

Liferower

by Rebecca McClanahan

There I am on the Liferower screen, the computerized woman in the tiny boat, and the little woman rowing below me is my pacer. We look exactly alike, except she does not get tired. Her strokes are even and unchanging. I aim for thirty three pulls per minute, but if I rest even a second between strokes, I fall behind. I want to train my heart, to make it stronger.

"Keep up with the pacer," blinks the sign on the screen. "Use your legs. Keep your back straight."

You row with your whole body, not just your arms. There is a leaning into, then a pulling away. The filling and the emptying. Systole, diastole. The iambic lub and dub--and sometimes a murmur, a leak in the heart. My father's valve has been replaced with plastic that clicks when he overexerts himself. Bad hearts run in our family. An infant sister died of a congenital ailment; another sister nearly died from a myocardial infection contracted while she was giving birth to her second child. I have no children. Which is why I am free to come here to the Y and row my heart out three times a week. Aside from a husband who can take care of himself--as most second husbands are able to do--I have no one to worry about. This thought disturbs me, wakes me at night. If I have no one to care for, who will care for me? When I was small I shared a bedroom with an old woman, my mother's childless aunt, who had nowhere else to go. I have fifteen nephews and nieces. Will any of them claim me? Each month from my paycheck I put away more than I can afford, insurance against what time will bring. According to surveys, women fear old age more than men do--the poverty, the loneliness. And the hearts of women beat faster and harder, both waking and sleeping, than the hearts of men.

"Keep up the good work. You are one boat ahead."

From the shoreline a crowd of miniature fans waves me on to victory. Each time I pull the rowing rope, the little woman on the screen moves her cartoon arms. The oar dips and lifts and a ripple of water sloshes across the screen, accompanied by a *whoosh* that's intended to sound like rushing water, but sounds more like the breath of a woman in labor: in through the nose, out through the mouth. Whoosh, whoosh. In the delivery room I smoothed my

sister's clenched fist and watched the electrocardiograph as twin waves danced across the screen--the rise and fall of mother and daughter. The heart is a double pump composed of four separate rooms. If I divide my age into four equal chambers, I am eleven again. It is the year I begin to bleed, the year my mother pushes my sister into the world.

I pump my legs and pull the rope. In a large open area beside the rowing machines, a yoga class begins. The instructor greets the sun, breathing in *prana*, the invisible life force: in through the nose, out through the mouth. The other women follow, open their mouths on the first half of the healing mantra *Om*. The yoga master has now become a tree--arms branching into finger leaves high above her head, one leg balanced against a thigh, the other the root sinking her deep into imaginary soil. *You can't learn balance*, she is saying. *You can only allow it*. The heart is controlled by two opposing bundles of nerves, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. One slows the beat, the other quickens it. Thus, balance is achieved through a back and forth dance, two mutually antagonistic forces pushing simultaneously against and for one another.

On the screen, red buoys bob between me and my pacer, marking off the miles in tenths: one point six, one point seven. The water rolls beneath us, and in the distance a miniature skyline looms. It's the kind of city a child might construct from Lego pieces, chunks of towers and boxy buildings in the shape of bar graphs a math teachers draws on the blackboard. What goes up must come down. My Y locker combination--32-22-32--is easy to remember because those were my measurements half a lifetime ago, when I was being fitted for my first wedding dress. The marriage lasted three years, three years longer than it should have because I was determined not to fail. My mother was my measure, my pacer, and when my husband began turning from me, I rowed faster and faster toward him. I would work harder, cook more of his favorite foods, steam his khakis with a sharper pleat.

"Lean into the stroke. Keep up with the pacer. You are three boats behind."

On the rower beside mine, a young woman pumps with long tanned legs and pulls with lean muscled arms that she probably believes will never soften. Her body is something she counts on--the belly flat, the skin snug and elastic as the Spandex leotard glowing in oranges and greens, the neon parrot hues of one

whose life does not yet depend on camouflage. The weight instructor, a short well-built man about my age, bends to speak to her, to comment on her form and technique. He does not see me. When he leaves, she watches her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror as if her body belongs to someone else. Her forehead is prematurely lined with worry; she is not enjoying this. Nearby, the yoga master assumes the lion pose, crouched and ready. She bares her teeth, lifts her mane into the air.

"Use your legs. Keep your back straight. You are five boats behind."

The heart is a hollow muscle housed in a a slippery, loose-fitting sac and protected by three layers of membranes. Its size varies from person to person, but is approximately the size of a clenched fist. At five weeks a fetus is barely eight millimeters long, but already its heart is beating on its own. When my sister had her first sonogram, I watched on the screen the undulating blur that would become my niece. The heart cells were already in place, all the cells my niece would need for the rest of her life. Her heartbeat sounded like a train roaring through a tunnel. A child comes into this world hammering its heart out, 160 beats per minute, a Teletype machine tapping its urgent message. And deep in the atrial chamber of each adult there survives a hole, the *foramen ovale*, remnant of the place where blood passed through the fetal heart.

The child I chose against would have been born into the cramped space of my life between marriages. I still ask myself how it could have happened. Things happen. You wake one morning and you know. Your tender breasts tell you and the flush across your cheeks and the feeling of something larger and smaller than yourself moving inside you. Time passes, liquid as a dream, and one morning, because you are alone and your life is a rented room, you make the call. And the next day when it's over and the nurse takes the gauze from between your teeth, the doctor, who is kind and slightly plump, his forehead lined from having seen too much, holds up a glass bottle filled with something bright and red. And then it's over, it's done. But your legs are still trembling and your tongue is bleeding from where you bit down and missed.

Five boats ahead of me, the pacer slides over the finish line, leaving buoys bobbing in her wake. I place my fingertips on my carotid artery and begin the count that will bring me back to myself. Easing up on the rope, I pump slower, slower, my boat cruising past the crowd of bystanders waving from the

shoreline. The yoga master begins her descent into this world, shifting from eagle to fish to cat to flower, shape by shape removing herself, moving towards a place that knows no shape. When she reaches it, she bows to the altar of Sadguru, the larger self that dwells within the smallest place. Forehead pressed to the ground, she assumes the child position: shoulders down, knees folded to belly, hands and feet at rest, ears open to the slightest sound. The music of a single heartbeat is actually two-part harmony, a duet sung by opposing valves, the low-pitched *lub* of the atrioventricular and the higher pitched *dub* as the semilunar closes down. The yoga master opens her mouth on "O" and the others follow, float on this communal pond until together their lips close on the hum and, one by one, their single breaths give out.

- *First published in The Gettysburg Review*
- *Reprinted in Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief, ed. by David Starkey*