

Ujjayi: Ocean Breath vs. Anxiety

written by Guest Contributor | December 13, 2018



Your mat looks puny. Dirty. Flat. Yours has been bent in your trunk, too many books sitting atop it at one angle, and your cat has bitten holes through it in a few spots, one in particular that you tend to angle towards the back of the room and away from you because the cat bites remind you of the day they happened—your cat nibbling on the mat as you texted on your phone in that blatantly happy way, that *'oh shit, his favorite movie is Before Sunset'* way, and it pains you to remember how easy that was, the beginning, and how far away it seems now after you've watched that trilogy more times than you've told him, especially since he's been gone.

Today you came in late, and Sabrina had started teaching, the water-like chimes of her yogi music already in their third minute of the practice, Deborah's exhales already exaggerated and louder than you'd ever feel comfortable sharing. So the mat is the wrong way, and the stupid cat bites are in front of you, and you can't stop staring downward. You forget your breath, and the groove of the room is off- you know that Deborah can tell, that Sabrina can tell, that even Siraj can tell, the yoga novice who took his first class only months ago. The four of you have formed some sort of strange cohort, a legion of early-risers, and your interest in a 6 a.m. yoga class, its rarity, has somehow cemented each of your commitment to attending, has guilted you into your car on mornings you especially found it difficult.

"Exhaleeeeeeee," Sabrina says, her ocean breath flowing out of her mouth in a more graceful way than seems possible for a 21 year old woman dating a guy who often waits for her in the gym lobby, sweaty, carrying a dirty protein shake blender, toting a MAGA hat. You used to buy Sabrina's yoga motif, used to think her talk of chakras and her insistence on eating morning oats at the same time every morning were at least somewhat legitimate but—and you know it's shitty, you know it might be unfair, you wish it weren't true—that red hat sort of ruined things, has made you inwardly scoff at her speech during savasana, has made it nearly impossible for you to close your eyes without forcing them closed. You've been trying, reaching for that stillness of the mind you were actually able to achieve- but straining for quiet requires a contradiction, and you don't have the kind of energy to fake it. This room hasn't quite been the oasis it was for you for the first three months he was gone. But you keep coming back, here and to him, three hour time difference

between you now. There are dead flowers on your kitchen table, in your office, because you don't know when to let those go, either.



Your first thought when the two girls walk in, fifteen minutes late, is *oh, what the fuck*. Your second is *don't contribute to female on female hate, idiot*. Your third is *they're wearing Chacos though...*, the ellipsis included. You do this often, moving from immediate mean thoughts, to shame at your contributions of ugliness to humanity, and then to embarrassment because how presumptuous of you to think you're big enough to contribute anything to the larger population, and then to humiliation because how desperate and superficial does that thought sound, even if it's real? And then the thoughts go to *fuck it*, and you try believing they can rest there on that precipice of unflinching ease and indifference. You've never said *fuck it* and meant it.

You know these two young women from your job at the university where you help undergraduate students study abroad on short-term programs, either during spring break or summer. These two have been especially persistent and organized, scheduling meetings with you often, planning two back-to-back summer programs together, asking after recommendations, that glint in their eyes when they look at your photos, your trinkets from your travels, so familiar and so far away from you now it actually hurts your chest. You're not far apart in age from these two women—in fact, you're daily mistaken for a student, by faculty, by other staff members, by students— and while at first you were determined to carry yourself as indisputably NOT an undergraduate, now you give in, accepting the student discount wherever you can, luxuriating, almost, in the three-years-ago-now feeling of wonder that is so clearly home to the students you're mistaken for.

