

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 84 *CutBank* 84

Article 10

Spring 2016

Breathe

Gina Warren

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Warren, Gina (2016) "Breathe," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 84 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss84/10>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

BREATHE

Quinn and I used to swim together. Before we became a couple we'd go to Chicken Ranch Beach and circumnavigate the No Boating area, trying to ride the buoys. Holding my breath was not so bad and not so hard; gliding below the surface quiet as a sigh, blood pressure rapping against my eardrums, I felt calm.

At Drake's Beach, ocean waves crashing hard and loud, Quinn wouldn't let me swim alone. For starters, there were always reasons why I shouldn't swim: "It's too dark," "There's that rip tide," "You'll get attacked by a shark," "You're drunk."

I never listened to his reasons, and unwilling to relinquish them, Quinn would stand stern and steady, navel-deep in the frigid water, while I swam past the breakers. When I fell in love with Quinn he was thirty years old. I was twenty-two.

*

When you don't breathe, your system releases adrenaline. Your heart beats faster. The carbon dioxide that's normally released in exhalations builds up in your body and it's this, not oxygen deprivation, that makes not breathing uncomfortable. The carbon dioxide floods your cells, overwhelms you. Your blood will begin to acidify. Given enough time without air, your lungs themselves, not your throat or voice box, will start to scream.

If you're holding your breath voluntarily, your body will eventually force you to breathe. If you hold your breath until you pass out, you'll inhale once you lose consciousness; this kills some divers in the form of shallow water blackouts.

Hold your breath long enough and your diaphragm will begin to spasm uncontrollably, trying to suck in air, trying to pump oxygen back to your starving cells. These contractions will hurt.

It's called the *critical line*, the point at which the carbon dioxide amassing in your blood causes you to feel pain.

*

When I heard Max's voice on the home message machine, I sucked in air. I was holding the front door open with one hand and my car keys

with the other.

“Gina... Gina... if you’re there pick up. I need to talk to you.”

Max lived with Quinn and me. I ran to the phone.

I’d been trying to reach Quinn for hours. It was the day before I turned twenty-three, and we were supposed to do errands in Petaluma together before meeting my parents for dinner in Point Reyes. I knew Quinn was running a load of yard waste to the dump with our neighbor, so I left for Petaluma alone. When I returned to an empty house, I texted Quinn, “Are you okay? Where are you?”

On the phone I asked Max, “What’s going on?”

“Quinn was hit by a truck. He’s in Marin General Hospital right now.”

“Is he okay?”

“He has a broken leg and a brain injury.”

“How bad is it?”

“We don’t know yet.”

I said I’d be there as soon as I could. My life tumbled into itself, beyond itself, and landed with Quinn in the hospital. I took a breath the moment I heard Max’s voice and held it, uncontrollably and complicity, and waited for Quinn get better.

*

“The body can be trained,” states pulmonary specialist Dr. Ralph Potkin, who helped train German diver Tom Sietas to withstand twenty-two minutes and twenty-two seconds without air. According to Dr. Ralph Potkin, with approximately an hour of professional help, most people will discover that they can hold their breath for about four minutes.

Training involves learning not to be scared or distressed by your body’s normal mechanisms, by the natural responses you’ll experience to oxygen deprivation and carbon dioxide overload. A huge part of Sietas’s training was pushing back his own critical line. Different people reach this point at different times, everyone having their own boundaries and limits, their own parameters for pain. Even though I love to swim, I can only hold

my breath for about a minute and a half.

*

Maya, a close friend of Quinn's who used to live with us, hugged me when I got to the intensive care unit. I could tell she'd been crying, and she smelled like smoke.

"You'd better go see him," Maya's boyfriend's mother said when I asked how bad it was.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Maya asked. I nodded, and she plucked my hand from my side and walked me past the double doors, the nurses' desk, and into Quinn's room.

When I saw him and began to shake, Maya wrapped her arm around my shoulder. I held my mouth.

Quinn's head had been partially shaved to expose a huge laceration that arched from his forehead to behind his ear. A series of staples held the skin together. There was another gash above his eyebrow, stitched with black thread. A clear tube ran from a hole in his skull to a bag somewhere, letting excess blood drain, relieving the pressure. There was another laceration in the back of his skull. Multiple IVs dangled from both of Quinn's arms. One leg was suspended above him, immobilized. His hair and face were crusted with blood.

