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We Still Breath

Sample translation by Matt Bagguley

The sound was like the tone that used to come from the TV when broadcasting ended for the day and the test card appeared. As a child I sometimes sat in the dark, open mouthed, thinking that the image on screen was a world made of Lego, and that the tone was an alarm. I would sit there imagining that this artificial world was about to explode, just like the Death Star in *Star Wars*, until someone told me to go to bed and turned off the TV at which point the high-pitched tone would stop.

But when I heard it again, on this July day in 2011, the sound wouldn’t stop ringing in my ears. It blocked out the noise around us, of the glass as it slid from blown-out window frames, and the whine of approaching sirens. We stood in the square at Youngstorget, just outside the government quarter. You were sitting in your strollers, your Mum and I knew that you were unharmed, but that was also the only thing we knew.

I saw shopfronts now lying smashed on the ground, and when I looked up towards the government quarter, where we had just been, all I could see was rising smoke. Your mum tried calling someone she knew at the ministry who we had just moments earlier been with and waved goodbye to. I felt like I should call a colleague at the newspaper to tell them what I’d seen, although I didn't know what it was and had no idea what to say. I pulled out my phone to look her up, and tried three, four, five times before my thumb touched her name on the screen because my hands were shaking so badly. I don't remember any of the conversation.

I ended the call and looked up again. It was the middle of summer, but something white was falling from the sky – papers and notes, written by someone and for someone, now floated aimlessly around in the air, like tiny flakes in a giant snow-globe. The view was still obscured by a cloud of smoke, but just as I was about to turn away, a hole appeared in the smoke, and through that hole I saw the shattered windows of the government cabinet building.

Injured people and ambulances started to arrive, so we left Youngstorget and went to a playground that had swings close to where we were living at the time. We sat you on the swings and tried to find out what had happened. We took calls from family and phoned our friends, while you swung, swung and swung.

Do you remember any of this?

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I’ve chosen to speak directly to you, although I’m aware that there are others in the room.

I hoped that this story would be easier to tell if I had you kids in mind while writing instead of another blow-hard on Facebook or show-off on Twitter. It might help me to collect my thoughts better, and separate what’s important from what’s not.

When you were still quite small and lay in our bed, I would sometimes lie there watching your faces as you slept. It was almost like I could see your eyelashes, noses, and lips growing and taking shape. I stared at your faces and didn't dare blink or look away, because I worried that if I did, you would disappear. In the end I had to turn away, but I still couldn't sleep.

I’m writing these words no doubt to make time slow down, before you all grow up completely. You who once couldn’t walk or talk, suddenly want to show me TikTok videos you’ve made with your classmates. One of these videos has you shout the names of the countries your parents come from. First you shout one at a time. Someone shouts Norway, another shouts Nigeria. Another Sweden, then Somalia. Someone shouts Pakistan, another shouts Palestine. None of them, like you, can shout Norway, Japan and Sri Lanka. But in the end you all jump into the frame and shout: Norway!

This book is about racism. But it is also about roots – my roots, and consequently yours as well. Those two things, racism and roots, are each intractable issues. But maybe they are easier to talk about when you look at them in context. Because racism, at the end of the day, is a way of putting one person's roots before another person's roots, even when they are interwoven.

What you are about to read is not a report, a study or a thesis. It is a series of snapshots of my encounter with Norway, and Norway's encounter with me. It is my attempt to document experiences from my life as an immigrant child in Norway in the 1980s and 90s, experiences that I fear will vanish when I look at today’s raging debates about multicultural Norway and integration. I want you to know what it was like for me – the good, the bad, the things that just were, and the things I still don't understand. It is also an attempt to describe how Norway and the world has changed during my lifetime, and understand how we ended up where we are, so that you might be able to figure out how we should move forward.

This book is not meant to be a bombshell, but a time capsule.

When I told you kids that I would be writing this book, people were at the time demonstrating all over the world with placards of George Floyd. The black American was killed by a white police officer, after being suspected of attempting to buy a pack of cigarettes with a fake $20 bill. That's what his life was worth, $20 that might have been fake. A worthless slip of paper.

