

A Nursery Rhyme from Another Summer

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**Abstract**

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This thesis was written as an experimental memoir on abuse and recovery. It explores these topics through poetry, prose, and experimental non-fiction.

## Poetics Statement

My original intent with writing this thesis was to write about trauma, recovery, and reintegration. In doing so, the bulk of the work would be rooted in psychological research and supplemented with stories of my own trauma and recovery. I was inspired to write on this topic after attending a reading over the summer. During the reading, a woman read a poem where she described her experience with abuse. As I listened to her read, I was inspired to write about my own experience with abuse. While she read, I felt less alone, as she broke the rule that I was raised on: you never say out loud what happened, especially to other people. In sharing her work at that café, she gave words to the unspeakable. After that reading I decided to write my thesis in such a way that it could do the same for those it's read to, as that woman's reading did for me. However, as I proceeded writing my thesis, there was still something missing. I was avoiding what I had to say and not achieving the effect that that the woman's work had on me.

I was adamant that I did not want to write an experimental memoir. I felt that my stories alone would not be enough, and that by rooting the work in research my work would have more authority. I also felt that if I wrote what happened to me, I would be seen as less, and damaged. There is a romanticized notion that survivors of abuse are stronger for having made it through. However, part of abuse is the sense that if anyone were to find out what happened to you, you will be seen as broken. The act itself lingers and becomes a filter that others will see you through if they find out. Staying quiet prevents that, but it also gives more power to the act. After discussing the progress of my thesis, I was asked by my thesis advisor, "Why are you not writing a memoir when you are writing your stories of abuse and recovery?" It was the first time in the

process of working on my thesis that I applied the word “abuse” to the trauma that happened to me.

The first piece in my thesis is a poem titled “Ghostwriter.” I wrote this poem in a creative writing course while completing a Bachelor’s degree in Community Psychology. It served as my poetics statement for my final chapbook for the course. In the poem, I describe wanting to write about a rose, but a carefree ghost takes my rose and bleeds my blood on my words. Going into the creative writing course I had a desire to write something beautiful and simple, a desire I still have. However, what I have to say is not beautiful, though it is simple. These dark things happened. I am hoping that in writing them down, the beauty will come from sharing these experiences with others and lessening the isolation that comes from having survived abuse.

The title of my thesis is “A Nursery Rhyme from Another Summer.” This is the English translation of the French title, “Comptine d’Un Autre Été” by Yann Tiersen. I first heard the song as part of the soundtrack for the film *Amelie*. The melody of the song is played on the piano and feels delicate and serene. The scenes in the film that the song accompanies follow the main actress as she enjoys simple pleasures – walking through town, dipping her hand in a bag of lentils, or using her spoon to crack the caramelized sugar top layer of crème brulee. The song for me has that same sense of peace, and I often listen to it while I write. It has the ability to center me and allow me to write some of the darker stories I have to share, while also the lighter moments when I recall the good things too. A significant portion of my thesis draws from my experiences growing up, and the title “A Nursery Rhyme from Another Summer” seemed to echo a sense of innocence and distant memory, which contrasts the darkness of some of the memories I have shared.

I have found that the experiences I have written about remain emotional and physical. I am worried that the long term effects of trauma exist as scars on my body, even if some exist without a physical mark. I have found this phenomenon in my effort to understand my diagnosis of fibromyalgia, and how it can be caused by early and repeated physical abuse. I'm worried at how these memories will echo if they did leave physical scars.

After I made the decision to write an experimental memoir, I started having more nightmares. I started having more night terrors. I started vomiting. I've spent more time on my knees in front of the toilet than I care to admit. Write. Vomit. Write. Vomit. On my knees, begging my stomach and my nerves to calm down — I need some part of me to not be broken. The process of writing this thesis has been just as physical as it has been mental as I sit at my laptop and type out these words and memories. When I sit back against the bathroom wall, or I shake when I open my laptop knowing what's about to come out, I've wondered, "Why am I doing this to myself? Why didn't I pick a different topic to write about?" I did this because of the woman who read at the café, because during the five minutes she read I wasn't alone. My experiences were validated through her voice. I want to be that for other people. I'm doing this because the ghost is still here. The one that stole my rose and laughed while calling me *dear*. The ghost that showed me it's okay to write something *not* beautiful. The ghost that encourages me to keep going, *dear*.

## Ghostwriter

There's a ghost in my poem.

I only meant to write about a rose...

But it took my rose  
Pricked my finger  
Leapt back to the page  
And danced its ghostly dance

Holding my rose  
Without a care  
Drips my blood  
On my own words  
Disfiguring them beyond recognition

The ghost, glancing over its shoulder  
Meets my shocked expression with an eye rolling response,  
*My dear, that poem never belonged to you,*  
with a wink and nod,  
*now it does...*

## **Shame**

My body was touched in a way that makes me feel it is untouchable.  
Unlovable.

