

## Your Little Heart Still Stands

By Alexis Rehrmann

I met the Ob-Gyn with my feet in stirrups. The ultrasound screen was grainy and grey with one tiny body suspended in the stillness. I could read none of it, make sense of none of it, and still, I wailed. It was my second miscarriage and the doctor's firm hand stayed steady on my ankle. I liked her.

The miscarriages were early. Each child passed so quickly, not more than a glimmered hope, and everything was so small: baby the size of a thumbnail, belly not yet thickened, a scant handful of life.

It's not that the doctor told me I'd be okay. She didn't.

She also didn't tell me I wouldn't be okay. I had to ask.

"We care for the body," said my Ob-Gyn. "There is no physical reason not to try again. But that does not begin to answer the question of what your little heart can stand."

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It's been nearly nine months now since the last of the babies died. I want so badly for it to be after, but it is still now. My wisest friend proclaims a new prescription. "You need a ritual," she says. "Some people plant a tree. Some people go to their rabbi. You need a ritual."

On a lazy summer afternoon, the house is settling into rest and mine arrives like a thunderclap. "A rock garden!" I grew up Catholic and went to theater school. I do love a ritual so, mind whirring, I creak quiet-as-I-can down the stairs. This is it. Mother-fucking rocks, because this is a mother-fucking metaphor, and I am a mother and the continual loss of pregnancies is really fucking with me.

A rock garden. Where to start? Pinterest.

A small sound as Henry pads down the stairs—pants off, nap skipped.

"Henry, want to build a rock garden?"

"Yes!" he says. His enthusiasm is surprising. At four, his sweetness is streaked with a wild stubbornness that changes like weather. I was planning to be silently elegiac and alone for this rock garden ritual, not parenting. But I gather him in my lap, his round legs still warm from the covers, and we peck at the keys together.

He is surprisingly discerning for such a little person. “That garden is too big for our house,” he says pointing to an aspirational photo of rocky landscaping for a Montana ranch home. We live in a condo.

Outside, we investigate the square patch of dirt wedged between our back stoop and the parking lot. Bordered by pavement on three sides, overlooked by our kitchen window, it’s a half-dead bunch of blue grass, a sunflower lying face down in the dirt, tiny sprinklings of clover, and some forgotten bush. It’s weeds. But then, I’m not a gardener.

We measure. Henry and I sketch our ideas on a sheet of printer paper, crayons pressing bumpy wax lines over concrete. I draw three rocks to honor children that aren’t here but whom I cannot let go. Henry adds a path. The process is inexact. The process is crayon.

Neighbors pass to and fro, laundry in baskets, groceries in hand, car keys jangling. “We’re making a rock garden,” Henry tells them. “We’re doing research.” Research is repeated trips to the hardware store. I pick no perfect tools. There is nothing in the neatly labeled aisles to fix what’s been broken.

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The medical assistant was so perky, shiny hair swinging, plump arms reaching, optimism jarring. She was leaning way in. “I’m going to give you a hug!” she said.

“Oh,” I thought, or maybe said. “You really... Don’t.”

“Are you going to try again?”

“Are you going to try again?”

“Are you going to try again?”

“Are you going to try again?”

She intended this as kindness, but my little heart can’t stand it.

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There is not a single thing alive in the tangle of roots I pull up. Not a worm. Not a ladybug. Just loss and inert dirt and clay. Burying and unburied, my back sore, and the blade hits over and over.

My husband is a gardener. He is worried about drainage. And the HOA board.

“You are on the HOA board,” I point out. “Surely, no one will mind if we replace a patch of weeds across from the parking lot with some nice, like, rocks.”

“I don’t want it to seem like we’re getting special treatment,” he says.

This is Dan. Solid. Loving. Mustachioed. He was raised with no religion and is mostly indifferent to ritual. The wellspring of his strong ethics is an enduring mystery to me.

“This is a metaphor,” I say, “and it’s really important.”

Board members are emailed and permission obtained. Then Dan turns to the problem of drainage.

“Where will rainwater go?” He asks.

And I say, “What?”

