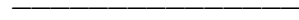


WHEN WORDS FAIL



A One Act Play

Logline

When Words Fail is the story of a young artist trying desperately to persevere after a miscarriage. Leigh is struggling with her loss in solitude and must find some way to transform her heartache into solace. In attempts to process her grief, she gives birth to an ambitious painting detailing her journey. Through a series of non-linear memories, she relives the discovery of her pregnancy, the joys of expecting, and the devastation of losing a child. While accepting the fact that she will never be the same, Leigh explores the violence and beauty of healing and the cathartic power of art.

Cast of Characters

Leigh: F. A twenty-something artist and student.

Scene

Leigh's studio.

Time

Modern times over the span of one year. Non-linear.

Prologue

SETTING: The stage is essentially bare. Far upstage is a giant piece of canvas. In front of the canvas are a collection of paint cans containing various colors of paint, a jar of brushes and a jar of clean water. Also found here are some props used in the following scenes, although these are not currently visible to the audience. If need, a ladder may also be stored here, but it should not obstruct the view of the canvas. The canvas is currently bare. The light will not shine here unless specified.

AT RISE: Center stage is covered in a soft blue blanket of light. LEIGH is sitting amidst some pieces of crumpled paper that have been discarded willy-nilly. She wears a simple white dress and white slippers. Beside her is black book bag. She is currently working on a letter, her legs splayed in front of her. She has written a few lines. Reconsidering, she crosses some words out, correcting herself. Giving up, she tosses the letter away. She stares frustrated for a few moments before grabbing a fresh sheet of paper from the book bag. As she writes she speaks her words aloud.)

LEIGH

I'm sorry.

(The light surrounding LEIGH fades until a clock face of white light appears on the surface of the stage. It's the eleventh hour. The clock hands begin to move backward, slowly at first and then more quickly. They arrive at 10:16, only a short time earlier.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 1

(The light brightens and whitens, erasing the clock face. Three partial walls appear center right, up left and down center stage. The paint cans of LEIGH's studio are no longer visible to the audience. The center wall contains Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist. The other walls are bare or contain random splashes of color. LEIGH gathers the crumpled papers from around her, stowing them away in her bag. She moves around the stage, examining the pieces as though in a museum. Her movement is slow and precise, though she seems slightly uninterested. Her exhaustion is apparent. She examines the last piece, the da Vinci and is struck. Almost instantly there are tears; not the quiet kind, either. Big, crocodile, heaving, sobbing tears. This display should be uncomfortable to watch. She is in fresh mourning. After a few moments she speaks.)

LEIGH

There it is. In her eyes. There's this... Something I can't describe. She's looking at her baby and...

(She breaks for another moment, then catches herself. The lights soften considerably, but remain white. In her loss for words she steps close to the sketch, which has come to life. The child squirms in the Virgin's arms. LEIGH reaches out and takes the baby to her, becoming complete. She gasps. Burnett and Norton's My Melancholy Baby begins to play softly. She hears the music and begins a slow, sweet dance with the child.

As the song fades out the characters of the sketch begin to turn back to charcoal. The child is morphing in LEIGH's arms. Panicked, she clings to the child with the wild desperation. But there is no escape. The woman of the sketch reaches her arms out of the canvas and LEIGH surrenders the child home. The woman holds the child tenderly

before returning to her original pose and becoming completely charcoal once more. The lights brighten, bringing LEIGH back to reality. She is choked up and remains staring at the sketch for a while longer. The museum walls melt away as the lights come up on the back wall. LEIGH approaches the paints and sets down her bag. She evaluates the canvas and grabs a brush from the floor, dipping it in the light blue paint. The blue is used for a general wash of the canvas, creating a soft watery background. She returns the brush to the water jar when she is done. LEIGH steps back to center stage to appreciate her work. After a breath she turns back to face the audience. The light on the backdrop turns off. The main light is soft and blue.)

I miss you. I miss you like I miss the blissful ignorance of my life before all this began. How can I show you how I feel? Does it even matter? I treasured you.

