

Peanut

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Spring 2016 Honors Thesis

April 11th, 2016

A lot has changed since Fall of 2014 when I originally began writing this collection for my BFA Capstone course. Where I live, what I am doing with my education, the path I've decided to take in my career, my view of the world and life as a whole. However, I think it is important to note where I come from, especially given my tale of ups and downs. For this reason I have chosen to keep this "piece" as a sort of intro to who I was when I began this project over a year ago, even though in some ways a lot of it still rings true. It has been a labor, if you will pardon the pun, of both love, pain, and more self-reflection than many would ever want to go through.

Artist's Statement

(Written Fall 2014)

There is an old saying: Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning. Growing up in the south near the coast, this saying was practically the word of God. So I chose to title my project *Red Sky in Mourning*, as in mourning the deaths of losses of the previous day or night. I was also recently forced to have a *Lord of the Rings* weekend with my husband, (forced is an extreme word considering I sat down immediately and reveled in it) and Legolas said the perfect thing: "Blood has been spilt this night..." as a red dawn broke behind him.

Moral of that story: I am a huge nerd.

It is my opinion that people are built like houses. Your foundation is given to you by your family or those that raised you, the exterior the shell you show to the world, and the interior your psyche. The stronger your foundation, the sturdier your exterior and interior. I myself have had to remake my entire foundation more than once. It creates a

fear that any change will destroy what I've made and the fear and paranoia muss up the interior I have worked to straighten out.

I have been trained to have a tough exterior, to not let anyone in since I was young, and through this project have realized this may not be the best way to live. I started to question this when I realized I was able to tear up over the death of a relatively minor fictional character, but not at the death of my grandmother. So I threw myself into this, hoping to see the light on the other side. And I think I have.

This whole project has been an exercise in ripping myself apart. Which was awful in itself, but I am also an OCD, type A, anal-retentive individual, and I have pieced myself together with glue, duct tape, post-it notes, and To-Do lists. The project has forced me to come out and say things that I have refused to look at for years.

Some of it is still buried beneath all the layers of lists and superglue, and might stay buried—but hopefully not, as it is my goal to use this project as a jumping off point for a potentially longer work. I would really love to use this project as a way to help facilitate the reorganization of my own interior and the flushing out of the ghosts that plague me, as well as to facilitate these same things in others.

All in all, I am more confident as a human being coming out of this project and also more confident as a writer. I am sure that my writing process has changed because of this work, though it certainly cannot become any more neurotic. Which brings me to the next section of this artist statement: my process.

My writing process is what I call “word vomit.” Ideas hit me at any time I am not one hundred percent focused on something that requires no deviation of my mind, and sometimes even then. They hit me like a truck, a right hook to whatever section of my

brain controls my creative functions, and I have to put my ideas down. I have written things on the backs of tests, old receipts, note-taking apps on various mobile devices ranging from inkpad to text messages and even an app that allows one to record lectures, which is what I should use that memory for, but I just can't seem to help myself. It helps that I have an hour commute one way every weekday that allows me time to brainstorm and work out the angle I want to take on this piece or that, and to record thoughts about them or even the whole piece itself.

It is this record-transcribe-rewrite-edit-fuss over like a psycho-edit or rewrite again-peer review that I took when writing the piece *Elephants* you will find in this portfolio. This has so many steps because when you get right down to it, I am crazy insecure. A lot of the reasons why will hopefully be explained in my work, though if for some reason it does not come through, chalk it up to my process. But even more than my insecurities, it's because I am an editor at heart.

I love to bleed on manuscripts and essays, talk to people about their word choice, and push people to do the work that they have brewing inside them. Work that they don't always know they are capable of, much like myself with my non-fiction, a genre I never envisioned myself writing. It is simultaneously my best and worst quality as a writer.

I figure it to be one of my better qualities, as it allows me to only put out work that I myself would want to read. Nothing with grammatical errors, strange, inconsistent formatting, or words that just don't seem to flow as well as they could. It pushes me to double-check myself at every keystroke and say that yes: this is what I want the world to see me, and this is how I want to be remembered, if I am ever lucky enough to be a remembered writer.

It is also my worst quality because I am constantly double-checking myself, which is something that holds me back. Constantly questioning whether what I have written is tolerably adequate to bother people with long enough to get feedback on, let alone good enough to think as highly of it myself. This leads to a lot of work that will probably never see the light of day, but I think that every writer has a secret stash of that, and more and more of mine is coming out as I reevaluate and become a strong and more confident writer.

It is my blessing and my curse.

One thing about my writing that I know I need to pay attention to is the flowery quality that is sometimes present. While not necessarily a bad thing, what I don't want is my work coming across as a skip through the gardens; rather more like a maze that you need to take your time to know before you can make your way around in it. This is something I need to be considerate of as well, because while I want my readers to feel the weight of my works, I do not want them to be suffocated by them which requires a simultaneous distance from and entrenchment in any given scene from me as a writer. This is made doubly hard by the closeness with which I feel to my works give their genre of non-fiction.

However it is these sets of short works that I have compiled into a sort of memoir, if you will allow me to use the term loosely, that I felt needed to be written. It was a story that had to be told. Not because it's mine and I am important. Not because it is a horror story of epic proportions and that makes it special. It wasn't any of that that made me feel the need to not just write my story, but share it.

It was because, in the end, it is a story of hardship that will one day be overcome.

And we need more of those in the world.

Beginnings

Youth is fleeting. It seems to rush faster and farther away from us each year.

