

Fall 2015

You Have a Body to Share

Shelby J. Smith

Eastern Kentucky University, shelby_smith404@mymail.eku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation

Smith, Shelby J., "You Have a Body to Share" (2015). *Honors Theses*. 284.
https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/284

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Eastern Kentucky University

You Have a Body to Share

Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

Fall 2015

By Shelby Smith

Mentor

Dr. Lisa Day

Women and Gender Studies

You Have a Body to Share

Shelby Smith

Dr. Lisa Day

Department of Women and Gender Studies

Posttraumatic stress disorder has been conceptualized as a failure of communication. This failure results from the effects of dissociation during trauma, the difficulty of expressing embodied experiences, and victim blaming in American rape culture which discourages survivors of sexual abuse to disclose their stories. The inability of survivors to create a trauma narrative results in separation from themselves, others, and reality, which further inhibits communication. The present discussion aims to explore the utility of creative writing in overcoming the communication failure of trauma and reconnecting survivors to themselves, others, and reality. A self-reflective example of confessional poetry related to sexual trauma follows review of the literature related to sexual abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder, and writing therapies. The discussion uses personal experience due to lack of representation of women's embodied experiences in the literature. The poetry collection is composed of poems written during exposure to sexual abuse and poems written after the trauma had ended. The format is designed to emulate the experience of time as punctuated while still maintaining fluidity, reflective of working and reworking identity. The conclusion of this creative project includes a reflection from the artist about the process of creating her trauma narrative and how creative writing enhanced her coping with posttraumatic stress disorder.

Keywords: thesis, posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD, poetry, art therapy, trauma narrative, rape culture, sexual assault

You Have a Body to Share

The analogous and overlapping processes of trauma and creative nonfiction provide a unique opportunity for losing and recreating one's self. Trauma is two-fold in that the experience of trauma precedes processing of the event. While the element of experience is the same in constructive writing, the individual takes an active role in processing by creatively expressing the experience. Constructive storytelling and trauma have a reciprocal relationship in which writing mediates the effects of trauma while trauma provides writing content. The present discussion aims to explore the utility of creative writing in reconnecting trauma survivors to themselves, others, and reality. Furthermore, this discussion includes a self-reflective, performative example of confessional poetry as therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from sexual trauma.

First, it is necessary to define and conceptualize posttraumatic stress disorder and in doing so, to highlight characteristics of trauma that may incline survivors toward creative writing. The earliest accounts of maladies like PTSD date back as far as the fifth century B.C.E. (Horowitz, 2010). Although the general public has historically associated PTSD with war-time and military personnel, psychological trauma first gained public attention in the late 1890s when Sigmund Freud, among others, studied hysteria (Herman, 1992, p12). Episodes of altered consciousness which occurred in response to the suppression of psychologically traumatic events characterized the female condition (Herman, 1992, p12). Though Freud's work remains the foundation for many models in trauma theory, he ultimately repudiated the validity of his patients' suffering and claimed that women want to experience sexual abuse (Herman, 1992, p19). Freud's refusal to

accept the exploitive nature of women's sexual histories not only demonstrated a disregard for women's real, lived experiences but also an unwillingness to see the domestic sphere as anything other than a safe haven. The common understanding of PTSD as a war ailment is an inability to adjust to life as a civilian after being exposed to the traumatic events of war. From this line of thinking, civilian PTSD is an inability to adjust to everyday life after experiencing trauma (Horowitz, 2010). Trauma, as a subjective experience, can be defined in a multitude of ways. Though specific traumatogens vary by individual, trauma occurs when an individual experiences an extreme loss of control at the hand of another person, group of people, or situation such as a natural disaster (Şar & Öztürk, 2007). Individuals who suffer trauma often do not perceive the event as traumatic during the initial occurrence. In order for an experience to be recognized as traumatic by the survivor, it has to defy one's beliefs about the world (Şar & Öztürk, 2007). In this sense, a survivor may not realize that a trauma has occurred until a substantial amount of time has elapsed and perceptions about normalcy have changed. Limits to recognizing an event as traumatic include motivation, ability, and life experience.

Since traumatic events fall outside of what is considered normative by the individual's cultural standards, trauma often results in separation. Individuals can become separated from themselves, others, and reality. The inability to articulate trauma creates fissures between the survivor and society. Isolation and a sense of abandonment felt by the survivor occur as the result of a communication and recognition failure (Horowitz, 2010). Communication necessitates a willing and, especially in the case of trauma narratives, empathetic listener. When responding to sexual trauma, an accepting audience

is difficult to come by in Western societies. The United States of America, specifically, is characterized as a rape culture in which sexual aggression in men is normalized and sexual submissiveness in women is expected (Griffin, 1971). Such norms give rise to problematic concepts like the Willing Victim Myth and false virgin/whore dichotomy, subsequently creating a hostile environment for survivors of sexual trauma to share their narratives. Being indoctrinated with a morality that is more accepting of guilt than shame, survivors of sexual abuse falsely blame themselves (Harris, 2003). Victim blaming is a common practice within American rape culture. Individuals' decision not to share their story for fear of victim blaming or because they blame themselves effectively silences survivors. In the case of sexual assault, survivors are likely to have previously experienced silencing. When an individual refuses the sexual advances of another, the other party must not only accept the refusal but also recognize that the individual has the authority to refuse; in other words, the individual has authority to make decisions about their own body by having ownership of one's body (McGowan, 2009). In a society that views women as sexual objects, rather than sexual subjects, a woman does not have ownership of her own body because men consider it their property. When a man disregards a woman's ownership of her body and ability to refuse sexual advances, he silences her (McGowan, 2009).

