

~Breathe~

By: Neiye Mukherjee-Roy

Opening slowly, crusty lashes prickling my eyes, I attempt to awaken my body. My throat dry as a saltine cracker, aching and chaffed raw from what seems to be a rod lodged in my esophagus. Mentally panicking now my blurry vision starts to focus, on the pale pastel patches of color. Soft bustling accompanied by a steady high pitch beeping fill my ears. I try to raise my hand to relieve my throat but to no avail; all I manage to do is move my eyes toward my hand to see it limp with a clip attached to the finger. The baby blue blobs before are now nurses with clipboards...I was in a hospital. Why?...The panic slowly begins to rise and like a slow poison, my eyes burn, my throat clenches to breath on my own and suddenly people are running towards me, none of them had faces I recognized. There's a damp mask covering the lower half of my face coated in a continuous layer of sweat. I attempt to breathe again but even with air in my lungs, I couldn't. My eyes start to roll back as I slip away, the beeping goes ballistic before everything is dark again.

My hearing is muted now but I'm still aware of myself, my body feels like lead, a hammering in my head, no comfort in this bed. Soon even that slips away. My last memories come back in pieces. "Please miss you can't come in here without a mask. Please I have a child!" The me in my memory shouts begging to a woman without a mask at what looks to be a grocery store. The woman's response isn't audible but she moves closer flailing angrily and wagging a finger in my face. I recall the terror I felt in that moment as she walked me into a corner. I see a few bystanders run toward me before a burly man tackles the woman to the ground. The memory ended and I returned back to my black abyss.

I thought about Hailey my 9 year old immunocompromised daughter. Alarm bells went off in my head as I remembered she was home alone. Given the current circumstances I couldn't have anyone over who could put her at risk. I tried to will myself awake again but my tries were futile. My mind wandered to my hospitalized father and I wondered if he was ok. "Ah that's right" I thought; we were in a pandemic and visitors weren't allowed in hospitals, so I was alone here too. A loud voice boomed, it was the lady from my memory "I have the right to breathe, I won't wear a mask!", in horror the pieces of the puzzle came together, was she positive for the virus? Did she get me sick? Is she the reason I'm here?! A flood gate of questions broke through the wall in my mind. Confusion was replaced with anger. Her inconsideration landed me in the hospital on a ventilator, worried sick to my stomach for my young child at home.

My chest tightened as I felt myself suffocating, drowning in my own sweltering sea of worry. Why didn't people understand? What did I do to deserve this?! Was this the end? My thoughts were a mess. I had kept working through the pandemic to support my daughter as a single mother and now hospitalized from exposure. Even in this unconscious state I couldn't breathe, I wanted to breath, I needed to, it's my

right to live! I worked so hard to support my child and get myself through school, graduation was in 2 weeks time. Feeling robbed and absolutely helpless I floated along waiting for the light to return.

With no sense of time, I waited and waited in a jaded almost defeated state. After what felt like an eternity, a thin red ribbon appeared and I held onto it with all I could muster. It couldn't end like this, it couldn't! What would happen to my daughter? She needs me! I was internally screaming demanding myself to get up. In a muffled voice that felt far away I heard "Clear!" That same word repeated a few more times, each time getting farther and farther away before I noticed my ribbon tearing. Fiber by fiber the ribbon started giving way so I took a deep breath to brace for impact.

"Time of death, 9:11pm. Nurse please take the body away immediately. Whose next?" "Doctor, there's a girl about 9 years old who was just admitted by EMTs."