

THE IMPRINT OF TRAUMA

COLLEEN RUSSELL-ANGLE

A fossil. A stone, imprinted for life. Buried under layers of mud and silt—preserved. The pressure of the sand and mud use their weight to embed an image, a memory...history. The mud becomes rock and sets for life. Even the brown sludge of the earth can leave its mark. We walk on dirt, we swish it with our feet, it flows through our finger tips; we don't always see what is beneath the surface. Underneath, lies an impression, a stamp, a mark, a scar, a fossil. Something left behind, a sign that "it" was there, whatever "it" was.

Like the plaques on my wall, *I ponder...* My children's hands preserved in plaster. It was years ago walking through the fairgrounds, that we spotted the vendor stand marked, *Impressions in Time*. I remember thinking what a good idea it would be to have my babies hands pressed in the plaster. To fossilize them forever. An artifact of my memories: their precious hands. They now hang in our hallway, a gallery of mementos—like the fossils in the earth.

I wish all imprints were good; welcomed, like the ones that hang on my wall. I wish we could choose which images embed; which ones leave their scar for life. Like the soil pressing, shaping, and preparing for a lasting stamp, trauma implants itself. It chooses.

It was the day of our trial. The first time I saw him since I left. I sat in the courtroom anticipating the moment that he would walk through the door. *What would it be like*, I wondered. *What would I feel*, I kept asking myself as I scanned the room nervously. I wondered if he would use his old tactics of control and manipulation with his piercing eyes; I wondered if my body would shake uncontrollably like it did when I told my story to my counselor, my attorney, and my support group. I feared that he would know the turmoil that was tearing me up inside and that it would give him the pleasure of control. I sat terrified and frozen in thought in the darkroom in shades of brown, like the colors of the marks he used to leave on my body—it reminded me.

My attorney summoned me to the front of the room where she sat at her table preparing for trial. I sat behind her in the pews where observers would soon be sitting, watching me struggle for composure as I spilled out every dirty detail for their gluttonous ears. I had to cross the barricade that divided the room of spectators from the attorneys, judge, and “us.” I had to open the gate and enter the space where it would all take place. I moved toward my attorney and sat in the chair next to her, making every attempt to avoid eye contact with the dark chair of oath that sat next to the judge’s throne—so commandingly awaiting my presence.

My attorney kept running through questions over and over like uninvited songs that repeat themselves in one’s head. I found it difficult to answer even the most basic requests for information. I could hear her talking, but could not hear what she was saying. Her mouth moved like a silent movie, while I sat still in my thoughts, trying so desperately to hear her. I could sense her frustration entwined with compassion. She slid her papers and files to the side. Her eyes locked mine; she told me to “breathe,” and that everything would “be alright.” She told me to take a walk outside and catch my breath. I knew I wanted to do this, but then my fears took over as I imagined running into him as he made his way to the court room.

I decided instead to take a seat on a bench outside of the room that was tucked away in the corner of an adjacent hall. It was dark and quiet, like the memories in my head. So imprinted and vivid, as if they were yesterday. The hair pulling, pushing, the time he whipped me with a rake and left a bruise so big on my leg that I could not hide it with my shorts—he cried when he saw it. He left lots of bruises including the ones in my spirit. I think they are embedded deeper than I thought; deeper than the fossils buried beneath the earth.

The biological process of wound repair, they’re called. They form when your body heals itself after an injury. Sometimes they are so deep, that they damage nerves and other tissue. Like a girl in my kindergarten class that had such a deep scar on her face, she did not smile the same way she used to; kind of like me. Her nerves were damaged. Scars usually fade over time, but they never really go away completely.²

I’ve been told that my nerves are damaged, or that I have “neurological abnormalities.” I have PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

it's called. Most people are familiar with the disorder and associate it with veterans. I "caught" it from my experience with domestic violence they say.³

I remember the weeks and months after I left him, I was scared beyond belief. I thought that leaving would make it over; that it would stop him from harming me, but he was still present in my mind. I couldn't sleep. I sat upright in my bed night after night. I guarded my home and surroundings like a soldier guarding his battlefield. Every sound caused a reaction—whether it was a dart to the window for a peek or my body freezing in fear. My nights became my new abuser. If I did fall asleep on accident, I would awake in a sweat from nightmares. I remember the worst one: I was begging for him not to do it as he kept ordering his accomplices to get the plastic wrap to wrap my body up so I could not breathe—all with his glib smile. The smirk I was so familiar with, as he muttered "I love you."

