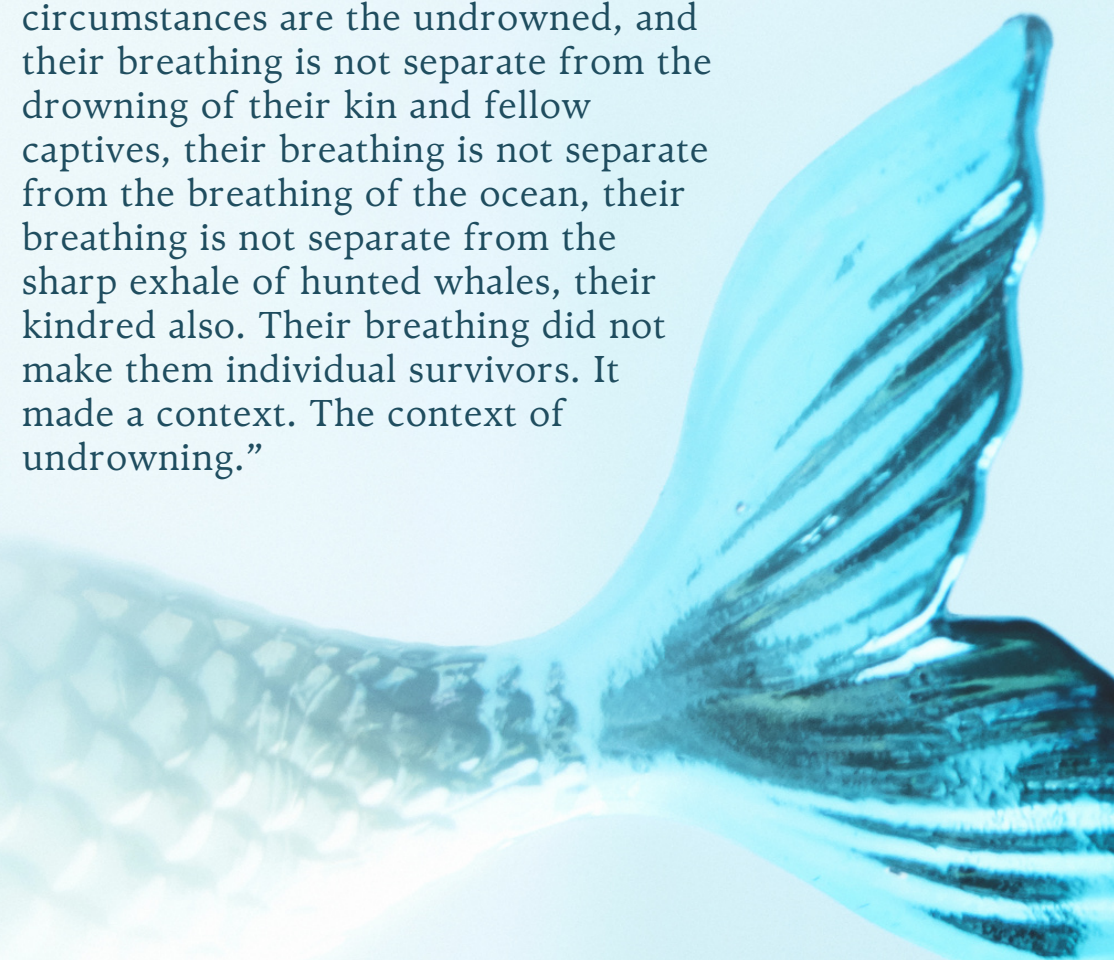


A photograph of a cave opening looking out onto a bright blue sky with sunbeams. The cave walls are dark and textured, with some green moss or algae visible on the left side. The light from the sky creates a strong contrast with the dark interior of the cave.

Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals

by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

“And if the scale of breathing is collective, beyond species and sentience, so is the impact of drowning. The massive drowning yet unfinished where the distance of the ocean meant that people could become property, that life could be for sale. I am talking about the middle passage and everyone who drowned and everyone who continued breathing. But I am troubling the distinction between the two. I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. It made a context. The context of undrowning.”



“Instead of simply identifying what was what, I had to go deeper. I took my cue from the many marine mammals who echolocate. I had to focus not on what I could see and discern, but instead on where I was in relation, how the sound bouncing off me in relationship to the structures and environments that surround me locates me in a constantly shifting relationship to you, whoever you are by now.”





