

### Editor's Note

*The following art essay consists of two pieces: a series of photos, and a personal narrative. The two work in tandem to deal with a difficult topic: the trauma of rape. Due to the sensitive and triggering nature of this topic, we want to reaffirm Dialogue's unequivocal condemnation of sexual assault. The following work represents an individual's aesthetic response, and we appreciate her willingness to share her work on this difficult topic with our audience so that we may practice seeing and listening together.*

*Trigger Warning: sexual assault, rape*

### Artist's Statement

After a lot of therapy and time, I assumed I would be fully healed. I wasn't. I began to notice patterns, albeit a little unsettling, as I took photos all over the world. I began to notice that I am drawn to churches of any shape and size, especially abandoned ones; to graffiti, chiefly depicting strong, unexpected images like images of powerful women; and finally that I am simply drawn to quirky juxtapositions, such as a woman's face sculpted into an English Garden, or two eyes drawn with a Sharpie used to make a face on a broken wall. What I began to observe is that my pain was reflecting itself through those images, and that somehow through those images, my narrative readjusted. As a result I began to heal. Instead of feeling hopeless or weak, I started to accept that being raped does not have to define me. It is simply a part of who I am. So, instead of turning away, or putting down my camera, when I saw an uncomfortable image, I embraced this unorthodox healing process. Ultimately these images reveal that there is always beauty, even when it seems broken, whether it is quirky, rugged, displaced, or strong. Instead of seeing an abandoned and vandalized building, I see strength and power reflected in a woman's face painted on exposed desert wall.

—Beth Adams























## a time to believe abuse victims

“I was raped by two men.”

It was only after many months of denial that I was able to utter those words. Even after facing the fact, the circumstances surrounding my assault were so muddy and bizarre that to this day it troubles me to consider them. Ultimately I decided to share my story because I am the mother of two amazing sons. Because one situation can enlighten the next, my particular parenting perspective is informed by my own experience. I am trying to break the cycle of secret-keeping and shame. My story is one of millions. It is a reflection. It is a template.

A constant theme in my early life was that of men who had an obligation to protect me and to respect me, instead committing numerous small acts of petty domination, verbal threatening, and entitled abuses of authority. In general, I did not see their behavior as an abuse of power. Instead, I often saw fault in myself. In my home, in school, and at church I was taught to submit to the authority of the men in my life.

Right now we are having a national conversation about sexual assault, and are raising awareness about how many victims continue to suffer in the aftermath because they are doubted, judged, and second-guessed. But there is another important point in this conversation, one that I want to emphasize here: most perpetrators of sexual assault do not start with violent rape. They start with acts of casual dominance.

The LDS Church’s standard of chastity would, presumably, act as a bulwark against sexual abuse among its members, but the publicity-sensitive Church has a history of secrecy in matters of sexual assault, and many members have felt pressured to allow their Church leaders to adjudicate these matters. Worse, victims, usually women, have often found themselves under the microscope in the aftermath. Faced with criticism, the Church has made some progress in recent years. Brigham Young University changed its policy toward victims of sexual assault in 2016:

[Brigham Young University's] Title IX staff will be charged with ensuring that information they receive from alleged victims will not be shared with the Honor Code Office without their consent. And students who report sexual assaults will no longer face having their conduct at the time questioned for possible Honor Code violations.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, while the LDS Church does unequivocally condemn sexual assault, its male-heavy power structure can condition both men and women to accept small acts of domination as normal. After I was raped, I went to my bishop. I honestly do not know why, except for the reality that I was taught that, as my judge in Israel, he had ultimate and eternal power over me. As such, I felt like his priesthood power would somehow make the pain go away. I felt guilty for drinking wine and wanted absolution. Ultimately, I was still in shock and not ready to talk about it, so I gave little detail about being raped. What I received were consequences for my own actions. Though the men who raped me were not members of the Church in good standing, they were raised in the LDS culture. One of the two men lived in the same BYU dorm building and at the same time as the man who later became my husband. The other was from Utah County and raised LDS. One of the more bizarre aspects of the event was the fact that at least one of the perpetrators had become so desensitized to forcing his will upon women that he utterly failed to see his actions as an assault and apparently even considered it to be a sort of courtship. I had been so conditioned to submitting myself to men that I found myself playing along. The culture we were raised in, both US and LDS, laid the groundwork for one of the most traumatic events in my life. It is only now, years later, that I have realized this.



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1. Jessica Miller, "Honor Code Amnesty is Just One Part of BYU's 23 Steps for Addressing Sexual Assault," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 26, 2016, <http://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2016/11/16/honor-code-amnesty-is-just-one-part-of-byus-23-steps-for-addressing-sexual-assault/>.

## #MeToo

There I was,  
at a party.  
Someone was asking me a question.

