

onto the rocks. The morning wind, fierce in my face as we turn back into the east.

Walking beside these other silences, I am only present as the morning turns, desiring not the next moment's coming, nor missing the one just past. I'll find time to ponder this later; I have no such ability, or liability, now.

If you asked me yesterday, I would have said I don't know how to meditate.

Tara K. Shepersky is a contemplative walker, writer, and photographer based in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Her first book is Tell the Turning, a collection of poems published by Bored Wolves, with illustrations by Lucy Bellwood. You can find Tara online at www.pdxpersky.com.

Air Space

CEAL KLINGLER

AFTER MONTHS of breathing air that tastes like crushed charcoal and lighter fluid, my husband and I wake to a change in the quality of dark falling across our windows. A cold wind has herded wild-fire smoke away over the granite crest of the Sierra Nevada. At dawn, we stand outside with our mouths agape like young birds. The sky shifts from invisibly grimy to azure, and peaks reappear on our western horizon. Pinyon jays yell from the hills after weeks of silence. Migratory white-crowned sparrows, just arrived, scuff for seeds in bitterbrush.

Good air is my favorite place. I think constantly about where and when to find it.

We animals breathe. Where I live, at the intersection of the Great Basin and Mojave Deserts and the Sierra Nevada mountains, lungless desert salamanders herd oxygen into their blood through

their skin and the linings of their mouths. Giant hairy desert scorpions absorb oxygen through book lungs, in which pockets of air and blood interleave like the fingers of lovers holding hands. When burying themselves, horned lizards tuck their forelegs to their sides, leaving room for chest-expanding inhalations.

From roadkill-obsessed ravens to mud-prodding ibises, birds breathe in a surprisingly fastidious one-way loop. Air sacs occupy spaces between avian organs and extend into their skeletons. Birds extract more oxygen from each whiff of air than we do, and they also extract more toxins. When something bad happens to air, birds feel it in their bones.

My husband breathes eighteen times a minute when he sleeps, twice as fast as I breathe when I'm awake, listening. He acquired asthma as a teen in Houston, a city saddled with chronic chemical halitosis. We identify good air both by what it contains (I like the thinner oxygen of mountain altitudes; he prefers sea level's richer stuff), and by what it doesn't. Our bubble of Basin and Range burps surprises all the time: not only arsenic dust from prematurely dry lakes, carbon monoxide from poorly installed water heaters, and the fake floral farts of neighbors' fabric softeners, but also the thin, cold, delicious air of high-alpine snowstorms, skunky scent of purple sky pilots in full bloom, and sagebrush-tinted air of rain.

Of all the places in the world, air is the most mobile, labile, and individual; it's hard to know where to appreciate it most. Vertically, our airy atmosphere insulates us against the intense UV light and near-absolute cold of space, where soft animals like us expand uncomfortably without air pressure and suffocate without enough oxygen. Horizontally, air has latitude and longitude, like other

places, but it doesn't hold still; it vibrates with speed, direction, and density. Air forms boundary layers: Uneven terrain catches, slows, and heats air near the ground. A little farther from the earth, air flows in faster and cooler currents. To reach these cooler layers, larval tiger beetles build hollow cylinders atop their burrows, where they climb up and pop out like fanged jack-in-the-boxes when something juicy passes by.

Air shapes us, from the hollows in our bones to the wind-wringing fluff of our seeds. Wind prompts Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frogs to pile, one on another, into mushroom-like heaps to reduce skin surfaces exposed to evaporation. Air lofts the silk balloons of baby spiders with gentle thermals and electrostatic forces, and resists the falls of humpbacked bristletails, that they may glide instead of plummet.

Air helps create scentscapes. It wafts eye-watering quinones from the rears of pinacate beetles to the noses of skunks, that skunks may roll the beetles in dirt to exhaust their stink before tragic dinner dates. Air carries romantic aromas from burying beetles performing headstands on mouse corpses, promoting more fortunate weddings and funerals. In spring, desert peach's daily wax scent yields the right-of-way at sunset to evening snow's floral curries.

Air creates soundscapes, too. When it's not clogged with the pointless growls of machinery, air transmits the meaningful buzzes of Bewick's wrens and tremulations and percussions of stink bugs. It carries the wingbeats of sphinx moths and bees to evening primrose blooms so they can reply with more nectar sugar. Good air picks up good vibrations.

As a collective effect that accumulates across time and distance, air connects us all. Ocean-dwelling cyanobacteria took



up carbon dioxide and gave Earth's atmosphere a slow breath of fresh oxygen more than two billion years ago. About half a billion years ago, their oxygen-laden exhalations allowed lungfish to survive drying shores. Cyanobacteria made flight possible for giant dragonflies, dinosaurs, and bats. They gave rise to chloroplasts, which enable oxygen production in phytoplankton and plants. Although humans live for the most part on land, even desert-dwelling animals depend in part on ocean organisms for breath. Think of air and breathing as an advancing and receding tide, an acknowledgment of others' exhalations moving our lungs.

Even without pandemics, wildfires, or climate crises, good air embodies goodwill. Whether buoying migratory monarch butterflies and white pelicans or saddled with racism and apathy, most air eventually travels, and thus what we do to our air is what we do to our neighbors. Industrial pollutants from China taint air in the western United States and are tainted, in turn, by U.S. consumption of goods from China. Pesticides from California's Central Valley douse yellow-legged frogs in the Sierra Nevada. Dust from Owens Lake—dried by diversions for water export to Los Angeles—may shape cloud formation and rainfall across the Southwest.

Every breath of air is temporary, a loan, a churlish or neighborly act. We residents of the planet and its thin-walled bubble suffer one another's blows. When I let go of one good breath, I pause and inhale again, living in hope of receiving another.

Ceal Klingler has written about charismatic minifauna, ecology, and conservation biology for High Country News, Natural History, and Orion. She is working on a book about how denizens of the Great Basin and Mojave Deserts live with one another.



CHRIS AUTTO

HEARD II, 2017, 27.5 x 20.5 x 14 inches. Clay, glaze, wax encaustic, mixed media, steel base.

Heard

For forty years, Adrian Arleo's sculptures have combined human, animal, and natural imagery to create a kind of emotional and poetic power. Often there's a suggestion of a vital interconnection between the human and nonhuman realms; the imagery arises from associations, concerns, and obsessions that are at once intimate and universal. Her work frequently references mythology and archetypes in addressing our vulnerability amid changing personal, environmental, and political realities.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)