The policeman was filmed with his knee on Floyd's neck, while Floyd gasped: “I can't breathe.” I know you saw that whole video uncensored, even though I said it wasn't something you needed to see, just something you should know about. But since you and the rest of the world have seen it anyway we may as well discuss it. Everything about that video is wrong. The look on the policeman Derek Chauvin’s face, who is sitting on Floyd. The officer standing right next to him, who does nothing but show the pained expression of someone who has sadly found a dying badger that’s been hit by a car. It’s actually him we should remember, because most of us, at least those of us who dare to admit it, have a uniformed bystander just like him within us.

Floyd said that he couldn't breathe twenty times, until he finally stopped breathing. But he also managed to say a few other things. He thought about his mother, who had recently died, and his own children, whom he hoped would live. He said, “Momma, I love you. Tell my kids I love them.” And then he said, while he was still alive, “I'm dead.”

“I can’t breathe,” the words Floyd used some of his last breaths saying, became a slogan. The words Floyd barely managed to whisper in the end, were shouted in the streets. They marched, not just in Minneapolis where he was killed, but in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and other cities too – people of all colours, everywhere, even in small God-forsaken places where people weren’t in the habit of demonstrating. In the United States it was a historic social movement, an anti-racist awakening, with many, many white people in its ranks. Because Floyd could no longer breathe, people started breathing for him.

They also called out the names of others, who had been killed but simply forgotten. Breonna Taylor, the 26-year-old who was shot at least eight times by police when they raided her apartment in Kentucky. Ahmad Arbery, who was chased like an animal and shot while jogging in Georgia. Eric Garner, who was forced to the ground by New York police and suffocated, just like Floyd, while repeating eleven times that he couldn't breathe. And there are plenty of videos, but one of these videos is especially painful to watch. Its grainy footage was recorded four years before Floyd's death, in the same state, and shows what happened in the back seat of a police car after a police officer had just shot and killed Philando Castile. Castile, who was also black, died while sitting in the car with his girlfriend and the couple's four-year-old daughter. The police officer shot Castile because he thought the driver was about to pull a gun. But that's not what Castile was doing; he was looking for his wallet.

The survivors were put in a police car, and in the surveillance video you can see that Castile's girlfriend is handcuffed from behind, and that she is rocking and screaming in the back seat while her daughter begs her to stop swearing, because she’s afraid that her only surviving parent will be “shooted” as well. The girl then says that she can comfort her mum, and hugs her, but the mum cannot hold her daughter because she is handcuffed. “I wish this town was safer,” says the child. “I don't want it to be like this anymore.” And they then pray to God for a sign of life from Dad. But by that point Philando Castile was already dead.

George Floyd's death became a mirror that spread light into other corners of the global ghetto. Someone painted a portrait of Floyd on Israel's apartheid wall in the West Bank. People in the slums of Brazil marched behind the banner “Vidas Negras Importam,” which means Black Lives Matter in Portuguese. Even more buried names were brought back to the surface: Adama Traoré, who died in custody in Paris; Iyad al-Halak, an autistic Palestinian who was shot dead by Israeli police in occupied East Jerusalem on his way to his special needs school; João Pedro Matos Pinto, the 14-year-old who was murdered by Brazilian police during a drug raid in Rio de Janeiro.

In Norway people marched carrying images of Eugene Ejike Obiora, a Nigerian who died at a welfare office in Trondheim when a policeman put him in a chokehold as he lay prostrate. Instagram feeds showed photos and drawings of Arve Beheim Karlsen, an India-born boy who drowned in a river in Western Norway after having been chased by people who according to a witness shouted “kill the nigger!” We also saw the face of Norwegian-Ghanese Benjamin Hermansen, who was killed by neo-Nazis, and Johanne Zhangjia Ihle-Hansen, who was adopted from China and murdered by her racist brother.

But slogans, protesters and faces weren’t the only things to appear. There were stories too, stories about what Norwegians like to call “everyday racism,” which perhaps sounds as trivial as Taco Tuesday to some, but like an ever-recurring doomsday for those who are exposed to it.

What’s striking about these stories, which were all told by very different people, was how similar they were, and how similar they have continued to be over time and across borders. Linda Tinuke Strandmyr told the Norwegian tabloid VG that aged nine she stood in front of the mirror and wanted to wash the brown colour off her skin, because she hated the way she looked. Her story might have been easier to click past and forget had one of VGTV's reporters not appeared and commented that this was just an unfortunate and isolated case – but it isn’t. One year earlier, the Labor Party politician Kamzy Gunaratnam wrote in the anthology *Third Culture Kids* that she too had tried to scrub her skin color off when she was a child. How many more are there? How many children have sat in their bathtubs, in different cities and countries, and moved the bar of soap up and down their arm in an attempt to wash themselves away? Why did they do that?

