

EARTHQUAKE WEATHER:
WHERE GRIEF AND MEMORY COLLIDE

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This work explores the relationship between grief and memory in my own life. In my research, I looked into earthquakes and compared the geological change that they cause to personal change in my life as a result of loss. To me, earthquakes feel like an appropriate metaphor for loss because, while they are destructive, they shape our world. Their unpredictability also mirrors the unpredictability of loss. As a San Franciscan, I've been taught to be prepared for disaster, even though we don't know exactly when it will strike. During my sophomore year of high-school, my best friend died after a year and a half long battle with cancer. Within the last month of her life, I knew that she was close to death, although I didn't know when it would happen. In my art, I aimed to create a piece to represent some of my memories of her, while also expressing the instability of not knowing when loss would occur.

My art focuses on a specific memory that took place in my best friend's old backyard. I recently returned there and sat on her rope-swing from our childhood. Although the yard was empty, I could clearly picture younger versions of ourselves, as well as other various memories associated with the place. I recreated the swing to physically recreate my present perspective; I intend for the swing to create a sense of instability for the viewer. I painted clouds in oil on a large-scale canvas and collaged charcoal drawings that represent memories from the backyard onto it. This installation combines realism and surrealism to capture the inaccuracy of memory.

Ella H

I. FEAR IS NOT A PASS/FAIL COURSE

I've lived in San Francisco for all of my seventeen years. My home is known for the Golden Gate Bridge, for fog, for cable cars, and for earthquakes. From birth, we are taught to be ready at any moment for our world to shift under us. We exist at the intersection of the San Andreas and Hayward faults. The first of the two has been building up tension over 159 years and twenty-six feet of plate movement, with no form of release. Disaster is becoming inevitable. The probability of an earthquake rated higher than 6.7 on the Richter Scale striking California within the next thirty years is over 99%¹. Home means playing the odds every day, and always checking our bets.

I was raised on earthquake stories: the grassy city park rolling in waves, or the blonde toddler on the bus whose hair stuck straight up with fear like a cartoon character. In school, when the emergency alarm drill with the familiar beeping pattern sounded, I knew exactly the steps to take to keep myself from being smashed by imaginary rubble. I'm prepared. I don't hang anything heavy above my bed, I check for exits (sometimes), and there's bottled water in the car trunk. To this day, the only time I've ever had to put my survival skills to use was sixth grade, during my second period math class. While the building trembled around us and our wide-eyed teacher blurted out, "We don't deal with this shit in Boston!" I squeezed under my desk, happy to escape the multiplication lesson. At twelve years, I still only associated disaster with excitement, and not with the ruins it leaves behind. Fear is learned, not inherited.

I've always known logically that our world itself is formed by destruction. Living on a faultline teaches you that collapse is part of nature. That didn't change how I reacted to disaster when it finally affected my own life. It's easy to be prepared, to stock up on supplies and put plans in place. It's hard to find a path out of a building that's moving under you. In eighth grade, my best friend, Becca, was diagnosed with a type of bone cancer called osteosarcoma. By the beginning of the summer before sophomore year, it had spread to her lungs and other parts of her body. It seemed like the only things anyone could say were recycled phrases that didn't comfort anybody: "the doctors did what they could" and "these things happen sometimes." Over the past two years, I'd built up knowledge about Becca's sickness. I knew that only around 70% of people survive localized osteosarcoma in the long run². The fact that chemo doesn't always work and that there is no way to know when it will was always in the back of my mind. None of the information I had about relapse percentages and inefficient treatments prepared me in any way for the reality that Becca didn't have much time left.

¹ Nace, Trevor. "The San Andreas Fault Is on the Brink of a Devastating Earthquake." *Forbes*, 6 May 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2016/05/08/san-andreas-fault-brink-devastating-earthquake/#6f8ffb56a810. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

² "Osteosarcoma." *St. Jude Children's Research Hospital*, www.stjude.org/disease/osteosarcoma.html. Accessed 28 Apr. 2017.

Twelve years had shown me my first earthquake. Thirteen had taught me how to use the San Francisco bus system to explore the city on my own and find adventure. Fourteen had taught me to put on eyeliner wings that I thought looked glamorous, but that probably just made me look like a raccoon. Fifteen only taught me to become helpless.

II. ALTRUISM OR *GREY'S ANATOMY*?

Anecdotes of animals behaving strangely before earthquakes have circulated throughout history. It's unclear how close to reality they are, but they've come up across every culture, every society. Although his theories are unproven, geobiologist Joseph Kirschvink speculates that slight shifts in magnetic or electric fields, changes in humidity, or ground tilt may cause animals to change their behavior³. These beliefs are taken particularly seriously in non-Western cultures. In 1975, the Chinese city of Haicheng successfully evacuated thousands of people days before a massive quake due to the irregular movements of snakes⁴.

