

Breathing through Catastrophe: Respiratory Disability in Sarah Crossan's Fiction

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Abstract

This essay argues that Sarah Crossan's young adult dystopian duology, *Breathe* (2012) and *Resist* (2013), represents a significant eco-crip intervention into the politics of atmospheric governance, one in which respiratory disability functions as the primary lens through which environmental catastrophe, political violence, and social stratification become legible. Set in a near-future world where the mass destruction of trees has rendered the atmosphere practically unbreathable, the novels imagine a sealed dome (known as the Pod) operated by a private corporation that manufactures and distributes artificial oxygen, thereby producing a deeply hierarchical society in which breathable air is privatised, unequally distributed, and weaponised as a tool of biocultural control. Drawing on disability studies and the environmental humanities, and engaging with the work of scholars like Jean-Thomas Tremblay, Stefanie Heine, Magdalena Górka, Alison Kafer, and Lennard Davis, among others, the article explores how Crossan's fiction stages the systematic conversion of ecological crisis into a logic of atmospheric infrastructure and bodily incapacitation. The first section examines how the Pod's regime produces and controls respiratory dependency as a structural effect rather than an anomaly, managing disability through surplus oxygen and the deliberate suppression of intuitive respiratory knowledge. The second section tracks the protagonists beyond the dome into a depleted and hostile landscape, where collective breathing emerges as a counter-practice grounded in shared vulnerability, precarity, and interspecies interdependence. The third section confronts the ethical price and limits of this communal vision through the duology's most consequential deaths and its two competing models of atmospheric community: the Grove's voluntary interspecies commons and Sequoia's eugenic regime of enforced bodily acclimatization. The essay concludes by arguing that Crossan's fiction refuses triumphalist resolution, offering instead a politics of recalcitrant persistence in which breathing remains a continuously mutating, precarious, and irreducibly collective practice of inhabiting damaged worlds.

Keywords: Eco-crip theory, respiratory disability, atmospheric governance, young adult dystopia, Sarah Crossan.

Resumen

Este ensayo sostiene que las novelas distópicas juveniles de Sarah Crossan, *Breathe* (2012) y *Resist* (2013), representan una intervención eco-crip significativa en la gobernanza atmosférica, donde la discapacidad respiratoria funciona como lente primaria a través de la cual la catástrofe ambiental, la violencia política y la estratificación social se hacen legibles. Ambientadas en un futuro cercano donde la destrucción masiva de los árboles ha hecho que la atmósfera sea prácticamente irrespirable, las novelas imaginan una cúpula hermética (conocida como el Pod) gestionada por una empresa privada que fabrica y distribuye oxígeno artificial, lo cual da lugar a una sociedad profundamente jerárquica en la que la respirabilidad es privatizada, desigualmente distribuida e instrumentalizada como control biocultural. Apoyándose en los estudios sobre discapacidad y las humanidades ambientales, y dialogando con académicos como Jean-Thomas Tremblay, Stephanie Heine, Magdalena Górka, Alison Kafer y Lennard Davis, entre otros, el artículo explora cómo la ficción de Crossan escenifica la conversión sistemática de la crisis ecológica en una lógica de infraestructura atmosférica e

incapacitación corporal. La primera sección examina cómo el régimen del Pod genera y controla la dependencia respiratoria como un efecto estructural, gestionando la discapacidad mediante el exceso de oxígeno y la supresión deliberada del conocimiento respiratorio intuitivo. La segunda sección sigue a los protagonistas más allá de la cúpula hacia un paisaje empobrecido y hostil donde la respiración colectiva emerge como contrapráctica fundada en la vulnerabilidad compartida, la precariedad y la interdependencia interespecífica. La tercera sección confronta el precio ético y los límites de esta visión comunitaria a través de las muertes más significativas de la duología y dos modelos rivales de comunidad atmosférica: los bienes comunes interespecíficos voluntarios del Grove y el régimen eugenésico de aclimatación corporal forzada de Sequoia. El ensayo concluye argumentando que Crossan rechaza la resolución triunfalista, ofreciendo en su lugar una política de persistencia recalcitrante en la que respirar es una práctica en continua transformación, precaria e irreductiblemente colectiva de habitar mundos dañados.

Palabras clave: Teoría *eco-crip*, discapacidad respiratoria, gobernanza atmosférica, distopía juvenil, Sarah Crossan.

It Was Like Drinking Fire”: Surplus, Scarcity, and the Eco-Crip Body

*“So, you aren’t overfeeding us oxygen?” Then another calls, “Yeah, what did he mean by that? We’re paying for extra oxygen we don’t even need?” [...] The Pod Minister rubs his mouth with the back of his hand and glares at the crowd. “If you want to leave the pod, you are all free to go. No one is stopping you. Leave!” [...] The camera closes in on Quinn and he seems to look right into the lens. [...] “We can’t leave, and he knows it. They have us addicted to their air.” (Crossan, *Breathe* 337; my emphasis)*

