

Fragments of Life  
by  
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Who builds art in the middle of nowhere? I knew we were going the wrong direction. Our Ford Windstar minivan lumbered along the dirt road as my dad sang along with John Mellencamp's "R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A." In the front seat, mom quietly pored over an art book that bounced with every bump in the road. Hope, always well-behaved, sat quietly beside me while my brothers punched each other ruthlessly in the backseat. Staring dismally out the window, I lamented how shameful it was for a nineteen-year-old college freshman to be stuck with her family on the weekend. I'd never heard of *The Spiral Jetty* before, but mom acted as if anyone who was sophisticated would know about it. Her obsession was probably one of those weird artist things, like how she got mad at me when I didn't stare long enough at the Alfred Stieglitz photographs at the National Gallery of Art.

When large clumps of sagebrush began to obstruct our path, we parked our car next to an abandoned trailer and picked our way around boulders. The remnants of a deteriorating car lay in the bushes. The stained backseat of someone's van acted as a viewpoint bench. A spiral of organized boulders peeked out of the lake as promised. My brothers ran ahead, clambering on the rocks forming the *Jetty*, almost tipping a middle-aged man and his camera into the Great Salt Lake's salty edge. My mother, in the process of screwing a lens onto her SLR camera, cringed and my father quickened his pace in order to supervise. Mom, in paparazzi fashion, snapped pictures of the desiccated scenery and the shadows of rocks reflected in the lake's surface. Dad stood at the edge of the spiral, brow furrowed. Hope disgustedly swatted at a small cloud of brine flies hovering around her head. The sun reflected off the shimmery salt along the shore, burning our skin. My eyes squinted. I had seen the Great Salt Lake and all its brine-fly glory before. I

had seen boulders just like those ones. I probably could have made a spiral out of rocks if I had the equipment and the desire. Unimpressed, I turned away. Not able to find any shade, I sat on a rock, wishing I were somewhere else.



Barely visible behind the overgrown trees, the house, its front porch completely concealed showed a coat of red paint from the 1960s, paint that curled away from splintery wood panels. The grass in the backyard nearly reached the top of my seven-year-old head. Mack Stoddard, the man who lived in the house, kindly turned off his porn video and left his rut in the couch to give my parents a tour. He made friendly chitchat, but did his best to point out all of the house's flaws, as if he needed to, and refused to show my parents some of the rooms. Those they did see were curtained thick to blot the sun, though boxes and bags still threw shadows in every room.

My parents looked for a house for almost two years, but the money they'd saved from my dad's meager English teaching salary wasn't enough for a down payment. This house was going for only \$54,000, and the combination of my parents' cheap streak and desire to own property pushed them to put in a bid. After weeks of waiting, my parents received word that their bid won; the knowledge that the house was being liquidated through bankruptcy court coupled the news. The realtor didn't even know.

Mack was crazy. He represented himself in court and was repeatedly found in contempt. When my parents would sneak over to the house to do yard work, they'd find type-written notes posted to the front door announcing the sale of the house was illegal. Mack claimed the house should legally be inherited by his children and that it was really his *second* wife who had credit card problems. Tired of Mack, everyone involved with the case pushed for closure to be

expedited. After putting together the longest title search they'd ever done, the county turned the deed over to my parents. Even though this development meant they had purchased a nightmarish project, my parents felt relieved; their dreams of homeownership were beginning to come true.



I tried to prevent my best friend's marriage from the very beginning. Emily met Daniel the summer after our high school graduation. He served as an LDS missionary in our town and Emily's mother set up a date for them a week after Daniel completed his service. Emily and I shared clothes, secrets, and checks at restaurants, but she forgot to mention her date with Daniel. She brought him to a play a week later. I couldn't understand why she didn't punch him when he slipped his arm around her. When I asked her about him, she replied with something along the lines of "sometimes things just happen." What does that even mean?

I secretly plotted ways to kill Daniel when Emily told the younger girls on the cross-country team we coached about how she had to shave her legs all the time because Daniel liked to touch them. I did my best to point out all of his flaws. But after six years of friendship Emily didn't listen to my opinions and fell hopelessly in love; just like all the chick-flicks we would watch together. Although I wanted Emily to be happy, I wasn't convinced that she'd found it in this young man with a prosthetic leg who'd had two kidney transplants. She was out of touch with reality.