Rape culture leads women to believe that their lived experience, particularly that of sexual abuse, does not matter. Were this the only cause of communication failure in the wake of trauma, survivors would at least be able to seek support from progressively minded individuals. However, trauma-telling in itself is difficult due to the insufficiency of words to describe survivors' lived experiences. The physical body experiences the

most when a traumatic event occurs. Sensory level processes record details of the trauma without words or images, giving rise to embodied memory (Culbertson, 1995; van der Kolk, 1998). During traumatic events, the mind has multiple ways of protecting itself. A survivor of sexual abuse may recall a feeling of disconnection from themselves during the trauma, as if the mind prevented itself from witnessing perpetration of the body (Culbertson, 1995). This type of visceral experience creates language barriers between the survivor and others. Though the survivor cannot describe their lived experience, they have a sense of knowing in their body about the trauma. Normally, the mind stores sensory information, converts it into narrative form with symbolic meaning and integrates it with other experiences (van der Kolk, 1998). The perception of traumatic experiences inhibits this process, leaving the sensory input without meaning (van der Kolk, 1998). The traumatic event is ambiguous yet maintains a vitality of its own (Culbertson, 1995). Memories of sexual abuse are similar in structure to imagined events because survivors have few supporting memories related to the trauma (Ward & Carroll, 1997). Supporting memories, such as conversations with others, occur after the traumatic event and reinforce its actuality (Ward & Carroll, 1997). The ambiguity associated with sexual abuse memories, paired with the lack of validating conversations about the trauma, leads to further uncertainty about feelings of guilt and doubt for survivors, and continual failure to reach resolution.

Psychoanalytic theory holds that the self has two main components: psychological and sociological (Şar & Öztürk, 2007). If an individual does not reach resolution after a trauma occurs, it inhibits development of the psychological self and accelerates development of the sociological self (Şar & Öztürk, 2007). The imbalance distorts reality

and time perception, causing the individual to experience dissociative symptoms (Şar & Öztürk, 2007). In respect to posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociative symptoms include depersonalization, which causes the individual to be separated from herself and derealization, which is the experience of one's surroundings feeling unreal or dreamlike (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Dissociative symptoms disrupt the cohesion of trauma narratives, further making the event untellable.

In addition to the separation between the individual and reality caused by dissociative symptoms, sufferers of PTSD struggle to separate the past and present due to intrusive memories and reliving of the trauma (American Psychological Association, 2013). Survivors of trauma re-experience the event through nightmares, flashbacks, pain, and bodily states (van der Kolk, 2002). The involuntary and recurrent nature of intrusion symptoms adds to the loss of control experienced by the survivor. In addition to having integral beliefs about the order of the world shattered, trauma causes a shattering of the self (Gilmore, 2001). People assign meaning to experiences through storytelling and in doing so, shape their identity (Tuval-Mashiach, Freedman, Bargai, Boker, Hadar, & Shalev, 2004). Unlike healthy individuals, who are able to maintain a coherent, dynamic self view that changes to accommodate new experiences, individuals with PTSD cannot integrate their trauma experience into their life narrative (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2004).

Narrative therapy provides a particularly efficacious approach to treating trauma by facilitating the integration of trauma into a cohesive life narrative. A life narrative is the compilation of several significant life events used to construct identity and explain life course (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011). Though individuals are able to narrate single life events by early childhood, life stories do not begin to develop until

early adolescence when individuals can integrate concepts of person-hood (Fivush et al., 2011). Within psychotherapy, narrative therapy consists of the creation of a collaborative oral history between client and therapist (Besley, 2002). The conversation aims to create a fluid narrative by deconstructing the client's problematic patterns of thinking. The role of the therapist is to pose questions to facilitate the dialogue and to empower the client to recreate their narrative with adaptive cognitions (Besley, 2002). Though the psychodynamic framework of narrative therapy addresses the importance of language in the construction of narratives, it fails to incorporate a powerful language tool – writing.

Multiple therapeutic techniques use writing and can take the form of journaling, letter-writing, or poem-making (Stepakoff, 2009). Poetry therapy has two approaches, receptive and self-expressive, that address the communication deficits created by trauma. Receptive methods utilize other survivor's preexisting poems that can be chosen by either the therapist or client to express difficult to articulate emotions (Stepakoff, 2009). The discussion of poetry written by others can mediate the sense of isolation felt by a trauma survivor. The self-expressive method of poetry therapy has clients create original poems, most commonly by using specific prompts given by the therapist (Stepakoff, 2009). However, some trauma survivors are naturally inclined to express themselves through poetry as a coping strategy. "Auto-poetic healing" describes spontaneous, unguided poetry writing in the wake of trauma (Stepakoff, 2009).

In addition to reliving the event through intrusion symptoms, individuals with a trauma-centered identity are likely to voluntarily think about the causes, consequences, and implications of the traumatic event (Ehring, 2008). Engagement in rumination can be interpreted as an attempt to create a trauma narrative. Recent correlational studies of

rumination and creativity have found that rumination has two subtypes: self-reflective and brooding (Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Verhaeghen, Joormann, & Aikman, 2014). Self-reflective rumination is an active, analytical mechanism to alleviate stress, while brooding is a passive experience of negative emotions (Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Verhaeghen, Joormann, & Aikman, 2014). Self-reflective rumination as an adaptive, voluntary coping strategy has been shown to have a positive effect on creative behaviors (Verhaeghen et al., 2014). Though Ehring (2008) did not study the effect of rumination subtypes on PTSD, the two subtypes are inter-correlated, meaning that an individual who is prone to brooding may also be prone to self-reflection (Verhaeghen et al., 2014). However, poetry as a self-expressive activity may promote self-reflection rather than brooding in individuals who have experienced trauma.