Irish author Sarah Crossan’s novel *Breathe* (2012) and its sequel *Resist* (2013) are set in the near future, in the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe on planet Earth called the Switch, during which mass destruction of trees and vegetation caused atmospheric oxygen levels to plummet from twenty-one percent to an unsustainable level of four percent. The survivors now live inside the “Pod,” a sealed glass dome governed by a private corporation called Breathe, which manufactures and distributes the artificial oxygen for the survivors. But this survival comes at a price, and through an inequitable process. The Pod’s population is divided into two classes: Premiums, who can afford the supplemental oxygen that makes free movement and bodily exertion possible, and Auxiliaries, who cannot. The lives of the auxiliaries are therefore organized around preserving breath. They are forbidden to run, or even walk faster than a regulated pace, since any exertion beyond the rationed supply is unaffordable and, outside the airtanked comfort of the Premium class, effectively outlawed. Michelle Deininger has read the duology’s stratified atmosphere through a material-ecofeminist lens, observing that there are “clear lines of demarcation between the spaces that the poor and rich can inhabit” and that “the inequalities created by multinationals are an underlying critique throughout the novel” (453). As I demonstrate in this article, this lens of class division is crucial, but so is reframing its effect as the deliberate production of respiratory disability rather than focusing solely on resource inequities. In the world of *Breathe*, breath is strictly transactional and heavily monitored. The ministry that administers this atmospheric economy

presents itself as a benevolent and protective entity: the custodian of a fragile population that would perish without its presence. Citizens are indoctrinated into believing that the outside world is lethally dangerous, that the Pod is their only refuge, and that their dependency on corporatized oxygen is only an obvious condition of their survival in this post-catastrophic world, a dependency they are taught to accept unquestioningly and whose engineering they never think to contest.

Here, it is useful to provide a summary of the novels. Though set within a single universe, the two novels chart distinct paths across it. *Breathe*, narrated in rotating first person by three teenagers, Bea, Alina, and Quinn, moves from inside the Pod outwards, following their flight into the Outlands and their eventual arrival at the Grove: the forested stronghold of the Resistance. There, a clandestine network of tree-planters and saboteurs work beyond the dome to restore a breathable atmosphere and break the Pod's monopoly on air. Disparagingly branded as RATS by the regime, the Resistance pursues its goals by covert raids on the biosphere and stealing plant cuttings to propagate and proliferate trees outside the Pod. The Grove becomes the setting of the closing chapters of *Breathe*, bringing in the Ministry's vicious assault and resulting in the dispersal of the survivors. *Resist* opens in the ruin of that defeat. It adds a fourth narrator in Ronan, a Premium conscripted into the regime's own ranks whose path intersects with those of the refugees. Their search for sanctuary leads them toward Sequoia, an ostensibly liberated settlement that later proves to be a creepy and eugenicist version of the Pod. It is governed by Vanya, sister of the Resistance leader Petra. Sequoia is organized around a ritual pairing that assigns reproductive partners by genetic fitness and the forced acclimatization of children to depleted air.

The passage from *Breathe* quoted above unfolds in this setting. Quinn Caffrey, a Premium teenager whom the regime's official story casts as a kidnapping victim, is now recovered by the ministry forces and brought before a televised public assembly. He is expected to denounce his captors and reaffirm the regime's legitimacy, but he subverts the propaganda spectacle, exposing on live broadcast that citizens are being overfed oxygen, that many could survive outside the dome if they were taught to breathe there, and that the regime is deliberately destroying the trees that might restore a breathable atmosphere. The crowd erupts in anger and, as the stewards move to disperse them, Bea's father breaks past the line and strikes the Pod Minister Cain Knavery to the ground.

What makes this moment significant is the affective and rhetorical aspect of the crowd's response. When voices start questioning the regime, the grievance emerges as a typical consumer suspicion: "We're paying for extra oxygen we don't even need?" (*Breathe* 337) Even at the threshold of political awakening, the language of market complaint is instinctively expressed and unavoidable. It refers to a transactional course correction without hurting the legitimacy of the capitalistic order. The Pod minister's retort, that anyone who objects is "free to go," daring the crowd to leave a Pod they cannot survive outside of, reflects a language of neo-liberal choice that has been systematically wielded against bodies that are disabled from

exercising it (338). This taunt also reveals how respiratory incapacity can be turned into an infrastructural product. The so-called freedom to depart is presented because the regime has foreclosed its exercise, biologically and socially engineering a population whose bodies, habits, and beliefs have been calibrated to require what only the Pod provides. Disability here is reframed from being an individual pathology to a political design: the body is systematically made dependent so that dependency can be reframed as choice.

It is against this cynical rhetoric, the minister's sarcastic invitation to leave the Pod at will, that Quinn's formulation lands with such force. "They have us addicted to their air" refuses the framework of consumerism and signals something more insidious: a condition in which the body's most fundamental need has been captured, recalibrated, and bound to a supply that presents itself as transactional care but functions as pernicious bondage (338). Addiction, as contextualized by Quinn, is not a moral failure or even a political passivity. Rather, it specifically names a form of atmospheric governance that manufactures incapacity. For example, Auxiliary hearts cannot bear the strain of running; bodies cannot exercise without purchased oxygen; toddlers are tethered to their cribs lest they deplete a household's metered air; and even the regime's stewards cannot afford to dance. The regime does not merely deceive or mislead its citizens about the so-called scarcity of oxygen; it produces respiratory dependency as an essential condition for citizenship. This is the premise of the social model of disability, which locates the disability not in an impaired body but in the built and social environments that impair it, in contrast to the medical model's framing of disability as individual pathology (Shakespeare 214-22; Davis 1-14). It is this social constitution of disability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson brings into focus as well. Disability, she argues, is not a property of bodies but rather a "set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled" ("Integrating Disability" 5). For Garland-Thomson, disability emerges relationally: as she explains, when "the norm becomes neutral in an environment created to accommodate it, disability becomes intense, extravagant, and problematic" ("Re-shaping" 2). The Pod demonstrates this logic operationally. By saturating its interior with oxygen calibrated to Premium bodies, it renders effortless breathing the neutral, invisible norm, and, in the same gesture, produces Auxiliaries who gasp for oxygen. In this construct, it is not the dependent body that requires justification; rather, the problem lies in how engineered atmospheres make dependency obvious and self-evident. This process connects to Garland-Thomson's conceptualization of normalcy as a process of quiet withdrawal and self-erasure rather than an explicit assertion. Within such an environment, unease can only surface as consumer grievance, until someone forces it into political rhetoric, as Quinn does. Quinn's affirmation about the fabricated dependency on air sees through this normalization by naming an atmospheric regime in which breath itself has become both the medium and the message of the state apparatus, and in which the body's (in)capacity to inhale sheds light on different forms of environmental and social violence that would otherwise remain imperceptible in an ableist order.