Stealing away in the night.

Or maybe it's stolen from us.

Many are able to hold on to some piece of themselves from this time through their memories. And while some revel in their remembered youth, and others push it away, still others, like myself, simply don't have anything to remember.

~*~ ~*~ ~*~

Two

It was hot. Almost boiling. A cool spray of water hit the back of my thighs up to my shoulders repeatedly as I lifted my face toward the sun. The red-orange glow of the sun through my eyelids was interspersed with rolling waves all the way out to meet the horizon and the cloying scent of salt.

The laughter of my mother and grandmother along with the seagull's calls and chatter surrounded me.

Four

Hot, golden sun shines on the caged dome climber. Wind blows past my face as I run toward it. I can hear the laughter of small children around me.

Five

The car blasted dry heat at me as my mother dropped me off to Kindergarten. The falling snow melted as it hit the windshield and I glared at it. It was my first encounter with the seemingly soft cotton floating to the Earth. I already hated it. It should have been warm and fluffy, the way that it looked.

It was the first time I realized that things aren't what they seem.

Six

"Meggy!" the high-pitched voice pierced my brain. I groaned and rolled away from the small hands pulling at the warm cocoon of my blankets. "Meggy!"

"Wha?" I asked. Though my voice was muddled by sleep and covers, he still heard me.

"Mere!" he kept shouting.

"Whiiiiy?" I whined.

"Pirates!" he giggled, "Meeegggggy. Mere!"

There was a rush of movement, blurred actions that I am told were breakfast and getting dressed. The next thing I truly remember was the blow-up kiddy pool pirate ship, complete with tiny island and palm tree. I was in my grandparents' backyard, the small one inside the fence and under the tallest of pine trees. Elephant ears waved hello like every other morning.

And there he was, my barely walking, barely talking, baby cousin Patrick in a bathing suit diaper combo. He was on the little slide that went from the ship to the island. He shouted at me again, "Mere, Meggy!" And I went.

Apparently our grandparents were there, along with our uncle and our respective mothers. But I don't remember much besides that pool, my uncle's face, and the high-pitched voice of my cousin saying "Meggy, Meggy mere! Mere, Meggy!"

* * *

I was bored. Painfully, soul-achingly bored. It was muggy. The summer storm that had just hit Myrtle Beach hadn't gotten rid of the stifling humidity that plagued the

South Carolina coast in mid June. My mom and Jim, her current boyfriend, were discussing what to do, where to go, and how to handle the situation. The situation being that they had locked themselves out of my mother's two-door, tomato red, Dodge Shadow. I played in the small pile of dirt and sand that had collected in a small indentation in the asphalt for close to two hours.

My mother looked so proud when she told me that I was good daughter "for being so quiet and out of the way." And Jim agreed whole-heartedly.

* * *

I was on a plane, and then it was cold. I met my mother's sister for the first time, along with her brood, adding over ten people to my ever-expanding family. There was a wedding, my mother's and Jim's. A little less than a year from when they first spoke, and only six months after they had met in person. I was awoken at 3:30 am two days later for my first Christmas with my newfound family. There was another plane, and I was home.

I was happy.

Seven

Pocalla Elementary School was where I learned that blueberry had three syllables, there was the opportunity to learn other languages, and that I had the potential to be good at them. It was the start of a stretch of having no real friends that would span until I reached late into my high school years. The only memorable individual was my silent shadow, a little redheaded boy named Harold.

* * *

It was hot in Minnesota the summer of 2000. Not quite as hot as South Carolina, but hot enough to feel normal. My new brother Kyle, Jim's younger son, was eighteen

and he taught me how to four-wheel and shoot my BB gun and, later, the family's .22. We played air hockey in the side room and video games on the floor of his room. All the things that brothers and sisters did in my mind.

He was my first friend in this strange new place and he made it feel like home.

Eight

It was time to go to bed. I rose from my spot on Kyle's moss green carpet where I had been watching him play hockey on some video game console or another. "*This was it,*" I told myself, my nervousness stemming from the fact that I was going to say something that *meant* something. I reached around his shoulders like I had every night before, but this time as I shut his door, I said, "I love you," something that I'd never heard anyone say to him.

* * *

A few nights later there I heard the sound of fighting downstairs. I crept down to see what was going on. Most of it's blurred. Figures grappled, and the larger threw the smaller into the wall. My mom stood back, her hand covering her mouth. She looked shocked, but not surprised, and not like she would ever step in for the younger person who had become her son, who was struggling for breath after his father left the room.

* * *

It was two weeks after I told him I loved him. My mother was gone to classes on Wednesdays, and Jim was home late every night anyway, which just left Kyle and me. A new routine. We walked down our long driveway from where the bus had dropped us off and, after shedding the immense number of layers we wore to keep warm, Kyle made

mac and cheese. After eating, I went upstairs to my room to play, and a strange smell, like burning garbage, came up through the floor. I went outside to play to clear my nose.

* * *

I know Kyle followed me outside.

I don't know what either of us did while we were out there.

There was never any evidence that something happened. He was good like that.

I know that it wasn't the only time this series of events occurred.

* * *

I made a mistake in class one day and pinched my leg as hard as I could. The dark, purple bruise lasted for over a week. Later, I slammed my fingers in the door. When asked why, I said that it was what I felt I should do to teach myself not to do something wrong ever again. "They" made me see a counselor whose name was Doctor Charlie Something or Another, but he told me I could call him Chuck the Chipmunk. He was a brown haired, middle aged man with no facial hair, and gold rimmed glasses. I told him whatever I felt would get me out of there with the promise of never having to return.