(The lights fade to the clock design. The time changes to 2:47, a long while back.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 2

(The lights come up white, lending a cold, sterile feeling to the space. LEIGH stands in the middle of the stage, full of youth and vitality. She is near trembling with nervous excitement. Her cellphone alarm goes off in her bag. She runs back to it and turns the alarm off, at the same time grabbing a stick from a jar the audience has not noticed until now. She looks intently at the stick. There is a moment of consideration. Her eyes cloud over with confusion and surprise.)

LEIGH

Nope. Nope. Absolutely not. Nope!

(She drops the stick and digs through her bag, finding a small box. Tearing open the box, she pulls out another stick and cup and drops the box next to her. She unscrews the cap, places it beside her and sets the stick down atop the cup.)

Faulty test.

(She glances around for no reason, making sure no one is approaching. She lifts her dress and stands straddled. She begins peeing and holds the cup between her legs to capture the violet paint pouring out of her body. Her cup runneth over¹.)

Shit.

(She drops the skirt of her dress back down and picks up the stick from beside her, being careful not to spill more. She places the stick in the cup for five seconds. Mouthing along with the passage of time, she pulls the stick out, sets it on the cup lid and resets her cellphone alarm for three minutes. LEIGH looks around and sees the paint that has dribbled down her legs and onto the floor. She grabs a paint towel from her bag and a spray bottle from within the paint can area. This spray bottle contains paint thinner. She attempts to spray some paint thinner onto her towel, but it doesn't

¹Psalm 23:5.

nozzle and tries again. And again. And again. She rotates the nozzle and turns the bottle toward her face and tries again. This time it works. The nozzle is in the correct position and she gets sprayed in the face. She sighs in disgust. She redirects the bottle and sprays the towel, wiping down her inner thighs with the paint thinner. It removes most of the residue, but not all. Then she kneels and begins to clean the floor. She cleans in a backward motion and accidentally knocks over a paint can. She rights it and continues to clean up the mess, not realizing that she has spilled paint upon her slippers as well. As she backs up, her slippers track paint through the studio. She keeps cleaning and tracking and cleaning and tracking. The paint thinner helps to thin the paint, but creates a blurry image on the floor instead of erasing it. As LEIGH returns to her starting position the image of a fetus is formed. These three minutes of cleaning should be filled with nervous anxiety; a tragic clown piece that generates sympathy and humor. The cellphone alarm goes off. LEIGH abandons her cleaning supplies and runs to the cellphone, turning it off. She grabs the stick from the lid of the pee cup and blanches.)

Fuck!

(LEIGH throws the test across the room where it hits the canvas and falls to the ground. She explodes. She loses control of her body and voice. The following line should take as long as it needs and may be interspersed with guttural noises, keening and sobs. By the end of the line, she sinks, exhausted, into despair.)

I wish... I... wish... Oh, my god...

(She crawls toward the canvas and picks up the pregnancy test. The moment she touches the test the lights come up on the backdrop, dimming the lights on the main stage.)

I'm going to have a baby... I'm going to be a mommy. I... I am going to be a mother...

(She dips the tip of the pregnancy test in turquoise paint and drags it across the bottom of the painting. The line is slightly

bowed. As she walks or crawls the length of the painting she is carefully balanced. She moves with the steady concentration of a tightrope walker. Looking down at the test one last time, she drops it carelessly to the floor and walks toward center stage to turn and face her painting. The light on the backdrop goes out. Lights fade to the soft blue glow.)

When I took that first pregnancy test I could have sworn it was faulty. It was a false positive, just like in the movies. Nick and his Honey. I knew my period wasn't' far away. Hell, my body felt different but maybe it was a hysterical pregnancy. All the excuses.