Crossan's novels make respiratory disability the form in which such systemic failure becomes legible, from the bodily to the planetary level. This failure is not merely the ecological catastrophe of the Switch alone, but rather the political and economic order that converts that catastrophe into a society of privatized air, stratified citizenship, and manufactured dependency, in which disability is not anomaly but the designed yield. What Crossan's novels offer, then, is not simply a dramatization of environmental corruption or scarcity but a felt account of how certain bodies come to be marked as problems while the systems that produce them remain unaccountable. Pointing to nineteenth century British polymath and statistician Francis Galton's invention of the "normal distribution curve," disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis reminds us that the norm "pushes the normal variation of the body through a stricter template guiding the way the body 'should be'" (5). Crossan transposes this insight within a respiratory register. The Auxiliary who gasps while climbing a staircase is not suffering from an individual deficit but from an atmospheric norm politically tailored to a privileged group's capacity. The reason Crossan's novels invite an eco-crip reading is that they refuse to separate environmental crisis from its embodied consequence, or to treat disability as a private trouble that exists independently of the infrastructures that shape it. The young protagonists of the novel discover their vulnerability relationally as an emergent process between their bodies and an engineered world. In Crossan's hands, breath becomes the site where environment and embodiment entangle most palpably: to notice one's breathing is to register an uneven distribution of survivability, and to see how ecological collapse is managed, domesticated, and made to appear inevitable.

Because this corporeal struggle is inherently bound up with the stories a population is told to secure their compliance, the characters' choice of language plays a crucial role in dismantling the Pod's protective mandate. In one of the most revealing moments concerning this biopolitical warfare, clandestine tree-planter and Resistance member Alina exposes the regime's manufactured scarcity when she claims:

they give us enough for free to get us hooked. Before The Switch, the earth's air was twenty-one percent oxygen. In the pod they give us almost thirty percent. Why? So that when we come outside and have to suck in only six percent, we won't be able to cope. But we can cope. We would cope if they only taught us how. (*Breathe* 121)

This passage deconstructs the Pod's rhetoric by exposing oxygen as a managed and partitioned norm rather than a neutral resource. By naming the air as manufactured and a "free" provision as a consciously expressive choice, Alina reframes care as a system that cultivates dependency, and then sells relief from it, as the same corporation that manufactures the craving also retails the satisfaction as supplemental oxygen for those who can pay, airtanks for sanctioned excursions, and an air tax levied even on the children. The numerical slide is also a crucial part of linguistic framing, for it recasts abundance as sabotage. The body, trained to treat supplementation as the baseline, becomes evidence of apparent uninhabitability. Thus, what is most striking about Alina's logic is its reversal of the expected grammar

of deprivation. The regime's cruelty operates through what might be called a weaponization of excess rather than scarcity: they flood the body with oxygen at nearly thirty percent, ensuring that the outside world, where air hovers at six percent, registers as asphyxiation rather than possibility. The instrument of control here is not the withholding of breath but its overabundance, because this is a surplus so generous that the body readjusts its limits around it, consequently losing its tolerance for anything less, and ultimately experiences the unmediated atmosphere as a hazard rather than as an adaptable condition. The mechanism is consumer capitalism's own: dependency is secured by a surplus that accustoms the body to crave more, the same logic that applies to the market economy's manipulation of appetite or the attention economy's algorithmic control of the information flow that keeps consumers glued to the feed. And when Alina insists "we would cope if they only taught us how," she identifies a violence accompanying the atmospheric one: an epistemological withholding, the deliberate suppression of respiratory knowledge that ensures citizens never learn what their lungs might actually be capable of beyond the dome (121). The surplus Alina names is atmospheric: the Pod's air is oxygen rich for Premium and Auxiliary alike, and it is precisely this shared saturation that disables the bodies for the outside world. Categorically, class enters here not at the level or quality of air breathed but of the exertion permitted to consume more of it. Thus, abundance and rationing become two sides of the same coin.

Disability studies clarify what the Pod's forceful normativity actually accomplishes: going beyond responding to catastrophe, it produces (both geophysically and discursively) a breathable baseline that can be mistaken to be natural. If, as Robert McRuer argues, compulsory able-bodiedness is sustained by systems that present able-bodiedness as self-evident while continuously securing it through discipline and exclusion, then the Pod reads as an atmospheric technology of normativity, one that trains bodies to accept managed respiration as the condition of belonging (370–71). We can also return to Davis's critique of normativity here because it elucidates how the Pod's hierarchy does not merely sort bodies after the fact but actively produces so-called normal respiration as a social mandate that can then be treated as self-evident (3–6). Crossan makes this logic legible at the level of physiological act of breathing: Premium life is secured through atmospheres that make breathing feel effortless and therefore ordinary, while Auxiliary life is organized around the constant management of exertion, the careful rationing of inhalation, and the internalization of debility as common sense, so that engineered deprivation reads as personal limitation, even individual failure.