When the connection between animal behavior and earthquakes is researched, it's always in the context of humans: how can watching them help us save ourselves? We never focus on how the animals themselves are affected by sensing impending disaster. We're a selfish species. I'm not above it. I've hidden whole boxes of chocolate so that they'll be only mine, or pretended to like talking to the person next to me in class just to get their notes for the next test. Our selfishness makes us feel most connected with those who are similar to us, whose situations we can relate to. It's probably only because my empathy itself is selfish and selective that I feel a connection to the animals feeling incoming danger.

When Becca was given a month left, I knew what it felt like to be the dog restless in its pen, or the snake waking from the earth too early. I could sense the coming disaster deep in my bones, but couldn't know exactly when it would hit. September of sophomore year slipped by. I watched Becca fade further down into her flowered sheets. She had told me once that she wanted to be a nurse when she was older. What she wanted more than anything was to take care of people in the small ways, the ways that matter. To be fair, this plan was probably also influenced by her habit of binge watching doctor shows on Netflix, *House* or *Grey's Anatomy*. That September, the only hope anybody had for her future was that just maybe she'd make it *at least* to Halloween (*God I can't keep this up till Halloween*). Becca took her last breath on the fifth of October, at around eleven in the morning.

III. RELEARNING BASIC CONJUGATION

³ Kirschvink, Joseph L. *Earthquake Prediction by Animals: Evolution and Sensory Perception*. Pasadena, California, California Institute of Technology, 2000. *Caltech Division of Geological and Planetary Sciences*, www.gps.caltech.edu. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

⁴ Bressan, David. "Can Animals Sense Earthquakes?" *Scientific American*, Nature America, 12 Dec. 2011, blogs.scientificamerican.com/history-of-geology/can-animals-sense-earthquakes/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

It's been a year and a half since the last time I saw her, but I still catch myself using the present tense when I mention Becca. There's irony somewhere in the fact that I'm tripped up by "to be," the most common verb in the whole English language. I get lost in the space between "was" and "is," in the sneaky ways that a tiny difference in conjugation can turn a conversation from laughter to pity. I haven't found a way to explain that "was" that my best friend lives in now shouldn't be the main focus of the story I'm telling. I want to remember her and speak about her without getting stuck in other people's sympathy, so I still use "is."

It's hard not to rewrite people who are dead (are gone? have passed away? "passed on"?) into things that they weren't. This is more true than under any other circumstances when the person who dies is young. We get stuck in patterns of describing them as the "best" this and the "most" that, creating perfect people who never existed. I don't know anyone else who cared about other people as much as Becca did, but that doesn't mean that she didn't have a pattern of lashing out and regretting it. She was amazing with words and with writing. She was even better at swiveling her head and making *The Office* style eye contact with me when something ridiculous happened.

It also seems almost impossible not to talk about Becca only in terms of her death. Even the people brave enough to ask about her repeat the same questions: "How did she die?" or "When did it happen?" It's easier for people to ask about her sickness than to ask about her. Yesterday, I was just asked her name, and the question took a second for me to understand because it's one that I almost never hear.

"Becca."

"Short for Rebecca?"

Short for Rebecca, but only when she was younger. Now, that name's mostly just for parents, teachers, and people who don't know her well. Translates to Rivkah in Hebrew, meaning captivating or binding, or even noose⁵. Long for Bec, but I've only heard her called that once or twice. Never Becky - she hates that name. Tintin because of our fifth grade inside joke. The joke itself was forgotten by both of us, but the nickname stuck.

"Short for Rebecca."

IV. YOUR MIND IS DIFFERENT NOW

During disaster, things that seemed hugely important before become irrelevant. Things that seemed meaningless take on all the significance in the world. We're more altered by negative events than by positive ones, explains researcher Nigel Barber. Trauma physically changes the brain by altering its anatomy, hormone levels, or function, leading to shifts in either

⁵ "Rebecca (Given Name)." *Wikipedia*. *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebecca_(given_name). Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

personality or prioritization⁶. Within an hour of finding out about Becca's death, my priorities flip-flopped.

Now insignificant: the dented red oxygen tank, shunned to the curb, unemployed without anybody to feed its breath to. My Spanish test scheduled for that afternoon and all its neat rows of memorized conjugations. The wilted flowers in my hand that smelled like rose and disbelief. The car ride across the bridge to Becca's house that lasted a second and an eternity at exactly the same time.

Suddenly important: the frayed blue wristband on my dresser from the first concert either Becca or I had been to. The line I can't remember now from *Orange is the New Black* that made both of us laugh until we cried one Sunday morning. The yellow plastic swing in the foggy backyard of Becca's old house. Her favorite thin gray sweater, which I stole from her laundry that day and sealed in a Ziploc so it wouldn't lose its sharp shampoo smell.

V. ELIZABETH KÜBLER-ROSS DIDN'T KNOW SHIT ANYWAY

After earthquakes strike, the process of repair seems to start before the dust from the aftershocks even has a chance to settle. There are four stages of disaster response. The first is relief, which caters to basic needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. Next comes a more long-term period of reconstruction. The third phase is rehabilitation, which puts long term "fixes" in place, such as improvements to economic and management systems. The last phase is readiness, which attempts to protect against damage in future disasters. One of the hardest parts of disaster response is balancing speed with efficiency. Rebuilding needs to happen quickly, but if repairs are rushed, they won't hold up in the long term⁷. Recovery is a balancing act.

