

**DAYS OF HEARTBREAK**



# Days of Heartbreak

curated by Nicola Elisabeth Petek

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# FOREWORD

Nicola E. Petek

Generally, the term “heartbreak” (also known as a “broken heart”) is defined as a proxy for the intense emotional stress or even physical pain one feels when experiencing a great and deep longing. The term is cross-cultural and is often cited in reference to a coveted or lost lover, though I believe this interpretation falls short.

In my research leading up to the exhibition and through many conversations, I came to realise that there are various types of heartbreak that go beyond the romantic definition. This pain of the heart can occur both individually and collectively: the loss of home, the memory of a moment that can never be lived again, the sudden parting from a loved one, a lack of understanding from one’s family about life choices, dissatisfaction with oneself or with the behavior of others.

Some of the artists I invited to participate in the exhibition confirmed that dealing with the subject was particularly cathartic for them, as they were confronted with the feeling of heartbreak at the moment of my inquiry. Others were unsure whether they had ever suffered from a broken heart, or whether they were even capable of doing so. Of course, I chose the respective participants because I could recognise a certain melancholy in their work that addresses the subject, be it in an abstract or literal way. However, my call for literary engagement with the theme, to whatever extent and in whatever way, posed another challenge for many, but all of them solved it in an impressively personal way. I am deeply grateful to all the artists involved for their openness and trust.

*“I had no trouble betting on the flood  
against the Ark  
You see, I knew about the ending,  
what happens to the heart.”*

Leonard Cohen

The “Days of Heartbreak” exhibition provides an experiential place to physically discover the artists’ interdisciplinary explorations of the topic. This publication, on the other hand, presents a collection of native-language, personal thought fragments and quotations, folk tales and prose, poems, snapshots, explanations, and searches that are as multi-faceted and diverse as their authors. In her introductory essay, the Sydney-based clinical psychologist Nadine Neukirch gives us an insightful overview of the “Psychology of Breakup Symptoms,” which we have all might have experienced in one way or another.

We are holding in our hands a small study that can perhaps contribute to understanding the influence that subjective circumstances as well as cultural identity can have on the respective ways of dealing with a broken heart.

# **SURVIVING HEARTBREAK. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BREAKUP SYMPTOMS**

Nadine Neukirch, Clinical Psychologist



Shock, anger, waterfall of tears, obsessive thoughts of the relationship, blaming ourselves, blaming the other, sleepless, numb, not hungry, too hungry, cannot think, cannot concentrate... pain of the heart. Breakups can be excruciating. A Google search of "heartbreak" in 2021 resulted in 81,200,000 results, with top questions asked including "Why does heartbreak hurt so much?," "How do I get over heartbreak?," and "What does heartbreak do to a person?" Heartbreak symptoms can significantly impact mental health, including sadness, depression, anger, and anxiety,<sup>1</sup> and can be akin to those of bereavement.<sup>2</sup> So why do we experience these symptoms? This text will explore the role of heartbreak symptoms through a psychological perspective, understanding them as survival functions of the body.

Heartbreak can be understood through the evolution of the nervous system, to adapt and survive threats and dangers. Polyvagal theory refers to the vagus nerve, and how different branches of this nerve connect to and affect our emotional, physiological, and social responses.<sup>3</sup> The vagus nerve is the longest nerve of the autonomic nervous system; it sends signals from our digestive system and organs up to the brain and back down the opposite way. Polyvagal theory explains three core states of the nervous system and how the body and mind change when we are under stress.

The first nervous system state, "social engagement," describes when the body signals we are safe. This would reflect stages when we feel secure in a relationship.

*"I am on a bushwalk with my partner, I notice the bold blue sky, the shades of green as the leaves rustle in the wind. I feel joy as I look over at my partner, their face looks sad but I feel gratefulness and compassion, I know they are tired from work and it's not personal to me. I don't know what this week will bring for us, but I am calm and grounded for whatever comes."*

In "social engagement" we feel more joy, compassion, and creativity. Our thoughts are optimistic, we are in the present moment, and we can absorb new information. Physiologically in the body our heart rate and breathing are relaxed

and restorative; our digestive and immune systems are functioning well; sleep is sound; and we release oxytocin, the hormone that promotes social connection without fear.

The second nervous system state, "fight or flight," activates when our body signals danger and switches to the sympathetic nervous system. Our thoughts and feelings change to anger or fear to help us approach and attack the danger, or to run away. In the case of a breakup, the nervous system says we are under a social threat and tries to protect us by altering the stories our mind tells us and changes the physiology of the body.

*"I've checked my phone for the 100th time – still no message from my ex-partner, I'm exhausted, I'm teary, I'm agitated. My friend says, 'focus on yourself and then you'll find the right person,' my stomach drops, my heart pounds, 'they think I'm doing something wrong.' 'It's my fault it ended.' I'm under attack from my own thoughts, 98% of the day spent looping in self-blame and re-living memories of 'what could I have done differently.'"*

In "fight or flight" our thoughts are narrowed and focused on threats – compared to "social engagement" – where thoughts are expansive. We focus on worst case scenarios and injustice, such as rumination of what happened in the relationship; intrusive frequent thoughts of our ex-partner; or worry of life being single. Walking down the street we may perceive more angry faces than in "social engagement" or interpret other's comments in a negative way. The brain also tries to make sense of what happened to try and protect us from future breakup pain. Our thinking becomes more rigid and focused on blame (black and white, all or nothing): e.g., "it's all their fault, it's all my fault." The brain likes to know clear cut answers for safety:

