

## It is Hard to Breathe, sometimes, in Africa

It is hard to breathe, sometimes, in Africa,  
when the stench of milky sewage seeps in rivulets down the eroded dirt of the hillside  
from the lean-to tin and wooden-slatted shanty shack  
clinging precariously to the side of the mountain.

Or when the mangy, tick born, gaunt and starving puppy approaches warily  
In the hopes of being thrown a life sustaining scrap.

Or the snotty nosed, dirty little orphans  
with flies buzzing around their eyes  
and their round bellies drum-taught with infestations of worms,  
and hunger  
put their arms up for hugs.

I find I sigh a lot in Africa.  
Sighs to keep living  
when my soul and breath freezes with sorrow  
for young men idling away their lives at the side of the road  
whoring away the strength of their youth to do the bidding of the wealthy  
digging and hauling and carrying –  
for a pittance of pennies - enough to feed the starving children on the hill tonight,  
or perhaps to buy oblivion in a bottle  
till the next morning of repetitious waiting

I stop breathing when I receive a little note on my pillow from the domestic worker,  
written carefully in 4<sup>th</sup> grade hand-writing,  
“Please can you help me to get my driving license?”  
She walks 10 miles a day to and from her work on the opposite hill  
to wash and iron the white peoples’ dirty laundry,  
clean their shitty toilets,  
wipe out the toothpaste and phlegm in their sinks  
and pack up the left-over table scraps  
to take home to the hungry children on the other side of town.

I hold my breath listening to the mad intensity of the young man  
who lives in a cave by the sea in the small town of Wilderness  
He explains that “the Father” tells him how to live his life.  
He takes in the homeless and bereft – they can sleep in his cave.

I sigh a lot in Africa  
I sigh the sadness into my being.

And sometimes as I open my arms wide to embrace the snotty-nosed dirty orphans and feel their soft little  
bodies snuggle up close with need,  
My heart expands and my breathe becomes vast and fills my being with life and love

Or the beauty of the shimmering, sun-bejewelled sea,  
untouched by the dramas on her hilly shores,  
is so beautiful that I breathe in deeply, to take in the fresh clean salty breeze,  
the light and luminosity  
and call of the seagulls,  
the flashing colors of the sunbirds and the  
noisy community calls of the seals far beneath the rocky cliffs

I cannot breathe in enough of the cool pre dawn African air  
filled with the primeval sounds of the lions hunting and calling one another,  
the sky and clouds lighting up blue and gold and pink as the earth moves in her orbit,  
drawn inexorably back to the light of the sun,  
in a regular rotation of necessity.  
I want to keep these sounds and sensations, smells and sights  
and hungrily breathe them in as if they will then stay with me forever,  
Knowing that I must leave soon, this beloved land.

Sometimes my soul relaxes.  
Air rushes in with the smiles of generosity and giving,  
the easy laughter of the saints on both hills.  
On one side of town  
those that are awake  
give rides to the weary women walking down the hill home,  
to other side, the poor part of town in the evenings.  
On the other side of town,  
the face of smile wrinkles and sparkling eyes of Margaret,  
her head thrown back with a toothless smile as wide as the ocean  
As she opens her arms to the lost waifs  
as well as the wealthy benefactors  
Everyone is welcome in this house of love.

It is hard to breathe in Africa.  
I sigh a lot in Africa.

It is enough to practice the breath in Africa  
So that it can become like the regular beating pulse of the land  
And the steady rhythmic natural movement of the ocean  
The slow and inevitable rotation of the earth,  
No matter what is happening on her surface.  
To remain calm and unchanging  
Accepting and present.

To breathe it all in  
And out .