“You’re digging out the dirt and making a pool to fill with rocks,” he says, “You’re building a void.”

I spent so much energy avoiding the void! Now, I make shallow scoops with the heavy shovel in the hard earth. Squat bags fill slowly with dirt. I am lucky: I have a home, a husband, a Henry. It should have been would have been could have been must have been possible to turn away from this empty space inside.

“I’m worried it’ll flood the foundations,” Dan says.

“Is that a metaphor?” I whisper.

“I meant the basement.”

I think about the flooding of our family foundations, the warm whoosh of red soaking through to the couch cushions, and I want to raze every last root, rip every forlorn weed out by my teeth, pound the earth flat. But there is one tree.

Given closer attention, the forgotten bush in back has strong graceful branches that bend under a canopy of waxed green. Delicate sprays of white spring flowers dry to a toasted gold in summer. In the fall, the leaves turn a romantic russet red against the parking lot asphalt. Maybe the tree can stay, I think.

I dig in the late morning as the sun starts to peak over the building. I dig with the kitchen door open and the radio turned loud. A neighbor has recently had a baby. A sleeping sprite buckled into his car seat, he is ferried past my excavations on the way to his well child visit. In my trunk, the dead weight of bags like full-grown bodies slumped, splitting, spitting mud. The back seat is pushed flat, the empty child’s seat boxed in with dirt.

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Because I also could not begin to answer the question of what my little heart can stand, I asked for a referral to the fertility guy.

He was smart and rumbled and scared to see me. He understood I was looking for answers that weren't in his power to give. He drew my present history of pregnancies on a scrap of paper ripped from the exam table. Scratched one, two, three, four hatch marks in black Bic across my wavering lifeline.

He circled hatch mark number two, a molar pregnancy. A molar pregnancy is missing a baby. Though the body is pregnant, the placental tissue grows in clumps. He tells me that this doesn't really count as a pregnancy loss.

"Even though it feels like one?"

"Even though it feels like one."

He delivered this information as truth, but this is a fact I can't understand.

I want it to count.

I want them to count.

I want this to count for something.

I want each of my babies accounted for.

Some numbers: Miscarriage is common. Between 10 to 20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage in their earliest weeks. Molar pregnancies are one-in-a-1,000 rare. After the twentieth week of pregnancy, a baby who dies is called stillborn. Every year here, about 24,000 mothers birth stillborn children. About a third of the time the death is unexplained.

Some numbers: None of them make a bit of difference if it 100% happened to you.

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At Portland Sand & Gravel Co., I pay a woman in an oversized sweatshirt \$60, and she points me towards a back lot. I steer slowly over the bumpy road moving through great mounds of dirt, mountains of grit, piles of rock all to be recycled or sold, re-claimed, or re-made. It's hard to see how. Where is the value in this?

I drag dirt-filled bags out of the trunk and upend my sad sacks, one by one, at the foot of a giant pile. In other corners, machines growl and reach skyward busy picking up gravel and putting it down. No one pays me any mind. This is not their ritual; this is their workday and my dirt is none of their business.

Trunk emptied and energy spent, I bump up the exit road splashing through a baptizing spray of water that shoots out from both sides of a muddy puddle. The wheel wash soaks my little car to the windows, sluicing sheets of water down the windshield and leaving the sideview mirrors dappled with droplets that streak like tears as I wheel out into traffic.

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Derek sells rocks at Smith Rock. He is tall and sandy-haired, broad-shouldered and trim from all the rock lifting. I sift through dusty stones, run my hands over smooth rocks, and seek out his handsome opinion.

I remember a version of myself who is charming, but I cannot quite conjure her. Each question starts out breezy—Reddish or greyish? Pea-sized or palm-sized? Smooth or bumpy?—and rapidly loses altitude. My entreaties are three-day-old birthday balloons, shrunken, trailing unspooled ribbons across the floorboards and kept aloft by a hovering anguish.

Perhaps sensing this, Derek offers me cursory cost estimates only.

