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S.O.S.

"Sighing appears to be regulated by the fewest number of neurons we have seen linked to a fundamental human behaviour"

—Jack Feldman, UCLA Researcher

We exhaled an end to this perfect pandemic twin cups of Starbuck's in hand, both white 3 sugars...no one knew and they weren't watching as we piled into my beat up old Prius and left the airport twirling swabs in noses, swirling them in solutions smashing the snow globe like Billy Collins said. Once the fine white layer of virions settled we walked sun blind into fierce bright March afternoon.

You told me how scientists found the neurons that control sighing, and created lab mice who couldn't, to study the why of the sigh: stress, sadness, helplessness, relief, pleasure...positive & negative valence states, peptidergic circuits, maximal gas exchange=lung efficiency=each inhale God's exhale into us=a necessary inflation of 600 million tiny wet balloons in our lungs=alveoli=Aeolus, god of the winds. That people died in the earliest iron lungs because they didn't build in room for sighing

we talk about your atrial fibrillation and periodic tachyachardia, the benzos & meditation & backpack defibrillator & trying to be the mellow mouse sneaking through sun drunk barnyard where pigs dream in mud and goose lays clutch of eggs amidst shorn wool and fouled straw in shaded manure spreader. A wind kicks up as we wander 2,000-year-old burial mounds surrounded by bony sycamore fingers, a touch of ancient wisdom with a red brick prison next door festooned with coils of razor wire like a bad kids' birthday party.

I'm always looking for signs, and today see two: #1 on back of rusted yellow truck bed "*Use Dummy Gladhands When Air Lines are Disconnected*" so we do, locking hands gladly like the middle-aged dummies we are, pausing after inhale, till later we see #2 on YMCA pool deck

"*Competitive and Repetitive Breath Holding Can Be Deadly*" so not wanting to risk arrhythmia, hypoxia, or ectopic heartbeats we heave twin sighs of relief knowing those sighs save us.

The PSI of Staying Alive

We evolved swimming in this airy bath of 14 pounds of pressure per square inch. Much more or less will cause problems. I escape to the yard, get the fuck outside, prone or supine, either is fine, will ease my troubled mind.

Picking off worries like so many fat ticks heads buried deep and sucking greedily. Old lady walks by asking if we bought this house, I answer yes, she says “good for you!”

The only chicken I have left in the yard is a fake and broken one painted plastic rescued from a trailer fire a decade ago, and that’s okay.

Today I learned how to “hide self-view” on Zoom after 2 years of pandemic meetings curating facial expressions and ocular tremors. Now I just let go, tasting angry tears, sad tears, tears of release and joy, I’m dying tears, all 31 flavors and don’t care if I have snot on my face or my eyes are red or I’m not smiling.

The redbud, the green roof, a shelter for my dreams, buckeyes unfurling early will drop leaves first too, new growth arriving just in time to save my winter-ivied mind before the squirrels prize it apart reorganizing wooden occipital bun to empty it of thought meat leaving shell fragments scattered like cheap furniture.

We stumble outside in 3 a.m. darkness hearts wailing along with condo fire alarm not knowing where to find calm. She says “gather your poets around you.” You say “I’m throwing pebbles in the water” and read Emily Dickinson and somewhere there are angels wrestling with gymnasts. Our experience of the present moment is a window of 2-3 seconds. Everything else is past or future, memory or anticipation.

How many times a day do I have to ask about suicidal ideation? (Are you now or have you ever...) or thoughts on the afterlife (Can the dead really live again? Would you say...Yes? No? Maybe?) I tell my poet friend I hope they’ll build a statue to him one day. He says for ½ the price he’ll stand on the South Side Bridge and recite. East End, West Side, South Hills, every street corner is haunted by barefoot strung-out angels.

A sharp-eyed falcon lands on my gloved hand. I am learning animal
ways of projecting desire skyward, and offer up elemental invocations:

Blow motherfucker blow, breath in chest.

Burn motherfucker burn, metabolize anger.

I'm drowning mother, I'm safe in your salty womb.

Mouth full of dirt, settle in to stardust bed.

1st Day, New Year

upriver through steady rain,
god willing and the creeks don't rise

We fill our long-forgotten cistern
with loads of broken stone to ward
off imminent collapse

our fogged breath, maybe free
of viral load meets chilly gray valley mist

black walnuts like a thousand secrets
some still held aloft by wooden fingers
some buried in the long grass

we feed red hot stump fire beside
family home despite downpour.
oak heart, oak blood, oak bone.

stagger through mucky black barn lot churn
aromatic batter of excrement and earth
to greener pastures; plantain, dock, fescue, clover.

slide top off cement tank, lift dipper to lips
imbibing cool spring water taste of lost youth,
the unheeded advice of the same few crowdads
always gathered here.

echoes of crowsong laughter and mourning dove lullabies
in fevered sleep, dream of Icarus falling from summer sky
to land in cloudy winter pond. he'll have to walk
before he can run, have to run before he can fly.

Not Right Now

Bearded burly neighbor ambled over
like Marlboro smoking grizzly bear
dressed in road worker's neon vest
offering clear mason jar of moonshine
in one paw. It wasn't the right
time for my tears.

Gray one day, sunshine the next
then rain then snow,
that's the way March is.

Sun strips off winter's last snow
like a dirty sweatshirt,
curtains flutter in open window
branches tapping morse code
promise of what's nestled inside
cool soil, green arrows piercing
brown blanket & underneath
are snuggling: feathers, skin
nails, teeth, bone, eyes.

It wasn't the right time to cry
when I sat in the sauna beside
middle aged hardbody coach
who called people dickless
and said having a girl on your
team is "the worst possible insult"

or when I sat in the car in Lowes
parking lot after buying supplies
to repair the hose that froze
and burst but there were too many
men spitting on the pavement
and hitching up their pants
so instead I just wondered
about who will love all the abandoned

masks or ones stuffed in drawers
forgotten now the pandemic is over.

But somehow when I had to pick you up
early from the Sky Zone trampoline park
because your friends were ignoring you
and it gave you a panic attack and I asked
the manager for a refund because \$30 is a lot
of money to spend to just be sad and he unlocked
the till and right then I felt the tears well up,
just one or two hot ones run down my cheek
and then a torrent when I made it
outside into the van.