We never really started talking again in our house.

* * *

I had changed schools again. My fifth school in as many years. My new classmates, who had finally beat the southern accent out of me, and I were sitting on the concrete basketball court near the jungle gym eating bomb pops. Our teachers had looked nervous all day, jumpy, snappish, and weepy in turns. They told us about planes that had flown into buildings.

A tragic accident named for the date it occurred: 9/11.

I came home to my mother in tears, glued to the TV in our living room.

* * *

Kyle was taken away by our parents. I didn't really notice he was gone because he was so rarely home, and I didn't see him much anyway. I wasn't sure until after winter where he was.

I knew we could visit him but I was never taken to see him. Whether it was at his request, the facility's, or my parents, I'll never know.

Ten

We picked Kyle up from the drug rehab center a town south of us. The twenty-mile drive there was like any other. I didn't really realize what we were doing; at least I don't think I did. The ride back was quiet. That quiet you feel pressing in on you from all sides. That makes you want to run and never look back.

Our house was that kind oppressive quiet for about a week. Then *Kyle* was back. The Kyle I knew before all fighting. My friend. My brother. My family.

* * *

Two weeks later, Kyle left. I watched him pack up his duffle bag in his room and as he walked down the street, my mom watched from the window. It was the last time I ever saw him.

Eleven

I stabbed myself in the cafeteria and as I lay there, dying, my classmates and teachers stepped around me. It was only when the janitor couldn't put out the lunch tables that they decided to move me. I was thrown into the dumpster. My parents never noticed I was gone.

Sometimes this dream still haunts me.

* * *

A year after Kyle left, I was sitting on a hill looking at the lake, talking to my counselor at Lake Beauty Bible Camp, something that was done with all of the campers. She asked the right questions at the right time, and I told her everything. I told her my stepbrother, Kyle, had beaten me up when I was younger, telling me I was a waste of space and deserved pain because I “was the reason the world burned.”

“What else did he say?” she asked me. And I told her those things, too. The good, and the bad. All the things that had made me question if I was a good person or not, if I deserved the space I took up, or not.

She wrote my parents, and that’s how they found out.

I had never felt more betrayed.

To them it was just another thing that happened. Like paying taxes, or doing the laundry. And so that’s what it became to me, too.

~*~ ~*~ ~*~

There are a few other things I remember. My Memaw’s house, and my Pawpaw’s. The way they would laugh when I would do something funny. I don’t remember their hugs, or kind words, or even if they had had any for me. I remember being told I talked stupidly when I spoke to my family from the south by my aunt’s children. I don’t remember ever seeing my father before the age of thirteen.

At this point in my life, I couldn’t tell you if Kyle did any of those things for sure. I do know that it’s whatever happened that I don’t remember that makes me question to this day if I am worth anything. And more than that, it is what makes me wonder if I am

meant, or even allowed to be, a part of what I had before my life was tied to my tormentors.

A happy family.

Missing

Early Spring, 2009

The edges of my vision grow dark as I lie here. The small area is barely able to hold my body, and the cool laminate flooring chills me through my clothing, deep, through to my bones. My muscles spasm, causing me to gasp in much needed oxygen. The jarring movement does more harm than good, though. Tiny pin pricks of pain radiate like burning embers, emanating from points on my ribs.

It is a feeling I have felt before, quite recently in fact, and every time it happened, including this one, I was having an asthma attack. The feeling of drowning in one's own fluids is beyond description, and the crushing weight pressing into my sternum is only making it worse.

Is this what it feels like to die?

Small things flicker into my mind and are gone before I can fully grasp them. Memories. Hopes and dreams. Loved ones. Tom, my boyfriend of five months, flickers in, and his face competes with what is left of my vision. I focus on him. I don't wish to see what hovers above me. *I'm sorry* I whisper to him, knowing he can't hear.

"Yeah, you are." The voice comes from above, in the space that Tom's face was so stoutly blocking out. The sound brings me back to the here and now.

It's him.

I try to gasp again, but there is nowhere for my chest to go. He is kneeling too heavily upon it now. It is right before my vision fully fades that my mom walks in. Jim retreats, stating that I fell and he was helping me up.

“She slipped on the step and had an asthma attack,” he told my mom, “poor thing couldn’t get up.”

I continue to lie on the ground as my vision comes back to me. My eyes lock with my mother’s, begging her to see what was really going on.

She knows.

But she isn’t going to do anything about it.

* * * * *

They say “you never know what you’re missing until it’s gone.” This can pertain to food, shelter, warmth, water, and one’s own dignity.

That was the day I realized I could miss oxygen.

But it wasn’t the day I realized I missed my safety because I’d never really had that to begin with.

A Not so Average Thursday

April 24th, 2014

The screeching noise is going off again. I continued to ignore it, that is, until I am almost shoved out of my comfortably warm section of bed that I have bundled myself into.

“Just get up. It’s the fifth time it’s gone off.” The deep, gravelly voice connected to the pushing limbs all belonged to my dear husband, Tom.

I moan and groaned as I reach over to slam the thing around to shut it up before turning it off. The snooze button had broken the day after I got it. Once that bit of technological fuckery is complete, I roll out of bed and grabbed my clothes for the day as quietly as I can. Tom had gotten home at 5 am and it was just breaking...shit.

