

Surreality

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The ripples stretch and peel away, receding into murky waters, departing as readily as they are born. I watch them, four by four, form and dissolve. The hull surges forward, slicing effortlessly. I remember, then, that this is not effortless; this is human propulsion in its most brute sense. A crew of eight men, and a coxswain, combine to race this slender watercraft as powerfully and efficiently as possible. They train for months, repeating the same motions over and over.

For those who say that it's all about the journey, not the destination, I would say I am inclined to agree, but then they have never been on a rowing machine (known by those familiar with the sport as an erg). Training on the erg requires as grueling a combination of mental and physical prowess as I have ever known. As on a treadmill, you remain stationary, your frame of reference never changing. Your only distraction is the three-inch by three-inch monitor hovering at eye level, offering numbers and measurements in your choice of watts, calories or time per 500 meters traveled. Unlike a treadmill, you cannot turn it on and run with the belt; there are no plugs or snazzy heart rate monitors, just a seat that slides back and forth and a handle attached to a resistance fan with a bicycle chain of sorts. You make it go.

I'll be frank. Erging is masochistic; the journey is a bitch.

But it turns the subzero months, the months when the river is populated by ice floes and the dock boasts two feet of snow, into a time for dreaming. January and February are reserved only for the dreamers, the ones who picture themselves standing on the awards dock in May and June, with gold swaying innocuously from their necks.

Water is where dreams and reality sometimes meet.

If one were to pass away while sleeping, I wonder if they might dream their death just before the heart fails. I think it is impossible to die in a dream. You always wake up right before the final moment. Could we create our own death scenario, when in reality we pass away while in the midst of sleep?

Reflections on the surface of a pristine body of water are dreams, in a sense. Slightly darker and upside-down, they retain all the clarity of reality. Yet only the weight of a pebble, or a droplet from the tip of a pipette can shatter a dream. Waves rushing through and distorting the picture, making us realize the infatuations of our mind. A ripple. A ripple is the fall, the jolt, the moment right before we die in our dreams.

The ocean and the vastness of the horizon unbinds us from the confines of what we have been told. An expanse of water offers mysteries to anyone willing to investigate them. Dreams are built on a subconscious that needs no explanation where foundations are appreciated but not necessary. Floating in a dream. Walking on water.

I row to collect myself. Water is where I collect my dreams.

Based on early human migration, we know that boats transported human beings across water 40,000 years ago - travelers floated in the belly of hollowed out tree trunks. Ships discovered The New World in 1492. The Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria sailed across the Atlantic to distant shores.

What if the earth was flat? What if Aristotle hadn't said otherwise? What if Columbus hadn't dreamed he could circumnavigate?

He did not know what he would find, though he expected to land in the Indies. But he did not know that he would not know where he landed. He did not know what was left to be known - that was left for the future, and waves of explorers, to figure out. Cartography would be a pretty solid career path for at least a couple centuries.

Boats provide us with the means to the journey; they discover. Sometimes the journey is painful, but hopefully always rewarding. Boats teach us who we are; they teach us what we know, what we don't know, and what we still don't know we don't know.

Colin told me that sometimes I yell German phrases and words in my sleep. My nightmares are foreign in heritage and philosophy. The other night I dreamt I escaped from prison with a friend in a strange city. We leapt and bounded from rooftop to rooftop. The streets were laid out in a grid on a hill, and we jumped over boulevards, evading police. I found myself perched in the support beams of a high-ceilinged museum exhibit as Providence's winter air seeped through my poorly insulated window. Another dream to record, more crystalline, less malleable to daytime's foggy errands.

My dreams are becoming more real than life itself.

"The lunatic is a wakeful dreamer," Immanuel Kant said.

But on the ocean, out in the open, or in the expanse of the subconscious, the constraints of worry and television do not

hold. They roll like raindrops off my jacket sleeve. The possibility of the distance opens up everything. Sitting on the water, the horizon circumscribing your position is un-inhibiting. You allow yourself to believe in the possibility of collecting new ideas, meeting challenges.

Ripples trail the stern of the crew in a V, leaving behind a trail of surreality. When the winds abate and the current ebbs, the glide of a boat, long and sleek through flat water is comparable to flying. Flying in the sense that penguins do, flapping their wings and soaring below the blue horizon. When the water is like glass you look over the side and the river and the sky are indistinguishable. The only sounds: synchronized breathing, oars grasping and releasing water. Nature concedes to sport.

