

Falling into Lakes & Other Misadventures in P.E.

FROM PAGE 10

you is rolling forward—which means suddenly somebody's oar is stabbing you in the back. Trust me, I learned the hard way—the hard wooden oar handle way.

Once I got the hang of the mechanics,

Someone else's oar broke with a sharp crack, and others struck each other like swords. We crashed into them, and they in turn crashed into the shore—or rather, into an overhang of trees with branches dipping down towards the water. The whole episode transpired in less than two minutes. There were screams and tears and bruises, and I was traumatized. Honestly, this is why I hate competitive sport. The whole episode transpired in less than two minutes. There were screams and tears and bruises.

though, rowing was actually quite wonderful. The seats were low enough that I could easily reach out and dip my hand in the cool water. I was close enough to the water to see the reeds and algae swaying

their willowy yellow-green-brown fronds just below the surface—a mysterious underwater world. The sun would just be rising over the trees, and the mist rising off the lake in the dawn light had a prelapsarian majesty. One imagines this is how morning might have looked in Eden. Despite the difficulty of waking at 5:45 a.m., once I was actually on the lake and mesmerized by the water, it was totally worth it. And since we were amateurs, most of the time we rowed at a moderate pace and I didn't get oar-stabbed too hard or too often.

And so my last semester of P.E. passed blissfully by. But dorm crew still involved a race at the end, with the different dorms competing. By this time it was spring, the thick woods surrounding the lake verdant with fresh growth. What could possibly go wrong?

On the day of the race, positioning four crew shells roughly equidistant from each other at the imaginary starting line turned out to be quite a feat. As soon as one was in the right place, the wind and water would conspire to move the others out of place. Eventually we were all lined up. The judge blew the whistle and four shiny crew shells began to slice through the water at the highest speed we could muster—higher than I was used to during our more relaxed practice sessions. It was my worst day of rowing. I couldn't keep up or stay in rhythm with the others, which meant I got thrown back and forth like a rag doll, and endured some backstabbing in the process.

What's worse, though, is that it's impossible to steer a straight course when the wind and water have a mind of their own. Within a minute or so, we had

veered off course—while going at top speed. There was another team to our right, also rowing at top speed. In a horrible cacophony of animate and inanimate sounds, we crashed into the crew shell on our right. Strictly speaking, it wasn't the shells that crashed, but the eight-foot long oars—ours and theirs—which got tangled into each other. My oar almost ended up swatting someone in the stomach. Someone else's oar broke with a sharp crack, and others struck each other like swords. We crashed into them, and they in turn crashed into the shore—or rather, into an overhang of trees with branches dipping down towards the water. The whole episode transpired in less than two minutes. There were screams and tears and bruises, and I was traumatized. Honestly, this is why I hate competitive sport. Rowing for fun was fine; why on earth did we need to race? What if there were fractures or concussions? And right before finals, too? Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, but it was a cataclysmic end to my athletic career.

These days, on the Boston University campus by the beautiful Charles River, I enjoy watching crew shells streaking by, and sailboats with the wind filling up their sails, and a few indolent kayaks sauntering by. Graduate school is so much more civilized, preferring to exercise brain over brawn. I'll take poetry over P.E. anytime.

Nausheen Eusuf is a PhD candidate in English at Boston University. Her first collection of poems, Not Elegy, But Eros, was published by NYQ Books (US) and Bengal Lights Books (Bangladesh).