Harris (2003) addresses the multipurpose utility of trauma story telling: “When we write, we signify not only for ourselves, but *for the other*.” Writing enables individuals to work out trauma narratives for themselves but also gives them a product to share with others. Expressive writing, in conjunction with therapy, is a way for trauma survivors to seek validation, accuse their aggressors, and regain agency (Harris, 2003). One way to conceptualize agency is as an individual’s ownership of oneself, and ability to choose and control one’s own thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Sexual trauma removes control from an individual while writing about the event, on one’s own terms, can restore agency. Validation is also important for trauma survivors because they struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. The distinction between feeling responsible for one’s own trauma and ashamed by the human vulnerability that accompanied it is fleshed out through confessional writing (Harris, 2003). Since traumatic memory is often emotional

or embodied, the use of metaphors which require the writer to take on a unique perspective can be a helpful communicative tool (Orange, 2011). Additionally, trauma narratives can use symbolism to express the consequences of the event for identity. These three characteristics make confessional poetry uniquely fitted to serve as a communicative tool for sexual trauma survivors. Contrary to critiques of confessional poetry as self-indulgent, it empowers survivors by allowing them to address previously unresolved trauma and to overcome societal silencing (Harris, 2003). However, resolution of trauma, like the writing process, is never complete (Herman, 1992). While most survivors find resolution within personal contexts, others seek global resolution through social action (Herman, 1992). The concept of personal is political can be likened to writing for oneself or writing for a public audience. Negotiating the ambiguity of creative writing and the relationship between private and public space is another way that trauma survivors can regain control.

Issues of context, personal characteristics, coping strategies, trauma type, time elapsed since trauma, and experience with disclosure mediate the potential benefits of written disclosure about trauma (Ullman, 2011). The limited research of written disclosure effects for PTSD patients shows results varying from insignificant differences from control groups, to an increase in avoidant behaviors (Gidron, 1996; Sloan, Marx, & Greenberg, 2011). Survivors of sexual trauma may face negative responses to disclosure, such as increased brooding, which could inhibit the positive effects of disclosure (Ullman, 2011; Brown & Heimberg, 2001). However, structured writing therapy, based solely on therapist-given writing assignments, has been shown to be an effective alternative to cognitive behavioral therapy in improving symptoms of acute stress

disorder and PTSD (van Emmerik, Kamphius, and Emmelkamp, 2008). Additionally, written disclosure reduces PTSD symptoms in women with a history of child sexual abuse (Meston, Lorenz, & Stephenson 2013). Clearly, practitioners should evaluate the appropriateness of expressive writing as a therapeutic device for PTSD patients on an individual basis, including considerations such as coping skills training (Gidron, 1996).

The current piece uses a personal example of “auto-poetic healing” due to lack of representation in the present literature. My trauma narrative is unique in that it involves the intersection of topics, such as statutory rape and sexual coercion, which have not yet been extensively researched in relation to PTSD. I created the creative component of this discussion by selecting original work I wrote on the subject of my aggressor and experience of trauma. The format emulates the experience of time as punctuated while still maintaining fluidity reflective of working and reworking identity. I wrote the poems left-aligned during the course of my trauma and before I was diagnosed with PTSD while the right-aligned poems were written after diagnosis. I present the pre-diagnosis pieces in chronological order while the post-diagnosis are presented in reverse chronological order. The last several pieces were written after the traumatic relationship had ended but before a therapist diagnosed me. This organization shows changes in my perspective. In addition to poetry, I include pieces of prose on the basis that they contribute significantly to the representation of trauma and cohesion of the piece as a whole. I provide a brief history of the traumatic experience being examined in order to give the reader context.

When I was twelve years old and had a geographically distant relationship with my father and an emotionally distant relationship with my mother, a new male figure, a friend of my older sister, came into my life. I looked to this person, who was four years

my senior, as a type of surrogate brother and protector, and after one year he took a sexual interest in me. I was in a sexually and psychologically abusive relationship with him from the age of thirteen to fifteen. As a junior in college, four years after the trauma had ceased, a therapist formally diagnosed me with posttraumatic stress disorder resulting from the relationship. Though I had shown PTS symptoms previously, a therapist incorrectly diagnosed me with generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder due to the ambiguity surrounding the relationship. Individuals whom I confided in were reluctant to validate my experience as sexual assault, or even traumatic, due to my aggressor's use of sexual coercion and my own doubt when sharing my trauma narrative. When the relationship began I was ignorant to the characteristics of a healthy romantic and sexual relationship. The abuse confirmed previously held beliefs that I learned from peers, media sources, and modeling of older women; my attractiveness and subsequently, the sexual pleasure men received from me, determined my value as a woman. Though my body understood the acts as traumatic and abusive, it was not until I reconceptualized my identity and self-worth that my psychological self was able to recognize the relationship as traumatic. Before then, I understood the world as a fundamentally painful place for women.

Within the relationship, poetry served an integral purpose. I first knew of my aggressor's interest in me after he intimated to my sister that he had written poetry for me. We began a call and response conversation of poetry by posting original pieces on a social media platform. This practice continued throughout the relationship and became one of its defining characteristics. The exchange of sentiments and used my own writing practices as a means of dissociating disillusioned me; through my poetry I created a

world that was tolerable. As the relationship grew more abusive, I carefully constructed my poems so that I didn't reveal my true feelings of fear and discontent regarding the relationship or did so in a way that was inconspicuous. Not until more than a year after the abuse had ended was I able to reflect and write on the subject from my new, freed perspective. I wrote the poems in the collection for personal expression rather than for the purpose of this discussion or other academic endeavors and have not been edited from their original form.