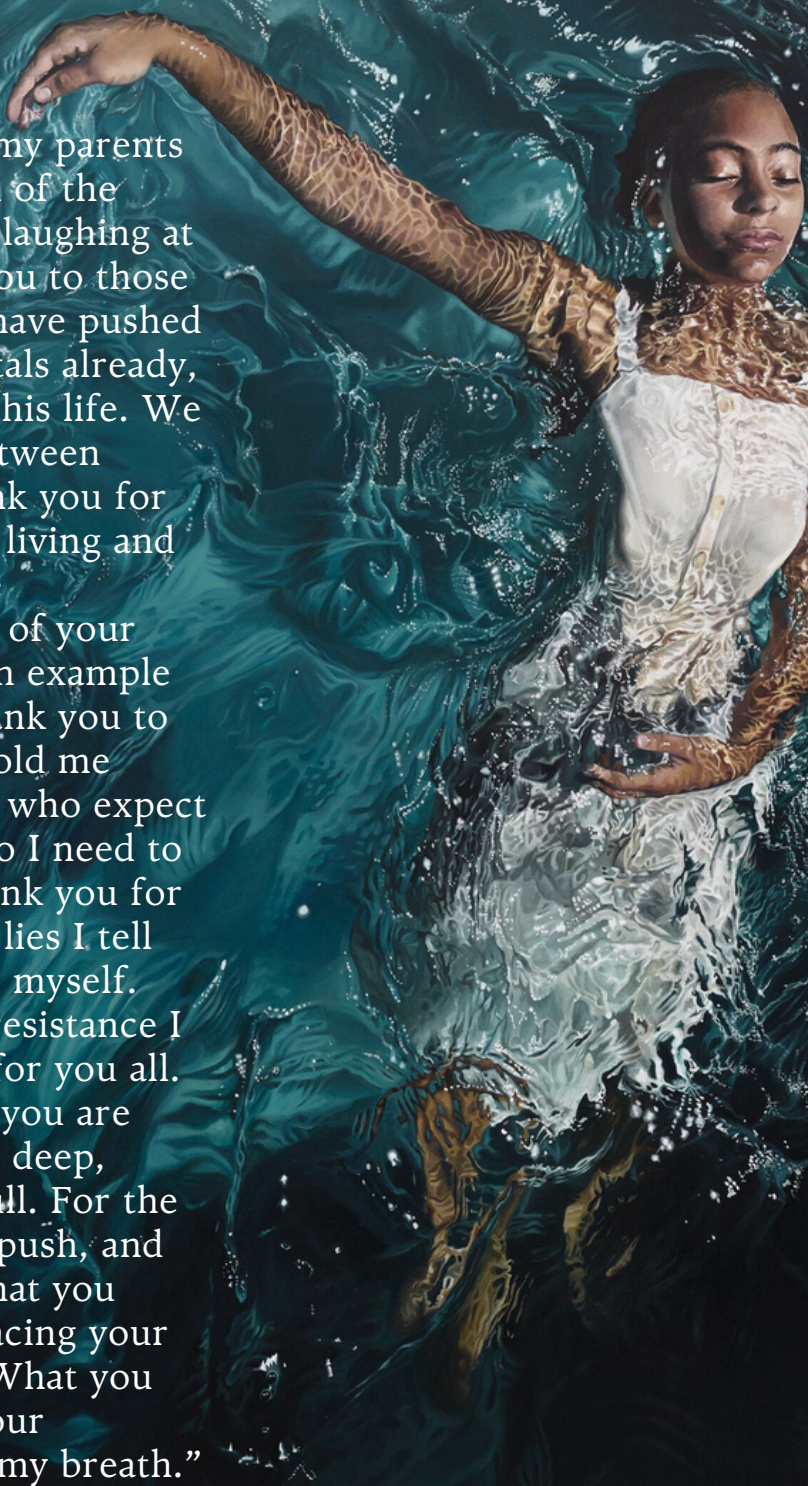
“Sometimes I feel like I’m communicating with you underwater. The impact of what I say outlives what I learned by saying it. And the ambient noise grows louder and the ocean is heating up and I need you to know where the bottom is, what will feed us, how close are the sharks.