(LEIGH moves toward the backdrop. The painting lights come up again, dimming the rest. She begins to create the backdrop; buildings and skyscrapers behind the tightrope. The middle of the painting should not be touched as there must be room for a woman-size figure on the tightrope. The buildings are perched at odd angles and slightly blurry. These are golden or muted yellow in color. The details of the buildings (i.e. windows, outlines, detailing) are fiery orange. These can be added to the painting now or later on as LEIGH completes the painting. She keeps the brush in her hand as she retreats toward center stage. The lighting changes to the clock design. The hands move to 6:03.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

(Lights come up bright white on LEIGH standing alone on stage. In silence, she begins to subtly shake. She takes specific, practiced, forced breaths. She begins to murmur.)

LEIGH

It's okay. You're okay. You're just fine.

(A baby laughs somewhere in the abyss. It is an adorable little giggle. LEIGH reacts visibly. She is shaken and broken apart. She lets out an audible cry. She seems to be fighting to remain standing. She begins speaking to an outside force. She clenches and unclenches her fist around the paint brush.)

Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! That sound is making my fucking heart bleed and it's leaking out my fucking eyes. My brain is fucking throbbing! Shut up! I feel my heart aching in my bones and my muscles. My mouth tastes metallic and my gut is in knots. My shoulders are wound up so tight I think I'm losing my neck. My breasts ache. Not my tits, not my boobs, but my breasts. I've ceased to be the self I knew and I'm living in the agony of remembrance. Fuck.

(The child cries out.)

Every cry runs through my stomach like the scythe of Death. Again. I try to forget the fact that I will never hear my own child cry. I try to ignore the fact that the mother of this particular child is a thirteen year old girl herself. Ignore the fact that this girl has been given the choice to abort this child, but I lost mine unwillingly. I want to hurt mothers and their stupid unborn babies. They are brutal reminders. They are train-wrecks of people 'raising,' and I use the term 'raising' very loosely, sweet, angelic babies. Stupid. Underwhelming. Undeserving women. And God says I can't have a baby. I can't stand it.

(At the height of her anger, LEIGH throws the paint brush in the direction of the unseen child. She storms to the back to pick up her bag, ready to leave the studio. She takes a breath, realizing her rashness.)

It's kinda funny, actually. In truth, no one has done anything wrong. Not even me, I guess. But, oh. I want to take it all out on the world. It's excruciating. But for once I am proud to be a woman. Ha. Who knew? My body is a fucking miracle and anyone who fucks with me can go fuck themselves. I can create life.

(We hear the baby giggle again. LEIGH doubles over, crying out.)

I'm desperate to escape this. Get away from everyone. I'm homicidal. And suicidal. And... But don't worry about me. I'm too terrified to actually do anything. Terrified it won't work. That I'll wake up incapacitated in the hospital and have to deal with everything. And then the truth will all come out- about how I failed you. I can't even get that right.

(The child laughs again.)

Oh, God! I just want you here so badly! And literally no one understands that! I just... I need you here with me. I would change everything in my life to hold you. I would stop going to school, I would stop drinking, I would stop doing everything the way I do just to have you here... So where are you?

(A softer laugh from the child. LEIGH appears resigned to her fate.)

And then I remember. There is nothing I could have done. Nothing I could do. My body rebelled. And there was nothing I could do.

(LEIGH digs her hand into her bag and after a moment of searching pulls out a box cutter. She holds it with the reverent tenderness of a mother holding her newborn babe. My Melancholy Baby plays and LEIGH replicates the dance of the sketch child from earlier. It is eerie, but beautiful with the tool. When the song fades out, she is left staring at the box cutter. In one fluid motion, she opens the cutter and drags the blade along one of her wrists. Instead of the blood we expect, a deep, melancholy purple paint pours out. She stands staring at it for a moment. She opens her other wrist and the same color leaks forth. After a few moments she collapses to the ground. The color continues to seep onto the floor around her. The lights fade to blue. She speaks while lying on the ground.)

There are times I can't breathe when I think about you. Seeing other mothers makes me want to die. Nothing soothes this pain. I would gladly give up my own life to see you, just once. There was nothing I could do.

(The lights fade to the clock design. We rewind the time to 3:14.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

(The lights come up in harsh whiteness. Purple still marking her arms, LEIGH sits up holding her stomach with love and endearment.)