Despite your allegiance to these young women, though, your obvious connections and similarities, they haven't become your prized students you expected them to be. You've written amazingly crafted recommendation letters for them both, taken pride in your newfound role as mentor or educator, felt good at your job, as if you belong. But that illusion went away, as you knew it might, a false bottom of success and influence, when you overheard the girls talking about you in the bathroom, their voices loud and unperturbed: *she got a master's degree? In what? I could do her job. Yeah, and she's still wearing Forever 21. I like her highlighter, though*. You'd picked your feet off the ground, afraid they'd notice your leopard-print flats and recognize that you'd overheard their laments. A part of you wanted to scream, to open the door both middle fingers raised; you wanted to yell *"fuck you, I came from nothing, I was a first generation college student, I studied literature and philosophy and the shit that matters, not 'marketing,' I went to Bulgaria from money I raised because I wanted a real cultural exchange, not your bullshit Instagram tour of France, I know your dads wrote a check for your fall tuition and for these two study abroad programs, I take back every nice thing I wrote in your letters, in our meetings,"* and later you would say these things, to your own reflection as you dusted your cheeks with the highlighter they liked; but another part, the heavier part, curled inward, into fetal position on the toilet until they left. You knew then that no one would ever know about this, not even Erika, not even Taylor, not even Tori,

especially not him, that the humiliation was too guttural, and, to top it off, you were bleeding then, too, another pair of underwear tainted with your monthly reminder of gristle, another metaphor for woman's cruelty, as if you needed another, as if you could forget that time you bought tampons at Wal-Mart and cried afterward because the boy who rang you out was a Senior at your high school, and how, two weeks later, you'd laughed at a classmate when a pad fell out of her back pocket, quiet violence on top of quiet shame, and back again.

They waved at you from the back of the classroom and you waved back, a little slow, caught up in your thoughts of rage and wonder at why they didn't like you, and then caught up in disgust at these middle school thoughts. *I'm an ADULT*, you wanted to scream into the void, into the wall of mirrors so that everyone could hear you, even the 12 versions of you that reflected outward. *I have a master's degree and a furnished apartment, even if the artwork on the walls are still posters from RedBubble, still contained in frames from Target; I smoke weed every night because it makes me feel good not because it's interesting to be the girl that smokes weed at parties; I've had my heart broken more times than I can remember, and I've written poems about each of them, titling each their initials so I wouldn't forget (the pain is so universal- displaced love and longing- that I forget to whom the pain belongs); I buy my own groceries and I try to cook and I put reminders in my planner to call home twice a week and all of this feels worthy of not your admiration but your respect.* You remember how far away 25 felt at the time of your senior year in college and how far away it feels to you even now, and you yearn for the carefree way these girls talk shit in the bathroom. *I'm hurting*, you want to say- *my boyfriend moved away and I knew it was coming and it wasn't supposed to be serious but I think I fell in love with him and this city isn't my home and home-home feels different now too, like I can smell the rust and the stink bugs all of a sudden, and I'd dared to think maybe this could work, maybe distance wasn't so hard, even if I'd only known him for six months prior, because we'd talked at 3AM of so many important, intimate things, and we'd eaten Greek food on the floor of his studio apartment and stayed naked for entire weekends listening to Frank Ocean and Shakey Graves and played chess at the coffee shop down the street, and all of this was proof, wasn't it, that this was worth trying for, that it was something I would never have to label with his initials because it was so specific to him, so breathtakingly original and interesting that sometimes I can't write a thing at all about it and sometimes all I can manage is coming to this stupid yoga class with Siraj and Deborah and Sabrina because I can't fucking stand the pending status of things in the morning, before he's awake in LA, and if I don't come here I won't breathe and I'll scare myself and-*

"Find your breath again," Sabrina instructs, and you know she's talking directly to you for the second time this class. There's shame again because you hate not being the best, especially at yoga, which your body seems especially attuned to, its flexibility always something that has been naturally yours, something you don't have to doubt or feign adequacy in, and you hate that you have such a childish impulse to be the best and Jesus, is there any thought you don't hate or second guess? Is there anything more pathetic than the answer to that question?