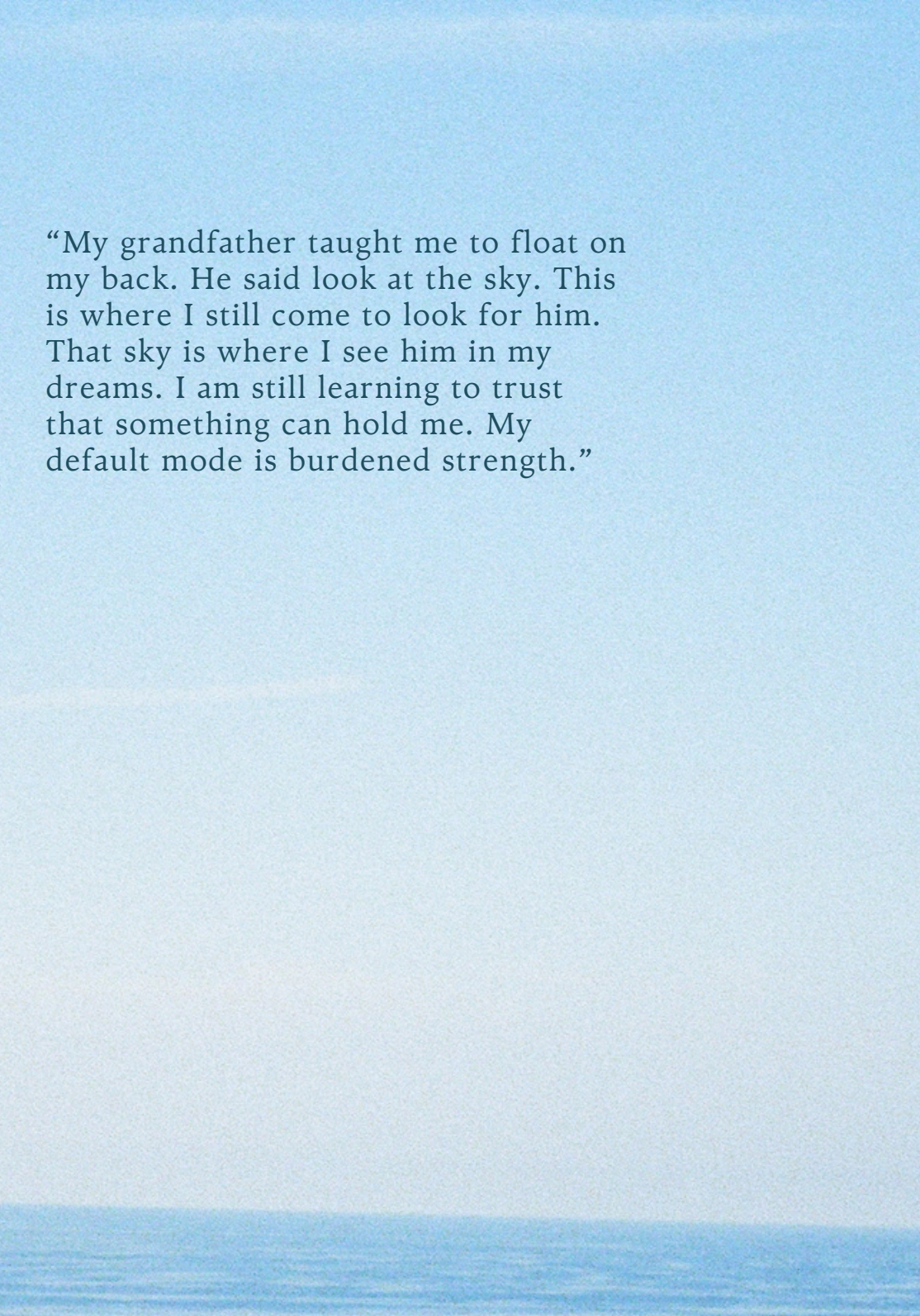
Which is to say I am humbly listening and I am learning to take responsibility for my frequencies. I can lower them to reach you. I can reflect before I speak out. Echolocation is not the same as mind-reading. Some of this magic is just the complexity of being a mammal alive in sound. I can hear what I cannot see yet. I can make a whole world of resonance. And live in it. Swim through it. Reflecting you. Whistle, click if you can feel that I am here.”



“It was always you I loved, not your elegant strategy. I will love you still, if you now outgrow it. I will love you more whether time moves forward or backwards. Whether ice melts or water freezes back. Whether your next move is protection, breakthrough, shift, or any combination. There are at least three ways to love you: as you were, as you are, as you will be. I love you. That means I choose all three.”

“Love to all my parents and the push of the universe for laughing at me. Thank you to those of you who have pushed through portals already, even out of this life. We can move between worlds. Thank you for those of you living and evolving, the vulnerability of your newness is an example to us all. Thank you to those who hold me accountable, who expect me to be who I need to become. Thank you for ignoring the lies I tell myself about myself. Even in my resistance I am grateful for you all. For the love you are teaching me, deep, Black, and full. For the nurturance, push, and example. What you learned by facing your own death. What you learned in your drowning is my breath.”





