FIRST PERSON

COPING WITH INFERTILITY

ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

My need to nurture is present in my garden, where I murmur to the seedlings popping through the soil or the flower buds that take their time to open, **Katherine Skene** writes

We don't talk about infertility until fertility treatments work. We breathe a sigh of relief for the couple when the news is positive and struggles that happened behind closed doors become public. "They've gone through so much. They deserve this."

But what about those families that never find their happy ending? If we've developed a language to talk about infertility when it is no longer a sad story, we haven't done the same when it persists, when infertility is the end of the journey and not just the middle.

I think about this as I tend to my garden. I watch my husband and wonder if it is the same for him as he carefully prunes his tomatoes. Does his desire to raise someone and help them thrive transfer to these plants we grew from seed? My need to nurture has been present in a thousand different ways in my life – in my career, where I help others tell their stories; with family, where I keep people together and fix problems; with friends, where I cheer their successes more than I cheer my own – and it is here, too, in this garden, where I murmur to the seedlings popping through the soil or the flower buds that take their time to open.

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In the beginning, I talked about it more – what it felt like to try and try for a baby that never came. Sometimes we still joked about it, and we would laugh. The first injection my husband administered took 40 minutes, each of us alternating between hope and despair and fear of failure so that we couldn't quite plunge the needle into my abdomen. After every treatment, our doctor encouraged us and friends held us as best they could. But the highs and lows were ours alone. Timed cycles, IUIs, an IVF cycle that was a failure before we had barely begun, when we had to abandon it before egg retrieval because my body wouldn't respond to the daily injections and pills. Lows became lower, the lowest. A therapist helped me name the feeling: the deepest grief, even if it was for someone that never existed.

Friends and family who knew we were trying stopped asking, because what is there to say? Our lack of news said what we couldn't, and we sunk deeper into a different state of aloneness. I realized at one point that it had been several weeks since I cried – a shock for someone who cries at airports and Tim Hortons' commercials. Then one day, it took only an innocent and commonplace "How are you today?" from an unknowing grocery clerk to open the floodgates. Suddenly I couldn't stop crying. Living became going through the motions and every perceived failure or rejection became an outsized commentary on my worth. I stopped showing up for myself and for the people around me. "How are you doing today?" We are drowning. We are overwhelmed. We are here but we are not. I got out of bed today. Please save us. "We are okay. Excited for spring."

I think about my dahlias. They are a flower from Mexico and to survive our cold Canadian winters, they must be dug out of the ground each fall and protected and cared for in exactly the right way so that next spring, they have their chance to bloom again. Underground, one tuber becomes many as they clone themselves over and over. Through the winter, I would head to our crawl space once a month and pull my tubers out of their sleeping place, carefully inspecting each of them for rot or mould, or to see if they were too dry. What do you need, my darlings? Is the air too warm? Are you thirsty? Sometimes they required a bit of surgery – cut off a bit of rot, dip the exposed tuber in cinnamon, leave it alone for 24 hours and it would be good as new. I wished the solution was that easy for my body. When we started our fertility treatments, we talked about the parts we thought might be hardest: pregnancies that didn't last or mounting costs; the emotional impact of a sustained process or having to be patient (for two perfectionists who have been able to fix anything by simply working harder or faster). We didn't consider what it would mean if there was simply nothing – no answers, no progress, no pregnancies at all.

We were on vacation in Mexico City when our doctor delivered the hardest blow. There was a 5-percent chance we would ever be able to conceive, based on the trail of bread crumbs left by each subsequent attempt, each treatment. The 5 per cent felt like a fake promise. Nothing is ever guaranteed, not even this. There is always a margin of error. We ended our video call and headed to the botanical gardens at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. The dahlia trees that grow there were in full bloom.

Back in Toronto, he catches me looking at him from under my hat. "What? Is everything okay?" He asks me this a lot these days. "I love you," I say. And it's true, and I feel lucky. At the fertility clinic, we were told that our story often tears love apart. Here, in the deepest shadow, ours has grown. I turn back to my dahlias, whispering encouragement to the little bud that has appeared.

