

The Impulse of Breathing

by gerard varni

She walks from the treeline toward the water, holding the stone in both hands. With each step, her bare feet slip gently into the warm sand, then out, flipping up thousands of grains like small explosions, leaving behind footprints that shift their shape even as she moves forward.

Twenty yards from the water, she stops, lets the stone drop, then sits cross-legged in front of it, running her fingertips over the smooth, cool surface. Before her is a familiar tableau; the tired, misshapen sun, like a squeezed blood orange, sinks below the horizon, extinguishing the day and brushing the sky with pink and purple streaks in a final act of defiant beauty.

She closes her eyes and exhales sharply. Then she begins to breathe deeply, rhythmically, 10 seconds in and 10 seconds out. She concentrates on the cadence of her breath and her beating heart. After each inhalation, she holds the air in her lungs for a few seconds before forcefully exhaling. She slackens the muscles in her face and arms, then her back and legs. She feels the tension loosen and slip away gradually, like the ebbing of a tide.

As her heartbeat slows, her mind settles on the same thoughts that have haunted her for weeks: her desire to understand the order and purpose of things, especially the ambiguity of death and the mysterious abyss between matter and spirit. *Inhale. Exhale.* She feels the urge to weep welling in her gut, surging toward her throat. She gulps, suppresses the urge. *Inhale. Exhale.* She must do this, this thing that is the only path to knowing. *Inhale. Exhale.* Then, slowly, she opens her eyes. The sun disappears like a wink, bleeding color from the clouds, now gray against the dull sky.

She unfolds her legs, pushes herself up gently, slowly, to avoid the dizziness. Then she bends down, picks up the stone and walks to the water's edge, wades in until the warmth swirls about her thighs. She

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looks again at the horizon, at the slate sky and clouds, wonders at the world of causes that transform color into ash, life into death. Then she takes several more steps, slips beneath the water and, clutching the stone, comes to rest at the smooth bottom of the sea.

This is my country, she thinks, opening her eyes, hardly aware of the slight salt sting. She listens to the distinctive hum and crackle of underwater life, the dark echo of the singing sea, and begins to count. *One, two, three*. Here, she feels disembodied from the physical world, suffused with a fierce and palpable joy that is a force stronger than the menace of the divine. *Thirty-five, Thirty-six*.

Her long hair, sinuous in the buoyant water, undulates in front of her like strange tentacles flying by one after another. And she is certain this is the sensation of flight, of otherworldly freedom that humans rarely experience. The only things preventing her ascent are her toes dug into the sand and her arms wrapped around the stone. *Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one*. A school of fish appears, quick colorful flashes like blazing birds winging through the sky.

For the first time, she is aware of the air in her lungs. She knows the oxygen, her fuel, is diminishing, breaking down, and that carbon dioxide is accumulating in her cells, her blood and lungs. She feels the creeping irritation that the CO₂ causes in her respiratory center. Soon it will become unbearable, and she will be seized with an irresistible will to exhale. *One-hundred eighteen, nineteen, twenty*.

She knows she's approaching the critical line, the boundary that can only be crossed a single time; she feels the thumping of her burdened heart and the rush of blood to her head. There is a brightness now, and a roaring. It is the familiar, inexorable impulse of breathing. This is the moment—the nexus of life and death, of joy and suffering, solace and despair. She unwraps her hands from the stone, pushes gently off the bottom, floats to the surface, exhaling as she rises. And then she is breathing again, standing in the shoulder-high water, taking in the cool evening air, inhaling, exhaling, replenishing her body, her blood, with oxygen.

Then she turns toward the shore, sees the whiteness of the sand fringed against the dark line of trees; and beyond, the mountains,

swathed in the soft, ever-present mist. Sitting once again in the sand, she shivers as the rivulets of water sing down her shoulders, her back. Two minutes, she thinks. That is good for me. When her father, a spear fisherman, was her age, 15, he began training to hold his breath in the same manner. Now, after years of experience, he can lie at the bottom of a pool for more than eight minutes. He tells her of his feeling that he is suspending life, that when he is in the water, lying there, motionless, he leaves his body, can see himself from above. It is the same image often related by people who have almost died.