Four months after Emily and Dan started dating, I returned to my apartment after a long day of classes to find a note on the marker board: Emily called, call her no matter how late. I threw my gloves at the wall and my surprised roommates looked up from their textbooks to see the stretch knit pathetically fall on the carpet. I knew my emails advising Emily of the dangers of the "M" word had no effect. I wasn't ready to stand in a bridesmaid dress while my best friend

abandoned me and strategically tried to toss me her bouquet. I ranted about how ridiculous it was for her to even consider marriage at such a young age; I mean how could she really know she loved him after such a short amount of time? All of my roommates were older, and I could see them slowly retracting their initial bets I would be the first to get married. After running out of excuses, I picked up the phone and oozed fake congratulations as Emily told me all of the details of how she and Dan had become engaged. When the conversation ended, I quietly hung up the phone and went into my bedroom where I stared at the wall and mourned the loss of my best friend.



According to the essay he wrote about the *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson first got the idea to build the work after reading a book describing red salt lakes in Bolivia. Smithson had already constructed a couple of earthworks elsewhere, and the idea of creating something in red water fascinated him. Since Bolivia was a little far from his home in New Jersey, Smithson settled on the Great Salt Lake since it was at least in the same country. With funds from gallerist and art patron Virginia Dwan, Smithson secured a twenty year lease on a piece of land on the north end of the Great Salt Lake, fifteen miles away from the joining of the Transcontinental railroad where the Golden Spike was driven. After being refused by several companies, Smithson finally hired Bob Phillips, a contractor from Ogden, Utah, to help him create his work. Phillips told *New York Times* writer Melissa Sanford that Smithson's ideas were unusual and many of the local contractors were hesitant to trust an artist from New York, especially one "who wore black leather pants in the middle of summer." Apparently, the term "earthwork" was unfamiliar to those in the Utah construction business.

In April of 1970, Smithson and his crew of two began their work. Using black basalt rocks and earth from the shore, they used two dump trucks, a tractor, and a large front-loader to move 6,650 tons of rock. The finished spiral would reach 1,500 feet if straightened and is so large it can be seen from space. The *Jetty* also functions as a pier people can walk on. Phillips said Smithson meticulously arranged the rocks so the artwork barely poked out of the water, like a monster pushing up from the “center of the earth.”



My poor roommate Linda. She’s submitting her papers for graduation, but instead of being elated, she’s depressed. While she does love music, she only intended to use her degree in violin performance for teaching lessons out of her home. She’d always thought four years would be enough time to find a husband and really start her life. She never created a plan for if she was still single.

The idea that finding true love is the ticket to happiness seems to be a fairly universal misconception. Literature, movies, and even reality TV shows follow the same fairytale plot: two beautiful, but lost people find one another, hook up after overcoming hardships, and the story cuts to the happily ever after. Whether life ends, becomes so blissfully happy it’s indescribable, or isn’t worth mentioning after this point always seems left out. In general, “happily ever after” seems like a vague term that everyone blindly seeks without any idea of how or when this state will be accomplished. Sometimes I wonder if such a thing as “happily ever after” even exists. Once on my way to campus I came across a poster that said “Make your happily ever after.” I scrutinized the poster for a date or location, but couldn’t conclude what exactly the poster advertised or how a person could take advantage of its services. I think “happily ever after” might be like the Holy Grail, something highly sought after, but never found.



Filled with fly and bat corpses, the house was much worse than they thought. Going barefoot wasn't an option. My mom told me the carpets in the house were so gross, a dropped towel became immediately dirty. Because the kitchen smelled bad, my parents kept the fridge in the dining room and only used the kitchen when they had to cook. Roto Rooter came before we moved in because of the faulty plumbing and Mack's method of circumventing this problem didn't satisfy my parents. I guess most people expect to flush their toilet more than once a week. Additionally, the clawfoot bathtub my parents loved didn't actually work. For the couple of months my parents dealt with the plumbing problems, we went to the local swimming pool each Saturday so we could bathe before Sunday. Embarrassed, my mom tried to quiet me when I told my swim teacher we only went to the pool to take showers.

