

Fifteen Rocks

By Alexandra Godfrey

The city of Kyoto is home to the Ryoan-ji Rock Garden. Wherever you stand in the rock garden, one of fifteen rocks cannot be seen. The garden reminds us that there is always something unknowable beyond what can be perceived or understood, as real as any rock amid the raked gravel.

Something like the breath in your body, invisible yet present.

When you walk to the end of my driveway and out through my gate, the first thing you notice is a white wooden cross. Not a little one like you see by the roadside. No. This one is wide and tall. At the foot of the cross stands a stone statue of a ball player. He's from Little League, crouched down on one knee with arm outstretched and palm upturned as though ready to make the catch. To the right of cross is a batting cage. It has stood empty for years.

Behind the stillness, there's an intense presence.

Years ago, a pediatrician who had not previously met my son saw him for a sick child visit. She lifted his shirt to auscultate his heart. She listened through systole and diastole, her attention focused on his heart sounds. Wrong flashed across her face. The body didn't sound as it should—

“Your son has a loud heart murmur. He should see a cardiologist as soon as possible.”

The doctor didn't notice the long scar running down the center of his chest, the puncture marks on his arms and legs, the little crisscrosses above his belly button from his chest drains and pacing wires.

She doesn't see the wounds I see.

My daughter sits on the bent trunk that borders our upper pasture, resting on the charred and wizened branches of the old oak tree. That tree has stood in my yard for longer than she has lived. I love it, with its one hundred blackened fingers and one hundred untold stories.

Beneath us and under the pasture lies the basement of a ranch house. That house burned to the ground one quiet winter night as I watched, flames reaching high above the eaves through the orange glow of burning limbs and crash of falling timber. Only the tall brick chimney, a child's red bike, and the kitchen stove survived, standing in the ashes by the old oak tree. We sit quietly in the pasture above the basement of the house—my daughter, the tree and me.

My daughter furrows her brow. “Mom, have you ever noticed that #15 jersey at the Little League baseball park? They retired it. I wonder why?”

I look at her, then shift my gaze to the open space above the tree. I breathe in the warm summer air.

“I don’t know,” I say.

My breath keeps me alive.

The woman has told the triage nurse that she’s been drinking heavily and has recently been arrested for a DUI. She wants help with detox.

I ask her to tell me as much as she can about her health and home situation. I do my best not to interrupt her, not to rush the questions I must ask: Are you suicidal, homicidal, maniacal? The questions burn the tip of my tongue.

I tell her to talk to me about her fears, her hopes, her body, her life. She weeps as she tells me about her drinking, her days spent alone, her fights with her teenage son. I scribble notes on paper, trying not to interrupt her narrative, trying not to make it my story. I am an amphora.

Eventually she stops talking. I ask my questions then: Thoughts of self-harm? Hurting others? Drug use? She denies it all.

Later I get her urine drug screen results back. She tests positive for cocaine, marijuana, opiates and benzodiazepines.

The body whispers its narrative over the shoulder of the patient.

My son’s heart is a collage. Gortex and carbon, pledges and patches, bovine and porcine tissue, all stitched together with Dacron. Cut and sculpted, it has hidden form and color. The surgeon wielded his knife with delicate precision. If you listen, you hear a sound like a clock wrapped in cotton—the timekeeper in his chest. The movement is flawless, the arc of the leaflets like a pendulum keeping track of life: imperceptible.

The body is an enclosure; we work within it and outside of it.

My patient sits on the bed with her arms wrapped around her chest and tears falling. She won’t speak. The detective shakes his head. He’s met her before. She is a confabulator, a troublemaker, a girl with a poor and unreliable memory.

The husband is innocent—well-known, highly-regarded, a man of the cloth preaching to us from his Bible: paying for forgotten sins, asking for mercy, reciting his catechism.

“What are we by nature?” he asks.

Later the girl will beg his forgiveness, curl her pale and trembling body around him, pull him toward her as she kisses his hands, feet, eyelids. She will promise adoration and gratitude and ask if he still loves her, shuddering as she says, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

But right now she is rigid in my exam room with her arms crossed, chin fallen, tears condensing on her dark lashes.

I ask: Who wrapped their hands around her neck and left blue prints on her skin?

The body whispers its narrative into my ear.