It’s just after 9. I have class at 10 and parking is always a bear this time of year. Time to run. I threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt while I was in our bedroom, a sweatshirt that tried to strangle me in my kitchen and socks as I set up my teapot to boil. Today is the day though. I had promised myself that I would check, though I had kept Tom in the dark as to what I thought was going on.

I made my way to the bathroom, making sure my backpack was at the door so that when I finished making my tea I could run out to my car. I grabbed the heinously pink package as quickly and as quietly as I could, though Tom was most likely dead to the world at this point, and positioned myself above the toilet.

“Oh, for fucks sake. Why is there not a better way to do this?” I mumble to myself as I attempt to aim so that I hit the stick for the required five seconds of mid-flow urine. Finally it’s done and I put the cap on the stupid stick that’s going to tell me the

same thing that it did last time (one-line), finish my business, wash my hands, and leave the small bathroom. It's either that or stare at it until I see what comes up.

I make my tea and set it next to the door by my bag and check. It's almost been the required three minutes.

Two lines. There are two lines.

I swallow back my scream and run to the bedroom, jumping over my two cats and dog that have all decided to be as difficult as possible today as I say "Tom" over and over again. When I make it to his side of the bed he's just starting to wake up.

"Wha?" he says. "Wha's wrong?"

"AH!" and I shove the pink stick at him to show him the two lines. "AH!!!" He grabs me around my waist and tries to pull me onto the bed, difficult due to my lack of height against our boosted bed and my shaking.

"I have to leave for class," I say, kissing his face. "I have to go right now."

He smiles as I pull away, pulling me in for one more kiss, and lets me go. "Pick where you want to eat tonight." He lays back and gets comfortable as he watches me walk toward the door. "We're celebrating tonight."

I couldn't stop smiling all day.

The End of a Home

Last week of May 2014

I have never enjoyed packing. Never enjoyed going through all the things I own, deciding what to take with me, what to leave behind. Never liked dealing with that much cardboard after working the flow team at Target for almost two years. Honestly, if I never saw another cardboard box, it would be too damn soon. Except I do have to see one, and it is too soon, but Tom's new job means that we have to move two counties over. So we either do it now, or right before college starts. And we won't do that again.

As I put together boxes, taping them securely on the bottom so that they won't fall apart as we shuffle them around our tiny living space, a U-Haul, our new home, I throw them in a pile in the kitchen, leaving just enough space for me to get from one room to the other to pack up my books. Fifteen boxes end up filled to bust with non-academic reading material, another six for academic, and I haven't even begun to dismantle all the things that litter my desk.

I hate packing.

There is one saving grace of this move. I'm pregnant. It is my fifth pregnancy and we've made it almost a month past when I usually lose them (five weeks). We are confident, but aware that anything could happen. We are excited, but I'm not yet ready to show the world that we are yet. But due to all of this my wonderful husband won't let me lift anything over 10 lbs. I'm not really complaining, but if he finds out I moved something deemed "too heavy," he throws a man sized fit (he's 6'4" to give some perspective). I know it's because he cares, but really...women have done this for years

and picked up toddlers and worked full time jobs. A small liquor box of books will not hurt anything.

I do let him load all of the U-Haul, though. Well, him and some friends that I was able to rope into helping. It was hot that day, and it rained once we made it to Fosston from Bemidji. I don't know what we would have done without them, especially Morgan, who went with us to Fosston. She had A&W with us for our first meal in our new house.

I'm not entirely sure how we were able to move our entire lives two counties over in a matter of a week. I'm not sure I really care to know. What I remember most, besides Tom's frequent glare and occasional reprimand when I looked at those things deemed "too heavy," was how quickly the room that we were going to make the nursery filled up with blankets I had made and things we had been given from our families already. A dresser that we bought from the previous tenant dominated the room, and still does, and tub upon tub created a maze of trying to get from corner to corner of the room to find what you need.

Unpacking is my second least favorite thing after packing, but this time, I didn't think it would be so bad. Everything was going well after the move (just like I said it would, because again, how long have women been doing this?) and I had all summer to settle in and 'nest' while getting ready for our newest addition to the house in December. Or maybe it would come in January. You never know when your due date is December 31st.

The Beginning of Another

June 9th, 2014

It was raining and Tom was eighteen miles away at work, driving in circles around the small town of Bagley. He had left me to the unpacking a few hours before.

“Just light stuff. Nothing too heavy, okay?” he had said as he walked out the door, badge shining in the fading light.

“Yes, dear,” I had replied. That was at 6:30 for his shift at 7.

Time passed, and then it was 11:30. And I had a craving. Which was something entirely new to my 10-week pregnant body. Sure, I had *wanted* pickles earlier that day, but I hadn't *craved* them. You don't know there's a difference between want and crave until you crave.

My craving wasn't for pickles, though. It wasn't for ice cream or hot coco. It wasn't for a single thing in my whole damnable house or even the entirety of the small town I now lived in. It was for something that I knew would take me over an hour to reach and another hour after that to get back home to eat.

“You don't *need* anything. You can eat something else and unpack the clothes for something to do until you get tired. Watch a movie. Anything. Just get your mind off its smooth, creamy-” I cut off my own inner monologue to quote something from a book that I couldn't even tell you the name of anymore just to stop thinking about it.

I was a grown ass woman. No food was going to get me.

But I couldn't stop thinking about it. And then, it was almost like I could taste it. Except it wasn't enough.

These are the events that followed.

11:10 pm I got into my car and drove just under an hour to reach the Bemidji Wal-Mart.

12:20 am I was back in my vehicle driving home.

