

STILL
BREATHING

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
The Coffle.....	7
At First Sight	8
Walking the Labyrinth	10
At the Water Shrine	12
Still Breathing	14

AT THE WATER SHRINE

(for Sobonfu and Malidoma)

Six hours dancing and memory comes in the slide of my foot against wood floors, in the undulation of my hips to djembe, in the chorus of moans that greet me at the shrine as I lie down to return home the only way I know.

Until now, I have only remembered the Passage. I have not had courage to remember the moment I died as the moment I lost my voice. The language of my mother and the language of my rapist converged in my throat and, unable to maneuver the simultaneous birth and death of myself, I stopped speaking.

I don't want to know what I know: the scar above my breast the smell of burning flesh the movement of wood my terror in the absence of trees a man squeezing my breasts pushing my legs the slap because I refuse again and again the beating and pushing until he believes I am nothing when in fact I have created many of me to survive.

I want to hold on to things I know are real: My mother's hand against my face the smell of cocoa and palm oil her fingers weaving beads in my hair my lover's body on top of mine market day and medicines wrapped in leaves, drums beating out the movement of my feet my hips following the sound.

No one remembers how to place cloth under water in a wooden bowl, how to arrange flowers and stone around the altar, how to throw the coconut, how to feed the Ancestors. No one trusts the rhythm of the body to recognize home and so they follow me back and forth praying my journey from village to shrine reveals the true nature of grief.

This is where I started: at the edge of the village offering myself to the Mother of All Waters if only she would save me from this day. But I am here two centuries removed, aware I will never be saved the pain of remembering.

I am the woman watching the first merchant ship arrive, its white sails emblazoned with a red cross. I am witness to the beginning of a continent's death. I am the woman who lost her tongue to save her priesthood. I am the woman who jumped.

Memory: a woman's hand on my shoulder, someone calling my name — both inviting me back to Loveland, Ohio, a fall day, a room filled with people who will never know what it is like to enter your grave with your eyes open, listening to the waters of your birth slap good-bye against its bow.

For a long time, I do not answer. I do not want to die or be born again. I do not want to hold what I know in my heart, and I do not want to speak it. I want only to be home, a young girl, watching the horizon, dangling my legs, and enjoying for the first time the ocean washing my feet, the water so calm the sky is cloudless.