"I think he can hear us," Maya said dreamily. "I think he knows we're here."

He'd just tipped into a coma that would last five days.

*

When Quinn was in the hospital, I visited him every day. I slept there often, first curled on chairs tucked together, then later spread out on folding hospital cots.

Sometimes at night, with my cot shoved against his bed, our hands would find each other and my critical line, the point at which holding and staying would cause too much pain and I'd be forced to exhale and let go of Quinn, would leapfrog eons away. I'd think, *I'll do this as long as I need to.*

One morning around four a.m., two nurses turned on the lights

and checked Quinn's vitals. One leaned over him, another eyed an IV bag. Quinn shifted and moaned: I put my hand in his and his finger pressed into the back of my palm.

"He seems cold, can you get him another blanket?" When they left for a moment, I kissed his hand. We remained touching, like a lifeline for the both of us in the dim room. At that point he still wasn't speaking, or eating by himself, or using the bathroom on his own.

I did graduate school homework beside his bed, I ate meals in the cafeteria or my car, and didn't sleep for more than half an hour at a time when I was there. I hardly slept at home. I didn't see my friends or my family and I didn't want to.

What I wanted was Quinn, dancing with the passenger side seatbelt of my car while I drove us to San Francisco. I wanted him trying to convince me to wear a lifejacket when I swam, or waving at me from the shore. I wanted his hands on me again, his mouth on me, and beyond that I wanted the idea of what he was more than what he'd been—Quinn was totally separate from everything about my life before I met him, and when I met him, I wasn't very happy with my life.

And slowly, so slowly, he did get better. I almost cried, laughing and hopping up and down and calling over the fence to the neighbors, the first time he left a message on my voicemail; finally, in the hospital, they let him have a phone. *Since when is he so coherent?* I thought. There were times I drove home at midnight, singing along with the radio, elated and manic because he'd called me "Sweetie" and bought me a lukewarm cafeteria coffee. Those nights I'd stay up late, even if I had work the next day. I'd dance with the dog in the living room, and eat a large meal with my fingers, standing over the sink.

But there were other nights, too. There were nights I cried on the long drive home because I knew the house would be empty when I got there, or because Quinn called me *Bitch* at the hospital, because he wouldn't speak to me, because he'd been swearing at the nurses, went to the bathroom on the floor in protest, or wouldn't take his meds. Those nights

I'd get home, let his dog, Tashi, out to pee, then crawl under the covers. Sometimes, I wouldn't even turn off the lights. I wouldn't lock the doors—and if all those unnamed, faceless shadows we sometimes fear wanted to do horrible things to me, then let them. I wouldn't eat, wouldn't change into pajamas. I'd just lay down in bed, Tashi circling my body to find a warm space against my thigh or abdomen, and let myself feel crushed.

*

The Water Torture Cell was a mahogany and metal tank with a glass front, built in England in 1911. It was one of Harry Houdini's great escapes—he'd be suspended by stocks on the cell's lid, ankles put into restraint braces, then lowered into the water. Lastly, the lid was locked. At the beginning of his performance, he'd always take time to outline the risks and precautions, and to inspect the locks and restraints in front of the audience.

In the only known recording of Harry Houdini's voice, he talks about this tank. "Should anything go wrong when I am locked up," his carnival voice echoes, "one of my assistants [will] walk through the curtain, ready to rush in, demolishing the glass, allowing the water to flow out, in order to save my life."

Houdini never failed this escape. His execution was so flawless and capable, so wholly magical, that some believed Houdini didn't *actually* break free of the restraints and escape the cell; they thought he could dematerialize and reappear outside the apparatus.

*

Finally, after I didn't die of sleep deprivation or in any of the cruel ways unnamed, faceless shadows can conceive of, after Quinn survived a coma, after he re-learned how to swallow, talk, and walk, after almost two months of hospitalization and a few weeks at his parent's house, Quinn came home. To the falling-down, fire-warmed ranch house we'd been living in before he got hit. On one of his first mornings back, Quinn spent hours looking through old boxes of memorabilia. He pulled out pictures and T-shirts to show me while I sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and pretending to do homework, when really I was just watching him. The way

he walked, the way his back muscles moved, the way he lit cigarettes, how his mouth looked when he leaned in to kiss me.

“Did I ever show you this?” Quinn asked, bearing newspaper clippings from when he was a paramedic. Bearing patches from when he was a firefighter. Photographs from parties.