In the family biography *A Drop of Midnight*, Jason Diakité, who you may know as the rapper Timbuktu, tells a similar story. Diakité grew up in Skåne, Sweden, with a black father and a white mother. When he was eight years old, he sat looking at some small, white pigment spots on one of his hands. The spots looked like an archipelago in a sea of darkness. He then wondered if the spots perhaps meant that there was something white under all the brown, and if he only had more spots like that, he could actually be white. He could become invisible, he thought.

Invisible. We are told that all children want to be seen. But some children would rather be overlooked. Why would they want that?

Another thing about these stories – about the racism that’s so everyday it eventually feels like another lost sock in the laundry – is that the people telling them quickly point out how there’s bound to be someone who experienced something far more dramatic, as if their own lives aren’t quite as important. I have thought similarly, and therefore didn't speak too loudly. Others have said the same thing. There is always someone who has had it worse, who has received uglier comments and been dealt harder blows. So we have waited for these someones to speak instead. We held our breath.

And then George Floyd stopped breathing.

It was as though, just before he exhaled, he verbalised something that millions of others had been feeling for a long time, as far away as Norway, even if they had never set foot in the United States or been strangled by a police officer. What was that feeling? Where did it come from? What made teenage Norwegian girls wearing hijabs shout out the last words of a 46-year-old black American, on the other side of the Atlantic? What was it that made me – who has just as little in common with Floyd as those girls – also feel that the air became a little clearer when the eruption came?

It didn’t take long for things to get sidetracked. After a couple of weeks, we weren't talking about the fate of black homicide victims as much as we were talking about statues of white murderers. In the USA, people had been fighting for years to have statues of Confederate leaders and other symbols of slavery and racism removed. In Bristol, England, protesters gathered around the statue of filthy-rich slave trader Edward Colston, tore it down, and rolled it into the River Avon to the cheers of activists. Colston was an investor and an executive at The Royal African Company, which in the 17th century transported people from West Africa to the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas, like living Amazon parcels. Amazon however treats its parcels better than Colston's company treated the men, women and children crammed into the slave ships. At least 20,000 of the company's goods stopped breathing during the voyage and were thrown into the sea.

In London, someone sprayed “was a racist” on the plinth below the statue of former Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Yes the same Churchill – who is also honoured with a statue here in Oslo because he helped save us from Nazism – told a commission in 1937 that it was unreasonable to claim that the indigenous peoples of America and Australia had been wronged, for the simple reason that “a stronger race” had taken their place. Churchill also said it was “nauseating” to see India's liberation leader Mahatma Gandhi “posing as a fakir” and striding around “half-naked.” “We should be rid of a bad man and an enemy of the Empire if he died,” Churchill said in a cabinet meeting, according to minutes that more recently became known.

It was under Churchill's leadership that the British quelled the so-called Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s, when the country was still a British colony, and when more than a million Kenyans were put in concentration camps. The British targeted suspected rebels, sympathisers or just ordinary people who might have useful information, and tortured them. They were beaten and whipped, had their ears cut off and their skin and eardrums burned by cigarettes. The British also had specific tools which they used for crushing testicles. One of the Kenyans subjected to this torture was Hussein Onyango Obama, who was the grandfather of Barack Obama.

When people started discussing Churchill, I thought about all this. But I also knew the kind of position he held. I worried that this important fight against racism, which so many white people had joined and sympathised with, could suffer a setback if people began whining that Churchill – an undisputed hero in the West – was also a racist. I had a theoretical and tactical relationship with the subject.

Then I started thinking about my own family history. I normally say that my father was born in Sri Lanka, except he of course wasn't. He was born in Ceylon, which was the British name for Sri Lanka when the country was still part of the British Empire. My father was born in what was still a British colony, at a time when Winston Churchill was Prime Minister of Great Britain, the seat of empire. The country I myself would be born into almost 40 years later did not become formally independent until my father was seven years old. He still remembers when the British Governor-General of Ceylon, Lord Soulbury, came to visit his hometown of Jaffna. Lord Soulbury, a baron who wore a monocle, drove through Jaffna in a car, past the citizens who lined the road to make the Governor-General feel welcome. One of those standing on the side of the road was my father.

