyes snap open. I am lying on a bed of sand, and the tiny particles have found their way into my hair, between my toes and fingers, in the shell of my ears, and every other exposed crevice. The hot sun caresses my face, comforting in contrast to the biting cold of the sea. *Wait. Why haven't I drowned?*