“I found this, I want you to have it,” he kept saying. Hair sticks, wood he’d carved, baseball caps, old shirts, all of it grew on the table next to the no-where-near-finished graduate thesis I wasn’t working on.

“You’re a beautiful creature,” Quinn kept saying. “I love you.”

He repeated that over and over, too: *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

He’d come into the kitchen just to touch his lips to my cheek and pour more coffee in my cup which was never less than three quarters full.

“See this picture?” he’d ask, pointing. “That’s me, right there.”

And that felt like him, right there. That felt like him the way I wanted him, the way I’d imagined he would be when he came back. The way he felt when I brought him take-out and we sat in the hospital together, laughing while we ate, him promising to take me to the restaurant I’d ordered the jalapeño poppers and burgers from once he was released. Sometimes the way he felt matched my idea of him, the way I fantasized our possible life.

It didn’t last.

I came home from work one day and he was swearing and stabbing his bookshelf with a knife that had an eight-inch blade. He’d have a bad conversation on the phone and I’d hear *tunk, tunk, tunk* ringing from the bedroom—he’d be shooting razor-tipped arrows at a board leaned against a wall. The first time I went to investigate the sound, he convinced me to shoot one, too; the arrow didn’t stick, rebounded, and almost hit me. I quit. He shot another; it rebounded and almost hit Tashi. Quinn laughed and said it’d serve her right.

One night, I woke up when Quinn shifted abruptly. In the almost absolute darkness, I could make out the shining streak of his knife held to

Tashi's throat. When I was at work, he'd hit her. In front of me, he hit her. Max's girlfriend said Quinn held Tashi between his legs, knife to her neck, and screamed, "Don't tempt me, Dog." When I refused to abuse drugs with him, he'd yell, "What the fuck is this? Am I some kind of fucking addict or something? Why doesn't anyone want to have any fun anymore?"

Where was my breath then?

I'd thought the waiting was over. I thought I'd held up, outlasted, dealt with the burning lungs and the contracting diaphragm and would be able to stand in the free air again. But having him home was worse than having him at the hospital. I didn't feel like I was holding my breath anymore, I felt like someone was holding me under. I'd close my eyes and try to exhale carbon dioxide while taking up as little oxygen as possible.

"You were never supposed to see this," Quinn told me once, after he'd just scratched his face and cheeks so hard they bled. He was right, I wasn't. Even Max didn't see it, spending the time in his room with the door closed and TV turned up loud. That rage, that darkness, it was supposed to be Quinn's secret, but it became mine, too.

*

When we breathe, inhalations draw air into our lungs, and oxygen is absorbed through our alveoli. Our blood holds it. We need oxygen to digest food, to perform any physical activity whatsoever, and to maintain bodily functions. Blood dispenses this necessary sustenance to our cells. Blood trades oxygen for carbon dioxide, swapping something useful for something poisonous. When we exhale, we make room for more oxygen.

Being in a relationship with someone who's angry and unpredictable is like overloading your system with carbon dioxide; you annihilate any room for growth. You block yourself to healthy exchanges, deny your body what it needs, and slowly the acidity level of the blood coursing through your veins rises. You burn from the inside, out.

*

Quinn claimed to not remember it in the morning, but on the drive home from dinner at his parents' house one night, he kept threaten-

ing to do things: to jump out of the car, to grab the wheel and crash it, to hit me, to kill himself, to run away, to call the cops on me. His breath was weed-smoke green and pharmacy-medication metallic.

“If you leave me,” Quinn snarled, his face inches from my cheek as I stared straight ahead and crested my Honda over a hill, “I’m going to come after you.” He waited a beat, so this could sink in. I’d seen him do dive-rolls with a sword off of a fifteen-foot-tall roof. He’d broken a stranger’s hand and dislocated someone’s shoulder because they grabbed me at a club. He’d thrown two of our house kittens out a window, and although it was the first story, I still screamed and ran outside to check. And this—the armed dive rolls, the two strangers, the kittens—this was all before the accident. I know that I knew, in some recess of my emotional-logical self, that Quinn was not right for me. That I was putting myself at risk, that I was getting into trouble. I wonder now, why did I try so hard to make it work?

From a young age I’ve collapsed the terms “danger” and “safety,” and if they weren’t totally synonymous they were at least so inextricable that one never seemed to appear without the other. Love stood at the epicenter of this dynamic, the pivot point for danger and safety, and this increased my tolerance for making poor decisions, for being reckless. But the way Quinn was talking to me touched a new level of danger, a colder, harder one that safety couldn’t reach.