The five stages of grief were first proposed in 1969 by psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*. They're sometimes viewed as a basic blueprint for personal reconstruction. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance⁸. In reality, at least for me, it was impossible to sort my thoughts into five even chunks. My emotions after losing Becca would look more like a Richter scale reading or the peaks of an EKG line than any sort of smooth slope.

During the first weeks, being constantly reminded of Becca was almost impossible. What isn't said about grief is that it's physical. It fills up your throat and your chest, doesn't leave you enough room to exist within your own body. In some ways, it was just as hard when I stopped

⁶ Barber, Nigel. "Trauma Resets Personality." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 13 Dec. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-human-beast/201212/trauma-resets-personality. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

⁷ "Reconstruction and Rehabilitation: A Response Strategy for Creation of Sustainable Livelihoods." *Development Alternatives*, www.devalt.org/newsletter/may01/lead.htm. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

⁸ Axelrod, Julia. "The 5 Stages of Grief and Loss." *Psych Central*, psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

thinking about Becca as much, because then when I did think about her, it was a reminder of my forgetting. Rebuilding myself was bittersweet. It meant changing and growing as a person while Becca was frozen in time. She had always teased me about my age, calling herself my elder because she was exactly two months and two days older. Today, I am around one year and five months older than she ever was. Sometimes I think about whether she would recognize me at first glance if we passed each other on the street today. The Ella that she knew had long hair that wasn't dyed. She wore different clothes, and spent her free time with different people, and had never lived on her own. She could draw, but she'd never made art that meant anything more than just how it looked. She'd never had a job, or driven a car. She was scared of some of the same things I am, but she didn't talk to anyone about it. She didn't know what it felt like to wonder who her best friend would be if she'd survived, but she also didn't know who she was as much as I do today.

VI. THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

A booklet made of printer paper folded in half was handed out at Becca's memorial. On the front cover, she smiles out from a photo taken in her house, all white teeth and sunshine on her cheekbones. Her birthdate and death date are written under the photo. *January 26th, 2000 - October 5th, 2015*. It always seemed funny to me that her life, the space in between birth and death, took up only a dash, a single punctuation mark. As time has passed, it's become easier to remember the things inside that dash, to look back on the moments I had with Becca instead of just focusing on the end. In Mexico, Dia De Los Muertos is a festival that honors the dead. Rather than being a time of mourning, it's a time of celebration. The dead are depicted as connected to the community, and are shown enjoying the good parts of life⁹. Death and joy don't have to be unrelated. In America, as a member of a non-religious family, tradition is hard to come by. In a lot of ways, I've had to figure out grief and memory myself. I stepped into the game with no rulebook. One day, to remember the times between Becca's birthdate and death date, I wrote as many of the moments in the middle as I could in a black notebook. I listed them out, numbered them, locked them down by putting them on paper.

1. I became friends with Becca in the second grade. She sat next to me in our art class at the low wooden table, laughed at her own jokes, and taught me the trick to drawing the face of a floppy tongued dog in less than ten seconds. One day, we had to build sculptures out of things that we brought to class. As towers of pennies and plastic soldiers rose around us, I traded Becca a seashell I'd found for a small metal Eiffel Tower that her mom, Margo, had given her. Something made me clench my hand around the tiny figure and slip it into my jeans pocket. I wanted to keep it safe and take it home instead of using it for my art.

⁹ "Dia De Los Muertos" ["Day of the Dead"]. *National Geographic Society*, 17 Oct. 2012, www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dia-de-los-muertos/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2017.

2. Becca's old house was at the very top of a hill, but the fog was so thick most days that you couldn't see any of the city below. Her yard was filled with eucalyptus trees and lemons, bougainvillea and weeds. There were two rope swings hanging from the largest tree: one with a red plastic seat, the other yellow. In fifth grade, we spent endless hours sitting side by side on her concrete patio, or drifting next to each other on the huge swings. We talked about anything and everything we could think of: people in our classes at school, or Becca's siblings, or *Glee*, or high school and growing older. The backyard was the launching point for our escapes to adventure through the back gate, but it was also where we went if one of us was going to cry. Even with tears on my face, messy hair and dirty shoes, there was no place in the world that I'd rather be.

3. September of sophomore year, hot and dry, drought season. At that point, most of Becca's life took place in her bed. Her leg and her lungs didn't bother her there, and her energy didn't run out as quickly. Something about this day was different: we were restless. Armed with crutches, Becca swung herself up, and we walked on the hot pavement until we reached the pool. The water was perfect, warm on top from the sun, and icy-delicious underneath. I can still remember Becca laughing, drops of water hanging from her eyelashes and her cropped hair. In that moment, one of millions in my lifetime, everything was still.

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