

Breathe at Zero

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My mother told me that's what brothers do
When my brother hit me,
His violence born of our father's belt
And Mom's words likewise felt
Like a punch to my heart,
Like I was betrayed by them all.

But isn't that what brothers do?
A punch here, a shove with a shout,
Nothing to make a movie about,
No big deal.
He was 16, controller in hand,
Pushing buttons for the game's next land.
I was 14,
And I was breathing too loudly.

He punched with one knuckle out
So it would hurt more.

But that's what brothers do, Mom said.

No big deal.
It was easier to believe her
Than to feel
Abandoned.

And four years later those words
Became in my mind,
That's what husbands do,
When the man I'd assigned my dreams to
Pushed me, threw me, bruised my face.

But it was only those three times.
No big deal.

And I'd already learned to quiet my breathing.

Then a sharp tug of my hair
Ordered me to quiet
My everything,
At the nape of my neck
So it would hurt more.

His hands were my controller.

So just five little moments,
Quickly come, faded out,
Nothing to write a book about.

I was 18, 19, 20 and he told me what to do
Because that's what husbands do,
I told myself.

I couldn't hear my own breathing anymore.

I abandoned myself.

Because of what no one ever told me.

I thought abuse was black eyes and split lips.
This was eight tiny incidents.
I thought it was fractures and swelling.
You couldn't even see my bruises.
I thought it was dislocations and compound breaks.
Sometimes I didn't even cry.

But where is that line between a little and a lot?
The line between OK and not?
The line our mothers never taught...

It's here,
Where I stand breathing.

The line is me, my body, my skin,
My hair,
My shirt,
My air.
The line is zero,
Because one
Time is too many.

The line is zero.

Breathe in that truth,
And breathe it loudly,
As you silence that voice within,
Whispering the lies of,
That's what brothers do,
That's what fathers do,
That's what girlfriends do...

No.

No.

It is not what they do.
Abandon those lies and stand
Breathing
On your line
Of zero.