“You won’t hear me coming,” Quinn continued, “you won’t see me coming, and I am one vindictive motherfucker.”

I kept my eyes on the small wedge of road illuminated through the mist by my headlights. I thought if I glanced a look at Quinn I might die, that my heart might jump the tracks of my ribs and head North: going, gone, gone.

This, I knew with every fiber of my being scared shitless, *this is my critical line*. It didn’t matter if it was the brain injury, didn’t matter if it was the drugs, didn’t matter if I loved him because I did, deep down and rooted into myself, raw and bloody, but that was my limit. That was the moment I knew I couldn’t hold it, couldn’t stay. I didn’t respond, just pushed down on

the accelerator. Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty.

*

Often during submersion escapes, Houdini would invite the audience to hold their breath with him.

Imagine the fear, the suspense. Half the crowd might've been screaming and the other half might've been desperately holding their breath and one man behind a curtain battling impossible odds.

An advertisement for Houdini's escape from a sealed, oversized milk can read, "Failure Means A Drowning Death."

Every time he appeared dripping wet and victorious, I imagine there to have been a moment of quiet awe, a total collective exhale that revved into a sudden explosive cacophony of shouts and applause.

*

At five-thirty a.m. Quinn didn't know I was leaving. I'd stayed up late with him the night before—prescriptions and street drugs, anything to keep Quinn at bay, anything to keep his yelling to a dull roar with the promise of my escape breaking over the horizon—then slipped out of bed before dawn. The stars were bright and focused, and in the darkness there were no clouds. My head throbbed with a pharmacy hangover. When I walked or turned my head, the floor spun. It was cold out.

I didn't move so much as I poured the contents of my physical life from the house to the car. Without time to gather boxes, I used paper grocery bags to relay stacks of books straight into the trunk. I shoved all my clothes into a traveling truck, and two suitcases absorbed almost everything else. Each time I got close to the door with an incriminating armload of belongings, I held my breath. Each time I turned the knob, I looked over my shoulder to the room where Quinn was sleeping. I was terrified that door would swing open and he'd catch me, then execute one of the scenarios that had been keeping me awake at night.

But the only door that opened, over and over, was the front door. It would yawn into the darkness outside, and whenever I crossed the threshold and crammed another load into my car, I exhaled a sip of carbon

dioxide and each one of my hapless, starved cells cried out in relief.

I drove to my parents' house with a carload of belongings shuffling and falling all around me. Tashi was there, too, shanghai'd to the backseat. His dog now my dog. My life now my life. All of it for keeps.

I was stoic on the first trip, but when I returned for the second pass and removed every piece of myself from that house, I felt like I was shattering. Like my fingernails were peeling back. For awhile I winced in silence, shoulders tight. But before I got onto the main road I bent forward against the wheel, leaned back into my seat, and let loose a frantic, maniac scream that hit the roof of my mouth like a freight train and echoed through the car like a swear word. I wheezed and cried and screamed and howled. I beat my hands against the steering wheel, my fists against the car door, my foot against the gas. I didn't realize it then, but at that moment I finally stopped holding my breath. Everything relaxed, and the terror and anger and rage and love that I'd been holding onto passed through me in waves. Even though my throat stung, even though burned with the freedom of escape like rain that sizzles soil after a long drought, I kept shrieking. I wanted my manic, brutal catharsis to break me wide open to prove I hadn't already split.

*

How long do you think you can hold your breath? We can train our bodies to withstand immense amounts of pain, to survive without oxygen and cope with the overwhelming burn of carbon dioxide, to push past our critical line, but eventually we will always fold. And when we do break and succumb, it doesn't mean pain has triumphed over us—rather, it means that our will to live, a vague term that exists at the nexus of Life and Love, has just walked through the curtain, rushed in, and demolished the glass so we can take another breath. We splay on the floor in those moments, tired and beaten and bloody, but alive and safe and wiser, the danger a passing pool at our feet.

Driving to my parent's home from the ranch house, I shook and cried and cussed at the top of my lungs all the way through Point Reyes,

and then Olema, and then Lagunitas. When I finally exhausted all swear words and desperate curses, I hyperventilated. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.

I rolled down the windows and let fog wash through the car, chilling my face where tears ran.