My parents' loan had been granted with contingencies. By the end of the summer, they had to repaint the house, replace some of the carpets and windows, and rebuild one of the walls that had rotted through. While the bank's demands gave my family a lot to do, they could have asked more. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles practically lived at our house the summer of 1993. After tearing down the heavy curtains, my grandma taught me how to play solitaire. My younger sister picked up pieces of caulk and cradled them like a baby doll. Dad chopped down the trees in the front yard with a vengeance. Mom worried about lead poisoning. The elderly neighbors sat in their lawn chairs and watched our progress.

While the adults scraped paint and my pregnant mother perched at the top of scaffolding for hours, my younger sister and I wandered through the tall grass in the backyard. That same summer *The Lion King* came out and we were pleased to have what we considered our own private jungle savannah. The house's exterior had been neglected for over 30 years and required

50 gallons of primer before the actual paint could even be used. As a child, I thought going out meant going to Home Depot.

Still, there were encouraging things: the stained glass windows in the living room, a dumbwaiter in the kitchen, and the removal of the carpet in the front room revealed a surprisingly well-kept wood floor. Even though my parents couldn't help asking what they'd gotten themselves into as they cooked dinner at ten o'clock each night, they were hopeful. They had a house.



The summer of 2007, Noel sends me a link to his Cousin Jessie's blog while we're both at work. "Have you ever heard of the *Spiral Jetty*?" he asks. Whether because of Jessie's rave reviews about the earthwork or the fact that she'd come across an annual wizardfest held there, my husband is intrigued. He's the first person I've known other than my parents that's expressed interest in the *Jetty*. I suddenly feel guilty that I grew up in the same county where the famous work resided, but know very little about it. As we look up directions on how to get to the work, I find myself becoming intrigued.

Aerial photos of the *Jetty* show a spiral of rocks that extends from the shore, looking like the curly tail of a treble clef. In some pictures, black boulders stand out against the water. In others, salt has overtaken the *Jetty* and a foamy coil bubbles in the lake. Sometimes the water is varying shades of red, sometimes an array of blue. In one photo the hue is so deep, the lake looks purple.



When I first saw Noel I thought he was cute, but since he had recently returned home from a church mission I decided to steer clear. Two years dedicated to God's work and focusing

on life's essentials often leads to a bad combination of awkward social behavior and an overpowering duty to find a mate. Granted, not all former missionaries are on a frantic search for an "I do," but I've met enough young men who think they are dancing at the edge of hell as long as they are single. Being wary is wise. Rifling through an LDS folklore collection titled *Returned Missionaries and Dating* I've found countless stories that reinforce my fear. My favorite is the guy that took every first date to the temple, where most LDS marriages are performed. Looking at the white building, he would sidle up to his current victim and talk about how many kids he wanted. As creepy as the story sounds, it must have worked; he was almost engaged three times. I never fell for that kind of crap.

Still, despite all my reservations, Noel and I started dating four months after he moved in next door and we married 11 months later. Mostly I felt smug for holding out on marriage until the age of twenty-one. I don't know what caused the attraction, but my grandma insists it was love at first sight. She says this phenomenon runs in the family. Grandma told me my great-grandma went to a dance with her fiancé, but saw a young man that interested her across the room. She asked her fiancé for permission to dance with him and they ended up leaving together. My own grandma listened to my grandpa give a talk in church and had a strong feeling she would marry him. My parents met at a dance in college and just never stopped dating. My experience wasn't quite as romantic, I saw Noel in the parking lot.



Bits and pieces of the house's history have been given to my parents over the years. Information that they puzzle together: a chauffer's license dug up in the backyard, old newspapers stored in window seats, antique wallpaper hidden by seven layers. Built around 1913 on land purchased from Lorenzo Snow, the house was rarely owned. Former inhabitants dropped



by for tours, adding what they knew. A car salesman remembers peeing off the roof. An old lady who lived there as a newlywed was excited that my parents had kept the original bathtub: big enough for two. The backyard used to extend further. There used to be cows.