Tobin Siebers's notion of complex embodiment instructs us to view physiology and social order through a common lens and reminds us that biology is neither a brute biological fact nor a complete social construction. Rather, it is an ongoing interaction between bodies and built environments, in which impairment is real even if its meanings and scales are socially made (283–85). The respiratory limits that Crossan constructs express precisely such effects: they are neither natural nor figurative deficiencies but a physio-cultural materialization of power through air's unequal

distribution. In *Breathe* then, the Pod is where ecological collapse is converted into an infrastructural commodity, and where disability becomes the unremarkable price of a world where violence is normalized and normativized. *Resist* widens this argument by relocating breath from managed interiority to conceptualizing exposure as collectivity, where air is not only scarce but contested as a collective condition and a political claim. Yet *Resist* declines to romanticize insurgency. Its narrative action is paced by lungs, climate, bodily exhaustion, and differentiated stamina, so that the call for resistance is repeatedly tested against changing bodily capacities, rather than measured by projections of revolutionary outcomes.

This persistence of the corporeal resonates with Achille Mbembe's invocation of a "universal right to breathe": a call that names breathability as a system of political distribution and a process of differential exposure acting as a governing logic, not an accidental or incidental crisis (58–62). In his eponymous April 2020 essay (published in the first stage of the pandemic, and weeks before the brutal murder by asphyxiation of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis), Mbembe claims that Covid-19 exposed a prior condition rather than creating a new one. Modernity, he argued, has waged an interminable war on life, and all such wars begin by taking away breath. Long before the pandemic, capitalism had already condemned "entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression" (S60-S61). What the pandemic foreclosed was the modern habit of delegating one's death to others, the ontological equivalent of exporting ecological damage elsewhere, and Mbembe warns that the crisis will deepen enclosure, as states fortify their borders, people stay glued to their screens, and life behind gated communities becomes the norm for those who can afford it. Thus, to claim breathing as a universal right, one that cannot be appropriated and "eludes all sovereignty," is to recognize it as a system of political distribution (S60-61). Feminist theorist Magdalena Górska grounds a similar claim in empirical particulars and intersectionality: her *Breathing Matters* reads breathing as both a corporeal and political process, across the coal miners' black lung disease, phone sex work, and anxiety or panic attacks. Arguing for a framework of "corpo-materiality" of breathing, she argues, "breath is a matter of structural power relations all over the world, and breath matters in power relations' differential operations of their local and global specificities" (95). Building on these formulations, it is my argument that Crossan's novels do not foreground breathability as a condition of environmental quality or a marker of bodily fitness alone, but as a way to name the socio-politically charged conditions that lead to unequal distribution of the ability to breathe: who is afforded breath? On what terms and at whose expense, and finally, to what degree of security?

Breathe and *Resist* are staged on this theoretical terrain. In Crossan's duology, breathability is never a natural given but rather a matter of political governance and allocation, and bodies most affected by this unequal allocation are also the ones most capable of reimagining its redistribution as commons. The sections that follow trace this drama across the duology: the contested ecology of collective breath beyond the dome, and its ethical reckoning through the novels' most consequential deaths and rival models of community building: the Grove's voluntary commons, and Sequoia's

eugenic regime. Taken together, these movements make breathing less a mode of heroic refusal and more a shared practice of community building in dystopic times.

Contested Breath, Atmospheric Commons, and The Politics of Interdependence

"One breath for you, one breath for me." (Crossan, *Breathe* 210)

With this literal and strikingly liturgical phrase, teenage rebel Alina explains how she plans to survive along with her friends Bea, Maude, and Dorian in the toxic wasteland beyond the Pod. She has shared her oxygen with Bea to keep her alive on their approach to the Grove. The implication here is that two bodies would share a single airtank in alternating inhalations, gesturing at breathing as an act of trust between emotionally conjoined bodies. The expression denotes both intimacy and anxiety because such an improvised rhythm of mutual breathing among friends depends on both a dual arithmetic of scarce air, and also tenderness. What Crossan hints at here is something more than an emergency measure. The practice becomes a figuration of breath as something not individualized but irreducibly relational. The air that sustains one body is tied to the care for and care of another. At its most elemental level, survival becomes an exercise in shared vulnerability, rather than a test of individual endurance. This passage and the rest of the chapter ("Bea") anticipate a central conviction of the duology: that breathability is not a private possession, but a communal condition, and any politics that responds to the planetary climate crisis must begin with this recognition.

The authorial context is significant here in finding the correct balance between storytelling and polemic. Crossan has emphasized that writing for young readers does not mean simplifying the political stakes of our current moment. Rather, the moment demands that we put our faith in the body as an instrument to channel our political consciousness, allowing adolescent characters to starkly *feel* what it means to suffocate under a system of malevolent and calibrated dependency. The premise of plummeting oxygen, due to "human folly," as Crossan acknowledges, depicts "a scary place and a place, dare I say it, that's possible" (Vallesteros). The emphasis on plausibility is less about providing a scientifically accurate account of dystopia and more about making the reader feel a sense of discomfort: an uneasy sense of complicity about the devastated world the young will inherit. Referring to her experience as a teacher, Crossan described her soft spot for teenagers in an interview with *The Bookseller* magazine: "they're brave and curious and often see the world with a clarity that adults have lost. I love writing characters who are just starting to realise that the adults around them don't necessarily have all the answers, and who are learning to make choices for themselves" (Noble). This implies a pedagogical ethic that, within her fiction, translates into a narrative structure where received truths about the environment, social safety, and governance are systematically dismantled by the young who bear their consequences.