“I never drink wine.” I responded.  
“Oh, you don’t?” a stranger said.  
The host continued, “This is Bob.”

I looked up and said, “Hi Bob.”

I was doing all the talking as another man lurched in the shadows of my words. Bob continued staring at me. It felt nice to be noticed. The host continued, “This is Matt. He works at the library.”

I smiled. Matt looked too mainstream in this room filled with overly-self-actualized hipsters. In contrast to my observation, Matt was comfortable (or was at least posing) as he rambled philosophically about growing up in Utah. He wanted to make sure we all knew that he was now a disenfranchised Mormon. Matt argued that he was misled by the Mormon “cult,” and that is why he found Mormonism so anthropologically wrong. “Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” I thought. Living in Utah for the last several years, I had become desensitized to this particular narrative, a narrative that often served as a party icebreaker. Usually I would hear it with an open heart again. That night I wanted to talk about something else.

Eventually Matt stopped. The night continued and people began trickling out.

As the hours passed, the conversation moved from awkwardness to elation. Excitedly I proclaimed,

“I don’t usually drink wine. It gives me a migraine.”

What I wanted to say was that I did not want to drink anymore, yet felt out of place setting my half empty glass down. Likewise, I did not have the courage to add the part about how I also felt really guilty drinking alcohol. Regardless of my internal struggle, someone encouraged me to finish. And as they lit up a joint, I noticed that same person take the glass out of my clumsy hand. I am not sure I finished, yet soon I was drifting in and out of consciousness. It seems, in retrospect, very unusual that one glass of wine would have had that effect.

I woke to Bob sitting down beside me. I was absolutely captivated by his eyes. They seemed kind and made the rest of him appear very attractive. Matt was sitting close by, complaining. The more he spoke, the more irritating his words became.

As the conversation continued, I bobbed and weaved in and out of a dream-like wakefulness. Bob began to rub my leg. Even though I saw it there, I was not connecting that his hand was literally touching my thigh. Instead, I noticed how electric his touch felt. Because I felt like I was watching from above, all these sensations seemed crazy and disconnected. (I know. It does not make sense to me either.) By this point, Bob was kissing my neck. Matt was sitting closer, eagerly watching. I struggled to keep my eyes open. My shirt was off. I felt cold. I could not say the words,

“I am cold.”

Now exposed, I saw Matt hold up a condom.

“I’ve never done this before,” I heard Matt tell Bob.

Next I heard the wrapper. I saw him pull the condom out. I tried to say, “No. No. No.” My words seemed lost in my sleepy delirium. (I guess I should be grateful that he put on the condom, right?) By now Bob was sucking hard on my neck, holding me down forcefully. I am small in stature. Fighting one of these men would be difficult. Fighting two would be impossible, especially in my impaired state. I could not move. I could only close my eyes. I held my breath. I felt it. I felt Bob’s

strength. I felt Matt at the same time. Then Matt jammed his large condom-covered penis inside of me. It hurt. I felt weightless.

“Asshole.” I softly uttered. Still quiet, I pleaded, “No! No! No!”

They did not hear me, and if they did, they did not stop. I passed out again. I know at some moment someone else was in the room. I always wondered why they did nothing. My guess is they did nothing because I was not loud, or maybe they told themselves that I was having a good time. I was not having a good time. Matt was raping me. Now Bob was raping me. Then there was a penis in my mouth. They continued to overpower me. I do not know if it was complete and utter fear, but something kept me from moving.

“I should scream,” I thought.

I could not.



I woke the next morning next to a discarded condom. Matt was still sleeping close by. My head was pounding. Bob was gone. My new white shirt was next to Matt. It was completely stained red and covered in dirt. Then I notice that the back of my hair was snarled. (It was snarled so much that later that day I had to cut chunks of hair off.) In an eerie haze, I got up. The hosts had cats. I am so allergic to cats, my eyes were practically swollen shut and blistered from rubbing them so vigorously.

I picked up my dirty and stained new shirt. I walked downstairs still holding it. I found a trash can, wadded up my shirt, and threw it away (placing it under other trash so no one would see it). Then I looked around to find Bob in his room. He held out his arms. I walked inside. He motioned to his bed. I lay down beside him.

“My wife is on a whirlwind trip. She comes home in a week,” he said as he started to kiss me and touch me. I froze. In my head I could not compute what I was hearing.

“You have a wife?” I said in confusion.



“We have an open relationship,” he said and continued, “She likes to watch me with other women.”

My confusion was replaced with fear. I wanted to leave. I felt disgusted with myself. We continued to kiss. For what seemed like a long time, he held my trembling body. I realized that I needed to be at work. I asked him to borrow a shirt. I got up, looked out the window and noticed that my car was gone. In my head, I was freaking out. Outwardly I was still in a relaxed, PTSD-haze.

