


Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing

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home.



poetry
creative nonfiction
photography
+ "art speaks" series

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RENOVATING

By Janice Post-White

The skies were calm the night the tree fell. The oak just gave up its roots after a heavy rain, as if in a sigh.

THUD. The explosion shook the house to the studs. As a thundercloud of white dust whooshed down the hallway, I raced the ten steps through my office and bedroom.

"Tyler!" I slammed the bedroom door shut behind me and scanned up and down my six-foot tall son standing in the hallway, a nurse triaging an emergency. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, and I slipped past him to look for anything out of place in his room. *Thank God*, I murmured, and then announced, "A tree must have fallen on Brennan's room!"

I had feared it for an entire year, ever since last summer when we had to cut down two trees, one of them a grandfatherly burr oak that had held its central place in our backyard for more than a century. With every thunderstorm, I ran into the back bedroom – Brennan's room – to get a birds-eye view of the direction the trees were bowing in the wind.

As the dust settled, Tyler and I squinted into his older brother's bedroom. Brennan had been home, sleeping in his bed, exactly one month earlier. I held my breath to avoid inhaling the sheetrock dust. It smelled like freshly chopped wood chips. We saw no flames, no fire, and no visible tree. Amazingly, one ceiling light flicked on, even

though it dangled in midair. Yellowed insulation hung down from roof to floor, layered like wafer cookies between huge wooden beams. Chunks of ceiling and orphaned wires dangled uncertainly. The only thing in its usual place was the stuffed dog sprawled out on the brightly colored duvet. "Boagsie" was the bigger than life-size yellow lab buddy that my husband and I had won in our first Childhood Cancer Kids Fund auction. His nose and big floppy ears peeked out from collapsed ceiling tiles, and it looked as if he was staring at the mass destruction. Broken glass and lamp shards crunched under my flip-flops as I backed out of the room, stepping over Lee Child and Calvin and Hobbs books and sheetrock stubble. It was 11:45 pm.

As I flipped off the light, the darkness outside engulfed the bedroom.

Sometimes it takes a tree on a house to wake us up to the inevitability of change.

We had added the bedroom on to our home twenty-four years ago, when our first son was born.

"It's like the treehouse I had as a kid," the contractor said proudly as we stood together on the burnished oak floor of the second story addition to our home. I imagined my son, then nine weeks old, growing up in a treehouse bedroom. I slowly scanned the room. Out of the east window, the maple tree – the one that always turned bright orange and yellow in the fall - hung like an umbrella over the stone patio. I watched two squirrels chase each other out the furthest branching arm. A long leap and they could be in his room. The south view scanned the steep slope of the back yard, where age-old oak, elm, and hackberry trees shaded the hill, allowing only enough sun for native Minnesotan shrubs, grasses, and goldenrod to wave in the gentle summer breeze. The egress window was big enough to jump out of in an emergency and was the safest second story exit. What I liked most, however, was how the afternoon sun streamed through the triple-wide west window, spanning the entire dormer and bestowing a bright, cheery feel to the back of our house.

I spent hours nursing and rocking my son to sleep, singing Joannie Bartel lullabies and reading *Goodnight Moon* and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. He napped in bright sunlight, waking with a smile and giggle.

When he was three, his crib migrated to his baby brother's room down the hall, and a full-size bed nestled into the dormer beneath the expanse of window. We would lie together and read books and talk about silly things and serious musings, sometimes until the moon levitated above the backyard hill.

What I didn't know then was that even a treehouse bedroom, with its egress window, warming sunshine, and vibrant life all around, couldn't shelter us from life's storms.

When he was four-and-a-half years old, on a cold, gray January day, Brennan lay curled on his side on crisp, white paper covering the tall, oak examining table at the pediatrician's office down the street. I stood beside him, massaging the pain in his legs, waiting.

The door latch clicked. The pediatrician

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walked in, sighed, and said, “He has leukemia.” Just like that. No hesitancy, no pause. He was sure.

“Which kind?” I asked, knowing that it mattered.

“A.L.L.,” he replied. The more treatable type.

I nodded at the answer, pretending that my experience as a cancer nurse might save my son.

After getting directions to “go home, pack a bag,” I lifted my son off the table that was taller than he was, my hands almost circling his slender torso. With his feet firmly planted on the floor, he slipped his hand in mine as I opened the door into the dark, narrow hallway. I took a deep breath as we exited the life we knew.