LEIGH

What is it called? Pointillism? Those paintings that are made up of all those individual paint flecks? Seurat's A Sunday Afternoon...? And Signac's The Port of Saint-Tropez?

(As LEIGH speaks the walls of Scene 1 reappear. Individual lights come up on each painting hanging on the walls as she mentions them by name.)

Well. You are kinda like that. You are one of those paintings. You are a perfect image composed of all these distinct little stabs of color. You, the most beautiful thing I've ever known, are made up of these tiny, miniscule dots of paint. And pain. Cyan. Magenta. Key. Morning sickness. Growing pains. Yellow and stretch marks. Cramps. You. You are a picture of Jesus created by the seven deadly sins of my body.

(When LEIGH mentions Jesus, the lights come up on The Virgin and Child with the Infant John the Baptist and St. Anne. The child has turned to pointillism. LEIGH stands with her bag, dropping the box cutter back inside, and moves to the back wall, picking up a brush. As she moves, the walls and their lights slowly fade out, bringing up the lights on the canvas. She puts down her bag and dips the brush in cyan paint. Unlike before, when she paints during this scene her strokes are rigid and aggressive. These flecks are sharp and painful. The walls and their lights slowly fade out.)

You are the one who inspires me to create. The one who keeps me going. The unattainable beauty that all of my art strives to create. Even though you're gone. And I am alone.

(LEIGH stops her painting and leans back to inspect her work. She has created the image of a child in the middle of the canvas in the style of pointillism. She has used cyan, magenta, yellow and key. She sets down her brush, content. Then leans forward and kisses the child tenderly. Perhaps she ends up with paint on her lips. This should remain here for the rest of the piece. She

remains staring for a moment longer, then turns downstage and the lights shift to blue. The lights on the backdrop turn off.)
Feeling you growing inside of me was the most intimate, touching thing I've ever felt. You were like a fire in my belly, heating my heart from the inside. Now I'm so cold and numb.

(The clock reappears. It turns forward slightly to 3:42.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

(Throughout this scene the lights remain a constant blue. LEIGH dances the dance of the seven veils². She lay on the floor, bare naked. Her eyes are closed and her hair lies loosely around her head and shoulders. Both hands rest on her stomach. She is slowly massaging her belly. This represents a marked change from the LEIGH we have seen in previous scenes. This woman is confident and completely calm. She radiates an aura of serenity and happiness. She has that pregnancy glow. The words she speaks are for the baby, alone. They should be spoken in a voice that relates this. It would be ideal if the audience had to lean forward in order to engage with her text.)

LEIGH

Hi, baby. It's your mommy. I love you. If I lie still enough I can feel your heartbeat...

(LEIGH feels for a heartbeat.)

You're so small, yet. Smaller than I can even imagine. I can't wait to see your beautiful face! And hold you in my arms. But for now...

(She lies for a moment longer. LEIGH gets up, still holding her belly with one hand. She sways slightly, beginning to hum and dance to herself. She smiles and walks to the back of the room, picking up a can of deep red paint. Walking to an isolated spot on the stage, perhaps near the umbilical cord of the ghost fetus, she pours the paint over her head, dousing herself. She walks across the room as the lights come up, dripping paint as she goes and approaches her canvas. She rubs her entire body against the wall, leaving the mark of a woman. The woman seems to be embracing the child she just created. LEIGH steps back, admiring the print. She grabs a distressing tool from her supply and begins to use it on the wall. Even though the movements seem gentle, the result is violent. The wall ends dented and broken. She sets down the tool and walks away from the painting, not looking back.)

²Salome by Oscar Wilde (the lights dim to blue.)

A woman's heart can only break so much. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night screaming because you're not there. I'm living in a nightmare. And I can't escape. I'm so sorry. I go on, day after day, but I can't bring you here. I'll always hold you in my heart. You were my little angel. My sunshine.