I bring home three stones. One is loaf-shaped, a ruddy pink. The second is a flat triangle draped in a white lacey caul. The third is cumulous grey with a crooked groove in the top that resembles a small head nested in the crook of an arm. Each sits comfortably cradled in the spread of my two hands.

Dan says, “I thought they would be bigger.”

I thought they would be too, but then I didn’t trust myself to carry the weight.

Derek is nonplussed to see me when I return (actually, if I stop to think about it, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t remember who I am). But I do not stop to think about it. I’m back to think about my bigger rocks.

I pick two. One a light turquoise in an arrowhead shape, pointing the way. Its surface is sprayed in showers of white. The other, a snub-nosed waterfall of moody stripes churning down a flat storm-grey plane.

To get the two big rocks into my trunk, Derek and a sturdy man in red plaid work in a deliberate back and forth. They lift each rock together in a practiced flow of trial, error, ascent, consent. Testing the weight between them.

I fishtail it home. Dan is out of town and, without a partner, there is no way to get them out of the car. For three days, I drive around with baggage in my trunk, feeling the drag. I avoid changing lanes because the weight throws everything sideways. My trajectory changes.

It’s not clear that Dan and I will be able to get the two rocks out of the car at all. We are very good at doing lots of things: packing a suitcase, hosting a dinner party, Scrabble, the kind consideration of each other’s parents. But this—

The rocks are black-hole dense, a time-bending, mind-warping weight. They are hard to grasp, the angles irregular, the sides smooth. Dan is worried about his feet, I am worried about my back, and no one is sure who is in charge.

There is one question that Derek was able to answer, the essential question that I didn't know to ask: How do we make space for two bodies bent to the task of lifting a single stone?

The movement is so mundane it's almost imperceptible. Holding our breath, we muscle one rock at a time out of the trunk, over an eight-inch chasm of open air, and bit-by-bit onto the pavement. We pause. We begin again, hoping like hell that the next one doesn't plummet into the gap and crush a foot. Ungainly and grunting, butts in the air, we scoot the two large rocks end-over-end onto the rain-slicked earth. They hit the dirt and they do not budge. We could not move them again even if we tried.

In another year, I will ask Dan what has kept our marriage together during the rough spots. Standing in the kitchen doorway, hands wet from the dishes he will say, "inertia." We will laugh together, pretty hard.

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The final laying of stones happens under a fall sun that shines gold over the turning leaves—a mosaic of crimson, cinnamon, yellow, and the last pale moments of green.

River rocks spill from heavy plastic bags. A light grey when dry, when wet the palm-sized stones are brick and blue, whorls of white and speckled striated greens, ochres, gold, shot through with lines of quartz. They gleam like planets cast down from the night sky. They fill the void.

The garden is beautiful. The three smaller stones are gathered in a small bouquet, the tree arches gracefully behind, the large boulders stand immutable as fact. Neighbors go to and fro and every child who passes moves the rocks. They are picked up, stacked, collected in shoeboxes, dropped, tossed at the cat. Children's feet race over the stones, playing tag and the-ground-is-lava and keep away. The rocks flow in and out of pockets. They are plowed under the soil and unearthed again in spring.

Two years from now Henry will ask, "Why are these rocks so special?" And my little heart will stand still. I will not know how he remembers our conversation or whether he tucks it away with the other rocks in his pocket.

I tend the garden when grief comes rattling. I pull weeds, smooth stones, water plants. I remember the children who were here, I know they are missed, and I reach again towards the light.

All this beauty and my little heart still stands.

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Alexis Rehrmann is a writer and editor whose print and digital work has appeared in publications including *The New York Times* and *Portland Monthly Magazine*. Her first piece of published poetry appeared in the *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*. A board member of the Northwest Narrative Medicine Collaborative, and a staff member at the Lewis & Clark College Center for Community and Global Health, Rehrmann has pursued the connection between story and healing throughout her creative life. She recently completed a certification in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University. “Your Little Heart Still Stands” is an excerpt of a longer piece that explores healing from miscarriage. The project is to re-site these losses, moving them from the medical narrative and claiming them elsewhere. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her family.

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