Katherine Skene lives in Toronto.

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers

Have a story to tell? Please see the guidelines on our website **tgam.ca/essayguide**, and e-mail it to **firstperson@globeandmail.com**

TODAY'S SUDOKU SOLUTION

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TODAY'S KENKEN SOLUTION

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Death Cab for Cutie frontman humbled by band's legacy

CONOR ROONEY

Twenty years ago, lightning struck twice for Death Cab for Cutie frontman Ben Gibbard. That year marked not only the release of the band's breakthrough album *Transatlanticism*, but also of *Give Up*, the debut effort of his acclaimed one-off project, the Postal Service. At the helm of two of indie rock's most influential projects, Gibbard is known for his incisive lyrics and deeply emotional songs, which build to cathartic, anthemic releases. Later this year, he'll pull double duty on a six-week tour, hitting the road with both bands to celebrate the two anniversaries, performing each album in its entirety.

Ahead of that tour, Death Cab for Cutie will play back-to-back shows at Toronto's Massey Hall, on June 2 and 3. The Globe spoke with Gibbard about the band's 25-year legacy and his thoughts on looking back.

What does it mean to be celebrating *Transatlanticism* and *Give Up* 20 years later?

A lot of that material on *Transatlanticism* has been such a large part of the live set for Death Cab over the past 20 years, so it's difficult to get that much perspective on it. The songs have evolved in small little ways, and I have difficulty breaking them out from all the other material. With *Give Up*, it still boggles my mind that that record did as well as it did, given the fact that there wasn't a band around promoting. It was this crazy cultural phenomenon that grew wings and started soaring.

You mentioned in an interview with Stereogum that part of writing for the band's 10th album, *Asphalt Meadows*, was to eclipse your own feelings of unease about the world. How has your relationship to anxiety evolved over time?

I think that it's difficult to be an observant, sensitive person in this world and not be overcome at times from the anxiety of living in a modern world. The 24-hour news and social media have done nothing but harm us. For me, my salve for being overwhelmed by the world is making music and long distance running in the mountains. I feel that the one thing we do very little of in this modern world is really be in our bodies.

As people spend increasing amounts of time online, including musicians, do you think that artists have become too accessible?

I want mystery amongst my favourite artists. I want to think about [the Cure's] Robert Smith, as I did when I was a kid and be like "I bet you he's somewhere making some amazing music or doing something cool." If I'd have known every meal he's eating or what football team he's rooting for, I don't necessarily think that his music would mean as much as it does to me now. I'm 46 years old and remember a world before social media. I just feel that art without mystery is kind of disappointing.

And as our online presence grows, our nostalgia for the not-too-distant past seems to be growing as well. Do you agree that our collective connection to nostalgia has shifted?

As I said, I'm 46. Just the advancements in technology between me coming online as a sentient being and today are unlike any other time in human history. We are inundated with information about not only how beautiful the world is, but also of every terrible, sad, tragic thing that happens. I look back on the period of the pandemic and think that, in the eye of the hurricane of all that tragedy, there were also some very beautiful moments and life became a lot simpler.

Yeah, and everyone sort of had to slow down.

Absolutely! I just read this incredible biography of jazz tenor Sonny Rollins, and there's a story that at the height of his powers he decided to just walk away from live performance and recording. He found a spot on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York City and played every night for six to eight hours by himself. He spent a year away, honing his craft. It was a reminder that as creative people, from time to time, we need to take a year on the bridge; time away from the obligations that are being foisted upon us.

Death Cab for Cutie has been together and touring for more than 25 years now. Looking back, how do you view the band's legacy?

We just didn't know what the shelf life of indie rock would be in 1997, when we started this band. When you're 21 or 22 years old, you certainly can't imagine being in a band for this long – let alone one that's been successful. I think qualifying the legacy is not necessarily something that I should be trying to do, but a lot of music that we've put out in the world has really resonated with people and continues to. It's a humbling feeling.

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This interview has been edited and condensed.