In the volatile, oxygen-depleted world beyond the sealed interior, where breath must be contested, rationed, and collectively reimagined, Crossan's philosophy of survival is deliberately unsentimental. There is no green utopia awaiting the protagonists beyond the dome with the promise of a pastoral restoration. Instead, there is a precarious and depleted atmosphere with roughly six percent oxygen, with a landscape of "usual desolation: tumbledown buildings, smashed up cars, warped roads, and toppled lampposts. Bones are scattered among the debris; animal or human, it's hard to tell. In the distance are folds of hoary, barren fields" (*Resist* 47). It is in the midst of this desolation that Crossan locates an emergent form of respiratory community, emergent because its members refuse to separate the question of who can breathe from the question of how breathable air is materially and socially distributed. They are communities forged not from abundance but from precarity: from bodies whose exposure to a damaged atmosphere has become, paradoxically, the condition of their political intelligence. Feminist aesthetics scholar Jana Kukaine's formulation is apposite here: she argues that "the body should not be viewed as a passive surface of political imprints nor a mere victim of social injustice. Instead, the body exhibits its capacity to revive by using the state of vulnerability to fore-ground visceral resistance" (96). What Crossan's novels dramatise, across *Breathe* and *Resist*, is precisely this conversion of respiratory vulnerability into political resource, but they do so without abstracting or mystifying the process. Here, communal struggle is staged as an ecology of breath in its own right: a domain in which consensus and dissent about risk-taking become a moral arithmetic, where the most vulnerable bodies model forms of interdependence the able-bodied must learn or perish, and in which the fragile prospect of an atmospheric commons emerges not from heroic refusal but from the slow, patient, embodied labour of learning to breathe together in a damaged world.

Consider the figure of Maude Blue. Alina describes encountering her as a terrifying and ghostly figure: an elderly drifter surviving alone in a derelict house, tethered to a solar-powered respirator that "looks like a small refrigerator," her body ravaged by malnutrition and exposure (*Breathe* 105). Maude viciously attacks Alina, trying to steal her airtank, and is subdued only with the arrival of Quinn and Bea, who overpower her. Maude is presented here as a figure of abjection, and yet, we also learn that she is actually an expelled member of the Pod's own apparatus: "The drifters are all ex-Breathe," Alina explains bluntly (115). This disheveled appearance of Maude testifies to the regime's logic of disposability, ejecting its surplus objects and furnishing them with just enough resources to survive but not resist. But Maude also becomes a symbol of adaptation and endurance; by the time the group reaches the Resistance's stronghold at the Grove, and later, throughout the perilous journey to Sequoia in *Resist*, she has become indispensable. Her solar respirator, once a mark of expulsion, becomes an emblem of adaptive survival. Disability theorist Alison Kafer's concept of a "crip future" is relevant here. She argues for "a crippled environmentalism, one that looks to disabled bodies/minds as a resource in thinking about our future natures differently," insisting that the experience of disability

“presents alternative ways of understanding ourselves in relation to the environment, understandings which can then generate new possibilities for intellectual connections and activist coalitions” (131). Maude embodies such a crippled environmentalism, her body a living archive of the Pod’s atmospheric violence. Yet it is precisely this violence, both physical and psychological, that has generated in her a sense of altered and counterintuitive understanding of her environment. In fact, what the Pod designates as expendability turns out to be the seedbed of an alternative respiratory politics, one grounded not in the fiction of self-sufficient and individuated bodies but in the frank acknowledgement that every breath, outside the dome, is borrowed, shared, and owed.

This alternative politics receives its most concentrated expression in the breathing training sessions at the Grove, which Crossan stages with an almost reverential attention to the body’s quiet labour. When Bea is first led into the training room, what she encounters is a scene of radical somatic discipline:

Inside the room are about thirty people without facemasks [...] Half of them sitting crossed-legged and straight-backed on one side of the room, their eyes closed, their lips slightly parted. The other half have twisted their bodies into odd shapes: there’s a girl standing on her head, her toes pointing into the air; there’s a boy lying on his back with his legs straight and pulled up to his face. (*Breathe* 231)

There is, Bea notices, a strange sound in the room—“a crackling [...] like static electricity.” Alina identifies it: “That’s their breathing” (231). The room’s oxygen level has been set to 6%, the same as the hostile atmosphere outside, and the trainees are learning to function within it: “Relaxation is the key to preserving oxygen... Everyone in this room is lowering their heart rates and maximizing lung potential” (231). What Crossan renders here is not simply an insurgent exercise regimen but an epistemological reversal of the Pod’s atmospheric logic. Where the regime cultivates incapacity and dependency by flooding bodies with surplus oxygen, the Resistance cultivates capacity by training bodies to survive on less. Where the Pod suppresses respiratory knowledge, the Grove restores it, painstakingly, breath by breath. The training is collective, communal, and fully dependent on a principle of the commons. Song, the Grove’s biochemist, has devised a system for “farming, storing, and transferring the oxygen from the trees and plants in the stadium to certain locations in the building,” calibrated to eighteen percent in some areas, six percent in others (218). Consequently, the urgent stakes of this embodied knowledge become starkly visible in the differential fates of Crossan’s protagonists. Quinn Caffrey, the Premium boy whose lungs have been calibrated to the Pod’s thirty-percent atmosphere, finds himself paradoxically disabled by his own privilege the moment he steps outside. Habituated to surplus air, his body registers the depleted atmosphere as asphyxiation. Near the end of *Breathe*, when his father asks whether he can yet “breathe without supplemental air,” Quinn replies as the first-person narrator: “I’m getting there” (361). Even deep into *Resist*, Quinn remains the slowest of the group, the one who cannot keep pace: “I wish I could run faster,” he admits. “Silas and Alina keep stopping so I can catch up” (300). Significantly, his lack of adaptability and pace is not a symptom

