

Waking Up, Breathing

Tone wakes in the middle of the night. A breath breathing on his neck. At first he assumes it's Flint's fitful breath. He must've joined Tone in bed, stretched across the arc of his back, his snout behind his head, his nose close to his ear. A grumblevoice. A shifting of weight.

A memory returns to Tone's consciousness from a lifetime ago. Across the miles, the dark-soiled prairieland that gives way to piney woods giving way in their turn to the wetlands of Louisiana. A summer's heat-burn in a mosquito's buzz. A virus awakes at the heart of this dark swamp overhung with cypress and the dank clamminess of all those coastal reveries.

A startled waking up with a shot, a hoot, a cry, wild and disturbed. Remembering only that he's now awake. And a figure in a shared bed. The ghost of Uncle Buddy who walked the town. But the warm breath alarms the boy who is Tone. It's a foreign sigh, an exhalation of pure evil.

Now, Tone wonders if this is a preinvented memory of Chawat before the arrival of Chawat. A coming in the dark of night as an annunciation of the coming to come. A wolf at the backdoor.

Rustle and wrestle in the nighthead. A hand on the back of the neck. Tone freezes. Disappears. Is gone in a flash from the nightfear. Running in woods,

howling at the fullmoon night, full and round like the guilt for which he seeks
expiation.

A child's prayer cannot contend with this bloodnight. Tone stops
breathing. An exaltation of nightfowl. A winged danger on the wind. Refuses
to blow. The full night releases. More damp than the mugginess of the
nightshirt clinging to his chest sweat.

Tone thinks about Soda Pop he once visited, what, last summer? Two?
Caged alongside Texas 34. Stops after the Quinlan dog trials for a soda before
heading home. Buys a grape soda for the bear, who drinks it down in a couple
of gulps. Its fur, tattered. A growl followed by a sigh.

Nobody knows how old ol' Soda Pop is. The store's owner happily sells
children twice as many bottled drinks, one for the child, one for the bear.
Guessing which sugardrink the bear prefers, as if preference plays any part in
this sideshow attraction. It's the only time Tone comes face to face with a bear.
He touches the bars of the cage, feels the metal. The solitude. Cries when he
sits back in the car for something illegible on the edge of his thoughts. He
can't quite make it out. The feel of the bear's warm breath on his face stays
with him on the drive back across the state. Within in a mile, his tears dry. He
falls asleep in the backseat, the dreary sagging of telephone wires swoop in

the fragmented clips. Lying on the backseat, he wakes up when a semi passes. The whoosh of air compressed and released as it passes his grandparents' auto. The rancid smells of raw onion and sweaty feet. The musk of people at close quarters in a car crossing state lines.

Something hangs in the trees. Still in the steely stillness of the breezeless evening. A hush descends. At night, back at home, Grandpa unpacks the car. Washes off the grill, the splattered guts and gills of grasshoppers. Walks the dog. Shoreline stroll at dusk. A distant bark of a hound.

The moon clears its way through the tops of the trees to shine on the too-still surface of the water. Faint scent of magnolia, also from a distance.

Voices. A splash interrupts the pond's surface. Boys out frogging the night away. Stay up all night to look for breakfast.

When Tone wakes up, he's alone. The breath on the nape of his neck gone. The heat burns through. He shakes it off and heads to the bathroom.

A faucet drips its greeting. The *plink* on rust-stained porcelain as if signaling through the solitude of the morning. Slight breeze. The slightest of breezes. No good, good-for-nothing breeze. Only stirs up the heat already accumulating. The buzz of flies around the splotches where dripping blood fell.

Steady. Steady walk. Stand straight. Don't look down. Pleases and thank-yous proffered, properly submitted to everyone he encounters. The table set. Tone sits at the table. The adults speak in hushed tones until Grandma breaks through the fog of the kid's head. Bacon and eggs. Fried. Syrupy yolks spilling over the white plate. The dissolution of succor.

A fly buzzes buzz buzzes very near the peachfuzz on the back of the kid's neck. It elicits a cry and the flailing of arms. Tone is back in bed, paralyzed. He moves with a motion not his own. He tries to scream, to call for help, but no sound comes. His eardrums explode with the infernal buzz just outside his ears.

Tone loses count of the summer days that give way to Indian summer. The slight chill, unexpected, that sneaks in at night. Travels over land lowering temperatures. Crops gathered, reaped, and cut.

There is no language that can capture this landscape of fear. This landscape escapes all of language's attempts to capture it. Not the landscape but the experience of the landscape. Not the language. Painted body. Nightbird. There is no language, no accepted symbology, to commit this to words. Wordless folds of time crease the landskydream. No rectilinear parcels incise Earth. Erdstimme. Erststimme als die Tonalität der Erde.

There is the land and there is the idea of the land. No name for the dead.

The nameless dead lie buried beneath the no-name land. Burned to ash,
burned to dust. Surrounded by the buzz of flies, the electric drone of summer
cicadas, the lone howl of a coyote. Unmournable, but no less forgotten despite
the absence of tears. Their names exist as whispers and glances aside. A
history of erasure. Archive of absence.

A history that writes itself as digression. Writhe across the sand in curious
S-shaped curves curving out the lisping hissing in the syllables of
snakelanguage. Deviation and detour. Ever departure.