You fold into yourself, setting up for a bind, and you try focusing on your breath, on the ocean breath that Sabrina has encouraged all of you to find. According to her, ujjayi means breathing hard, "as if you're clearing a fogged up mirror." This breathing requires sound, and you've liked the excuse to exhale louder than you normally would (not as loud as Deborah), liked putting a noise to your inward discomfort; you half-expected, the first time you used your ocean breath, for Sabrina to say something like 'wow, you're really hurting, aren't you?' You thought it was obvious, evident in the way you exhaled or the way you filled your water bottle up.

Later, in savasana, you'll hear rain against the windows. This is perhaps your favorite thing about this class, about these mornings- the rain. It's almost guaranteed that in the last five minutes of your practice, Florida rain will fall against the windows, never softly but rapidly, and it's rare that you don't cry. You're inclined to make metaphors out of nothing, to turn rain into an OK for you to cry, some kind of symbolic valve that permits your sadness without too much shame. This time, though, you don't cry, because you know those two girls are there, and the minutes of silence aren't relaxing but are maddening, the rain reverberating like reminders of what you lost or may have lost or will soon lose, and you realize, with a cruel awareness, that nothing sounds like what you have, what you'll gain.



You'll miss the way Florida rains. Three weeks in to your empty apartment that's in Mid-City-but you tell everyone is in Culver City-it'll rain in Los Angeles, and you'll concoct a plan to leave work early just so you can roll out that same yoga mat (you'll no longer care which way it faces- in fact you learn to quite like the cat bites at the top), stretch toward your windows, imagining that you're back in that university yoga studio where you first learned to breathe. You didn't know then, of course, how much it was teaching you, how much Sabrina's voice did comfort you, how much the practice of ujjayi did slow your mind. Then you were embarrassed of your own sadness, haunted by the triteness of it- you couldn't bring yourself to tell even your therapist what was really wrong (*I don't think I can be happy- every time I've let myself think I'M HAPPY, the false bottom has given way*). It felt, at the time, like a bad movie script, someone trying to write about depression the way you'd tried catching fish with your bare hands in your father's fishing boat when you were a child.

Now, though, you know depression isn't pretty. That it can be unoriginal in its attacks. When you're in Germany for a friend's wedding, a friend will ask, late into the night after a board game and beers, *are you more depressive or anxious*, and you and the man you had once thought you were losing will answer: he'll say depressive and you'll say anxious, and he'll tug on your hand and you'll smile at one another, at the impossible trajectory of the past year, at a relationship predetermined to expire at the six month mark, at the fights that kept occurring afterward, at your weight loss (14 pounds in two months), at your hypersensitivity to the mornings, three hours ahead of him, being alone and anticipating that this would be the morning he just didn't say hello, that you'd see his little green dot on Facebook messenger and know he was gone, that the false bottom had given way

like you'd always known it would; you'll smile at the 2 a.m. German moon and the bells from the church chiming, even at that hour, smile at the blow-up mattress you'd slept on together for a week, the way you shared luggage and space, fumbled over Google translate at the market together; you'll even smile on that exhausting train ride back to the airport, the one in which you'd fought, relentlessly, for hours, throwing grievances against one another into the clumsy foreign space where there were no dishes to clean or clothes to put away, just the two of you, who'd been haphazardly thrown together before you were ready, mostly because of you and your dogged determination, your refusal to fail; yes, you'll smile at one another even after that, your face puffy with exhaustion and heavy crying, because there is no false bottom, there is only the bottom, and maybe you were there, but you were there together, and there wasn't going to be any unexpected drop. The barrel of existentialism and dread and sadness you'd been living in (and would continue living in, but as aware of it, which made you better) had a base. You could put your feet down. You could inhale without thinking of the exhale. You could breathe.



Erika Gallion's past publications include: "What's in a Major?" a critical essay published in Robert Atwan's tenth edition of *America Now*; "Fan Pilgrimage and Student Learning" an article co-written by Dr. Maura Grady and Dr. Robert Robertson published in Katherine Anderson Howell's anthology *Fandom as Classroom Practice* by the University of Iowa Press; and "Trouble" a book review of Yrsa Daley-Ward's memoir *The Terrible* published by *Women's Review of Books*.