

Breath

by Jim Breslin

Every breath that is in your lungs is a tiny little gift to me. Only now do I sense it. In you. In me.

I mull this over. It's so silent, not something you can hold in your hand. If it were, I would hold it out for you. I hadn't thought about it much. After eating raw onions or a night of drinking, or when I fog up a mirror. Occasionally I glimpse it, crystallized and smokey, as I scrape frost from the car windows. Even then, it's not like I've examined it, marveled at it. Until now.

Here's the thing. We didn't expect you so soon. You met us with a weakened cry. You're working so hard to stay, I understand. So brave. Your mother still takes my breath away. At unexpected times. In the garden, amidst the petunias. When she laughs, with her head tilted back. Last night, when she nudged me awake. Pointed out the dampened sheets. As she sleeps now. Sedated.

I almost lost it once. In third grade, wrestling behind the piano at recess. Marty Thompson's arm around my neck. My windpipe pinched. I flailed about. Tina Anson stood bug eyed in disbelief as I turned purple. In a panic, I worked my chin down under. Sunk my teeth into Marty's forearm, like a dog into flesh, broke skin. You don't realize what you cherish until you lose it.

Outside the window I see the helipad. The cement circle, emblazoned with a white cross, awaits someone else's trauma. Beyond it, a clearing of freshly cut green grass glistens in the morning sun. In the distance, the highway snakes like an umbilical cord. The morning rush has started, and traffic bustles by. Hundreds, thousands of people have risen. They clog the roads, sipping lukewarm coffee out of cardboard cups, fidgeting with their radios, chatting aimlessly on their cell phones.

And here you are. Before your time. Behind the glass. Fists clenched like a fighter. Our hopes rise and fall with your chest. You are wired up. Disciplined like a zen master. One shallow breath. Then another. Every moment is a gift.