My teenage son fights to breathe. We are walking in my yard, and he has walked only twenty meters. I tell myself this will get better. I tell him it will get better. I look up the usual post-op course for his type of surgery. Nothing reassures me.

There's no one like him. Not now, not ever. I am afraid.

I buy my son a Fitbit. I create a journal. I study nutrition. His goal is to reach the gate at the end of our driveway, and it takes all summer. He leans over the gate to catch his breath.

I feel the evening breeze blow through my hair. I see my neighbor sit down on a stone bench next to the cross, near the statue by the empty batting cage.

In the silence, you might sense something.

The girl on heroin etches words in angel dust: "Remember me."

The girl speaks of a forgotten story.

Last fall my son parked in a disabled parking space at his campus in the mountains. A security guard pulled up, demanding that he move. My son had a current disabled tag hanging in the correct place, the place where it should be. He pointed this out to the guard. The guard still insisted he move his car. My son parked three miles away and carried to campus his heavy book bag.

He looks good, you see. He has a thick thatch of blond hair, eyes of slate, clear skin, no signs of disease.

However, my son had open-heart surgery last summer. His chest was cracked twice. He lost his pulse and his pressure. His recovery was long and slow. His cardiologist didn't want him to walk uphill, the heart surgeon didn't want him to carry any weight heavier than a gallon of milk.

The body is transparent and opaque.

I look at the ultrasound screen and see a still heart. The last time I saw him, he looked happy—content in his life-bubble. As he turned somersaults, he waved at me. I had thought he was saying hello, but I realize now he was waving goodbye.

Soon I must deliver his still form into the world. The doctor offers me five days to keep my son with me.

When I leave the hospital, passers-by smile at my rounded belly. One asks, "When are you due?"

"In five days," I say.

Who knew that death could be so hidden?

There's a rose garden by my front door: pink, yellow and white blossoms thick on white trellises tinting my windows smudgy pink. Simple five-petaled blossoms and heavily-ruffled beauties scatter their prickles and seeds, hips and buds, leaves and petals across the earth. They tip their sweet scent into the air, an elixir of fruit, cloves, and violets. Butterflies float through the garden on an invisible wind from flower to flower, fluttering the pages of their wings around honeybees busy collecting pollen and nectar.

Beneath a deep pink single rose, hidden under briars and nestled into the leafy soil, sits an angel. He crouches with arms folded, head tucked down to knees, wings reaching skyward to touch the edge of a petal.

It seems so simple on the outside.

I like to walk after work. I enjoy the quiet, the slowness, the continuity—the contrast with the urgency of the ER. I breathe in ordinary moments: my husband watering the potted plants, the swarthy toad on my doorstep, my boys shooting hoops at sunset.

My daughter, home from college, walks with me.

We set off through the dogwoods that line our driveway and pause at the gate. My eyes drift from the cross to the batting cage to the baseball player. I stand still, settling the chatter of my mind. A ruby-throated hummingbird comes and goes, and clouds spill down the skies, creating shadows and darkness, lightness and warmth. I hear the movement of wind in the trees, a gentle rustle of leaves.

I shiver. The sun is going down. Birds settle in the hedge like sleepy children. A dog barks in the distance, and a truck rumbles along the highway. A faint smell of ozone tells me that rain is coming.

Nothing happens.

At the center of the cross is a baseball as though placed there temporarily. Waiting. Waiting for someone to glove it, catch it and pitch it in a slow wide arc, then return it to home plate. When I look closer, I see a small silver cross and a ring hanging on a chain next to the ball. I have never noticed them before.

Then it all fades away.

My daughter suddenly remembers:

“Mummy, I forgot. I meant to tell you this—the cross, the statue, the batting cage. They had a son. He died of brain cancer three years ago just before we moved in. He was a young teenager. It’s his jersey.”

The fifteenth rock breaks silence.

Alexandra Godfrey is a graduate from Wayne State University where she received a Master’s degree in Physician Assistant Studies. She completed an emergency medicine fellowship and now works in two community emergency departments in western North Carolina. Previously, Alexandra worked as a PT in Britain, where she was born and raised and has worked as an author and columnist for the Journal of the American Academy of Physician Assistants and the New England Journal of Medicine. Her writing has appeared in journals, including Confluence, Cell2Soul, The Healing Muse, Pulse, and Blood and Thunder. She was awarded the American College of Emergency Physicians’ writing award in 2017.

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