



Breath

Bill Merkle

We moved Mom from the hospital to our family room for her final days. She was with me when I took my first breath; I would be with her when she drew her last. Hospice angels helped keep her comfortable.

She could not speak. She would take occasional sips of water, take wisps of applesauce if only, I imagined, to remember taste. We played her Elvis Presley songs — but not the sad ones — and watched reruns of her favorite shows like *GunsMoke* and *Star Trek* and marveled at how many of the same actors showed up in each. Mostly, Mom slept.

I had been through this before, with my dad, my sister, and a high school friend. For weeks I kept listening for that long last exhale. Not Mom. Her final one was as short as any other, and it took me a moment to realize she had stopped.

And all the things I knew I had to do evaporated. Instead, I kissed her forehead. I held open the door to the backyard and said “Come on, Ma,” beckoning her into the misty night. Clouds obscured the stars. I lit the tiki torches around the patio, but only one would take. It flamed brightly, then extinguished in the damp. I went back inside, stood beside what was my mother, and breathed deeply to take in some of the air that had been in her.

I thought about the air we breathe, how it has been in trillions of living things going back to the very first, has been in the famous and the forgotten, the good and the evil, the exceptional and the blessedly ordinary.

We walk with every pant of every faithful dog through the breath of every child at every age. We sleep in the remnants of screams and laughter, of pain and pleasure, of joy and sorrow. We take in the carrier of every word ever spoken, every note ever sung. Eighty-three years of my mother’s breath will find its way into trillions of living things.

No one ever really goes away.

About the Author:

Bill Merkle is a writer, graphic designer, and musician with an affinity for short stories, short films, and very short songs. His writing has appeared in *Columbia Journal*, *StoryBytes*, *The Record*, *New Jersey Monthly*, and the HIV Here & Now project. He lives in northern New Jersey.