My husband, my twelve-year-old brother, and I head to the *Spiral Jetty* on a June afternoon. The directions we've obtained from the internet easily take us to the Golden Spike National Monument. After that, we are guided by a dirt road and mark our progress by the number of cattle guards we cross, there are supposed to be four. My husband drives carefully, ignoring my paranoid warnings about potholes. The air conditioning in our Honda Accord hasn't worked since Noel acquired it two and a half years earlier, but the dirt billowing in the windows makes breathing difficult, so we are forced to keep the windows almost completely closed. I can feel myself cooking. Still, dirt seeps in through the vents as we perspire incessantly. The landscape is drably monochromatic and only makes me thirstier as I stare out our car window for the next fifteen miles. Now I understand why the website advised us to bring water.

Smithson purposely built his earthwork in a remote area; he liked building on the fringes. As he told Gianni Pettena, he preferred sites that were "free of meaning." He wanted to bring people to places they normally wouldn't go. Additionally, David Gallenson comments that Smithson, like many of the other late 60's artists, was trying to make a statement: art doesn't have to be in a museum. For Smithson, art wasn't just a single experience, but a lived experience. The journey was part of his work.



During my teens, I remember getting in an argument with my mom about what love meant. I don't remember why the topic came up, but I remember being sure my life was going to be much more romantic than my parents.'

"Love is different than you think it is, Audrey. It changes with time. It's not necessarily better or worse, it's just different." I didn't want to hear about the dull realities of married life. In my young heart I knew that I was destined for blissful happiness.

When I was thirteen, I put together a wedding time capsule at a church activity. In a letter I would read eight years later, my mom wrote, "Romance and love are important and very enjoyable, but in a good marriage, romantic love turns to a deeper love and conviction. A love made of compassion, tolerance, and familiarity."



The summer has already been so hot and dry the *Jetty* is completely exposed. We can walk on the salt deposits in-between the spirals; if I press hard enough with my toe, the water seeps through. Because the water level of the lake constantly changes, the art is never exactly the same. The jetty was built following a moderate winter, so the water-level was fairly low. Within two years, the water raised so much the work was completely swallowed by the lake and didn't reappear for the next twenty-seven years. People began to think the jetty had simply disappeared and really didn't expect to ever see it again. When the *Jetty* began reappearing in 1999, Smithson's own foundation was surprised. In deciding the work needed to be looked over, they gave the rights to New York's Dia Art Foundation.



"My teacher says my story is too much like a Disney movie, what does that even mean?" This girl has come in to the campus writing center get help on revising a personal essay for her

English 1010 class. As is unfortunately the case with all too many students doing revisions, I have become the liaison between the student and their instructor's criticism.

"Well, she probably just means it seems too perfect. Talk to me about your wedding day, what happened?" I feel like a therapist. From experience, I know a lot of students are better at telling stories verbally than they are at writing them.

"Everything was perfect. I had sparkly flip-flops, a princess dress, white of course, and a tiara. All of our family was there . . . and everyone was so happy, I was so happy. It was perfect. I was a princess and he was my prince."

Patiently, I try and dig a little deeper. "So, what about the details? Was there anything unexpected? Was anyone late? Did your crazy uncle say something inappropriate to your new in-laws?"

"Well . . . I guess my husband did step on my dress, but other than that *everything* was perfect."

For the next couple of minutes I try unsuccessfully to find flaws in this girl's perfect day, but she adamantly insists she lived a fairytale. I am unsure what to do with her. Maybe she's right. Maybe everything was perfect. I have a hard time relating. My normally curly hair fell flat, Noel forgot to bring his suit, and I was half an hour late to the temple because I had to ride in a minivan with my family, and they are never on time. Needless to say, my wedding day didn't have the makings of a fairytale.

As I meet other newlywed couples and read my friends blogs, I sometimes wonder if I am too cynical about my life. All the other couples I know seem so upbeat, so blissfully happy. Then again, maybe everyone is pretending. Recently, the anonymous blog "Seriously So Blessed," a parody of the typical Mormon newlywed blog, has emerged and gained so much popularity it

averages 6,000 hits a day, according to an article in *The Daily Herald*. If the satire didn't resonate with people, the blog wouldn't be so popular. The anonymous author put it best when she told *Mormon Times* in an interview, "joking about [Mormon blogs] is an easier, more entertaining way to deal with it than barfing." Maybe perfectness doesn't necessarily induce happiness.