of essentializing stereotypes about disability, but rather a proof of a residual dependency on the control of the atmospheric regime. In this regard, literary and media scholar Jean-Thomas Tremblay's argument regarding the situational indistinction between "not being able to breathe and performing not being able to breathe" is relevant, especially when one is dealing with historical trauma (25). By contrast, those whom the Pod has marginalised or expelled, such as Auxiliaries, drifters, and the chronically breathless, possess embodied knowledge that becomes both a form of power and a performance. To elaborate, the Grove's relatively sophisticated training, Quinn's learning by trial and error, and Maude's learning by endurance all gesture at processes that, in Tremblay's words, "turn breathing into [an] art" (25). Jazz and Alina's reflections on their training are also a performance that questions the Pod's hierarchy of respiratory worth, and the performance matters because it narrativizes every act and existence of breathing into a process inscribed with milieu-specific power relations. With the dialectic of the inside and outside, which is also a dialectic of coercion and co-operation, Crossan dramatizes this power dynamic, for example, in the breathing exercises at the Grove. To go back to Alina's declaration about shared collectivity, in Crossan's fictional world, the literalism of the phrase compounds rather than diminishes its political force. The Resistance fighters practice breathing at six percent not merely to acclimatize but to reclaim a capacity that the state has deliberately extinguished: to render their lungs self-governable again. Their strained chests and moments of lightheadedness give this bodily labour an artistic and political force, locating resistance in the collective negotiation of bodily limits rather than in their heroic transcendence. Thus, the electric sound of their collective breath in the training room is at once the most ordinary and the most radical in the novel: the music of lungs that refuse and resist normative violence.

But the duology also does not let this vision of resourceful and mutually interdependent bodies stand uncontested. As I explore in the next section, there is a complex political reckoning behind this communal breathing: not just exertion and exposure, but also grief, psychological damage, and moral exhaustion that strain unrelentingly against a practice that is itself precarious. As Stephanie Heine reminds us in *Poetics of Breathing*, breath itself is never simply a sign of vitality but always "an ethics of breathing together apart, as being thrown into an atmosphere with others, others who are—to various degrees—always different from one another, and cannot be held together by a substance as frail and intangible as air" (35). It is this tension, between solidarity and singularity, or between redemption and ruin, that Crossan refuses to settle in the duology.

Shallow Breath: Interspecies Grief, Eugenic Air, and the Ethics of Expenditure

Going beyond the unstable collective established at the Grove, Crossan's narrative immediately tests the limits of shared respiration against the trauma of dispossession. To understand this context, we can turn to environmental humanities scholar Matthew J.C. Cella. In his effort to bridge ecocriticism and disability studies,

Cella introduces the concept of “ecosomatic paradigm” to contend with “a key method with which to deconstruct norms of embodiment while simultaneously promoting ethical treatment of the natural world” (169). By emphasizing the fundamental porosity of human embodiment, Cella’s framework clarifies how ecological degradation manifests directly as a bodily and psychological crisis. Crossan dramatises exactly such an ecosomatic rupture in the beginning of *Resist*. Fleeing the destruction of their sanctuary, the survivors face a reality where endurance itself crosses the threshold of tolerance. Holly, one of the Grove’s gardeners, is unraveled by the catastrophe: she hyperventilates, refuses supplemental oxygen, and begs for fresh air, “as though there’s such a thing” (4). When she is helped onto the deck, Holly still repeatedly attempts to throw herself over the prow. Holly “laughs mirthlessly,” tells Alina, “I’m all out of hope” and let’s go; she “hits the water and is devoured” (9). In this devastating scene, Crossan strips the emotions of any redemptive rhetoric. As the water devours Holly, she becomes a symbol of a terrible ecosomatic surrender to a damaged world. Holly’s surrender illustrates how the atmospheric precarity manufactured by the regime ultimately extinguishes the imaginaries of liveable futures. Her death is a failure to envision and implement a true respiratory commons: a condition under which breathing actually feels worth the effort. Alina’s despairing question “What are we fighting for, anyway?” (10) wraps up the first chapter in *Resist* and foreshadows every subsequent act of solidarity and defiance. The atmospheric commons the protagonists seek to build will therefore have to be adequate not only to the needs of lungs but to what Tremblay identifies as the irreducible morbidity of respiration itself. Holly’s drowning clarifies this forcefully. As Tremblay writes at the close of his meditation on the last breath, “To breathe is [...] to be near death. Discourses of the last breath do not deny this reality so much as they frame it within a form of life. Those are the stories we tell ourselves in order to keep breathing” (157). Holly’s drowning is also the loss of a narrative, however fragile, that might frame each act of breathing within a liveable horizon. Without it, respiration becomes indistinguishable from the slow violence it was meant to withstand, and the body’s most elemental persistence ceases to feel like survival at all.

