

My Little Egg

In September the Maine coast is craggy and cold, less friendly than in summer. Sharp evergreen spikes pierce the grey sky like battalions of serrated teeth. At the water's edge, stones rounded smooth tumble against one another, gurgling and popping with the rush of each icy wave. It is a hostile kind of beauty composed of smearing greys, blacks and midnight blues.

I am in a dark, brooding mood to match the weather. In flip-flops and a light jacket, I pick my way slowly along the rocky beach. I relish the bite of the wind on my bare skin. Between salty gusts off the ocean, the sour smell of seaweed and pine needles hangs in the air. I wander down to where the bedrock meets the beach and pause. The ground at my feet is a mosaic of smooth stones in every shape, color and size. But one, in particular, catches my eye. I stoop to pick it up. Small and egg-shaped, flecks of grey and white mottle its salty shell. I roll it over and over in my hand, letting its chill surface caress my skin. My little egg. It will never hatch, but it is beautiful all the same. An instant frozen in geological time. Feeling mildly better, I slip the stone into my pocket and turn for the road.

The next day I board the ferry for the mainland, and watch as the island's prickly silhouette dissolves into a curtain of fog. The moisture gathers into shiny dots of light in the curly wisps of my hair as I continue gazing off the stern, long after my island is gone. The ghostly hulks of other islands loom out of the mist, but in my mind another, crisply defined image hovers against that empty whiteness: a bathroom, eerily quiet, lit by a single bare bulb. The memory is painful, and it mixes like oil with the water of all my other feelings for that beloved island home. My childhood heaven and refuge is now a tragic place, too. Returning here three months after that night, the wound still stands like an angry red gash in an otherwise pleasant, tranquil canvas of memories.

Back on the mainland, I ride south on a quiet bus. Knees propped on the seat in front of me and iPod playing, I let the music sink in as I stare out the window at blurring guardrails and the half-clothed trees of autumn. Somewhere in New Hampshire, Dar Williams' *Happens Every Day* enters my contemplative state. I listen as she sings gently: "Then I look away, happens every day...and every day will happen without you." My head drops back onto the seat. *Happen without whom?* I always thought the song was about a lover, but then...there are so many different kinds of "without." Death, for example. The true end of a person and their relationships. The absence of their movements, actions and emotions from the places and things they knew best. Not simply a falling out of touch, but a loss.

A life-long journal keeper, I have been writing about my loss for days in heavy, raw words dredged out of my sadness. The writing in my journal aches, grasping so closely at the pain I almost lose myself in it. Now, all of a sudden, I want to write something different. I want something more cerebral. It's time for my computer.

I pull out my laptop and Dar's words fade away as my fingers fly. After a few pauses, deletions and reconsiderations, I read what I have written:

You experience grief as an individual, uniquely and in darkness. Your loss is your own, and you alone must find your way out of its shadow. It is a strange paradox: a universal, but intensely personal and solitary, human experience. No one can tell you how to live with your loss, or how long it will haunt you. If and when you are strong enough, maybe you'll share your grief. But even then, when you turn out the light it may still be there. Loss lives in silence and isolation. It waits

patiently in the spaces beyond your immediate thoughts. It lingers on the horizon of every landscape.

I feel refreshed by this effort to draw away from myself, to pop outside of truth and look at things as if they'd never happened to *me*. In it, I find thoughts that seem to capture a broader reality. For a moment I feel like an outside observer, my own therapist. Still, I can feel myself descending into a darker place. I hover at the edge of this smoky horizon, reluctant to touch it but somehow feeling like I *should*. Turning my face to the window, I take a deep breath and let myself slip into the shadows.

Before I had my own I didn't know it, but apparently as many as one in three pregnant women miscarry. My loss is so common it is almost ubiquitous to human procreation. But it is also eerily silent. I know, more than feel, that my loss is shared; and in other ways, it still feels wholly unique. I lost someone with no name. Someone with tiny hands and feet, and perfect ears smaller than my pinky nail. Eyes that never opened, lips I never heard. *Is it loss if we never touched, never saw each other until death? Can you lose someone you never knew?* In the spring, while I lived my life for sixteen weeks, my body had been quietly working. Making something new. A being that never came to be.

Sometimes I wish I'd looked to see whether that tiny body was male or female. Then I could at least say he or she, instead of "it." But again, maybe that would only make it more painful. Still, each time I allow myself to think about that night I find myself arrested over that tiny body. I hate to do it but I feel pressure to inhabit that space, as if knowing the memory more

fully will help me to leave it behind. For an instant I see the dark, deserted hallway, the bathroom light, the intense pain and the despair, a feeling so piercing that I couldn't cry, at first.

I pull away again, singed by the hot, intense hurt. A glancing brush like this one has become my habit, a numbing flash that I quickly bury behind work, exercise, my dog, the laundry, anything. Over time the shock of the moment, those three hours that felt timeless like a nightmare, has settled silently to the bottom of my life like sediment. The memory itself has become detached from what I feel every day: a kind of shapeless, persistent and melancholy haze. Remembering helps me to know my grief as something real, to recognize what I am hiding. *Hiding, why? And why does it feel so unreal?*

I look back at my computer screen. Out of my fingers come more words:

So much of loss is about shared places, memories and feelings deepened over years or a lifetime. You feel the absence of someone who will never be there again. Their familiar presence is supplanted by a frightening void, and the spaces and sounds you knew together elicit pain. You miss them.

This, I realize, is part of my problem. *Who do I miss?* There was nothing shared between us, no stories to tell. Those moments were fabricated memories-to-be, un-made memories and phantom expectations that somehow sting as if they were real. Worst of all, they have a nasty habit of popping up everywhere. They hover around the baby carriage we almost bought; in the list of name possibilities on the coffee table; in the empty, untouched infant clothing and accessories already gathered in our living room. They sabotage me in less material places, too. In the expecting mother app on my smartphone, telling me the estimated size, in

fruit terms, of the unborn fetus. In my adjusted, and re-adjusted, doctoral thesis completion plans. In my visions of how we would spend the holidays this year.

