

Breath in the time of COVID-19 has become a symbolic and nuanced concept - a representation of mindfulness and vitality, a means to connect with others despite physical isolation through speech or song, a precious resource that those who are healthy still have. In this piece, I recall healing from a TBI, exploring the concept of breath in recovering from an illness amidst a community facing disaster.

The Embers
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It was a blustery morning, sharp powdery peaks chiseling the cheekbone of organza sky. Hugging the rusty stretch of road by the winding Colorado River and through the telescoping tunnel, I was besieged by white. My car shuddered and swerved and slammed into the guardrail. Hands freed from the steering wheel, I saw the hood crumple into that rail. I remember gasping for air as my body curled around the wheel, feeling gut-punched, like I was back in second grade soccer and an accidental cleat to the belly had brought me to my knees. Then my head collided with the back of the seat and the roiling world went quiet.

“It’ll take a while for you to feel like yourself again,” the physician nodded later from behind her clipboard. My eyes swam with the ache of concentration. Her crisply laundered shirt, pressed khakis, the tongue depressors lined up like soldiers by the sink, the sharp square walls. I felt some great desperation, the urge to yelp like a dog on its first night in a new home. In monotone I had recalled the details of the accident. But I didn’t know how to describe that moment of breathlessness. Where I felt utterly powerless and utterly free.

I arrived at my next clinical rotation eventually, in a small town perched on the edge of the Western slope, where lovers kissed barefoot on the benches by the creek, where the twilight purpled into inky black in the woods by the clinic like clockwork each evening, where some nights old men with stained teeth and uneven beards would gather in the basement of the local coffee shop to coax music from their ancient mahogany guitars. I was still digesting words slowly, but these languages I could understand. The orb of my brain, pummeled into confusion, was shaping and reshaping itself as I pressed my stethoscope against trundling hearts. As I listened to Mrs. Gilman’s stories of how she grew up wandering the pillow hills flanking the town - she sketched out trails on the exam room paper. As I greedily popped the lid off the jar of homemade pickles Mr. Rafferty had given me after we had perused his blood sugar logs. As violin strings etched railroad tracks into the fleshy tips of my fingers in the basement of that coffee shop, alongside ukes and banjos and guitars and mandolins. As I rested my forehead against a mossy patch of river rock after a run that reduced my calves to taffy.

The second month, there was a fire. A steam train headed north had coughed up a blaze, and now billowy imitations of clouds crowded the sky. Everyone knew someone whose life had been overrun by the smoky plumes. I listened to the soot-speckled lungs of at least a dozen firefighters, palpated bellies as the wind carried greedy ash past the clinic windows in powdery ribbons. As I stressed her sacroiliac joints, Mrs. Gilman told me, in between winces, that she was headed south to her daughter's home for a while. Mr. Rafferty still brought me something to share from his garden every clinic visit - cherries dripping syrup like the setting sun, and an apple I nearly broke a tooth on while standing barefoot on the rough, splintering planks of the deck one evening.

The next morning I startled awake while the sky was still the color of a bruised ocean. I sifted through my rumpled pile of clothes. Everything was covered with a thin veneer of dust. Even my skin felt ash-hewn.

If you drive north a little ways out of town, there's a hillside where I swear wildflowers were invented. That's where I parked, my headlamp flickering in tune with the fireflies. I crammed a few shriveled slices of an orange I had found in my glove compartment into my mouth - it tasted fossilized. I made my way across a clearing where the ground was too rocky for the stakes to sink their teeth into the grass. I danced from foot to foot to keep warm in the dawn chill, watching the light climb the tips of distant mountains as it journeyed to reach me. I propelled myself onto the singletrack that kissed the edges of the potholing highway.

From here, I could see where the fire had made its home, reducing, in its blinding embrace, the essence of these rooted and growing beings - to smoke and cinders and ash. To weightlessness. My feet made prayer wheels past the skeletal trees, through the heavy grey mist, down, down, down, paralleling the scarred asphalt, I found myself gulping, gasping for air, gut-punched, down, down, down, arms splayed, muscles thumping, hair tangling, down, down. Between footfalls I was free.