

Little Earthquakes

*It never ends, does it?*

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I grew up scared of things that didn't make sense. I've been told I would run away from the door and would have to be reminded that I was safe and that things were okay, it was just a friend. It wasn't my dad. I don't remember much from my childhood but there are certain moments my mind continually goes back to. I remember being told that I would hide in my grandma's room, unsure if my dad would come over. At that time, my parents were separated. They separated when I was four. When my dad would come to our house, he was typically looking for my mom. There was unfortunately an overall fear when he'd arrive because of his unpredictable behavior. My mom feared that when he left, he'd try to take me with him. Although I don't remember how old I was when I first registered it, but my entire life I subconsciously knew my dad was not a good person to be around. With my dad, there are few moments I can recall that were good and unfortunately if they were positive, none of those memories have seemed to stay with me.

I remember being eight years old when my cousin asked me if my uncle, my dad's brother, had ever put his hands on me. I answered truthfully, "Yes." At the time I did not know what it meant to say yes to this question. By that point, I thought that the sexual abuse I was enduring was normal. It turns out my uncle was sexually abusing her too. As an innocent seven-year-old child, I couldn't understand that I was raped. At that age, like most children, all I wanted to do was play a game or go outside and instead, I had his hands on me, kissing parts of my body and undressing me, making me do things to him that I didn't understand or want to do. I often tried running away from him, but he was holding the door closed. I remember him standing above me making me feel smaller than I already was. When I resisted he became angry. After my

conversation with my cousin, my aunt, his sister, found out. I remember her calling me in a room and asking me to sit next to her on the bed. She held me and gazed at me with watery eyes and said –

*“Sweetie, did he ever touch you?”*

I froze. I remember looking in the direction of my uncle and then back at my aunt. By then he began yelling, and things went quiet for me and I felt unable to even speak. My aunt asked me where he put his hands on me. My uncle is in the room now. He is crying while yelling –

*“Don’t fucking listen to her. She’s lying.”*

I moved my hands across my body as to cover it up, while answering her previous question, and nodding my head –

*“Yes.”*

Now I was crying and wanting to apologize and also thinking that I was in trouble. I was worried that I made my uncle both mad and upset and now it meant that I was going to get hurt. But my aunt held me. I was confused by her clutches because I didn’t understand what she was doing and why. I wasn’t used to this. My dad walked in the room and physically removed his brother. I didn’t know what was happening outside the room doors but I recently learned that they hid him

-- to protect him. My dad took me outside and told me not to say anything to my mom and that he would find a day to talk to her. There was no care for me whatsoever. He did not ask me if I was alright or even want to speak to me about what happened. That same day, I told my mom.

*“Every 68 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. And every 9 minutes, that victim is a child. Meanwhile, only 25 out of every 1,000 perpetrators will end up in prison” (RAINN).*

For many years I never thought about what I went through. I don't remember most things from my childhood because I was too busy growing up and trying to move as far from that place and time as possible. I do recall spending time with my mom and grandma trying to be a kid and to absorb all the love they tried to give me.

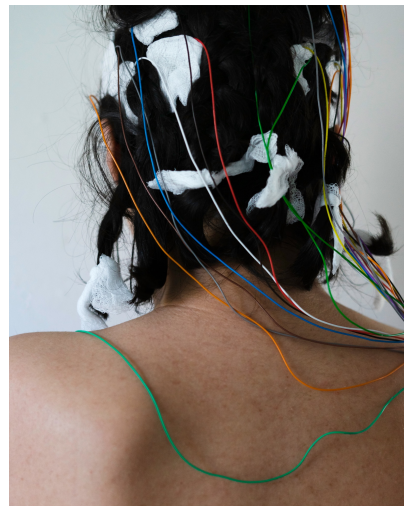
At the age of twelve I experienced a different trauma when I was diagnosed with Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM) in my brain. It turns out it was something I was born with. As a result, the veins and arteries in my brain were tangled and ruptured. After the AVM I was left unconscious and hospitalized. I suddenly couldn't breathe well and I started seeing double. I managed to ask a friend to walk me to the nurse's office because I knew I couldn't do it on my own. I remember being completely disoriented. I wanted my mom. I wanted her to be with me, to hold me and tell me that I was going to be okay. But I didn't have that. Instead, I had the nurse who was running around getting supplies while taking my blood pressure, which was dangerously high. She told me – *“The paramedics were on their way.”* By that point someone had called my mom and grandma who were rushing to the hospital. The superintendent came

into the room. I remember him talking to me. Most of it I can't remember and despite all the commotion. It was then that things became quiet for me again.

