

Breakdown

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I recently had what I can only describe as a breakdown.

It happened after I presented photographs I'd taken for a very difficult grad school assignment that propelled me way out of my comfort zone. Though I did not enjoy the exercise, I was proud of myself for having pushed through the fear and discomfort, and I was excited about the resulting photos. The course instructor, however, was considerably less enthusiastic; he thought I'd missed the mark and hadn't really fulfilled the assignment.

I was stunned at having received a reaction that was so different than I'd anticipated. Leaving the classroom, I tried to catch my breath and collect myself, but I found I was furious. And crushed. And completely alone. As the minutes ticked by, I only got more angry as I paced back and forth, cursing, heart and mind racing, too upset to even cry. I didn't really know what was happening, but I realized I had lost control. I was aware that I was behaving irrationally, and I felt awkward and self-conscious about it. But I seemed paralyzed, unable to do anything, with no idea of what I even could do.

It felt, on many levels, like a very bad dream.

This was, in hindsight, one of the more surreal experiences of my life. But even while it was happening, I knew that this was about way, way more than having received critical feedback. My inner dam had finally cracked, and what broke through was years' worth of stress, anxiety, fear, grief, and rage.

The following weekend, still shaken, I set out to tackle my next school assignment, which was to use photography of the outside world to attempt to express my inner thoughts and emotions. *How timely.*

I went to a park in a nearby industrial area, much of which was abandoned. Unsurprisingly, I found that I had a lot to say. I shot indiscriminately, almost wildly, for hours. Bleakness surrounded me, and I reveled in capturing it all, in ways I'd never done before. I deliberately overexposed, and underexposed, and jerked my camera around to blur my subjects. I felt unleashed.

This shoot was a turning point for me. It changed the way I think about my camera and my relationship to it. I found it exhilarating to intentionally try to speak through photography, to be an "author," rather than simply documenting what is in front of me.

I shot all the photographs included here that day, and I think they capture those nightmarish moments for me in a perfectly imperfect way.

In the time since, I've been climbing out of the rubble. I'm working with a new therapist and having long-overdue conversations. I'm being kinder and gentler with myself. I'm arguing less with reality. I'm reevaluating and recognizing my limits, saying "no" and asking for help more. And I'm focusing my attention on the things I can control, refusing to be derailed by those I cannot.

As a result, I feel more truly alive than I have in a long time, and I've resolved that I will do everything I can to make 2024 the best year I've ever had.







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