She is training to hold her breath now, to free dive, not because she wants to be a fisherman like her father, but because she craves the sensation of life suspended. Truthfully, she would like more than the mere cessation of things; she would, if it were possible, rescind the past, dismantle it somehow and piece it back together differently. She wouldn't revise much, wouldn't tinker with the essential order of things. She would simply unravel one slender thread of time and untie a single knot.

Then, inevitably, her mind drifts back to that awful night. She remembers it so vividly, the sound of it, the smell of it, everything. She feels the snugness of her bed, the warmth of sleep seeping into her body. She hears the approaching storm. First the distant rumble of thunder, then the night being split open by lightning, followed by the hiss and cackle of rain beating the palm fronds. Her door is ajar, admitting a rectangle of light from the kitchen, where her mother and father are standing. Her mother is crying, speaking quietly, unbuttoning her blouse. In her bed, the girl wavers between turning over and covering her head and continuing to watch her parents. She is transfixed; she senses something terrible.

Reaching out, the woman takes her husband's hand and places it beneath her blouse, guiding him to touch the stricken breast. And then she falls into his arms and they are both sobbing, their faces pressed together, tears mingling and falling, splashing silently on the dusty floor.

Then the girl is weeping, too, alone, sick with the knowing, pierced by an intuition of doom. She closes her eyes and thinks of the rain, the streaming sky pouring into the sea, and the thousands of sluggish things alive in the water. She hears things, the creaking of unseen wood, and creatures that slither dryly through trees murmuring that everything ends in cinders. She falls asleep, lulled finally by the blind hissing of the storm. And in the morning, when her parents tell her, the tears come again like the night's streaming rain. Clinging to them both, she sobs until her breath comes only in staccato bursts, hardly at all.

Her father, though a man of little formal education, is expert in both the art and science of breath-hold diving. He has books on its history and chronology, on the nature of seawater, pressure and buoyancy; there are manuals on psychological preparation, physical training and techniques. And after everything is over—the suffering, the anguish, the ghastly farewell and, finally, the leave-taking—the girl asks her father to teach her to dive.

“Yes,” he says. “I prayed you would ask.”

He tells her first of the women in Korea and Japan who, long ago, used the techniques to gather pearls from the sea floor. He speaks of Yorgos Haggi Statti, the sponge fisherman reputed to be the first deep diver in history. And Jacques Mayol, the legendary free-diver who was the first man to breach the 300-foot frontier without air reservoirs.

He explains to her the physics of diving, how hyperventilation reduces the level of carbon dioxide in the blood. And that it is high levels of carbon dioxide, not low levels of oxygen that urge the diver to breathe. The impulse of breathing, he calls it. The thing that forces this impulse is the concentration of CO₂ in the blood, called the critical line. Great divers, he tells her, can overcome the impulse of breathing; but they know not to exceed the critical line, which leads to black out, suffocation, death.

For student and pupil alike, the nightly lessons are comforting, the balm of the moonshine a healing salve. Each dive is an invocation, a sacred petition against the overwhelming tide of

grief and ruin that threatens to engulf them both. And though the girl listens attentively to the science of it, to the physiology and technical methods, this is not what compels her. The father senses this. So he focuses on describing the wonder, the delicacy of light and vision, of sound and listening, the mystical feeling of being submerged yet floating above all earthly existence like an apparition. The girl quickens to these revelations, to the supernal nature of the experience. And what the father utters is like the breath of another world, cleansed of all the coarse and impure elements from which human wisdom can rarely free itself.

But this night she is alone, her father trusting of her experience and judgment. The air is cool, and though her skin has dried, she is trembling. When the breeze rises, she shudders visibly, shoulders twitching for an uncomfortable instant. Still, she is loath to leave this holy place. She looks out at the bay, a breadth of darkness both mysterious and restful. She listens to the rhythm of the tide, each surge and surrender like the death of an old life and the resurrection of something new. She pushes herself up, rubs the sand from her hands, faces the dark line of trees. Then she looks back at the sea, the sanctuary that begs her return. She longs for the stillness, for the sense of enduring a lifetime in mere minutes. She turns back, though, toward the trees, sighs, inhales deeply, overcome by an impulse to breathe.