(The lights fade to the clock design. We reach current time again; it is the eleventh hour. LEIGH remains naked and covered in paint.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 6

(The lights come up white and almost blinding. LEIGH reaches for her dress, pulling it over her head. The dress will be stained by the colors of paint that it comes into contact with. LEIGH reaches out for her bag, pulling out piles and piles of paper. The amount of paper is unreasonable. This is a sort of magical bag. During the flowing speech she drops the papers around her.)

LEIGH

How do you explain it when a straight A student starts failing classes and getting write-ups at work? Her parents know of no reason, her friends are at a lost, and there is no lover left around to care, Her boss and teachers see her as a lazy, unmotivated, waste of time. But fuck. How does someone who's not a mother get postpartum? It's fucking stupid. I'm working as hard as I can at less than I'm used to but I'm still drowning. I spend all of my time trying not to think of you. And hating myself for it. I wonder if you would look like your father with his charming little smile. Wonder if you would be prematurely gray like my uncle. Wonder if you would be a boy... Every little thing. I'm holding on to it all. My little jewel. The journal entries from when I first started having morning sickness. The pregnancy test. Anything and everything I can find that has to do with you. My life as I had known it has changed. And nothing helps.

(LEIGH holds a small pile of papers in her hands. She reads off them.)

'Student shows promise but has difficulty applying herself.' 'Lacks concentration.' 'Lacks determination.' 'Lacks motivation.' 'Work is uneven.' 'The student routinely applies herself but produces inconsistent results.' 'Might benefit from more time spent studying.' 'Might benefit from tutoring.' 'Might benefit from retaking the course or taking a remedial version.'

(LEIGH drops the papers one by one as she finishes reading them. The lights fade to blue.)

I can't fathom what it would be like to hold you and to look into your trusting little eyes. To feel you suckle at my breast. My little boy. Treasure of my diary. I can't keep your memory close enough.

(The image of the clock appears again. We move to 4:48; the moment of truth.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 7

(The lights come up bright but this time with a reddish tinge. This is the only part of the play in which LEIGH stands and delivers without interacting with her surroundings. Her paint covered body seems almost sickly.)

LEIGH

I had just come back from the doctor. I was late for class. It was weird to me that I felt so much more concerned about missing class than the news I had just received. I knew I would get marked off for being tardy. I waltzed into class and sat in my seat as though nothing had happened. Almost immediately we broke off from lecture to work on our projects, and I was grateful to have something to take my mind off the doctor's words. I was writing a piece about the psychological and economic effects of the Roe v Wade decision. And suddenly, I couldn't move. I sat in my chair and wept. I remember feeling alone in the room. The tears were silent, just rolling down my cheeks. But no one knew. And then he saw me. A friend in the class, acquaintance, really. He saw me from across the room and did what I'm sure was only instinct. He found me. He came to me and hugged me tight. He didn't ask what was wrong, and that was the best thing. He hugged me and held me and I could feel his heartbeat. I was so lost. Somewhere in the time he was holding me I must have gotten loud. He led me away to the hallway, blind. I would not have made it if he had not been there to guide me. I had no desire to move. No motivation. I felt like death. I honestly cannot remember ever crying so hard. It was absolutely infantile. Ironic. Still, he just held me. He stood with me in the silent hallway and held me. And I held him back, harder than I'd ever held anyone. It was my teacher that eventually asked what was wrong. I remember I could not get my eyes to focus. I hadn't spoken the words aloud at that point. I had just found out, after all. It's still difficult to talk about, but nothing compared to that day. It came out, all the words came out. "I lost my baby. I lost my baby and I lost myself. I don't know what to do. I did something wrong. I hurt. I'm dying. I can't. I can't. I lost him..." I think that was the beginning of the hysterics. Before long I would have broken blood vessels in my eyes and face, pulled out chunks of my own hair. I gave myself a black eye. I had no idea how to cope with something like this. Now is when he spoke. "I will never understand but I am so, so sorry. So sorry." Having someone hold me that way and give me that

kind of support was overwhelming. On top of everything else, I couldn't handle it. I crumbled. I was loud. I remember that. I think I was wailing for a while. He was doing his best to calm me down, but how do you help a girl whose heart has been torn out? The rest is a bit blurry. I know I ended up at home, thankfully, though I don't know if it was him or my roommate who brought me to bed. I slept the rest of the afternoon. Medicated. I needed something to be my heart's tourniquet.