Before I went into surgery I looked at my mom and said –

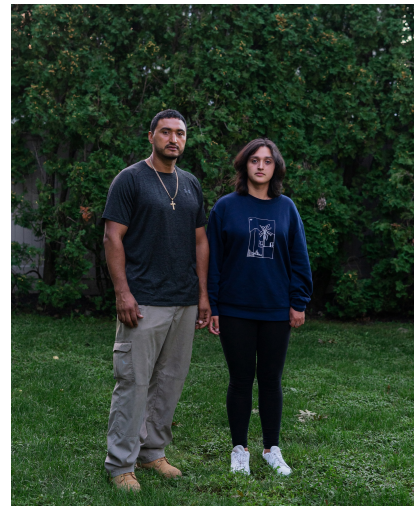
*“Mom, am I going to die?”*

My mother said it was the first time in her life when she didn't know how to answer me. After the surgery I was dependent on machines to help me breathe. I was receiving an IV for fluid and had to be fed with a feeding tube. I couldn't do anything for myself. After the rupture, I dealt with a lot of complex feelings lying in the hospital with various doctors and nurses who had their hands on my body. They had to help me to re-learn basic human functions such as sitting up on my own, breathing, eating, talking and walking. Everything hurt, I was in so much pain and was absolutely exhausted all the time.



After leaving rehab and going back to “*normal*,” I was struggling to understand this new chapter of my life. I was desperately trying to remember who I was before I got sick and I just couldn’t. Around this time was the first time I thought about dying and about my almost premature encounter with death. I even stopped eating and felt there were many days when I wanted to die. I couldn’t understand the point of moving forward. Fairly quickly, I realized I was afraid of death and that I didn’t want to die. While I was still not okay, I made myself believe I was and it worked. I believe this moment was the beginning of a fully recognized mental health decline.

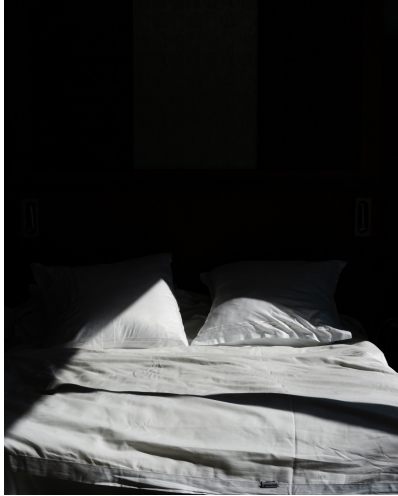
My entire life I have identified as being someone who shoves down what they feel. I rarely allow myself to express anything that would make another person concerned. For years I’ve wondered why I did that. I had always been told that it’s okay to cry and feel whatever I need to. For many reasons I suppose, I just couldn’t. I slowly started to piece things together. I began to go back in time to the place and the room where I once had to hide my fears and pain. If I showed that anything was wrong, it never meant anything good. It meant if I made my uncle upset, things got worse for me. For my own protection and well-being, I couldn’t show that anything was wrong. In addition to the behavior, I would take on around my uncle, I grew up knowing not to show my dad any emotion when he hurt me. With my dad, he hurt me with words. Countless times he has told me that I’d never be good at anything and that I was too fat. Other remarks were that “*I couldn’t be his kid because I was too stupid*” It was never good enough for him. I’ve learned that my father is a mastermind of manipulation and



brainwashing. He succeeded in briefly making me believe that my own family –my mom and grandmother– didn't love me as much as he did. His words about what happened with my uncle being my fault and by not coming to visit him and his new family have caused a very strained relationship. Over time I have learned how to deal with it. I now know what it is he's doing and have learned to anticipate the toxic behavior, because it always arises.

*“Do not internalize the abuse, because that will make it seem that the abuse is happening all over again.”* (Adam, Survivor).

Since the time I got sick, hospital visits became a part of my normal routine. Along with the constant verbal abuse from dad, this all seemed normal. In early 2019, I felt like things were going downhill fast, mentally-speaking, but I kept ignoring it as much as I could. I began to make photographs to distract myself. While making images however, I kept bottling up my emotions and for a time it felt like it was working. No one knew anything about my past – my classmates and certainly not my professors -- and that was good. By 2020, I had fallen into a deeper depression but still managed to make photographs and attend class. By 2021, I was revisiting hospitals in need of more tests on my brain and also dealing with medication changes. After many tests with no answers, it led me to getting a procedure that checked the blood vessels in my brain, making sure there were no other clots or any new diagnoses. I remember it and was awake for this. My emotions started to overflow from anxiety and fear and I remember how hard I kept trying to hold it together. Throughout this time, I kept making work, documenting what I could about my medical process and more of what I had been feeling over the past two years.



PTSD episodes started occurring and I was confused about why I was suddenly having them. All of these traumatic experiences triggered my past, hidden trauma. My uncle's room was now haunting me in my sleep. Randomly throughout the day I would recall the layout of his small bedroom, the light from his window which always looked so beautiful. I remember what he made me do and what he did to me.

For years, I couldn't say the words –

*"I was raped"*

I could not say these words because I didn't want to believe it. If I said those words, it would make it all too real for me. The PTSD episodes became more frequent and I'd often wake up in a panic.