Amused by the silly, love-inspired stories that were shared, I listened to a tape of engagement stories at Utah State University Special Collections. Interestingly, the story that touched me the most was that of a woman name Shari Winters. Her family was against the marriage and her church leaders tried to dissuade her. When her boyfriend finally proposed he pulled into a Tasty Freeze parking lot on their way to a funeral and simply handed her the ring. Now that's not exactly my idea of the perfect start to a "happily ever after," but the woman said yes because she loved him. Fifty-years later when she tells the story her voice cracks, not because the story is necessarily touching, but because that decision brought her more happiness than any other decision she has ever made.



Smithson was fascinated with the idea of entropy, or the natural disintegration of all things. In an essay he wrote titled "Cinematic Atopia" he expressed his belief that "there [is] nothing more tentative than established order" and change is the only constant in life. For Smithson, even a person's thinking was subject to natural decay since, as he told Paul Toner, there is always an inevitable shift or breakdown. In essence, Smithson built the *Jetty* to be what Jennifer Sinor calls a "geologic clock" that would change with the years and seasons.

My husband finds Smithson's obsession with entropy intriguing. As a mechanical engineering major, Noel says the Second Law of Thermodynamics, or universal law of

increasing entropy, is one of the four most important laws engineers work with. As we balance on the time-smoothed rocks that form the edge of the *Jetty* and stare into the light pink salt water that hugs the edges, Noel chatters about how there are no truly isentropic processes and I nod my head, half-heartedly listening.

“ . . . but the odd thing is that human life pretty much goes against the second law.”

Something interesting, I turn my head, “Really?”

Scientists have a hard time making sense of human life. Even though the human body cannot escape the effects of aging, it has a much higher resistance to the natural state of chaos that affects most everything. As biologist Lyall Watson states, “life is a rare and unreasonable thing.” As humans we constantly try to bring things together: we play matchmaker, we look for connections between our ideas, and we form families. Quicker than a computer, the human eye can detect patterns simply by looking at a set of data since the brain naturally gravitates towards patterns and associations. Because we are so determined to see how things relate to one another, we often create patterns in things that scientifically have no natural connection. To explain this phenomenon 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Richard Buckminster Fuller even created the term “syntropy,” the antithesis of entropy, to categorize humans and their tendency towards “symmetry and coherence.”



My parents had a grand plan for the master bathroom they would build off the side of their bedroom. They bought a Jacuzzi tub off eBay that sat in the garage for over a year before my dad decided to install it, despite the bare floor and sheetrock walls. As all projects in our house went, the bathroom came along slowly. Over the course of a couple of years, we slowly collected bathroom fixtures and installed a shower. Finally, my dad set out to lay the tile. Dad cut every

tile by hand and together my parents arranged the maroon, black, and cream in a pattern my mom designed. On a Saturday, dad mixed grout and we all got out of his way.

Dad worked for hours, but none of us really thought much about that. We were used to our parents disappearing for entire days while they sanded banisters and re-wired outlets. Finally, Dad came downstairs. His hands were gray, his eyes on the verge of tears. The tiles hadn't been sealed and their porous surface kept absorbing the grout. Instead of a clean line hugging the edges of each tile, the floor had a smeared look, like my mirror after I Windex it. Dad had dirtied several old t-shirts as he scrubbed, but the floor didn't improve.

"It's ruined," he said angrily and flopped into a chair. No one dared speak.

Silently, mom slipped out of the kitchen and upstairs to the master bathroom. With a bottle of vinegar and the edges of old towels, she diligently scrubbed each individual tile until they all came clean. When Dad saw the floor later, I think he cried again.



There is an ebb and flow in human relationships. As psychiatry professors Sylvia and Byram Karasu express, "There is no finished product . . . but rather degrees."



The *Jetty's* re-emergence has many people thinking critically about the *Jetty's* future. Dia Art Foundation director Michael Govan told *New York Times* writer Melissa Sanford that because of the damage incurred by being submerged in salt water for nearly thirty years, "the spiral is not as dramatic as when it was first built." The subject of whether the *Jetty* should be rebuilt or whether it should follow nature's course has become quite a controversial topic.

