THE ARTIST IS NOT PRESENT

—mayfield brooks

When the body is absent how do opportunities for connection expand?
What imaginaries can I create in our collective absence?
Perhaps absence makes our hearts yearn for each other more.
Perhaps absence is a gift.

During this time of multiple pandemics, absence etches itself into my body.
Ordinary gestures of affection are now fraught with questions.

Can I hug you?
Are you okay with touch?

Spaces of habitation become vacant
a storefront psychic lounge
an empty garment
a neglected dance studio

The absence of the body speaks louder than its presence.
Absence affords spaciousness and time for decomposition.

The "whale fall" is a scientific term describing the process of a whale's decomposition after it dies and falls to the ocean floor, providing nutrients for deep water creatures.

The whale fall is a study in absence. For me, the whale fall becomes the dance, the space of grief and regeneration, the lamentation, the ecstasy, the song and the sonic release. There is a desire to sit with grief and rage in a world that discards too much, consumes too much, and pollutes too much.

The bodies of whales and the bodies of Black folk seem to have a kinship in how they have both been hunted, consumed, disappeared, and silenced from the time of the transatlantic slave trade. Some slave ships were later used as whaling vessels.

Black death is a bulbous space of absence.
It looms in the air of my consciousness like an invisible interloper.
Black death haunts me, nips at my heels, gives me night sweats.

I look to the whale who teaches me how to live and die.
I look to the whale who teaches me how to breathe.
I look to the whale who teaches me how to sing, listen, echolocate, communicate, take care of matriarchal families, and enrich the oceans.

I hear the whales.
They tell me that they will teach me how to exist in the abyss. They tell me that they are familiar with absence because they live most of their lives in the depths of the ocean. They tell me that they will take me to the depths where their bodies fall after they die. I tell the whales that I cannot go to the depths because I won't be able to breathe there. The whales remind me that I can't breathe here on earth. They tell me that my ancestors sent them here to remind me of my impossible existence.

I come up for air. I am a whale falling into the abyss.
I sense my body losing its human form and shedding its anxiety. I am absent.
The artist is not present. I do not have to show up or do anything or be anybody for anyone. I disappear into a blackness that decays as it falls into nothingness. No one is trying to kill me because I am no more.
Whale fall with me.

Film still by Suzi Sadler

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