

# Drowning

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This poem and photograph come from re-experiencing the death of my father through the many patients I have taken care of, and my reflections on medicine while working in northern Manitoba.

## Oar by oar

I can hear his cough in every emergency department,  
like a rippled wave,  
one of life's disgruntled customers.  
His voice has faded, and its ebbing silence has left me  
stranded,  
moving oar by oar in search.  
At night these waters become deeper and the horizon  
becomes longer.  
He took my map with him,  
down into those drowning diseased waters that wait for  
their opportunity to seize me.  
My mind floats uneasily amongst their plots.  
Water prickles my skin from their splashing arms.  
I look out, but I can only feel their eyes.  
There is nowhere I can row,  
no land in reprieve of these reminders.  
I will not find you.  
I will search but I will not find you.  
Where did you leave me?  
You left me an amnesiac, you and your sinking words.  
How long now until the pull below becomes too strong?  
Your eyes were blue, with the slightest hint of green.  
How long until my love will no longer keep us afloat?  
You took our map with you.  
At night I stare into the stars in search for you,  
guiding my path north—I can hear your cough in the dark.

The flares were long ago used,  
it is just you and I left on this boat.  
There are times when I am not sure who is rowing.  
There are times when I'm no longer certain if it was you  
or I who died.  
I search.

I hear your paddling as those blue-green waters fill my  
lungs and I claw these wooden walls for air.  
You must replace the waters in me with the air outside.  
I row, you row,  
exasperated by this impossible nowhere place.  
We search.  
My only hope now is to find a hole in this boat.  
I grate my palms against each edge, gathering slivers in  
hopes of a crack to this reality that might be ripped open.  
I gleefully bleed from raw fingertips.  
That's where I lay, in crimson cerulean waters—  
forever in an agonizing search.

Dr Ladd is a chief resident beginning the Emergency Medicine Enhanced Skills program at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

**Competing interests**  
None declared

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