Some believe, Smithson's widow Nancy Holt among them, the *Jetty* should be preserved with rocks being added to the current work. However, many argue it is ridiculous to rebuild a work that was designed to show the effect of time. Robert Storr, former senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York sums it up by saying, "Earthworks were not made to last forever. There is a danger when restoring them to make a more perfect thing than was originally done."

Smithson's wishes regarding the *Jetty's* future are unclear since he died in a plane crash three years after the piece's completion while staking out a site for another earthwork. On one occasion he said the *Spiral Jetty* was "strong enough to take care of itself," but he is also recorded as saying he would build the piece up by fifteen feet if the lake levels continued to rise. For now, the controversy continues with both sides molding Smithson's words to their purpose.



My sister-in-law has a copy of *Cosmopolitan* on her coffee table. I've only had a subscription to church magazines and *Runner's World*, so I'm curious. I skim past pages that give me tips on how to achieve sexier looking hair and makeup and settle on an article titled "Fifty Best Relationship Tips Ever."

"Listen to this," I say to Noel who sits next to me on the couch, dutifully writing computer code for a class. "Rule 30: Don't let him see you peeing, plucking, or using a bikini-wax. You can be 'real' in ways that don't chip away at romance." I shake the magazine in front of his face, pointing at the rule. "What do you think they mean by putting 'real' in quotation marks?"

Noel pauses his typing and laughs. "I don't know, but I guess we're shot."

I laugh too and he kisses me on the forehead before returning to his programming. That morning we ran a half-marathon, not our first in two years of marriage, and after 13.1 miles and a few too many cups of Gatorade I crossed the finish-line and vomited in a gutter. After I'd finished he simply asked, "Do you feel better?" and gave me a hug.



"You know your father would sell this house if anyone would offer him money for it," My grandma said while the other relatives laughed. Dad laughed too, joking about how he wished someone would take the house off his hands. I couldn't believe him though.

The house is like a fifth child. My mom's hand-soldered stained glass hangs in the window. The path with rocks collected from numerous family vacations leads to my dad's berm in the backyard. My parents have spent too many hours wiring rooms, laying sprinkler pipe, and scraping paint to sell their home. What would my parents do in a new house with perfect square rooms and impersonal banisters? They might be happy for awhile, but they would become restless and miss their house. Wood splinters and the gentle clink of water flowing through a warming radiator are too much a part of them.



Marriage counselors Kevin and Marilyn Ryan draw a parallel between art and relationships that makes sense to me. As they put it, both successful art and successful relationships are "conscious creations."



I stare at the continuum of color, a spiraling fusion of blue, purple, yellow, and green. The colors look like they are moving even though they are hugged tightly by a natural wood frame – a frame sanded by my father's hands in the clutter of my parents' basement. Mom



specializes in abstract photography. She shoots close-up images of light reflected in other mediums such as glass or water and blows them up until they are over 100 times their original size, as big as exit signs on the freeway. Tonight is the opening of her April 2009 show at the City Library in Salt Lake, and everyone has come to see her work.

“What is that?” Emily asks, whose four years of marriage haven’t yet destroyed our friendship.

“It’s a glass with peach soda, but I only know that because I saw her take it.”

“Really?” She moves closer to the frame as if the added proximity would help the part become the whole.

Like Smithson’s earthworks, my mom’s images are not static and are constantly evolving. Mom indicates in her artist statement that she believes “the universe can be found in the minuscule.” Similarly, Nancy Holt once told *New York Times* writer Michael Kimmelman that Smithson’s works were “little pieces of infinity.” As I stare at my mom’s photos, I grapple with the idea that large truth exists, condensed into small almost imperceptible pieces. Felicity Coleman, a professor of Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University, said Smithson’s work, and I would add anything worth creating, is “a wholly lived gesture that must be broken apart to be thought.”

Before moving to grab some refreshments, I pause to locate my husband. I smile across the room to where he is engrossed in a piece titled “Reverberate.” My wave cannot compete with the jagged melting of blue and green that holds his gaze, but I am not bothered. A phrase of Smithson’s comes to my mind. *On the edge of memory art finds a temporary foothold*. Like so many things in life, the *Jetty* waits at the back of my thoughts, gradually teaching me its meaning.

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