If Holly’s death marks the psychological limit of respiratory precarity, Petra’s death at the climax of *Breathe* marks its interspecies horizon. When the ministerial troops descend on the Grove, the forest that the Resistance has spent their collective lives nurturing “is shriveling up before [their] eyes” as “Black foam swells along the columns of trees and eats its way from branch to branch” (344). Petra refuses to abandon her trees. When the others scramble back down to find her, she is sitting on the low branch of an oak. Her demeanor is calm, and as Alina’s narration puts it, she is “meditating her way to defeat” (344). To the pleas and curses of her comrades she responds with a question that scaffolds the novel’s entire moral economy: “What have they ever done? [...] All I ever wanted was to protect them. I failed. I won’t desert them” (344). Then, with those words, she begins to climb upward, moving closer to the toxic foam. Petra’s upward and suicidal steps in these final moments are a refusal to separate her own breathability from the respiratory labour of the more-than-human

organisms that make breathing possible in the first place. The trees of the Grove are co-participants in a shared ecology of breath that forms a matrix of kinship with humans. Their destruction constitutes a violence she recognizes as being inseparable from the violence done to human bodies. And crucially, nine-year-old Jazz follows her, scurrying up the trunk. What makes this moment so unsettling is not simply the risk but its root: the youngest and most respiratorily vulnerable body in the novel chooses the trees over the retreating collective, intuiting a kinship that the adults around her can only articulate as grief-induced insanity or impracticality. Jazz's ascent inverts the expected eco-crip logic of protection; it is the precarious body that extends care toward the dying nonhuman world, rather than receiving it. That Crossan suspends Jazz's fate from the reader across the novel's closing chapters deepens the ethical charge, refusing to let the reader emotionally metabolise her ascent as either certain martyrdom or simple rescue, and leaving it instead as an open scar in the narrative's cartography of conscience, until she is found in the Grove's rubble, alive but altered. In eco-crip terms, Jazz's initial stubborn immobility and the frantic ascent are a refusal of what Kafer refers to as a "curative futurity:" a time frame that casts disabled people (as) out of time, or as obstacles to the arc of progress (28). By orienting her precarious body not toward the normative arc of survival but toward the flaming and fuming canopy, Jazz enacts the kind of crip futurity that insists vulnerable bodies are not obstacles to be overcome but the ethical ground from which any alternative futurity must be imagined.

Against Petra's arboreal solidarity, Crossan sets a darker example in *Resist*: the settlement of Sequoia, which is governed by Petra's sister Vanya. If the Grove represents a future that is collective, shared, voluntary, and attentive to the more than human, Sequoia represents a far more sinister atmospheric regime, capable of transforming the language of adaptation. When Abel, a former resistance member who has been living at Sequoia, leads Alina to the compound's hospital ward at night and shows her what Vanya's program truly entails, she sees through the narrow windows a room of metal beds, bodies strapped down with tubes threaded through their mouths and noses, and machines hissing and beeping. The second room is even more disturbing, full of cribs and playpens: "The children are crying, wheezing, or asleep. None of them are connected to tubes, but most are covered in Band-Aids and bruises" (247). "They're pumping the air in at fifteen percent," Abel whispers, "and they keep lowering it until a child looks like he might suffocate. Then they hook him up to an oxybox. They're training them" (247). The scene tells us that the pairing ceremony that governs Sequoia's political economy, in which genetic compatibility determines who is worthy of breeding, and with whom, reinforces the picture of a community that has responded to the crisis of breathability not by reimagining its terms but by reproducing the Pod's logic of austerity governance at a smaller scale.

Where the Pod manufactures dependency through surplus oxygen, Sequoia manufactures supposed strength through enforced deprivation. But in both cases, breath remains an instrument of biocultural control rather than a commons. And the bodies that struggle to adjust are treated as extractive resources for a governance

model beyond their choosing. Alina's revulsion at the hospital ward underscores that settlements like Sequoia are the result of a biopolitics that dispenses with solidarity and substitutes it with eugenic management, foreclosing a crip future through the language of authoritarian design. This distinction between these two models of atmospheric community, i.e. the Grove's collaborative interspecies commons and Sequoia's biocultural and technoscientific apparatus, gives the climactic sequence of *Resist* its ethical grounding. The question that these two approaches highlight is grounded in lived experience: how does such politically charged accessibility and capacity of breathing count, and who controls it? As Górska puts it: "It does matter whose lives (do not) matter; it does matter whose lives are (un)breathable; and it does matter whose lives and what practices of resistance and transformation are (not) considered political" (252). Specifically, Crossan builds this differential logic in the narrative architecture of the novel. We encounter Sequoia only after putting our faith in the Grove, and the sequencing nudges us to confront what Górska's formulation lays bare: that equitable breathability is not in itself a political good unless we grapple with the questions of agency and instrumentality. The real horror of Sequoia is its shared premise with the Grove's vision that bodies must be remade for a damaged atmosphere, ultimately obscuring the possibility of imperfect commons. Crossan's deepest provocation, then, is that atmospheric liberation carries no insurance against its own inversion, and that the distinction between care and control must be a part of the broader vision of any respiratory politics.