The first entry in the collection is a brief attempt at describing my trauma narrative and serves as an introduction to the collection. It is heavy in metaphorical language that served as a way to skirt around naming my traumatic experience. The purpose was to describe the alternate universe I created through my writing. The theme of an alternate universe continues throughout the collection, beginning first as a representation of a young girl's fantasy and continuing, post-trauma, as a world where the past live on. The juxtaposition of poetry written during and after the traumatic experience shows the change in perspective though at times the tone is similar. While the left-aligned poems reflect feelings of adoration and affection, one would be amiss to disregard the use of dark imagery and expression of conflicted feelings. The change in perspective is evident not only through content and the passing of time but by the use of the pronoun, "you." In the peri-trauma pieces, "you" refers to the abuser while the same pronoun in the post-trauma pieces refers to the traumatized self. The parallelism in addressing the abuser and abused symbolizes the inseparability of the two. Furthermore, I treat the peri-trauma self more like a separate entity than the post-trauma self due to the change in identity that

occurs as a result of trauma. Each poem shows how my sense of identity was related to, and often defined by, the abusive relationship.

Through talk therapy I was able to reconstruct my trauma narrative through writing. The last entry in the collection is an excerpt from a journal I kept during the course of therapy. My therapist instructed me to write an entry about what abuse means to me. The raw, uncensored response juxtaposed with the poems shows the difference in my facilitated writing and self-directed writing. The facilitated piece retains characteristics of my self-directed writing, such as use of metaphors and symbolism, while introducing a new element: hope. By composing a conversation between my younger and present selves, I was able to track my progress in the realization of the experience as traumatic. I was surprised to find more similarities than differences between the writing, which suggests that I have not changed my perspective as much as I had hoped. Evidence of a trauma-centered identity appears throughout the collection as I lament the past and use it as a reference for present circumstances. The post-trauma pieces accuse my aggressor, pity my adolescent self, and implicate my fears about current romantic relationships. The collection of poetry is an example of a trauma narrative that I have not yet integrated into my life story.

My inability to situate my trauma narrative within the context of my life story and identity mediates the persistence of my trauma-centered identity and PTS symptoms. My aggressor sexually abused me over the course of a year and a half, during the formative years of my adolescence when identity coalesces. My research conducted through the poetry collection has enabled me to reflect on the usefulness of creative writing in my healing process. While I used poetry to overcome the communication failures resulting

from trauma by successfully expressing my embodied memory, I also engaged in trauma related brooding. Not receiving feedback from others during the writing process may have dampened the positive effects of articulating my experience. Rather than reconnecting with my pre-trauma sense of self in order to form a cohesive sense of identity that was not predicated by trauma, I immortalized my traumatized self. While this project was intended to qualify my personal experience with sexual trauma and PTSD, its creation has broadened my understanding of identity and encouraged me to continue my process of healing by actively reflecting upon and championing the parts of my life story that are not defined by my experience with trauma.

July 2nd, 2014

My experience was distinguishable by my unflagging imagination and hopefulness. I am still incapable of articulating the state of being which encapsulated my

abuse. It was a state of perceived transcendence concocted by the developing mind of a child. Reality was a far away entity that I was negligent toward until I woke to find him inside of me. My days were malleable in my soft hands. The world was a creation of my own and at thirteen I was not opposed to make believe.

Through poetry, art, play and role-modeling I was able to cope with my parents' divorce and my own anxiety. From a young age I have appreciated solitude and the limitless capabilities of human thought. I was twelve when I met the first person able to recognize my imaginary world and build onto it. He was my play mate. This commenced an exchange of music, lines of inquiry, beckons and calls, clandestine glances, and a never ending game of tag-along.

This imaginary world was the beginning of my journey into adolescence to ultimately become an individual separate from my family. It was an experiment in personality, thought patterns, values, and goals. It was a safe place for me to express myself and to grow. Reality was supposed to come slowly and gently into my oasis but the surface was broken by a mind older, more developed, and more desolate than mine. This mind was smooth-talking, skilled in architecture, morose and parasitic.

He reached into the womb in which I was developing and fed off of my life source. He corrupted the order of my timeline and maturation in an attempt to rehash his own experiences and live through me. I became his life source. The incorrigible consequence was my altered state of living.

For the next two years, as I was combating the typical ailments of an adolescent girl, I went through a series of systematic isolation from my peer group and my family. I was enthralled with the growing relationship between myself and would be abuser. I was

petrified by disillusionment. It led me into a dark chasm with space enough to reach the bottom but not turn about. In the dark chasm of a platonic relationship turned visceral, reality found me.

September 9th, 2007

A more than curious glance from across the room

Your shameless stare lies so heavy on my face

I don't see how you've found me
I've been lost for the past, forever
How is it that you don't tire?
Nor does the sincerity of your gaze soften
Diminishing my haste to find things that are unsuitable, but luring in every way
You find my ways scandalous, but note the difference of my demeanor
I have no edges to be softened, nothing yet corrupted
I'm an empty vessel, drowned in the deepest worlds
Waiting for the inevitable waters to crush me

October 28, 2015

My memories are not aligned
with you
You are inseparable from the image
of him
Your eyes in a photo frame
matching the blue of your shirt
were his
Your lips in a rear view mirror
full and crinkled into a smile
were his
Your slender, elongated legs
Your golden, soft skin
Your contoured, pouty cheeks
Pouring over old photos,
even I sexualize

and objectify

you

June 24th, 2008

The horizon beckons us tauntingly, daring us to find our way
We've stumbled upon this fine line of dust that separates letting go and giving in
Time and time again, never knowing how to work its magic
Like every other time I wanted something so badly
Like all the other times I sought out fire I swear, this go around differs from the rest
Looking onward, my surroundings create illusions, giving travelers hope
Gargantuan rays fold themselves around curves of the horizon
Seemingly trying to keep the sun afloat
Mountains encroach upon every corner, hugging the empty space
You're standing there, hands in pockets, drawing a line in the dirt
"This is the starting line," you say but what you mean is "Are you ready?"
I swear, this go around is different
The road stretches on, two parallel lines
Giving us the impression that we're going somewhere
I swear, this is so much more than a dream
I'm so much more than I used to be

August 1st, 2015

If only my past were a crystal glass, I could crack and shatter into innumerable pieces,
Crush with a mortar and pestle into a fine, innoxious powder.