*"Is there a snake or not?"*

It does not like ambiguity, therefore it can jump to rigid answers of why the breakup happened without taking into account the complexities of context, both people's circumstances, and other contributing factors. Physiologically we may have difficulty sleeping and eating: the release of stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol disrupts sleep.<sup>4</sup>

*"Have you ever woken up at 3 a.m. wide awake with racing thoughts? It wouldn't be safe to sleep if a snake is around the corner so your body pumps adrenaline at random times."*

Under stress, our appetite is dysregulated.<sup>5</sup> The body says it is better to shut down restorative functions, such as digestion, and gear all resources to short-term survival. When "fight or flight" is activated, our actions become more impulsive and based on the urge of an emotion, and our prefrontal cortex in charge of complex thinking deactivates.<sup>6</sup>

*"If a snake is about to bite me it's better that fear makes me jump, rather than wait for the thinking brain to say 'take two steps to the left.'"*

Our actions are movements toward the threat, for example viewing photos of the ex-partner or excessive calling and texting, or movements away from the threat, like partying every night and escaping through alcohol.

What happens if the nervous system says we cannot survive this danger by fighting or fleeing? What if we feel powerless to change the situation? The nervous system goes into the third state of survival, "freeze," activating the dorsal vagal nerve.

*"I'm weighted to the floor, every limb sapped of energy, my insides are hollow. It took two hours to get out of bed, I stood up thinking, 'I should do something,' I'm clouded, nothing feels worthwhile, I collapse to the floor and cry. 'No one will understand, I am all alone.'"*

In "freeze" the body goes into immobilisation mode, shutting down resources to conserve energy and wait out the danger.

For example: we cannot outrun the snake, so freeze, play dead, and hope it slithers away. In a breakup we can experience feelings of shame, guilt, helplessness, depression and numbness. The stories our minds tell us may be of bleakness and self-blame, "That was my last chance for love," "I will never meet anyone again," "There is something wrong with me." The brain says it is not helpful for survival to have hope and optimism now. It is safer to shut down thoughts of the future. If we blame ourselves, then that is an easy solution: "If

I am the issue, then all I need to do is 'fix' myself, then I will be safe from future heartache." This is the brain's way of trying to get control of a situation. Physiologically we will experience a decrease in heart rate, blood pressure, social awareness, and our behaviours: e.g., low motivation and fatigue, difficulties initiating tasks, cancelling social plans, or oversleeping yet not feeling energetic.

By understanding the body's survival responses, we can make sense of the painful and intense symptoms of heartbreak. "What does heartbreak do to a person?" "Why does heartbreak hurt so much?" When a relationship ends, our nervous system believes there is a serious imminent threat to our survival, and it activates an equally intense physiological survival response. Our nervous system tries to protect us, by triggering anxiety or anger – "fight or flight" – or depression – "freeze."

"How do I get over heartbreak?" Next time we are heartbroken on the floor, with puffy eyes, surrounded by soggy tissues, numb, and confused – instead of blaming ourselves and saying "What is wrong with me?," we can reframe and ask ourselves "how is my nervous system currently trying to protect me?" and "what can I do right now to help it feel safe?"



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# DANIELA ELORZA

\* 1989 in Bogotá, Colombia

*Growing From Within*, 2021  
Oil on jute  
55 x 45 cm





## **Creciendo desde dentro**

Existe una forma de crecer que tiene que ver con las entrañas de nuestra alma y no con la cambiante forma de nuestros cuerpos.

Un crecer que ocurre en el profundo reino de nuestra esencia para acercarnos a lo que genuinamente somos.

Nos transforma de tal manera, que nos hace más conscientes de lo que existe en nosotros y en todo lo que existe.

Este crecimiento trae su propio dolor. Un dolor que llega a ser insoportable, intenso:  
Como si un árbol estuviese creciendo desde la semilla de nuestra alma. Nos duele en lugares que siquiera podemos señalar con precisión. Un dolor abrumadoramente ardiente que nos palpita en el ombligo.

Para nutrir este crecimiento hay que confrontarse a sí mismo. Hacerlo posible significa aceptar la totalidad que somos: la luz y la sombra de nuestro árbol-alma.

Este crecimiento es el más doloroso de todos, pero así mismo, es esencial para construirnos una vida íntegra y hermosa, arraigada en una presencia consciente, amable y agradecida.

## **Growing from within**

There is this kind of growth that has more to do with the core of our souls than with the changing shape of our bodies.

This growth happens in the essential realms of ourselves. It occurs within, but only to bring us closer to what we genuinely are.

A kind of transformation that makes us more aware of what it is in us, and in everything there is. It is growing to become ourselves.

This growth brings its own kind of pain. A pain that can be unbearable at times: Like if a tree was growing from the seed of our soul. It hurts in places we cannot even pinpoint. An overwhelmingly burning pain that throbs in our navel.

One must face oneself to nurture this growth. To make it possible is to embrace the whole of us: both the bright and the dark side of our soul tree.

This kind of growth is the most painful of all but also, the most essential to building a wholesome and handsome life for ourselves. A life rooted in awareness, kindness, and gratitude.

# ABOUT

the artists

**Daniela Elorza**  
\* 1989 in Bogotá, Colombia

Daniela Elorza grew up in between different countries in both South and North America, mainly in the Peruvian capital Lima. Ever since she was a child, her passion for art was almost second nature, and still is to this day. Elorza's (academic) experience in South America fuelled her deep interest in pre-Columbian Latin American art, echoes of which can be discovered again and again in her paintings.



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curated by Nicola E. Petek

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