1:15 am saw me back in my garage.

1:20 am in my kitchen, clutching a Wal-Mart bag with what felt like the Holy Grail of food items.

1:25 am my food open, the smell of its deliciousness wafting around the small space.

1:30 am has me putting it away and taking out juice instead.

1:40 am and I am in bed.

8:45 am “Why is there cheesecake in the fridge?” Tom asks as he slides into bed, catapulting me into wakefulness.

9:00 am has me happily eating cheesecake with caramel sauce on the most comfortable chair in the house, belly happy with this choice where it wasn't the night before.

“This baby will be the death of me.”

Beds, Beers, and Bassinets

Middle of May 2014

“A friend of mine at work is getting rid of a crib if you want it,” LeAnne said.

“How much is she looking to get for it?” I asked without looking up, my attention focused instead on a variety of baby blanket patterns even though I knew my child already had all the blankets it would ever need.

“Nothing. Other than to know it goes to a good home.” She moved a few skeins of yarn around before starting on her next motif for a baby blanket that would be going to one of her many nieces or nephews.

“Any idea what it looks like?”

“No, other than it’s in good shape.”

* * *

July 18th, 2014

Tom and I drove an hour to meet with LeAnne in the Wal-Mart parking lot in Bemidji. LeAnne is Tom’s mother, and she was going to be staying a few days to spend time with us, see our new house that she hadn’t gotten to see yet. She has had some issues with her heart over the years, and it has caused her to have a more difficult getting around than she would have otherwise. That being said, even Tom was fine with her carrying portions of the heavy crib but not with me. I was allowed to carry the hardware (as the entire thing was in pieces for ease of transport) and to hold the door open without letting out the cats.

Needless to say it was a long weekend of sitting and talking about crochet while not being able to do anything under the watchful eye of my loving husband and mother-in-law.

* * *

August 3rd, 2014

A year ago on this date, Tom and I said our vows in front of a load of witnesses, even though we had already technically gotten married almost a month prior due to financial aid and changing my name and a host of other reasons. This year, Tom was in the spare room of our three bedroom rental, attempting to put together a crib, and I was 18 weeks pregnant.

As my husband carted the pieces of our parted out crib from the kitchen to the spare room I watched, hand rubbing circles across my taut stomach. The skin was just beginning to itch and I knew I would need to remember to actually use the lotion I had bought in preparation for the stretching. Our pets lounged around me, watching his back and forth movement like a sort of slow moving tennis match. When all the pieces were in the room, he shut the door.

BANG!

A grumbling came from behind the door. It flung open as I went to check on my husband and I stepped out of his way as he barreled out with gnashing teeth. Less than a minute later, he flew back into the room with a beer in hand and a bit less crazy in his eye. The door closed behind him nicer than it opened. An hour passed as curse words filled our home, each one worse than the last. Tom came out now and again for beer and a helping hand or to rub my stomach to remind himself why he was doing all of this.

All in all, putting together a crib with a minimal guide took four and a half hours, three beers, innumerable swears, and two mentions of “lighting the damn thing on fire,” but Tom and I couldn’t be happier with how the room was shaping up.

Elephants

I squinted my eyes together in a gargantuan effort of not thinking about something. It was hard. It was like trying not to think about an elephant when someone tells you to not think about an elephant and now all you can do is think about elephants and then...fuck. And so my eyes were squinted as I hugged Nurse Kathy whose face I had come to loath more than anybody else's on this planet. Which is saying something for a person who has been abandoned by her father, beaten by her stepbrother, and tortured by her stepfather. But enough about my life.

It was Kathy's face that I had come to loath *so* much simply because she was the one who administered the pain medication that didn't work, leaving a woman who had done nothing to deserve this pain, writhing, crying out, and whimpering like a beaten animal. For eight hours the woman went through this pain until they finally found a drug that did the job. Fentanyl. I'll never forget the name.

All the while her husband held her hand, murmuring soothing words, or simply just being a strong quiet presence. His hand is bruised because of hers squeezing his. Every time I close my eyes I see his tear-filled ones as he watched the woman he loved more than anything go through this pain.

It started at 1 pm on August 21st and ended at 7:30 am on August 22nd for the suffering of this woman to be over. It was horrific. I watched them cry as they held each other because of the loss. Laugh at stupid, cynical, dark jokes that should probably never be repeated. Eat candy that he brought in—at least for the hours before the pain started promptly at 8 pm.

It took her a full half hour before she was willing to take any pain meds because she didn't want to look weak. And she might have thought, in some dark part of herself that she wouldn't allow her husband to see, that she deserved the pain that she was about to go through.

When you get down to it though, anyone in her situation would feel weak. Death is nothing you can be strong against, but you can't be truly weak against it either. It's just...Death. You can celebrate life, you can mourn those gone, and you can be happy that someone is out of pain, but it is still never something you look forward to as a blessing. At least not on the side she was on.

Her pain lasted for eight full hours. Gut wrenching, indescribable pain. If it wasn't enough that the physical pain was so horrific, she also had to go through the emotional pain. A pain that is difficult to describe in the fact that it is never brought up in day-to-day conversation, nor does it really need to be, even in circles set up to discuss it. This specific pain needs to be discussed by those that have made it to the other side of it to help others do the same. How else will others learn to survive past this tragedy, and not just survive, but live? Get up in the morning and go to work, or class, or simply enjoy the little things in life. How will they go to church, if they ever want to go to church again that is, because, well, it's hard to have faith in the face of something so bleak? Something so emptying. And that's what she felt. She felt empty.