Instead it is encompassing like a bridal veil, intrusive like an illness.
My past is a blood-infusion, dissolving with every passing cycle of my mapwork veins,
Disintegrating with time, leaving only a deep purple stain behind

July 8th, 2008

We're on a crash course to Hell
With season tickets, front row seats
Once upon a broken day we were welcomed like heroes
But today the guards refuse us deliverance from the place themselves escaped
Said they had more faith in us but we just sat down at the gates
Told them we could wait, thought ourselves into oblivion
They lit up the "No" on their vacancy sign
Tacked our name to the bottom
In attempt to convince us that we deserved a better end
It's a long way home and I don't know where we're going
The roads leading to getting lost and being found run alongside each other
Unsure if you're ahead or behind, I'll leave a trail of sand for you to find
You crawl into my palm, wrap my fingers around you
Telling me to lose control, life seeping into me
Reminding me of how I'm supposed to be
Reteaching my eyes to see, my tongue to speak and whole self to feel
Beat me back into existence
Until I remember how to fall.

July 1st, 2015

Not a cloak clinging to my collar bone,

Not a woven hood of wiry wool,

Now a veil of viscous verisimilitude,

My memories are iron shoes.

July 30th, 2008

I heard you sneak into my room

Late last night, when all was quiet

Felt you drape the cover over me

I wonder if you felt me shiver

Through paper thin eyelids

I watched you turn out the light

Felt your gaze heavy upon me

Dared me to stay asleep, watched me breathe

To make sure you were alive too

I know you hung the moon for me

So I'll try to keep it shining

Because when you left, my doorway was so empty

I wonder if you know, I'm always awake

When dreaming

May 7th, 2015

By morning I'll have armor which cannot withstand the depths of sleep,
Which flies off at any critical activation of my autonomic nervous system,
in slumber or in wake, revealing my torn muscles,
match-lit nerves, and shaking bones.

My affliction cleaves my ribs and draws them backward,
Bearing my heart and pulsing blood on display.

I'm surviving while living,
Breaking while healing,
Fighting while sleeping,
By morning I'll be glowing.

August 28th, 2008

I got lost quite some time ago
Dancing and dreaming in a world of air
But I've always known, this isn't heaven
Isn't where children play
Isn't where sunflowers sing
Isn't where the moon comes out during day
Last week I found a hole in the sky
Sat and stared for hours
Never disappointed, 'cause I never expect much
So when I turn back to find my place here

Can't believe you found it first
Settled yourself in nicely, like you'd been here before
I envy the way you close your eyes; content
Think, maybe, I could be that way too
Learn how to live from you
We built forts in the forest
Lit a fire in the sky and watched it burn
Because I didn't tell you I'm far from heaven,
Just let you, let me, make believe

April 11th, 2015

The walls of my vagina are sweating blood instead of lubrication,
Like the walls of a fearsome fortress that is founded on human sacrifice and despair
Bones thrown in with bricks, skin with mortar, and all red
Every bed is a pool of red tears

September 5th, 2009

Drip drop
Until our lives come together
If you ever thought I was in control
I should've told you
You were wrong
In the worst possible way

I figured out what this heart is for
And how it works
Doesn't it scare you?
The way we share this purple world
Keep secrets in the sky
Use stars as guidelines
Even though we both know,
They burn out before reaching our eyes

March 12th, 2015

“There,” he said.

“Now no one will ever be able to love you in a way that you understand.

Now you will spend your days loving with nothing in return.

That is my gift to the world.

You have always been good at loving

January 11th, 2009

Green, green waves

Come in bursts of consciousness

Awareness and disorientation

Alluding to your presence

Because I was there

And it was good

Thought I could pull through
You
Deep red clay
Is what I've become
Crystallizing in the earth's stomach
It's too warm
To melt the dullness
Before it becomes me
Drips off my nakedness
Ashes; gray, gray ashes
Disseminated by your presence
Because I was there
And you thought it was good

March 10, 2015

You were so small
You lived once in the same confines as I
You were so much smaller
I can't enter your world anymore
I kneel in our Alice in Wonderland skirt,
In front of a door inset in a larger door,
The inset unlocks only with a particular concoction
Of fear, shame, fury, confusion, and hope

I cannot freely access those emotions anymore

I do not experience them daily

They do not live in my skin

They drown me in moments

When my ear catches a trigger tune,

When my arm is brushed like before,

When a familiar stimulus of any sense

Sends me back in years

Then the door is not so much unlocked as blown open

So that remnants of your essence rush toward me

Your memories, skin, voice, and cries are mine

I look for your eyes to no avail

You do not live here anymore

You do not greet me at the door

You do not throw your arms about my waist

You are gone

From this world and mine

March 6th, 2009

I saw you and your wild mane today

Combed my fingers through your hair

And brought forth your insecurities

Because I can see you now; it's becoming clear now

As your features melt together
I find you folding into me; overestimated my fecundity today
Raked through my thoughts to find my most magnificent dreams
But not one could escape the shadow cast upon it by this ethereal feeling
Neither sentimental nor trite it fills and allures me
For no body has experienced its tenant defy the laws of being so frequently
And you'd think an encasement such as the one in which I dwell would be worn
But it seems to tolerate, no, embrace this way of living
And the pattern of waves I make, falling in and out of line
Beckon you home

October 1st, 2014

He took intimacy from me before I knew myself.