When I think back to how eager and happy I was then, I feel utter defeat. The pure joy of my expectations has been stripped away, like so many clothes, to reveal the empty, naïve hopes of a young woman for her first baby. In some cases, silence can be peaceful and soothing. But this quiet is unnerving. I linger hopelessly over what could have been, and most of all the question: *What if I hadn't miscarried?* I imagine the sublime ignorance of what could have been, the contentment of merrily riding past islands of unknown risk on the currents of chance. I desperately wish I could be there, instead of where I am.

I reread what I've written and find it incomplete but still refreshing, in some way. The detached tone distills a simplicity that I crave in the jumbled chaos of my feelings. My grief has been anything but simple. For months I have vainly tried to comprehend something shapeless and painful but, at the same time, *liberating*. How to explain, for example, the bitter and strange relief at having my own body back? After weeks of inexplicable bleeding, the tranquility was both heavenly and unsettling.

I review my memories of the days after my miscarriage, perplexed by the dream-like collection of moving, half-lit images. Lying on my bed for hours, staring at the wall as the tears ran down the side of my face. Emptiness. Waking up those first few mornings to realize, again, what I had lost. The constant feeling of almost crying.

Despite being with my husband and family when it happened, I still felt terribly alone. My body came to terms with the change in its own time, trailing days behind my loss. Still believing it had someone to support. This was a cruel revelation, since no one had warned me

what to expect beyond a vague reference to hormonal changes. Above all, I had no inkling how painful my breasts would be. I iced them whenever it wasn't too obvious, and methodically swallowed ibuprofen at every meal. The physical pain only aggravated my mental state, trapping me within the confines of that one, horrible memory at a time when all I wanted to do was escape. When I finally regained my normal body weeks later, I felt something close to joy. Without stopping to consider what it meant I greedily clambered to reclaim my pre-pregnancy life, moving forward with plans for work and travel.

I wonder now if this was wise, and whether my coping mechanisms have been adequate. Even before my body had fully recovered I was boarding a plane, a lingering ache in my breasts and my brittle emotions in exhausted tatters. When I returned home I found a house still full of baby and sniped at my husband: "I thought you would've put all that stuff away by now!" The next day I moved everything to the basement.

I wonder whether I was running away, when I left for that trip. I left behind all reminders of my loss, but also the loved ones eager to provide support. I arrived at my overseas destination and I learned to breathe again, in a kind of isolation. Six weeks later, I returned to the immediacy of my grief. I was shocked by the baby clothes, but for my husband they were normal. Perhaps having them around the house actually helped him deal with his loss, while I was away. I never asked. We are best friends, lovers and life partners, but each of us has faced the miscarriage in his or her own way. Talking about it is still a struggle, and may forever remain so. Though our loss is shared, we have found that it is also lonely.

I have been adrift in thought and my fingers hover, poised over the keyboard. I feel spent. My chin drops slowly and I close my eyes as the race in my mind suddenly halts. I

breathe a deep taste of sour, stuffy bus odor and regret it. I shift my focus to absorbing the lurching vibrations of my seat, regular and real. Images from a film I saw recently float lazily into my head. The plot follows a woman who loses her husband. After the funeral the woman returns home, grabs two trash bags and sweeps through their apartment throwing out all his things: photographs, cologne, toothbrush, computer. On the empty street outside, the heavy bags make a hollow "bang" as they hit the bottom of the metal dumpster. I fix on that scene, envying the woman in a strange way. I want to pack up all my empty hopes and un-made memories into plastic bags, just like that. Boom, into the dumpster, *out*.

When I lost my unborn baby, one of my first thoughts was: "How can I make this go away?" The idea of telling everyone, all the happy well-wishers we'd contacted weeks before, horrified me almost as much as the miscarriage itself. As if facing my loss, and sharing it, would make it more real. But I realize now that parts of my loss will always be phantom-like, unspoken and ill-defined. I wish I were strong enough to share it more. But like so many of my friends and relatives before me, I hide it instead. Immersed by millions of other silent miscarriages, my loss is a story I keep to myself.

For my husband and I, our silence began on a sunny afternoon in June. Without a word to anyone, we quietly buried our loss on the edge of a wild riot of black raspberries overlooking the rocky, ever-green shores of Maine. Since then I don't know what to say, when I visit that spot. I want to speak to it, to chat; but all I can think of is how much we would have loved it.

My loss is not rare, but it is deep and icy cold, a lonely river winding through the stillness of a winter wood. The fullness of it submerges me sometimes, in thoughtful moments. I don't always return to the surface right away. I must remind myself, again and again, that of all the different kinds of loss, mine is a lucky one. My grief has something close to a remedy: begin

again. I can dare to hope, again, and take on the same risks with courage. I write down: *Even though you are lonely, you are not alone.* Life goes on and, together, we go with it.

I feel a warm, swollen tear quivering at the base of each eye. Glancing quickly across the aisle, I wipe them away with my sleeve. The words slide in and out of focus on my screen, and I force myself to breathe evenly. Out the bus window, the guardrail is still a grey blur against an endless wall of silent, dusk-lit trees. I read the last sentence I wrote once more, then close my laptop. Enough for now.

Back at home, I happily reunite with my husband and share an animated dinner of homemade bread and hot soup. After the meal I pull the egg stone out of my bag and rub its smooth sides, still clouded with salt. I stick it in a dish on the table in our living room, then continue unpacking. From now on, my little egg will remind me of what I've lost—and what I've found.