I felt empty.

Which begs the question, how does one know when they are truly broken? Because after seeing all of this, I wonder if I am. How is her husband not broken? How was she, during all of this, not broken?

Or was she?

I don't know.

I can't really ask her anymore.

It's difficult to fully explain the situation. We talk circles around it, we babble out words to show that we are okay. But the word is miscarriage. It's stillbirth. It's a dead baby. And those words are jarring and hurtful in the sense, not that they tear a person down, but they make them think of things that they would rather never think about. I know I don't want to think about them.

But I do.

Every morning when I get up to live another day, I remember being in that hospital. Watching her cry out "Just make it stop. Just make it stop hurting." She never did cry out to God, though. And I remember when the pain had ebbed because they had forgotten to give her the induction medication that she cried, not for the pain in her body but in her heart. The pain of never being able to hold her child. A child the hospital staff refused to call a child, instead saying "it" when discussing the birth of her baby.

"Call us back when you pass it."

As if it were a kidney stone, or a bowel movement.

She was 21 weeks along when she was told that her baby was no longer alive and that its heart had stopped 3 weeks ago with nothing to alert her of this change in status. She hadn't even been told what her baby was yet, had not yet been able to call him or her by their name. Not that she would have been able to bless them with the name that she was planning for them. Those names were too attached to the small children tottering around her home in her mind's eye. To the babies she has seen grow and formed

attachments to. Those names, would be for the babies she and her husband would take home in the future. She couldn't fully kill off those children. She ended up giving him the name that she knew she wouldn't be allowed to name her child due to a family member already claiming it for their own.

It was fitting since that dream was already dead, like this one.

But when I remember seeing that woman crying out in so much pain not because, at this moment anyway, the pain was so bad but because she had to go through all of this and I got nothing but a handful of "I'm sorry"s and "My condolences." When all I want to do is turn around and tell people where they can shove their apologies and condolences. And the next person who tells me that "it's just God's plan" will get a thunder-punch to the throat, because my God wouldn't do this. He didn't plan this.

He couldn't.

Could He?

So I squint my eyes and pretend that I'm not thinking about the elephant, I pretend that I'm okay, because what happened in that room, happened to someone else.

Her name was Meagan Brault,

And though our names are the same,

I'm not her anymore.

My First Brush with Cain

CAIN: “What is your Family Medical History?”

ME: “Cancer in all the women blood related. Heart disease is the killer of the men in my family. Thyroid trouble that skips a generation, but should be hitting me.”

CAIN: “Have you ever had the BRAC1 test?”

ME: “The what? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

CAIN: “The Angelina Jolie Test that alerts you to whether or not you have the cancer gene.”

ME: “No, but I’m sure it would come back positive considering my family background.”

CAIN: “Did they do any testing on him?”

ME: “No. They said it was unnecessary.”

She took a moment to look at me. Really look at me for the first time. I was relaxed in my seat. Detached from the situation with dead eyes staring back at her.

It was the first time I didn’t see judgment staring back at me for it.

CAIN: “I’m going to throw the book at you for tests. Be prepared for lots of blood tests.”

ME: “That won’t be a problem.”

In the end we shook hands, like it was a business deal. And it was: you fill out an application, you take tests, and you receive a baby.

It is the perfect formula.

But I was left with a question: Would the tests ever be over for us?

Cain to Kobrinsky

After two more visits to Dr. Cain filled with a variety of questions and a fair bit of invasive testing, I was to be shipped off to another physician. His specialty being cancer and blood, particularly in the children. I would be going to see him because one of my many tests came back saying that there was an issue with my clotting. So I packed up my car, tried to remind myself I was going to a huge cancer clinic in Fargo for something other than cancer, and set off. The two-hour-drive gave me plenty of time to worry myself to death and so by the time I got there I was exhausted, and it was only 1:40pm.

As I sat in the waiting room watching the crowd wax and wane as people were brought back for testing at the lab, chemo, or to speak with their doctor about options, I penned the outline for a twenty page paper that was going to be due in just over a week. Then I made a to-do list for the Thanksgiving break coming up. After that, I downed my entire 20-ounce coffee and set to fidgeting while repeating, 'You don't have cancer' in my head. At 2:15pm I was brought back to see Dr. Kobrinsky and his partner, CNP (certified nurse practitioner) Suder.

Their policy was fairly straight-forward. I was to sit and answer the questions Suder asked me, and she would then leave and have a conference with Kobrinsky and a few other doctors within the clinic about what to do. Then Suder and Kobrinsky would meet with me to tell me the game plan. So I sat for over an hour answering questions I had already answered when I first found out I was pregnant, not to mention the three times I saw a specialist for infertility.

"You are not infertile. You can get pregnant." I tell myself.

"You just might never be able to carry to term."

“Shut up”

Twenty minutes after she left, the door opened again to the smiling face of Dr. Kobrinsky. He seemed, for the few minutes I had been around him, constantly upbeat, which seemed utterly exhausting. He and Suder sat down and told me all they knew about my case. That the blood test that got me sent to them in the first place was done incorrectly and, in all actuality, was perfectly normal. That they thought it all came down to my thyroid, or more specifically, my antibodies for my thyroid, which were almost literally off the charts. (Supposed to be less than or equal to 4.5 or 5.5 and were instead 18.8 and 147.8 respectively.) My gluten sensitivity could mean that I was developing Celiac Disease or that I had something else going on.