I am closest to him when I'm closest to others.

For six years I have been trying to kill a ghost

but once my fingers are around a throat,

and I'm shaking insanely, I discover it's yours.

It's you. It's always been you.

You and your gray eyes, your sad gray eyes and sweet

thirteen year old face.

June 9th, 2009

As we sit here with open books, I find our words have been petrified,

Not unlike the tentative touch of hands,

Scaling and receding; searching and then finding,
Without justified appreciation for what was being done
That could one day lead us, somewhere
Somewhere beyond sheer expectations
Somewhere far from here, where we search frantically
For something that has long since been exhaled
From tart lips like a rustic puff of smoke that flocculates
Forming a coat of slick misdirection and generalizations
However thick, it does not allude nor derail us
It does not persuade or question,
That fog of ours does not ask or know,
Feel or touch, harry or depreciate the valor of our efforts
To remain in our stolen world, holding hands
Without ever finding atonement or knowing to what satisfaction
We try

September 12th, 2014

Months have passed since I last wondered where you live. I tried on your skin today. It was small, soft, and thin. The gloves were tight from you clenching your fists. The left, little finger was coiled into the palm. The pointer fingers were not as long as mine. My legs, waist, and stomach did not fit. I have curves where you did not. After all, you were a child. You never wanted me to touch your skin. I used to not want to either. You told me your skin was rough and dirty. I reached an arm through a sleeve. It was smooth and

gentle. It was warm satin with tiny blue vessels that smelled like fresh springs. Your skin is a canvas of purple watercolor ruptures. A ballet of masked figures danced upon it. You were a silent stage, not tread upon lightly.

July 30th, 2009

We were whole when this first started
When we lingered on the precipice of the visionless
Raking the ground and then, sewing foundations
We seemed to have left them there –those stout beginnings
Eager to, at last, have that which we had long since coveted
I was right there with you, perhaps leading, in our scavenge
With one more prerequisite under our belts
We bounded onward, searching for that entity
Some solution that could keep our living full
To no avail, we failed and that newly acquired fragment
Was now irrelevant to the whole and subsequently,
It became the cornerstone of a new plane of living.
Some sort of newness filled us and indeed our garden flourished
When tended to by our watchful hands the sanctuary lent itself
To quiet conversations, afternoon strolls and shared repose
And though few negligent winds reaped havoc on our land
The trees began to bear fruit and as I turned,
With a start, we became whole.

June 30th, 2014

Honey and the moon and the moon and the moon and the moon and the moon. I purse my lips and whistle because I learned to do that after him. It's the little things that help me to remember how much I've grown. I hate that line "how much I've grown." In all reality I have not GROWN in five years. I am not a DIFFERENT person. I'm the same body with the same mind and heart.

I bear the same scars.

August 19th, 2009

I drift I breathe, often succeeding, often living as you beckon to me

Those days, living as the living sleep and sleeping as the sleepless live –I came

Just a couple of thoughts, a few shared losses and shoes for walking

Just a couple, were we. I remember more than a few years back

Found you 'round corners found you through fogs – you caught me

Turned me sideways, sped round and round, I stumbled, I strived

To catch your eye but it's not so lonely looking out anymore

Yet, I'm still looking out, still immured in something

Something new, something old, that I once ran to

I've been considering, mulling over, pondering, in a more than pensive manner

The way we'd be someday, if that day was soon approaching

Whether or not I'd run from it, after all, my music was yours first

My eyes were yours always, the passenger seat of your car –my sanctuary

And there's still your scent on some of my clothes
But if it should come, I always hoped we'd be that way
I hoped you'd be ready, I hoped you'd remember me
In the best possible way and want to hold me again someday
The way you described it, even if you were talking about real-estate
I'm too myself and you're too sure
And now your words are out there to be analyzed
I can see you fall to your knees, in search of me
And the breathtakingly beautiful story of ours
With the hardships we thought sure, would bind us
But have only brought us here
Here, where you find that I'm hollow
Here, where you shake the hand of a new year
As it offers to take me away

March 14th, 2014

Everything I remember is stained. A blood soaked moon. The first memory, you are twelve. It is warm outside, sometime between summer and fall. You have just walked home from school and he is outside the house with our sister. I remember moments not as how you experienced them but disembodied. I pull my hair back as I am writing because I hate the way it feels on my skin. Any light touch makes me cringe. I am reminded of how our mother used to press her hand into the small of your back to make you walk faster in public.

March 2nd, 2010

Much of this agony precipitates from that far away vanishing point
Where the storm meets a quiet meadow; our camping site
Within, such a place exuberates a sense of euphoria and security
Without, I'm looking at a sun-kissed couple who feel like the world is so far away
I flick ash to the sullen ground, its dry mouth puckers and frowns
I was never one for smoking but it's so much harsher now
Not dissimilar to the crude voices these four o' clocks bloom to
Leaving a crisp aftertaste for the morning when I move on
With other travelers to find other, perhaps less secluded, meadows
Where I can see colors again, shed my ashen skin, return to you
And start all over again.

February 20th, 2015

He took something beautiful. He unveiled you in the mirror.

"No one can hold a candle to you."

Drops of wax burn, you are wounded. He took something beautiful.

"No one can hold a candle to you."

Bandages, you are bonded. He took something beautiful. He unveiled you to yourself.

He said you were wounded. He asked to help you heal.

"No one can hold a candle to you." But he tried.