That night he lay dwarfed in the hospital bed, his red and black Mickey Mouse pillow tucked under his pale sunken cheeks and vacant blue eyes, his faded blankie with sailboats and his mouse buddy dependably by his side. His other buddies waited on his pillow at home, the comforter tucked securely around them. After one fleeting glance into his bedroom the next day, I completely avoided it, hoping to escape the fear that my son could disappear from it forever.

We couldn’t flee through the egress window. There was no safety anymore.

After the first intense and traumatic week of tests and treatments in the hospital, we came home. As the bright, midday sun beamed through frigid, subzero temperatures outside, he and his brother hopped on their scooters and chased each other around the “Indy Loop” that circled through the family room.

“Time me, Mom!” Brennan shouted as he sped through the kitchen and dining room, dragging his slippered feet around corners. They raced, laughing uproariously, as remnants of ribbon from the hospital bouquet of mylar balloons snagged the wheels and trailed behind like memories.

That night, we lay together on his big bed in the protection, comfort, and welcome of his treehouse bedroom. There was no need for steel bedrails to protect us. We had each other.

As we left the destruction of Brennan’s room and headed downstairs, Tyler and I ran into my husband, who appeared dazed from sleep. “Did you hear it?” I asked, even though I had felt it more than heard it. “It must be a tree, but we can’t see it!” I headed into the library, Tyler followed, and then into the dining room and kitchen. Surprisingly, nothing seemed amiss on the first floor. We found out later that the double-wide, twenty-foot bedroom ceiling beam had held the tree, preventing it from crashing through to the first floor.

"It fell across the yard," my husband said as he went out the back door to the driveway. Tyler and I went the opposite way to the backyard patio and peered up into the moonless sky. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw the trunk, only the trunk, draped in an arc across the back yard, anchored on one end by the roots and by the two-story house on the other. The main arm of two bifurcated limbs zeroed in on the back bedroom, falling straight and direct. The other arm torpedoed into the unattached garage, arching as if in a calculated hit,

penetrating the roof beams but stopping short of my car parked inside. I couldn't see the top of the tree from the patio; it was like the beanstalk Jack chopped down in the fairy tale story, the top reaching the clouds where the Giant lived. As we walked quickly around the house, the massive trunk hovering over us, I saw the basketball hoop, cemented into the ground on the opposite side of the driveway, supporting the top of the eighty-foot, seven-ton red oak, saving the car parked in the driveway from total annihilation.

"Danny!" I called out in surprise as our neighbor across the alley appeared in our driveway with a hand-saw in one hand and a broom and dog leash in the other. "It's midnight!"

"Let's clean this mess up!" he said energetically.

Brennan's room became a haven from the intrusive but life-saving three years of chemotherapy. His energy – and his appetite – vacillated wildly through the first year of aggressive treatment.

"I need chips and cheese NOW!" he would exclaim, arms plastered stiffly by his sides and feet planted in place, until his demand was met. Prednisone, a steroid medication that killed leukemia cells, fueled his frenzy, but only for a week at a time. Then he collapsed.

About six months into treatment, we lay in his bed together in the late summer afternoon. He wore pajama shorts and shirt and rested his head on his arm, too weak to get up and play. But he was bored.

"Do you want to read a book together?" I asked, propped up on one arm, facing him.

"No, I've read everything."

The door latch clicked.

The pediatrician walked in, sighed, and said, "He has leukemia."

Just like that. No hesitancy, no pause.

He was sure.

“Want to do a puzzle book?”

“No.”

I got up to look in the hall closet outside of his room. I scanned the shelf of Scrabble® and Monopoly®, games I had since childhood, and word games we occasionally played when we had company. I frowned, wondering why we didn't have any board games for kids.

“I'll teach you cribbage!” I said enthusiastically, not realizing that at five years old he hadn't learned double digit addition. He caught on quickly, adding up pegging points to fifteen and thirty-one and counting his hands of fifteens, pairs, and runs. Cribbage, puzzle books, and brain teasers became the “tired” day games we played in bed as the leaves outside his windows turned from green to gold and back to green and his feet inched closer to the foot of his bed.

A few months after coming off treatment, I came home from work and was surprised to find him in his bedroom. He wasn't sick. He was reading *When Mom Has Cancer*, a book I was using for a research study that I had left on the kitchen counter that morning. I lay down next to him, our bodies seeping up the late afternoon summer sun as we stretched out like legs of a clothespin. I watched as his slim eight-year-old fingers skillfully turned to the sixth chapter.

“It says here that the mom has breast cancer, and that ten to twenty percent of women die from it.” He pointed to the paragraph as proof. “I had cancer too. Could I have died?”