Antiphospholipid Syndrome. An autoimmune disorder that creates Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis and Celiac Disease like symptoms in sufferers along with a variety of other things.

Like recurrent miscarriage.

Is this the answer I’ve been waiting for? The answer that my own body killed off my baby and that, “While treatable, there is no cure of either Hashimoto’s or Antiphospholipid Syndrome.” I would have to be under careful watch by my physicians if I were to ever try to have a baby again, and even then there were no guarantees.

They took 14 vials of blood, one more than my first round with Cain, and I was told to go to my local clinic for one other test that they have to do in the AM.

I received the proverbial pat on the back and a “We’ll let you know anything we find out” and was sent on my way.

I was still left with the same question as before:

Would it ever end?

Cain...Again

“Looks like everything checks out. Wish we had more to tell you, but in reality, this is good news,” she said as she looked up from the chart she was filling out. “As Dr. Kobrinsky said, gaining weight should help and you’ll need to monitor your thyroid, but there is no underlying cause to your miscarriages. You and your husband are free to start trying as soon as you want and if you aren’t pregnant in six months we will re-evaluate.”

“Any questions?”

“Not at this time. Thank you for your help in trying to figure this out,” I replied.

I was in and out of the office in 35 minutes. An absolute waste of her time, my time, my money, and my gas. I wished she had just called me like Kobrinsky’s office had to let me know that they had found nothing and to just “...gain some weight. That should help a lot...”

If it was that easy, I would have done it years ago. But at least I didn’t have any diseases besides that of a dying thyroid, right?

Phobias

I have a lot of irrational fears.

I like and do a lot of things that make my fears seem as ridiculous as they are.

I am afraid of:

Law enforcement officers.

I'm worried that if they pull me over, they will somehow tie me to an enormous bag of cocaine and throw me in prison for the rest of my life without a trial.

I am married to a Deputy.

Spiders.

At the tender age of three, my mother told me "Don't let this bite you. If it bites you, it'll hurt and you'll die." Now this may seem harsh of my mother, but we were living in the south at the time, and a vast majority of the things living in the area would kill you if they bit you.

I love snakes.

Freezing temperatures.

What if my car breaks down, or the heat in my house stops working? I live in town with neighbors I know, only drive on Highway 2 or in cities, and my phone is never without at least a half-full battery. I can't get lost or stranded.

I love the heat. The hotter the better. Leave me alone in the desert for all I care.

Clowns.

I saw *It* when I was young and was scarred for life.

I've got nothing for this one; I also avoid manholes and grates in the road and sidewalks.

Men.

My father effectively abandoned me before I was born, and has only come back now that I'm grown. My stepbrother beat me. My stepfather tortured me with words, choking holds, and inappropriate touches.

I have surrounded myself with men and avoided women because women are sheisty. I believe this has to do with my mother.

I am not afraid of:

Death.

I'm not afraid of losing people to it (except my husband) or of dying myself.

I'm afraid of what's after death.

Cancer.

Almost every female directly related to me has had it by my age.

I'm afraid of watching myself waste away and being the reason my family cries.

The dark.

The dark can't hurt me; it's simply the absence of light.

I'm afraid of what lays in wait in the darkness.

I'm afraid that it will take me to whatever depths spawned it.

I'm afraid that I will like it.

Nothing Changes

Suffocating. Confining. Draining.

I sweat profusely. My heart races. I urge to push at my bindings.

I do.

Nothing changes.

Burning. Scalding. Pulsing.

The skin I am encased in seems to slough off. Something surges within me.

I move to stand.

I lay back down.

Nothing changes.

Bracing Stabilizing. Accepting.

I am alone after what has died left me. Shaven and buffed away. I am some how both smaller and larger than before.

I am reborn.

Nothing changes.

Nothing's the same.

Red

Red,

a color I've seen everyday for as long as I can remember.

Red,

it comes out of me every month to remind me I am a woman.

Red,

a color I didn't think I'd see in this place for the next 9 months.

Red,

a color I saw this morning letting me know I was no longer an
impending mother.

Red,

a shade of which my nightmares are now tinged with.

Red,

a reminder of what I have lost before it was ever even mine.

Fog After Elephants

The thick, off white fog surrounded me.
The lights of my car giving me 10 feet of sight.
The fog was a wall.

Cars appeared and disappeared into the ether.
Animals appeared and disappeared as well.
There was nothing to warn me of their coming.

But that wasn't the worst of my problems.
My mind was.

The fog, coupled with the darkness made images.
Made horrors.

Was that a deer, or a demon?

Was this real, or a nightmare?

Getting from here to there has become about survival.

Would I make it?

Did I want to?

Hell

Hell is said to be hot. A pit of burning brimstone that tortured souls scream inside of for an eternity and beyond. Being in hell is becoming one of the souls, so the church tells us.

Medieval thinkers thought hell was more than that. That there were layers and circles, portions sectioned off so that the punishment fit the sin you committed.

Hell to me though, has always been reliving your worst moments over and over again. Living your nightmare for an eternity, no hope of escape, but also an inability to resign yourself to your fate of horror. No way to numb yourself to the constant onslaught that is your everlasting fate.

And yet...

Even with that hanging over me, those three options, I still turned from my faith in the most visceral way. Wanted nothing to do with one of the main things that kept me sane when I was living at home, terrified of what would happen. I was never able to numb the pain I went through either. And I relived those moments in that hospital bed. Never able to not feel every moment of every day that I was the cause of my child's lack of life. That I was the reason my child was disposed of by the hospital simply because we lacked the funds to take care of him ourselves the one time we had the chance.