March 10th, 2010

Remember my girl, to breathe

I rarely breathe anymore and you can't consider this living

Remember my girl, to dream

Curious things that erase that bleak bleak outlook you seem to take

From some old, tattered soul

Oh how I've loved watching you grow

I thought you had gone like the rain, too

Gone with that last scent of crisp air undulant rings of blue

Rolling off your car like smoke

Remember my girl, to sing

I never could sing,

But you were always right there beside me

Wind blowing through from my side to yours

As I pretended your car and everything in it

Was mine to call home

Until the music drifted through every empty space and all that was

left was

Silence

January 4th, 2015

I write only uncertainties so I can work them out on pages. I worry this leaves gaps in my writing. The parts of my life, of which I am certain, are my truest reality. With only the

uncertainties, I am disillusioned. The uncertainties allow me to hide, to skirt the truth, and deny reality. Through writing I am able to suspend time, warp matter and manipulate truths.

August 10th, 2010

She was not mine but I carried her with me. I coddled her, I soothed her, I tended to her seams but I didn't give her a name. I fed her, I clothed her, I bathed her but I didn't give her name. She was not mine but I carried her with me. I slept shallowly and counted her breaths but didn't give her a name. I brushed her hair and meticulously detached every tangle but I didn't give her a name. She was not mine but I carried her with me. I removed the dirt from her fingernails and scabs from her knees but I didn't give her a name. I removed the soreness from her throat and filth from her thoughts but I didn't give her a name. She was not mine but I carried her with me. She tore at me but I didn't give her a name. She lived off of me but I didn't give her a name. She was not mine but I didn't give her a name.

January 14th, 2011

You never feel completely clean. You don't think it's possible to ever be completely clean so when you get to the apartment that is nice but is not yours, you go to the couch and do not sleep because you are not clean. You do not sleep because there are new noises that you are not used to and there are old thoughts that you are used to but cannot stop so you stare at the ceiling which looks like angel food cake and you pull the bear your mother gave you closer because it is cold even though you went south and the

tears sliding down your face make it colder. You're crying not because you're already homesick, which you are, but because it is late and your eyes burn but you cannot sleep. The heat kicks on so you raise yourself from the couch that is not yours and you reach toward the vent on the ceiling which does not look like angel food cake when you get closer to it. Eventually you go to sleep because there is nothing else to do and your eyes are heavy. Five hours later you wake up to an alarm that you do not have to appease but do anyway so you can hold your phone in your palm, stare at that picture and debate pressing the dial button which you do not end up pressing because you are groggy with sleep and there is something in your throat, always something in your throat. You send an impersonal message instead and go to sleep.

When you wake you are still not clean. You debate the worth of being clean, pilfer away an hour and eventually roll into the shower where you pull off your clothes, shudder, and then step into the basin where the water is mercurial and pulsing harshly. You turn to shield yourself and grab the nearest bottle, dab its contents on your palm and slather it on your skin. Ankles, calves, knees, thighs, between your legs and upward. You reach your shoulders, your always rough shoulders and breathe in. you smell like your mother which is comforting because the last time you embraced her, after not having been held by her for so long, she felt small but you, you who never feel clean, do not feel small anymore. But you at least smell like her. The water turns frigid so you turn the knob which does not turn all the way and step out of the basin, dripping. You grab a towel because you are cold even though you went south and wrap it around you. After you've dried your legs, between your legs, and your back, you notice little black flecks of fabric on your skin, sticking to your little blonde hairs. You are never clean. You reach for a

bottle of lotion because if you cannot be clean you at least want to be soft so you run your hands down your legs and over your always rough shoulders and now there is a film fitting on your skin with little black flecks swimming in it. You put on your bra and panties and walk to the kitchen that is not yours. You pull a paper towel from the rack and begin to rub off the film and little black flecks until your skin turns raw. There are still little black flecks on your white bra and under your bra. Your skin is raw. You are not clean; you put on clean clothes anyway. You fix your hair anyway. You apply bright red lipstick anyway. Over the sound of the fan you hear your mother say that you look cute. You smile anyway.

February 16th, 2011

Hands, I remember. Hands that shake and spill coffee on themselves. Hands that peel dollar after dollar apart from each other. Hands that are worn and shrinking. Hands that adorn tacky jewelry that is too large for their fingers. Hands that hold paint brushes at elegant angles. Hands that straighten their shirts over their stomachs. Hands that brush their hair from their face. Hands that argue a point. Hands that have a record. Hands that strum guitar strings. Hands that scream. Hands that rest in laps. Hands that are always folded. Hands that are rough and never touched. Hands that don't fit within mine. Hands that reach toward me when the car is skittering to a stop. Hands that brush against me in the hallway. Hands that rest on my shoulders. Hands that cut my hair and brush my face. Hands that have protected mine from fire. Hands that reach toward my hands. Hands that reach toward me. Hands remember.

April 14, 2013

Into the wood to fell the timber,
A fine timber, a gregarious timbre,
To ward off the warden of Gehenna,
Where Helius has abandoned me,
I am not alone

Into the wood to bore a hollow,
A smooth, rounded hollow,
To rest my head and save my soul
For Helius has abandoned me
I am not alone

Into the wood, to carve a lid
A straight lid, a heavy lid,
To cover my hollow
Because Helius has abandoned me
I am not alone

Into the wood, to escape my bed
A cool sheet, a sheet made of tulle
To make sure there is no laying
Helius has abandoned me

I cannot escape.