“I will be late to work. My car is gone. My keys are gone.” I said. Feeling ashamed, I left Bob’s room.



Since then I have learned that people react to trauma and fear in every way you can imagine. My therapist suggests that I probably reached out to the safer of the two men, and that I was trying to normalize the terrible thing that had just happened. I appreciate my therapist’s compassion, but it still seems crazy and wrong.



Now out of Bob’s room, I frantically tried to reach the person who took my car. There was no answer. That is when I found myself sitting on the stairs by the entryway. I called work, nervous. It is a new job and know that I am already late.

“I will be late this morning is that ok?” I asked.

“Beth, if you can not get to work on time, do not come in at all,” she urged.

“Please understand. Someone took my car,” I pleaded.

“That is not our problem,” she tersely said and hung up.

It occurred to me that I needed to get out of there. I need a ride. I could have called a cab or even another friend. Instead I called my mom.

“Will you come and pick me up?” I asked.

“Where are you?” she replied.

I told her where I was, which was actually a block over from where I actually stood. Now on a random street, I found myself standing far away from where these people would see my mom, and where my mom would see them. My hair was still a crazy mess. My eyes were still mostly swollen shut. I was wearing a stranger’s t-shirt, a shirt I would also throw away. My mom pulled up. I got into her car. Lovingly (because I think she may have actually been terrified) my mom acted as if nothing was out of place. I shut the door, put on my seatbelt, and she drove.

It was at her apartment when she noticed how bad my eyes were. She asked if I had been around cats.

“Here. Take this. It will help with your allergies,” she said.

She left.

“Why isn’t she staying?” I wondered, “Can’t she see I am in pain?” Then I thought, “Well, if she left it must not be that bad.”



Even though I told myself it was not that bad, I was afraid to be alone. I was also too afraid to ask her not to leave. A few hours later, after the swelling in my eyes went down, I tried to assess what had happened. As I looked at this person in the mirror and stood stunned, I saw the image of a woman in horrible pain. Her hair was so tangled she had to cut chunks of it out. Her bruises were so thick and purple around her neck that she looked as if she had survived a botched strangulation attempt. You could see finger marks in her bruises. In shock, I saw the outline. I wanted to hug her. I wanted to tell her it would be ok. Her eyes were so raw that I knew it was more than just the cats. I started to cry. It seemed like forever that I stood there staring. Finally, after a lot of looking away, I was able to see that the woman I was staring at was me.

In that moment I was able to intellectualize that in the past twenty-four hours I had been abandoned at a party. My car was stolen. I was fired and I was brutally raped by two men. And as quickly as I put those pieces together, I hid my secret far away. I became stoic and filled with quiet fury.

And for the next several months I was disconnected. I was embarrassed. I was ashamed, and mostly, I was confused. It took all of those extremely rage-filled months before I could utter the words. What actually pushed the words back to the surface was a moment of extreme stress. The trigger was my familiar but horrible eye-swelling cat allergies. An empathetic roommate of mine and I were visiting a friend in Kansas. One night at bedtime, when I was about to itch my eyes right out of my head, I blurted out the words:

“I was raped by two men.”

Months later, because I was tired of always being so completely angry, I finally made it back to my trusted therapist. I uttered those words again:

“I was raped by two men.”

I paused as the guilt settled in. Sheepishly, I continued. “Not only do I think I was raped, but I kissed one of the men the next morning.” Then I looked at my therapist to make sure he was ok with what I was telling him. I took a breath and said, “Not only that, the man I kissed is married.”

I waited for my therapist to scold me. Instead I saw tears.

“Oh Beth. I am so sorry.”

He urged me to call the police. I told him I was not sure I could.

At that he quickly got up and raced to get out a legal book. He pointed out the definition of “gang rape” and read it to me. He copied the pages so I could process. As he handed me the pages he said,

“Not only were you raped, but you were gang raped. Not only were you raped by two men, but you were abandoned by your friends.”



In spite of all the years of family dysfunction and abuse that I dealt with and conquered, I could not wrap my head around what happened that night. And it happened to me. I still did not want to go to the police. I absolutely did not want to embarrass my family or draw attention to myself. I just wanted it to go away.

For many years, I have screamed from inside a deep place. No one could hear my screams. I know others were screaming too. Ultimately within our LDS culture, systematic abuse of power is a process, and it is built upon over years, even generations. Within that process I was taught, I assumed things were my fault. The fact that I drank wine that night somehow exempted my rapists. This logic makes no sense except within the system I was taught. And if abuse of power is a process, when we teach our children our patriarchal process, are we also responsible? In the end, breaking the cycle is why I speak up today. I do think things are changing. People are believing victims and victims are being heard. We scream differently. My screams join the other screams. Those once-silenced screams are becoming conversations. And conversations are happening because no one, absolutely no one, should have to go through this, especially not alone.