It is in light of this recognition that breathing can be engineered toward liberation or toward domination, and that the difference is legible only in collective organizing and entanglement of vulnerable bodies, that the novels' two most significant deaths acquire their full eco-crip weight. They register not as isolated tragedies but as connected indices of how atmospheric governance distributes conditions of survival, how malleable bodies and environments convert broader ecological crisis into intuited and embodied cognizance, and how these precarious bodies become, in their very expansiveness, sites where any genuinely collective future must be envisioned. The first death is that of General Jude Caffrey. Throughout the narrative arc, Caffrey embodies the ambivalence of complicity: a man who enforces the goals of the regime and commands the destruction of the Grove, yet who, at a decisive point in *Breathe*, cannot sacrifice his own son to the system he serves. He leads Quinn to an exit and pushes him into the Outlands with a quietly profound speculation: "In another world I think we would have been friends, son" (362). In *Resist*, this ambivalence deepens, as Caffrey recruits Auxiliary soldiers to defend the Pod against Vanya's attack, effectively militarizing a disabled population. When he is shot in the neck in the final battle, Quinn kneels beside him as the General rips off his oxygen mask and flings it beyond reach. "His breath is short and soft," Quinn notes (349). This detail is crucial to the scene's meaning, as it underscores the transformation and vulnerability of the enforcer of the atmospheric order. This final and unmediated inhalation, along with his self-unmasking, helps complete the cyclical arc of the novel where no breath is solitary; even the enforcer's lungs are implicated

in the atmosphere he helped to make toxic, and as that complicity unravels, it does not necessarily redeem the past so much as acknowledge a shared condition. The second death is Alina's, and it tracks the entire trajectory of breath from private commodity to collective offering. When she discovers Vanya's bomb and carries it into the open field, running on atmospheric oxygen alone, she reassures herself, "The oxygen in the atmosphere is thin, but it's enough after my training" (*Resist* 345). It is also "enough" because this air supports everything the Grove has built so far. As Alina carries herself across the terrain, she becomes a vital part of a social whole. And what she does with that collectively forged capacity is give it away: not through the reciprocal rhythm of shared inhalation, but in a terminal expenditure that ensures others will continue to breathe. As Black studies scholars Jessie Cox and Isaac Jean-Francois argue, breathing liquifies "any fantasy of individuated contours" between self and other (110). Alina's sacrifice takes this dissolution to its limit, converting the ecosomatic malleability, from Holly's despair through Petra's arboreal fidelity, into an act whose political meaning is inseparable from its physiological cost. That Bea must lift her own face mask to whisper to Alina's body turns even this final communication into a form of respiratory caring. This gesture refuses to let speech exist outside the economy of shared air. Yet Crossan does not end with this image of sacrifice or even triumph, as the epilogue represents a quiet and radical resolution: a crip present. Bea's closing reflection on her "own shallow breath" refuses the triumphalist mode that a conventional dystopian ending might demand (*Resist* 356). Bea's respiration is damaged and insufficient by any normative standard of respiratory health. Yet it is not hers alone. Her struggle for breathing now stands for a respiration that the survivors share. What Crossan offers is a continuance of inhabitation in a damaged world and finding, through physical and emotional labour, not redemption but rather a sense of adequacy and healing.

Conclusion

Sarah Crossan's *Breathe* and *Resist* constitute a significant eco-crip intervention into atmospheric governance, one in which respiratory disability is not just a figurative framework, but indeed the primary register through which ecological catastrophe, political violence, and social stratification become legible. The Pod converts environmental collapse into a bio-techno-cultural regime of normativity, engineering a respiratory baseline that produces disability as its key structural effect, rather than as an anomaly. In situating her characters beyond the dome, Crossan stages collective breathing as a counter-practice grounded in vulnerability. Yet, the duology also resists letting this communal vision stand unchallenged. It traces interspecies kinship, its perversely eugenic inversion, and the question of breath being converted from private commodity into terminal expenditure, culminating in Bea's imperfectly tenacious continuance. These three movements—the Pod's manufactured logic of normalcy, the Grove's contested commons, and competing models of community in this narrative universe—are critical because a single

underlying logic connects them: the conversion of crisis into infrastructure. In Crossan's fictional world, ecological catastrophe gets rationalized, domesticated, and, ultimately, administered to function as the governing structure of everyday life. The Switch creates conditions under which breathability becomes a managed resource, distributed hierarchically. Within this administered environment, disability becomes the ongoing yield of a system requiring differential incapacitation to sustain itself. Tremblay's formulation delineates this dynamic within the contemporary crisis of breath, as he argues:

The intensified pollution, weaponization, and monetization of air and breath since the 1970s amount to a crisis in the reproduction of life. Within this crisis, breath, a life force to be marshaled individually or collectively, reveals its contingency on environments, broadly conceived, that exhaust their occupants at different rates. Accordingly, articulations of survival become predicated on the management and dispersal of respiratory hazards. (2)

Crossan's fiction depicts this dispersal of hazards, staging it across bodies, milieus, and institutions to expose how atmospheric governance embeds a gradual spectrum of respiratory precarity whose distribution reinforces existing hierarchies of expendability. Yet the novels also show how breathing emerges as a site of ethical possibility even after its instrumentalization. As Heine argues in her study of respiratory figurations in Modernist literature, "breath is the recalcitrant persistence of material always on the move" (172). Crossan realizes this as breath in her fiction is never settled, never safe, never fully redeemed, but neither is it obliterated. It is an ongoing negotiation and a practice of inhabiting the world that always remains hostile and conflicting. Bea's closing reflection enacts this recognition that survival in a damaged world requires something beyond restoration: a politics of recalcitrant persistence and defiance, attuned to a collective, rather than individual, understanding of freedom. Crossan's Young Adult dystopia thus offers more than fictional anticipation of the contemporary planetary climate crisis, by providing an eco-crip account of how bodies, ecologies, and political orders are mutually constituted through the most elemental of acts: the continuous and precarious work of breathing. Young adult fiction, in Crossan's hands, becomes the form and also a tool for political education about our shared and collective atmosphere. This is not a simplified iteration of adult crisis, but rather a sharp reorientation of the logic of this crisis to imagine a liveable world through a commitment to the common good.

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