July 13, 2013

Paper thin Soaked Paper thin

Shattered like the surface of a coconut cream cake

Cracked like the plane of recently laid asphalt:

poured, disrupted but still smooth

Smooth like the softness of night

Cool velvet, folding, wrapping, consuming

A dark band,

the shadow of a bridge

or an unevenly blackened layer of sky,

as I leave and approach home at once

Paper thin

Vulnerable to the world as I roll my windows down;

it presses against me, comforting yet stern

Paper thin Easily damaged;

soaked torn wrinkled burned

Paper thin

Like paper

September 16, 2013

A painless love is one with which I am unfamiliar. The romantic in me believes strongly in the individual's requirement of pain. Not just in the confirmatory action of an equal

opposite to contrast that which would otherwise be unknown. Darkness defined by light, indifference by love. Most opposites involve only one concept, such as light, and its absence, darkness. Pain stands alone. The opposite of pain is not pleasure, though if it were I still would not strive to eliminate pain. I cannot thrive, feel, fear, act, or dare I say, love without it.

April 27th, 2014

Abuse was inflicted first on the mind and soul, only later to be transposed on flesh.

- Being abused means that I am never sure of my thoughts or feelings. I worry about distinguishing what originates from my core and what has been implanted in me.
- Being abused means never giving in to my feelings.
- Being abused means having to sleep with my back against a wall.
- Being abused means fearing physical harm when men are upset with me.
- Being abused means sex is both freeing and disempowering
- Being abused as a child means confusion about adult relationships
- Being abused means anger
- Being abused means not giving up
- Being abused means wanting to advocate for others
- Being abused means finding my voice

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders:DSM-5*. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association.
- Besley, A. C. (2002). Foucault and the turn to narrative therapy. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 30(2), 125-143.
- Brown, E. J., & Heimberg, R. G. (2001). Effects of writing about rape: Evaluating Pennebaker's paradigm with a severe trauma. *Journal Of Traumatic Stress*, 14(4), 781-790.
- Burwell, R. A., & Shirk, S. R. (2007). Subtypes of rumination in adolescence: Associations between brooding, reflection, depressive symptoms, and coping. *Journal Of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 36(1), 56-65.
doi:10.1207/s15374424jccp3601_6
- Culbertson, R. (1995). Embodied memory, transcendence, and telling: Recounting trauma, reestablishing the self. *New Literary History*, 26(1), 169.
- Ehring, T., Frank, S., & Ehlers, A. (2008). The role of rumination and reduced concreteness in the maintenance of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression following trauma. *Cognitive Therapy And Research*, 32(4), 488-506.
doi:10.1007/s10608-006-9089-7
- Fivush, R., Habermas, T., Waters, T., & Zaman, W. (2011). The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narratives and identity. *International Journal of Psychology*, 46(5), 321-345.
- Gidron, Y. (1996). Written disclosure in post traumatic stress disorder. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 8(184), 505-506.

- Gilmore, L. (2001). Limit-cases: Trauma, self-representation, and the jurisdictions of identity. *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 24(1), 128.
- Griffin, S. (1971). Rape: The All-American crime. *Ramparts*. 27-35.
- Harris, J. (2003). Signifying pain: Constructing and healing the self through writing. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Herman, J. L. (1998). Recovery from psychological trauma. *Psychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences*, 52S145-S150.
- Horowitz, G. M. (2010). The homeopathic image, or, trauma, intimacy and poetry. *Critical Horizons*, 11(3), 463-490. doi:10.1558/crit.v11i3.463
- McGowan, M.K. (2009). Debate: On silencing and sexual refusal. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(4), 487-494.
- Meston, C. M., Lorenz, T. A., & Stephenson, K. R. (2013). Effects of expressive writing on sexual dysfunction, depression, and PTSD in women with a history of childhood sexual abuse: Results from a randomized clinical trial. *Journal Of Sexual Medicine*, 10(9), 2177-2189. doi:10.1111/jsm.12247.
- Orange, D. M. (2011). Speaking the unspeakable: 'The Implicit,' traumatic living memory, and the dialogue of metaphors. *International Journal Of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*, 6(2), 187-206. doi:10.1080/15551024.2011.552171.
- Şar, V., & Öztürk, E. (2007). Functional dissociation of the self: A sociocognitive approach to trauma and dissociation. *Journal Of Trauma & Dissociation*, 8(4), 69-89. doi:10.1300/J229v08n04_05.

- Sloan, D., Marx, B., & Greenberg, E. (2011). A test of written emotional disclosure as an intervention for posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behavior Research and Therapy*, 49, 298-304.
- Stepakoff, S. (2009). From destruction to creation, from silence to speech: Poetry therapy principles and practices for working with suicide grief. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36, 105-113.
- Tuval-Maschiach, T., Freedman, S., Bargai, N., Boker, R., Hadar, H., & Shalev, A. (2004). Coping with trauma: Narrative and cognitive perspectives. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*, 67(3), 280-293.
- Ullman, S. E. (2011). Is disclosure of sexual traumas helpful? Comparing experimental laboratory versus field study results. *Journal Of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 20(2), 148-162. doi:10.1080/10926771.2011.546751.
- van der Kolk, B. A. (1998). Trauma and memory. *Psychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences*, 52S97-S109.
- van der Kolk, B. A. (2002). Posttraumatic therapy in the age of neuroscience. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 12(3), 381.
- van Emmerik, A.,A.P., Kamphuis, J. H., & Emmelkamp, P. M. G. (2008). Treating acute stress disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder with cognitive behavioral therapy or structured writing therapy: A randomized controlled trial. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 77(2), 93-100. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.eku.edu/docview/235474563?accountid=1062>
- 8.

Verhaeghen, P., Joormann, J., & Aikman, S. N. (2014). Creativity, mood, and the examined life: Self-reflective rumination boosts creativity, brooding breeds dysphoria. *Psychology Of Aesthetics, Creativity & The Arts*, 8(2), 211-218. doi:10.1037/a0035594.

Ward, G., & Carroll, M. (1997). Reality monitoring for sexual abuse memories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 11(4), 293-304.