This is a wakeful dream.

Ships explore, escape confines of the past. Captains conquer and strategize. Rowers look back, always - move backwards. The propellers are not allowed to see what waits ahead, only the puddles from our oars fading into the distance. My frame of reference: looking into the past, trusting a voice to steer the proper course.

I do not know where my dreams will take me, nor do I know where the boat may travel, but I can imagine both.

Imagination is the oblong shape formed between two circles of a Venn diagram. One circle represents dreams, the other, life.

Boat races called *regattas* first began in 13th century Venice. The Head of the Charles Regatta brings rowers from around the globe to Boston in October.

The Thames River was the site of the first modern rowing competitions. Professional ferrymen wagered on their abilities in the 18th century. The Boat Race, between Oxford and Cambridge began in 1829. Rowing is also the oldest American intercollegiate sport (thank you Yale and Harvard). It has been an Olympic event since 1900 (only the first Olympiad went without crew, because of bad weather).

Weather doesn't keep us off the river all that often. Only storms are deemed truly dangerous, as the metallic riggers flanking the gunwales could be particularly effective lightning rods. The boat, however, is carbon fiber. We row through wind and rain so we will be ready for it on race day. It keeps our imaginations convinced that dreams and life are oblong. But sometimes we erg anyway, just because masochism never hurt a rower. Erging keeps our dreams on that dock and those medals.

We stare begrudgingly at that monitor of numbers, trusting the encouraging shouts from coaches. We trust that they are trying to make us stronger. We trust their knowledge. We trust the fact that they stood on those docks with the gold before us. The photographs on the wall tell us they stood on those docks.

Crossing the finish line ahead of Yale and Harvard. For that, we row through all of it.

So we stare into the monitor, watching the numbers tick away into history while our muscles scream and our foreheads pour sweat.

A race is 2,000 meters. Every minute and every meter has been planned out. Time can trick the mind during a race, because you know it will last about six minutes, but it's never the same six minutes. But that doesn't matter, because all eight of us know that six minutes is a small amount of pain in the scheme of the nine months of preparation. So we time our strokes and surge our backs forward, toward the line. Because rowing is about the destination, and how much preparation you can handle to move faster than the boat next to you.

In 9th grade, my history teacher told me that dreams are manifestations of our longings. Mr. Rivera loved Jungian psychoanalysis, and for a while I convinced myself that my calling was to study Jung and Freud in German. His words echo in my mind when I wake up.

The ability of the mind to cause powerful sensations seems preposterous. Take for example a nocturnal emission, a wet dream. Our minds, and our dreams, are capable of inducing one of the most physical bodily experiences. Stimulation of the body causes orgasm, but the mind can create a reality that causes us to think we are being physically stimulated. That is the power of the dream. Is a dream more pleasurable than pleasuring oneself, even if when you wake up, you know none of it was real?

A number of scientists at a university in the Netherlands researched the physiological and mental characteristics of an orgasm. Gert Holstege, who spearheaded the experiments, claimed that during an orgasm, the regions of the brain controlling fear and anxiety completely shut down. He told the London Times, "deactivation, letting go of all fear and anxiety, might be the most important thing, even necessary, to have an orgasm."^[1]

The word "endorphin" is a portmanteau of the words "endogenous" and "morphine," essentially meaning an excretion of a morphine like substance that originates within the body. Endorphins cause us to feel euphoric and relaxed. They are produced through excitement, pain, love, eating spicy foods, exercise and orgasm.

The feeling of finishing can only be understood through such a correlation.

Crossing the line, quads pumping lactic acid, lungs burning, eyes stinging with sweat. The moment of relief, when you catch your breath and regain your voice. No regrets, because all eight rowers have collected themselves for this moment. You trust that they went to hell and back for you. They dreamed so hard for you. They endured the journey. And

then you paddle, because it is over, the tension released. And now you can see the finish line, see where you've been. Now you can look forward.

[1] Henderson, Mark (20 June 2005). "Women fall into 'trance' during orgasm" . *Times Online* (London). Retrieved 7 July 2009