“Yes,” I admitted quietly, with a hint of relief that we were finally talking about this reality. I looked up to see his eyes avert mine. “Some children who get leukemia do die. That's why it's so important to start treatment as quickly as possible.” I avoided pointing out that he was only a few months off treatment and relapse remained a real danger. And yet, somehow, life felt a lot safer lying together in his bedroom.

I shuffled through the glass and black shards of car frame at my feet, worried about the dog's paws. As the three men started to saw and sweep, I went inside to call the insurance company, the tree service, and the roofing contractor who had installed a new roof the previous summer. But first, I texted Brennan, who at that moment, was packing up and moving to another state, even farther away from home.

“Thank God you aren't here. A tree just crashed into your room!”

Even though it was one a.m. at his house, he replied promptly with, “Oh my god. Glad everyone is okay...send pictures when you get a chance.”

I imagined him turning back to his task at hand, bending over boxes, neatly folding and packing his clothes, four days before moving.

Over the years, the treehouse bedroom had morphed into a teen-age boy's sanctuary. He hung posters of basketball stars and Usher, and added a shelf to display his basketball, baseball, and golf trophies. When I asked why he always kept the shades down and windows closed, he said, "I want my room to feel secure around me." I realized then that I alone owned the treehouse image.

"Can I paint my room the Carolina Panther's colors?" he asked one year.

"Blue and black?" I guessed.

I was amenable to doing whatever he wanted to make his room his space, grateful that he was alive and invested in choices. But his dad vetoed it, claiming "It's too dark to paint over." So the walls remained a golden yellow until he went off to college.

And then he was gone. All too suddenly, graduation arrived and college move-in day loomed. "I'll pack later," Brennan kept saying, which, when you are an eighteen-year-old who rightly lives in the moment, meant 'the morning of.' He packed his computer and backpack and threw some clothes in a suitcase and declared himself ready for the five-hundred mile drive. He left twenty-six baseball caps in his dresser and cubbies.

I cried every night for a week after we got home. And for six weeks, I left his room just the way he had. I wasn't ready for emptiness.

Then one night on the phone with him, I mentioned that I should probably start cleaning his room. "I haven't done much except open the blinds and wash the clothes that were on the floor."

"I don't care what you do with my bedroom; I don't live there anymore," Brennan said, abruptly, distractedly.

My breath caught in my chest as I quickly tried to think of the right thing to say. I measured the words out in a careful monotone. "I like to think you will feel at home in your bedroom when you do come, even if it's just for a visit." I exhaled slowly. I was proud of myself for not blurting out what I really felt, *What? Of course you will! This is your home forever!*

It took me three more weeks to get the courage to sort and clean his room and closets. He had given me permission to "do whatever you want with whatever is left." *Did he purposefully leave all these memories for me to face alone?* I asked as tears flowed readily down my cheeks with every item I uncovered. I carefully selected and tucked away the mementos from his coming-off-treatment party, his first off treatment eighth

birthday, his “Light the Night” t-shirt from the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society survivor walk, and pictures from the American Cancer Society Relay for Life. He was three months off treatment at the Relay, and when it was time for the survivors’ victory lap, Brennan glanced back at me sitting behind him on the sun-warmed blacktop track. Without a word, he jumped first in line and walked ahead of everyone else by half the length of the track. Halfway around, he turned and faced the camera, and me, confident in his victory.

I sat on his bed and lovingly arranged the keepsakes in a clear acrylic box. *See how far you’ve come*, they seemed to say. He had been ready to move on, anxious to move away. I tried to accept his absence by walking back – again - through the years. Would it ever get any easier? When was I going to trust that the world as we knew it wasn’t going to come crashing down again?

Three days later, it took a 275-ton semi-truck “rocket” crane seven hours to safely lift the tree off the roof and yank out the roots. I watched from across the alley on Danny’s deck. After four hours of preparations, as the tree inched up slowly, a “crack” shot through the air like a bullet. I turned away and cringed. When it had fallen, the tree had split the south wall of the bedroom away from the house. All of us watching the crane feared that the wall would fall away completely. But it held, merely protesting as it shifted its position a few feet out.

And that’s how it remains poised, six weeks later. Waiting for the next journey.

Janice Post-White is a cancer and integrative health nurse, teacher, researcher, and writer living in Minneapolis, MN, and Lana’i, Hawaii. She is completing a memoir, “Leaf Houses: Renovating Dreams When Life Intervenes,” which was narrated before the tree delivered its wound.