

The Breathing Poem

Take a deep breath, breathing in slowly. Feel the air filling your lungs.

Now hold it. Feel the pause, the space as oxygen swirls around inside of you.

Let the air out. Feel the release, the movement from inside to outside.

Now rest. Feel the emptiness, the stillness.

It was breathing exercises like this that got me thinking about the breath and poetry, as well as this gorgeous poem by Lü Dongbin and the following observation by the translator Nathan Brine (<https://nathanbrine.com/>):

觀浪止息聞水聲
退潮靜心聽沙響

Observing the waves I make my breathing circular
and listen within to the sound of the water,

As the tide ebbs I still my mind and hear the sound of the sand

止息 zhi xi: “I make my breathing circular”

This term is a little trickier. In Chinese this term could easily be read as “stop the breath.” However the term xi has special Taoist meaning, it means the space between the inhale and exhale, and the exhale and inhale, that little gap when the breath turns around.

It was that phrase, ‘where the breath turns around’ that caught me. What a sensual image – the breath as inspiration, the breath as a spirit snake circling within the body.

There is so much to be said about the breath in poetry in terms of sound and performance, but I was especially interested in thinking about the breath and poetry in other ways. While researching, I came across a study that suggested that certain metred poems, when read aloud, actually synchronise the breath and the heartbeat. I also loved finding out that the ancient Greeks had a notion of the breath being the source of thought, rather than our modern and scientifically influenced notion of the brain being the place where thought begins. (See: <https://interartive.org/2011/09/words-of-air-breath-voice-and-poetry>).

I began to think about the breath as a metaphor itself. Let’s go back to the breathing exercise at the beginning. What if the active part of the breath is akin to clarity in poetry... that way that certain poems, when they get the words and images and rhythms just right, shine like a brilliant bright light, like when you’ve been running on a beach and breathing hard and everything – the water, the sand, the sky – all shimmer with a kind of internal light?

What if the passive part of the breath is like ambiguity in poetry... the way that poetry has its own potent, magical ways of conveying meaning through obfuscation, and space, and pause, and impossible connections?

What if the best poems, the really memorable poems, are the ones that – like the circling breath – can do both?

These thoughts became the basis for **The Breathing Poem** workshop, which I will outline below. Though in some ways quite simple, I think the challenge lies in trying to push yourself (depending on what type of poet you are – one who leans toward clarity, one who leans toward ambiguity) out of your comfort zone. Think and feel deeply what these really are; techniques which we can keep in our toolbox so that we can use them both when helpful. I hope you enjoy the process and the exercises. Be sure to breathe!

This workshop can be done on your own or with groups. If working with a group, ask the individuals to share their responses and experience of the process along the way.

The Active Breath / Clarity

- What is clarity in poetry? Why can it bore readers? When is it most successful?
- Image, Description, Narrative, Word Choice, Timing, Meaning, the shining of a light
- Think of and read examples of extreme clarity in poems

Writing Exercise

- Write the clearest poem (lines/draft) you possibly can. Use 'breath' as a theme or image if useful.

The Space Between Breaths / Ambiguity

- What is ambiguity in poetry? Why can it frighten readers? When is it most successful?
- Spaces in poetry: line breaks, between words, the vibrating interior of metaphors, obfuscation of meaning, the mysterious unknown (death/love)
- Think of and read examples of extreme ambiguity in poems

Writing Exercise

- Write the most ambiguous poem (lines/draft) you possibly can. Use 'breath' as a theme or image if useful.

The Circling Breath

- What is the balance between?
- Can a poem contain both clarity and ambiguity, and be more powerful for it?
- Think of and read examples of poems that contain both clarity and ambiguity and are all the more powerful for this

Writing Exercise

- Write a poem (lines/draft) that contains both clarity and ambiguity. Use 'breath' as a theme or image if useful.

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See also:

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems/each-breath-page-each-page-breath>

<https://clinicalaffairs.umn.edu/covid-19-updates/brief-meditation-breath-poem-yesenia-montilla>

<https://insighttimer.com/bryantbelarmino/guided-meditations/mindfulness-of-the-breath-poem-by-thich-nhat-hanh>

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-99948-7_5

<https://interartive.org/2011/09/words-of-air-breath-voice-and-poetry>

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