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Intersections at the Site of Breath

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Intersections at the Site of Breath

Dr. Laura Johnson

The deepest and darkest parts of each night
since my daughter was born some months ago
I've spent startling from fleeting and sweaty sleep,
hand darting out instinctively, holding my breath
as I search for hers.

Finding that soft, round belly,
I rest my palm and outstretched fingers there,
cupped slightly, like an oyster shell,
locating its rise and fall.

That sweetest, most kissable belly,
protruding like the Buddha's, bobbing like a buoy
on calm sea, each wave of breath a gift
given and returned:

reciprocity in real time,
source of all life,
our birthright,
this breath.

(invitation to breathe)

Watching her silhouette in the dark
dim light illuminating pieces here and there,
I marvel at this fullness of breath,
uncensored roundness of belly –
undisturbed embodiment –

a liberation I lost long ago:

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taught by patriarchy to take up less space
at the expense of my breath,
taught by capitalism to be productive
at the expense of my breath,
taught by modernity to disconnect from my body
at the expense of my breath,
this violent mind-body separation
joining all those other power-laden fragmentations
of modern supremacist culture:

reason severed from emotion /
self from world /
human from nature /
men from women /
white from Other /
and on it goes, each false binary
blurs realities of relations,
each a breath-diminishing,
life-dimming violence
meeting at the roots
of this dissociated culture.

(invitation to breathe)

My sleeping baby daughter,
free but for collective trauma
that lives in her bones –
as in mine, as in yours –
doesn't know the ways this world
will work to take her breath,
or how her privileges will spare it,
or that for this she owes a debt.

She doesn't know of the ancestral land
onto which she was born, of native breath
stolen and marginalized, ongoing cultural genocide,
or of the missing and murdered Indigenous women,
breath snuffed out like candles
in a storm.



She doesn't know that as she turned just six months old
George Floyd cried out for breath and for his mother,
joining so many other Black Lives smothered
beneath the knee of state-sanctioned violence
and white supremacy:
breath withheld,
life stolen,
trauma perpetuated,
power upheld.

(invitation to breathe)

And my sleeping daughter doesn't know
that before she lived just half a year
the world was brought to its knees
by a pandemic that preyed on our ability to breathe,

taking breath from BIPOC in particular, illuminating
intersecting injustices like a sky-opening crack
of lightning, no more hiding,
despite the masks we wear
these days.

She doesn't know that long before Covid-19
oppressed peoples have struggled to breathe:
from proximity to poisons,
from stifling prisons and camps,
from sleeping in their own beds,
from preferences of pronouns,
from fear in public places
commemorating enslavement,
nervous systems frazzled
and fried, breath held in,
life dimmed.

And she doesn't know that this virus was derived
 from ecological devastation that deprives
 human and more-than-human kin of their right
 to breathe; or that this ongoing exploitation –
 called the Anthropocene –
 has ushered in sixth mass extinction,
 global climate catastrophe,
 applauded as progress by the powers
 that be: smoke from its wildfires,
 water from its floods fill lungs,
 already full of the grief
 that lives there.

And like us, the Earth can't breathe.

And like us, ki grieves.

(invitation to breathe)

And when I teach my daughter this
 I will teach her too that this grief,
 thick and heavy as it may be, is a lifeboat
 on this rocky sea, a common sacred ground,
 a portal.

For we have swallowed the lie
 that emotions should be stifled,
 and as we stuff them down in dark
 depths of bodies aching from things
 left unfelt, we hold our breath:
 afraid to let in,
 afraid to let go.

But what if each inhale could open our hearts,
 each exhale an act of surrender,
 our great grief metabolized with breath,
 in ritual, together?

What if in this sick and dying culture
 gasping out its last stolen breath

we re-learned how to breathe,
 and breathed deep?

What if we stitched back together
 all that has been severed, precious breath
 by precious breath, making space
 for all beings to breathe?

What if breath were reconciliation?
 reparations?
 revolution?
 renewal?

(invitation to breathe)

Here now in this deep dark night I marvel
 at my baby's breath, so full and free;
 I have so much to teach her,
 but she more to teach me –

like how to breathe with my whole body,
 like how to live embodied and whole,
 like how to make each wave of breath a gift
 given and returned:

reciprocity in real time,
 source of all life,
 our birthright,
 this Breath.

*Ki and kin are pronouns
 for the living world proposed
 by Robin Wall Kimmerer*

*Artwork by Samantha Stone.
 Find more on Instagram @abaloone*

*Poem originally published
 September 28, 2020 at resilience.org*

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*On the Way Down
from Huangmaojian*

Joben Penuliar