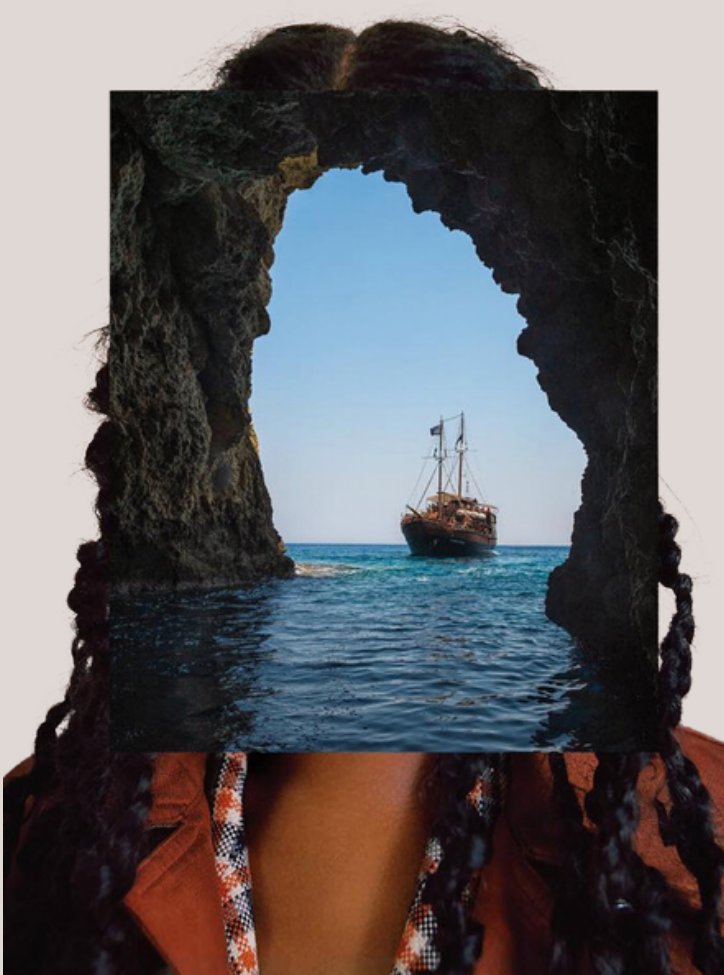
“My grandfather taught me to float on my back. He said look at the sky. This is where I still come to look for him. That sky is where I see him in my dreams. I am still learning to trust that something can hold me. My default mode is burdened strength.”



This line is a part of very large circle.



“I think of Debbie Africa, who gave birth secretly in prison, how the other women prisoners used sounds to shield her birth process. They protected the two of them from guards so that she and the baby were able to share precious time together, undetected for days. I think of Assata Shakur too, impossibly conceiving and giving birth to her daughter while a political prisoner, mostly in solitary confinement. And how she listened to her angry daughter, and the dreams of her grandmother when they told her she could be free. They could be together. And a community of freedom fighters made the demand and the dream real.”



“This is my prayer. May anyone who seeks to mention you be called to learn the language of those who first loved you. May you study the pink of yourself. Know yourself riverine and coast. May you taste the fresh and the saltwater of yourself and know what only you can know. May you live in the mouth of the river, meeting place of the tides, may all blessings flow through you. I love you impossible dolphin, quietest in the river, breathing close to the surface. I’m grateful for what you remember even if you never say. And I’m keeping your name in my mouth like a river internal, like this love ever flowing. I am keeping your name in my mouth every day. All day.”

“And I think about you and what you remember. What you keep close for as long as you can. I think about repetition and code, and when we prioritize what communication and why. And how we ever learn our names in this mess. And the need that makes us generalize and identify. Become specific and vague. I think about the dolphin mother and what she needed to say. Her own name, in her own way. And what else under strict observation? Remember this feeling, there is something called love. I would say remember, there is something called freedom, even if you can’t see it. There is me calling you, in a world I don’t control. There is something called freedom, and you know how to call it. Even here in the holding pattern, here in the hold, remember remember. You are. You are held. Named.”



“The message for me today is about specificity. About choosing a lane with all my infinite potential. About how strong we grow sometimes, swimming upstream. About what the world can learn from the visibility of our message in a context that is specific enough to ring clear. And to trust that all water touches all water everywhere. And for all of you, ocean dolphins, wondering “What am I doing in this river full of mud?” Remember why Harriet Tubman went south. She didn’t have to. She was skilled, untraceable. She could have been individually free. Unencumbered. But if she wanted to tell an everlasting truth about freedom that would ring across the planet, a message for the ages, she had to live free in unfree space. It was the only way to bring us all with her. Thank you, my loves, for the bravery of your freedom in spaces of clear limitation. In spaces of muddy reality. Thank you for your decisions to do not what you could do, but what you must. Thank you for teaching the difference between privilege and courage. Escape and transcendence. Reaction and revolution. Your endurance inscribes an eternal alternative, carried by bottles and bottlenoses, blood and breath. Message honored. Message received.”