I remember a homework question one of you kids once had to answer: Why do you think so many people speak English around the world today? I suggested that you reply with something like this: Because the British went around the world plundering other people's countries of resources and history, while raping and killing the inhabitants, leaving behind gonorrhoea and “God Save the Queen.” They convinced themselves and the people they subjugated that white people had the right to rule other peoples. Because they were, yes, racist. And they made others racist too, even people who were dark-skinned themselves, and they built an entire system and an international economic arrangement based on this self-image. Your answer to the homework question probably didn’t end up quite like my suggestion, which I expect you found too severe. But it is true. It happened in the country where your granddad and I were born.

When I wrote a newspaper article on the so-called statue debate, I received a bitter e-mail from a reader who wrote: “All Western history will be erased, our history is of course ugly and unfit for the new we. And the ultra-left traitors in the Norwegian media are ecstatic.” I’d never advocated for the removal of either Western history or any statues, nor was it the e-mail writer’s point. The reader was taking these actions personally, because they had somehow picked holes in a part of his identity.

But of course Western history isn’t detached from the rest of world history. That was the point of drawing attention to these statues; to remind society of the part of this history that had been forgotten. How many of Bristol’s inhabitants knew about Edward Colston's slave trade in all those years he was standing on a plinth? How often do we really hear about Churchill's opinions on the Empire's subjects? For some, the furore over historic monuments still became just a chance to once again divert the conversation from what the main topic had been when the Black Lives Matter protests were spreading, namely the racism of our time. The statues had become lightning rods.

There is always someone who wants to distract. Before the statues, some here wanted to talk about Ramadan and why state-funded TV should have a specific broadcast for Eid. Before that, some questioned why public figures seemingly favoured a lapel badge showing the UN logo rather than the Norwegian flag. And the debates continue. Handshaking. Hijabs. Mohammed caricatures. Hot-dogs without pork. Schoolchildren forbidden to sing carols at Christmas. 17th of May committee members who aren’t “terminally Norwegian.” Norwegians who don’t have Norway at heart. Norway without Norwegians.

In the end, factual and fictional themes merge into each other. Principal and political issues, wether they concern equality or freedom of expression in multicultural societies, become colonised by inflated or constructed controversies that trigger reactions and divisions, because they are about the others, about immigrants, minorities.

There is always someone in society who wants to talk about everything else, everyone but themselves, because the alternative is to look in on themselves. And that means having to ask some fundamental questions, not just about their understanding of the world and the reasons why people keep coming to Norway and other rich countries, but also about their understanding of Norway, why Norway is so rich, and specifically what and who is Norwegian. They may also have to take a fresh look at their own roots, which is an alienating and scary practice, because it means stepping out of your own body and seeing yourself from the outside. How many people would do that voluntarily?

And this is so unfair. Because stepping outside ourselves is virtually all we ever do. We look at ourselves from the outside, every day, every hour, every minute, through the eyes of the greater community we believe we are a part of. Am I doing anything wrong now? Am I likely to offend anyone? Does that woman think I'm following her? Does that man think I'm trying to deceive him? Why should anyone believe what I tell them about?

Why should anyone read this book?

I don't know if I've told you this, but when I've taken the 37 bus in Oslo without you, and if the only available seat is beside a white lady, I've always automatically chosen to stand. Why? Because I would never know if the lady was averse to or afraid of dark-skinned men. When I told a colleague about this at lunch, she could barely understand what I was trying to explain, because it sounded so irrational, almost like an obsession.

But that is exactly how racism works. It seeps into your skin, short-circuits your impulses, and your body adapts and behaves accordingly. For some, the body will allow itself to be cowed, to shy away and find its place. For others, the body will display excessive self-confidence, it will lash out, to hide some weakness or irreparable humiliation. Either way, you slowly but surely become part of the system you hate.

Was that why people filled the streets and shouted that they couldn't breathe, in country after country, after the murder of George Floyd? Did they at last feel that they no longer had to see themselves from the outside and always correct themselves because perhaps, in this one historic moment, they saw not just a shiver from the past but a glimpse of the future, and marched, ready to be beaten down as long it was by anything but claims of them being oversensitive? That for once they could be out in the streets without feeling like they were in the way?

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