

## **Sea and Sky**

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### **Abstract**

“Sea and Sky” is a lush, layered examination of trauma. Much of motherhood, particularly black motherhood, and more specifically motherhood in the context of the descendants of formerly enslaved African peoples, is bound up with trauma that we carry with us even as we carry on. This piece looks at trauma as an event with a definable before and after and examines the survival of our ancestors—and ourselves—as a holding of breath, of choosing the familiar discomfort of the depths over the risk and raw need of learning to breathe again. It also acknowledges the necessity of surfacing anyway and showing future generations how to swim to shore. My use of sound effects in “Sea and Sky” is intentional. I seek to have listeners in the room with me as my daughter takes her first breaths; to follow me to the water, its surface the line of demarcation between the trauma’s before and after; to dive with me beneath the waves into the weighted quiet of life underwater; to feel the panic of coming up for air in a world that’s no longer recognizable; and, finally, to choose to breach the surface again, intent on filling their lungs.

**Keywords:** *Black motherhood; memory and trauma; healing; generational trauma*

**Researcher Bio:** Living and working in Toronto, Janelle is a writer of both advertising copy and long-form fiction, and proud solo parent to a spirited seven-year-old.

### Artwork Statement

I am, at my most fundamental level, a storyteller. At the heart of the stories I tell is always a singular phrase that echoes at the back of my mind; the heartbeat that pumps life into everything I create: “What do you want to say about life and the human condition?” When you tear every piece, I have ever written or recorded down to its studs, this phrase is there, underpinning everything. It’s my north star, shedding light on what gives my work meaning—for me and those who come across it.

For survival, I write—both for capitalism and catharsis. My work ranges from compelling ad copy in print and online to poetry that may never see the light of day, and from television scripts that earned high praise from mentors to horoscopes that delivered gasps and giggles. In every piece, I ask myself that same crucial question, the question that echoes like a heartbeat at the back of my mind. Whether my aim is to grab someone and shake them awake, or leave them feeling seen, soothed, and held, I am compelled to build my work around a kernel of truth we can all recognize; to hold up a magic mirror that speaks to the human experience.

This piece, *Sea and Sky*, is an audio essay that braids narration with various sound effects to create an immersive, visceral experience. I have, over my career, honed my voice to be as smooth and flexible as my favourite pen; an instrument through which I bring my words to life. For this piece, I have built a soundscape that incorporates my voice, the first cries of my daughter, and the crashing of waves contrasted with the density and depth of the waters beneath.

*Sea and Sky* is a lush, layered examination of trauma. Much of motherhood, particularly Black motherhood, and more specifically motherhood in the context of the descendants of formerly enslaved African peoples, is bound up with trauma that we carry with us even as we carry on. It looks at trauma as an event with a definable before and after and examines the survival of our

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ancestors—and ourselves—as a holding of breath, of choosing the familiar aching discomfort of the depths over the risk and raw need of learning to breathe again. It also acknowledges the necessity of surfacing anyway and showing our future generations how to swim to shore.

My use and choice of sound effects in *Sea and Sky* is considered and intentional. I seek to have the listener in the room with me as my daughter takes her first breaths; to follow me to the water, its surface the line of demarcation between the trauma's before and after; to dive with me beneath the waves and feel the weight and the quiet of life underwater; to feel the panic and desperation of coming up for air in a world that's no longer recognizable; and, finally, to choose to breach the surface again, intent on filling their lungs.

**Audio Transcript**

**\*\*please visit the YU-WRITE Journal to hear the audio file\*\***

[Audio of baby's first cries]

[V/O]

I once heard actress Anna Klumsky describe giving birth as a traumatic event. She clarified that trauma is not necessarily a bad experience. Rather, think of it as an event with a before, and an after. In this line of thinking, birth certainly is a trauma. There's you, before, and then after, you are mother. You cross that threshold in an instant, and there's no time to grieve this sudden death. There's only holding your breath, so you can keep going to, because you must. You're a mother now.

[Ocean waves crashing on the shore]

[V/O]

What if the seam between the before and the after is the sky and the sea? What if in the after we submerge, in a desperate bid to shut out the noise so we can just survive? I find myself wondering how much of ourselves we lose when we never come up for air. Because while you are straining, fighting, surviving in an environment that is squeezing the life out of you, against all odds it becomes familiar. Normal, even.

[Person in water gasping for air]

[V/O]

Resurfacing, though, involves gasping, sputtering, and existential flailing that may reveal, to your greatest horror, that you are simply too far from shore to be saved, too tired to make it on your own, too weak to fight the undertow.

[Sound of submerging]

[V/O]

And so, you give up. Give up your dreams, give up your gifts, give up the ghost of who you might have been. Give up your air. And somehow, you carry on. Straining, convulsing, life under water.

I think about our mother's mothers' mothers' mothers' mothers who were ripped away from their before and crossed oceans against their will and found themselves in the after on foreign shores. To survive, they went under water. Raised their babies under water. For generations there was no time for gasping and sputtering and existential flailing.

Now, here I am, born under water, standing on the shoulders of my mother and our foremothers, having experienced my own before and after: a beautiful, curious, brilliant little soul, who swims effortlessly, but I want her to breathe. That automatic, biological choreography necessary for human life. And I know that means I have to do it first.

[Waves crashing, gulls]

[V/O]

I must swim up and break through the waves. I must do the gasping, and sputtering, and existential flailing in order to find my air. To show her what's possible.

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I write. My hand puts pen to paper. Automatic, biological choreography necessary for my human life. I fill my lungs to show my daughter what it is to breathe, so that she can learn what, for her, is as automatic, as necessary, and filling her lungs with air.

*[permissions for audio file upload granted by Janelle Snipe-Burke (author), 2026]*