(All the strength that LEIGH has shown in the preceding speech can feel free to evaporate now. She can choke on the following words. The lights fade to blue.)

I love you for what you might have been, as well as what you were. I'm sorry I can't kiss you and make this all better. I need you to know that I love you, and I miss you so much.

(The clock reappears and moves us to 10:44.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 8

(The light comes up, white once more. LEIGH has pulled herself together. She is functioning again, though shakily at times. She retrieves three paint cans from the back of the stage and a paint pan, setting the center stage. She sits upstage of them. There is a long pause as LEIGH considers how to tell the rest of her story. Throughout the following text she pours different amounts of each paint into her pan and mixes them together with a paint stick. This act is very precious.)

LEIGH

I love shopping for baby stuff. But since all this has happened it has gotten so much harder! I never used to worry when I would see cute babies wrapped in a blue or a pink blanket. But now? Now I'm concerned that parents are subjugating their children to patterns of thought and behavior that don't suit them and that irreparable harm is being caused! I know, I sound like a pretentious, privileged asshole. But I just want to do it right. I'm a product of my times and I want my child to be comfortable in how they were raised. Regardless of sex. Regardless of gender. Regardless of anything. When I did find out I was pregnant, I didn't tell anyone. I kept it to myself. I was keeping it a secret until I could find the right way to tell people. An so, when I went shopping for the first time I was on my own. What would say, unconditionally, "I love you," from a mother to her child? Clothing is a punishment and blankets a necessity. The gift of life? Sure! But that seems too literal. It needs to be something loving. From the heart. I knew. Very soon afterward. After I lost him, I knew exactly what to get him. It had to be something that was a piece of my heart. And since I couldn't give him the world, I gave him the next best thing. This stuffed animal, this teddy bear, Marco. So when he's lost we can play Marco Polo until he's safe again. And, so now. Now that he is no longer here. Now that his father and I are no longer together. I sit here with Marco, feeling lonely and abandoned, always waiting for a small "Polo" out of the dark. But words fail.

(LEIGH reaches her hand into the paint pan and pulls out a teddy bear. He is drenched in purple paint. She hugs the bear to her as the lights change to blue.)

This is dedicated to the one I love.

(LEIGH continues to hold the doll as she moves the paint cans and the paint pan to the back of the stage. The lights come up on the backdrop. As the clock design reappears she gives the teddy bear to the pointillism child. The child embraces the doll and turns back to paint. The backdrop lights fade. The hands of the clock move onto the eleventh hour once more.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 9

(The entire scene takes place in the blue light of the beginning of the play along with soft lighting on the backdrop. LEIGH stands at the back of the stage, completely focused on her piece. She mixes and fixes and works the paint. Soon we see the full scope of the picture appearing. A woman stands on a tightrope with one arm out, the other swaddling a child and his teddy bear. The background of the picture is high among a city scape. The painting seems soft and passionate, but at the same time suggests a certain precariousness. As LEIGH completes the painting, her song begins to play once more. LEIGH steps away from the painting and closes her eyes, her back to the audience. A sheet of white fabric falls from the ceiling. She swaddles it into a baby shape as she turns toward the audience. She dances to the music, a slow, nurturing sway as she finds her way to center stage where the clock hands would meet. LEIGH kisses the baby, then slowly lets it melt from her arms as she releases her hands to her sides. The fabric stretches into a tightrope which runs parallel to the one in the painting. A light smile comes to her face. She seems lifted. She steps onto the tightrope and pauses, taking the time to look offstage. She walks the rope, leading herself off. Before she exits she turns back to her completed painting. The lights brighten for a moment on the canvas. LEIGH exits. The clock reappears onstage. The hands move on toward 12:00.)

(BLACKOUT)

(CURTAIN)