Many times, I would awake in tears, saying the words –

*"I'm sorry, don't hurt me. Please."*

Over the past two years, the work I have made has been about my journey medically, emotionally, and mentally speaking. Initially, I had no intention of making work about my past and abuse endured by my uncle along the medical issues I endured. I soon discovered the process

of photography was a new form of protection. Photography was the only way I could let anything out, emotionally-speaking without any repercussions. The photographs I was making allowed me to keep my emotions secretive. I felt safe in this space because part of me still believed that no one would ever know the truth.

Around that time I began looking at the work of Jo Ann Chaus. The bulk of her projects reveal the collective experience of womanhood. In her series *Sweetie & Hansom* and *Conversations With Myself*, Chaus uses a type of lighting that I was trying to evoke in my own work. Chaus has been able to place herself in areas using, mostly, natural lighting to her advantage. She pays close attention to the shapes and shadows the lighting creates and how it lays across the space and on her. Her photographs are quite simple but yet hold a lot of emotion. From the wrinkles throughout the white sheets and the way she has laid on the bed to the way she isn't fully standing up straight against the wall. Seeing this in her work made me focus on how lighting, and the way you place yourself in the space can help express emotions, like I've shown throughout my work. In addition, I found inspiration with her series *Conversations with Myself* – as it was created to mirror inner states of being.

*“I see the constraints imposed on them, by society, family and themselves. I see the resignation and the surrender, and I see a glimmer of courage and strength coalescing to emerge anew”* –Jo Ann Chaus, Interview with Lenscratch Magazine, 2020

The words Jo Ann Chaus said during this interview have always stood out to me. In thinking about my work and what I am trying to say through my photography, I consider all women who aren't being listened to, and who don't feel heard or seen when it comes to the topic of sexual abuse. I knew that with my own work however, I was still shying away from being more open about the abuse that I went through as a kid.



*Jo Ann Chaus*

Another artist I took inspiration from was Francesca Woodman. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Woodman explored a variety of topics including body image and questions of the self. She made herself vulnerable but also there was a sense of empowerment in her work. This influenced me into becoming more vulnerable within my own work. Woodman seemed playful in the way she created her work. She used her body in the space she was in and incorporated direct natural lighting with her body to almost interrupt the space she was in. With Woodman, her struggles feel more direct (as opposed to Chaus) and her photographs feel chaotic while using natural lighting that imbues them with a more dramatic feel.

I took bits and pieces from both bodies of work and incorporated it into my own photographs. I paid attention to lighting, often more than the content itself. My project became heavily focused on light and not solely about the emotions I was releasing. I was focused on what light can add to a photograph, how it can create its own narrative. In this manner, lighting became crucial in my work because I had long been thinking about that window in my uncle's room. I also haven't forgotten the lighting in the hospitals.



5 Francesca Woodman

I also started looking into Seiichi Furuya's work about his wife, Christine Gössler who had committed suicide. Gössler always seemed to present herself as if she was doing well. I wanted to understand Christine as much as I could since she seemed to be masking how she really was. I also found myself trying to understand Seiichi Furuya, as the person and partner photographing her.

*"I feel that it is my duty to keep on photographing the woman who has so many meanings for me. By facing her, by photographing her, and then by seeing her in the photographs, it is like seeing myself at the same time, discovering myself." –Seiichi Furuya, 1980*

This is the point when I was able to understand what I was doing as I am both the photographer and subject of the work I have made. From that point on, I began facing myself and my trauma head on. I was able to start seeing myself from a different vantage point. I was able to look at the journey I had been on along with the person I was becoming. *Little Earthquakes* is a record of me trying to cope and manage the realities of these traumas.

Most days, my feelings are a bottled, mixed cocktail of emotions, a deep-seated trauma which I have long avoided ever letting myself feel. On this long road to recovery, I often feel alone and scared, afraid to plunge back into the depths of memory and my past. While I know I am not alone, I recognize I am on a long journey to reclaim and heal the child inside of me.

Making these photographs is the way I feel able to tell my story. The process has allowed me to become vulnerable in a way I never let myself be. Joined together with the constant medical issues I continue to face; I still don't know how to handle it all. But I am trying.





Works Cited:

RAIIN

[statistics](#)

[Children-and-teens](#)

Dr Kostas Prapoglou in conversation with Lissa McClure on the work of Francesca Woodman

[Lissa-mcclure-on-francesca-woodman](#)

Seiichi Furuya

[Seiichi-furuya-45048](#)

Jo Ann Chaus

[Icp-alumni-jo-ann-chaus](#)

[Jo-ann-chaus-conversations-with-myself](#)

Francesca Woodman Photographs

[Woodman-space-providence-rhode-island-ar00350](#)

[Woodman-untitled-concord-new-hampshire-ar00361](#)