Hell, true hell, can't be much worse than that though, can it?

Brilliance

I wish to be saved
From the darkness
Of my mind,
But please,
Do not expect me
To go into the light,
For I was not built
To with stand its
Brilliance.

Walking Tall

One day I will walk tall
For the weight of
My burdens
Will have left me,
But for now,
I am stooped.
Lowlier than most.
For my burdens are
Self imposed.
And those are
The heaviest.

Bled Dry

You dig your knife

Deeper

With every look,

Twist it with every

Word.

How much

Blood

Can one man spill

Without a

Single

Touch?

While You Watch

The pain I feel

Is amplified

By the fact that you

Will do

Nothing

To end it.

Learning

They think I am drawn to

Fiction

As a way to escape my

Reality.

But, in truth,

It is a way to learn

How to hide a

Reality I have

Never

Been allowed to

Show.

War Zone

I am told

I am an old soul.

A middle-aged teenager,

But you have to be

When home

Is a War Zone.

What's Between

I want to weep for my lost child(ren).

I want to weep for my lost innocence and child(hood).

I want to weep for my child(less) husband.

I want to weep for my child(less) self.

Cycles

It breaks at the first sign of dawn. Pieces are chipped away with every movement I make. I go through my day and it is in tatters by the time I lay my head down at night.

In my dreams, I fight the demons of my past who have created the broken being you would see if I wasn't so opaque. And by the AM hours I am whole, only to break again at dawn's light.

The cycle is never ending,

But neither am I.

A Demon's Screams

Even the quietest

Demons

Are never silent

But I do not think

Life

Should be about

Silencing them.

No.

I think that

It should be about

Learning to drown out

Even their loudest

Shouts

With those of

Our own making.

K.W.H.

Your hair falls on our kitchen floor as I buzz off two weeks of growth. You play with our animals and forget to turn your head just so. I complain but smile silently knowing, wishing, hoping that this will one day be our child taking your attention. Knowing, wishing, hoping that you will be as attentive with them as you are with our pets. And even so knowing, wishing, hoping that I will be just as mesmerized and infatuated with watching you with them as I am in this moment.

Luck and Choice

You chose me, as damaged and as broken as I was. And you continue to choose me everyday. You did and do this not to save me, but to give me the chance to save myself. You are my hero for that, which is something I am reminded of *so* viscerally every time you put on your real world superhero uniform that I can't help but stare.

Because I am the woman lucky enough to have married
Superman and Clark Kent,
Batman and Bruce Wayne,
Every superhero and the person they are in the real world.

So laugh all you will at my star-struck expression because your smile is the healing balm to my tattered soul.

Self-Contained

Tom's innocence when talking about babies never ceases to amuse and frighten me. He has held exactly one infant in his *entire* life. He was barely eighteen at the time and only held her for five minutes. To drive home just how innocent he is when it comes to tiny humans, I will relate to you a quick tale of Tom showing me the dispatch office.

We stopped in on a Saturday so that I could get a look at the computer systems and decide if I thought I could handle them or not as I was job searching. (Side note: there are five computer screens, two computer mice, and one keyboard, and the phone and radio all work off one headset and a foot pedal. I'm terrified.) There were two female dispatchers on duty, and somehow the topic turned to babies as it always seems to do around young married couples.

I made the joke that Tom has never changed a diaper and I am excited to see how that goes.

His response: "At least the mess is self-contained."

A beat of silence.

Three females eye him in disbelief.

Howls of laughter.

He hasn't been that red since he apologized to me about not being able to do late night wake ups with baby because he obviously couldn't breast feed. My reply was that that is why the Good Lord saw fit to allow the invent of breast pumps, bottles, and formula.

This poor man won't know what hit him when our first child comes home.

As I write this at my kitchen counter I notice a distinct lack of heartbreak, and even though its been over a month since the pain and anger has faded, it is still such a pleasant surprise to be able to look forward to the future and not dwell on the past. And it prompted me to write the following...

Peace

Peace can be many things.

Stillness, Silence, Rest.

But sometimes it is your heart not breaking when you become conscious after a full night of sleep.

Sometimes it is a lack of anger when joy finds someone else.

Sometimes it is merely the ability to look ahead without being weighted down by what's behind you.

Peace has been so elusive for such a large portion of my life and so I can't say if this is actually what it is, but I am much closer than I have ever been before even knowing what has been and what still could be.

As you read in my Artist statement from the Fall of 2014, there were many reasons for the title of "Red Sky in Mourning." However, I believe this title to be too small for this project now. From the beginning it was about my journey to figure out why I wanted a family so badly, and my struggles to try to obtain it through the normal routes.

My reasoning for wanting a family was simple: I wanted to prove to myself that I could have one. I didn't think I could do that without children. The eighteen months of despair and adjustment after my miscarriage have proven to me that I already had one. It may be unconventional for some. My parents and I aren't terribly close, and my other blood relations and I hardly speak, but the family I have built with my husband, Tom, and the friends who have stuck by me through all the hard times, have proven to me that family is more than what my Mayberry town taught me to believe it was.

As for my struggles with having children...I may never have any of my own. My fertility, or lack thereof, is still up for debate and will be until I have a child that I am blessed enough to raise. I should know by November if the "Peanut" currently sitting on my bladder is going to join us in the real world or not though.

And while arguably "Peanut" is a smaller title than "Red Sky in Mourning", it has the potential to be so much more.