That smile... What if I see it again as he walks in the courtroom, I wondered. *Will it have the same effect on me?* The elevators lined the hallway outside the courtroom and around the corner where I sat. With every, ding and slide of the door, my body froze. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears as it used to at night when I would hear a sound, imagining it was him. Ding, the elevator sounded again, as I heard the laughter of two young women. It was not him—thank God. I stared at the trim around the ceilings and doorways, admiring how beautiful it was. I picture the soft hand of the artist that shaped it and pressed it in place. I imagined the brush swishing from side to side softly as he lay the paint on it, leaving his mark with the soft stroke of his hands. Like the hands that line my walls in my hallway, such a kind mark left behind. A "good imprint."

I think of the hands that would so often wrap my throat and the funny feeling they would leave afterward when I swallowed. Hands have so much power. They can shape and mold in so many crafty ways. I remembered the day I lay on the floor in my kitchen while he kicked my back and legs; he was infuriated that I questioned where he had been when he got home at midnight from his day job. He said I should have kept my "trap shut." I lay there on the floor holding my belly; protecting the baby inside from his blows. It was as if time stood still as I admired the baseboards in front of my eyes. Like I do now sitting here on the bench in my hiding place.

I had trimmed the room out the week before like the carpenter that trimmed the rooms in the courthouse. I was pleased at how good they looked. I had done it the right way with the caulking and mitered corners. They looked seamless with their white paint. I was happy in that place where I could shut his blows out. This was a skill that I became quite talented at over time. I was able to do it with such precision, that I almost forgot what was happening.

I felt a jolt as he pulled me to the kitchen corner cabinet. He kept me in a choke hold sitting on the floor with our backs to the cabinets—his arm reaching around me from behind. With one arm around my neck, he reached for the knives on the kitchen counter. They sat neatly in their butcher block holder on the marble counter-top that I had shined earlier that day. The sound of it sliding out of its holder—sw-o-o-o-o-sh—still screams in my head. The sound only a knife can make. I almost have to hold my ears when I think about it; he did not cut me. Bone chilling screams must have startled him just enough for me to break away and run out the door.

I can still see it all. I can hear my screams. They are imprinted in my mind. I can even take myself right back there as if it is happening again—right now or anytime. Sometimes just a thought can do it. Sometimes, I see something that reminds me of him or a time and place where things happened. I would imagine that the fossils buried inside are pretty well set in stone.

Ding, ding. I hear it again. I begin to shake as I wait for the sound of the elevator door to open. With a swish to the side, the quietness fades as I hear footsteps enter the hallway. There are no girls laughing this time, there are no voices. I begin to tremble as each foot hits the floor like a giant monster pounding his feet into the earth. Stomp, stomp, I hear, heading to the courtroom door. I freeze. It is the sound of his voice as his attorney greets him just before he opens it. She calls him by name. He answers. That voice. I sat silently as I remember each tone. Sounds that are so familiar and so ingrained; I will never forget the sounds of his voice. “You had better check yourself, b—tch!” he used to say in that voice. Another time, “bow down!” if I wanted him to stop. So ugly those words were. His voice makes me cringe. Ugly it all was, “like the sludge of the earth.”

My attorney comes out and says, “it’s time.” I follow her to the room and sit in the front row snuggled up to the paneled wall that

divides my attorney and I. I feel naked as his eyes pierce the back of my head from several rows behind me. Even from a distance, I can still feel him, his power, his control as I freeze in place waiting for it all to begin. “All rise,” the lady in the front says. A door from behind the solemn desk opens as a gray haired man with a black, dark robe enters the room and sits at his throne. He looks down at his papers as if it is just another day at work. All the while I sit restlessly awaiting the moment when I will have to recall it all. It is more than just another day for me.

It is still embedded. Like a scar it fades a bit, but still sets in for life; it is a part of me now. I cannot separate who I am from who I was before “it” happened. Trauma has left its mark. The earth spun, the sun rose. The wind blew through my hair as I crossed the parking lot that day at the courthouse. The oceans swelled, their waves crashed the shores. The old town clock struck the hour like it always does. It was just another day. I sat buried in memories as I do most days and nights since. Imprinted for life. He left his mark. Like a skilled craftsman.

¹ Krystek, (1996). *Un Museum*. Retrieved from www.unmuseum.org/fossil.htm

² NIH, (2015). *MedlinePlus*. Retrieved from www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/scars.html

³ van der Kolk, (1994). *Trauma Information Pages*. Retrieved from www.trauma-pages.com/a/vanderk4.php