I try to hide it. I try to act as though it never happened.

## **FI-BRO-MY-AL-GIA**

\*insert definition

\*insert controversy “is it real”

\*insert research saying caused by abuse

There are pages of my journal that are ripped out. Why?

## Cold Sweats

My body betrays me at night. I finally calm down, finally settle, relax, sleep. Then they kick in. Images. Dreams. Memories. Nightmares. Nightmares I wish I could wake from. The ones where the hands on your throat and body feel real. The scream that won't leave your mouth is real. I can't wake up until my legs start kicking at the sheets. They kick the sheets hard enough to cause a breeze that makes my sweat drenched body shiver. This is what finally wakes me up. The only light in my room is from my tablet on the nightstand, on auto-pause from the last show I fell asleep to. I check the time on my phone. 4:31 am. The phone is shaking in my hand and for a moment I wonder why I set the alarm early until I realize it's me that's shaking. I have an hour before I need to get up and get ready for work. I know that by the time I fall asleep again the alarm will go off for real. I debate cranking up the bathroom heater and taking a long bath, but the sensation of hands on me is still too fresh and I'm afraid to be naked. I settle for hitting replay on the stand-up comedy show I fell asleep to. Something familiar that will make me laugh. I listen to my favorite jokes while I make a mental note to swap out the blouse I had planned to wear to work with my big fluffy sweater. It will keep me warmer. Safer.

When I get to work and walk to my desk, I'm greeted by my coworker's ritual. Every morning he starts our day by telling me how long he slept, how good or bad it was, and if it will be an Excedrin day.

“So, September, when'd you go to bed? How'd you sleep?”

“Went to bed early, slept great.”

Some days there's nothing to say.

## **Unnoticed**

How do you make yourself small and unnoticeable?

Why would you want to?

What's the payoff?

What's the downside?

**Fine**

Don't ask me if I'm okay. Don't ask.

## **Missing Entries**

There are ripped out pages in my journal. What did I write that I hid from myself?

## The Meeting

I met with my ghost today. He was waiting for me outside the Greenlake Starbucks looking at his phone, biting his finger nails. Same old habits. I hoped he was nervous. I moved slowly and silently toward him, hoping he wouldn't notice me so I could look at him without him knowing for a little longer. I wanted to see what he looks like now. I wanted to see who he is now, before he sees me and puts on a façade of a smile and we pretend we're friends. Pretend that we were never lovers. Never man and wife.

We go inside Starbucks and stand in line. He points out my usual snack and asks if I'm hungry. I feel a weight in my chest as that question. In the past he would have been holding my hand while he asked. "No, thank you." He offers to buy me coffee. Of course I wanted coffee but I didn't want him paying for it. "No, thank you." He finishes paying for his coffee and steps away. I walk up and place my order. He laughs a little and shakes his head, giving me the same look he used to when he thought I was being adorably stubborn. I felt heat flush to my eyes and cheeks. Suddenly aware of my posture, I stood up straight. Shoulders back.

It had been several months since he was in Seattle and despite the cold and wind, he wanted to walk around the lake. He had lost weight since the last I'd seen him and was on an exercise kick. He's become more Californian than me. We carried our coffees and started our walk around the lake. He still walks beside me on my left side like he used to. I wish I didn't notice these things. We had been there so many times before. I was so distracted by watching the ghosts of our memory laughing along the pathway sharing a mocha, holding hands by the water, or kissing behind a tree, that I almost couldn't hear what he was saying. Does he see them too?

I kept catching my hand drift up and over to his. It was so instinctual I was afraid I would take his hand without even knowing it. I put my hand in my pocket and clutched the lining of my jacket so my hand wouldn't drift back out. The same way a mom would tell their child to put their hands in their pockets so they don't break anything. I would break myself. A gust of wind went by and I felt an ache as my instinct still wanted to slip into the space between his arm and side as I used to. Finally finishing my coffee, I throw the cup away freeing my arms to cross in front of me. A little comfort.

As we walked I avoided looking at him. I avoided looking at the families with strollers or couples walking their dogs. The life we were going to have. As time passed I saw less of who is now, rather the ghost of who he was. He looked more and more like the man I fell in love with. The man who showed me what it felt to be loved and home. The man who betrayed me. Stole our future. I saw the ghost of this man in his face. Heard it in his laugh when he awkwardly chuckled at his own joke.

Greenlake used to mean a relaxed afternoon enjoying each other's company, laughing at silly jokes, always holding hands. Now it is a graveyard of hopes and happiness past. I still see his ghost at the edge water. I still see his ghost in the little girl wandering by, with the same curly dark hair and big brown eyes we joked our daughter would have.

I see his ghost other places too. I see it pouring cream into its coffee at the café where we met. I see it under the tree on campus where we had our first kiss. I see it in the wedding rings that sit across from me on the bus. I hear it laugh at me whenever I start to have feelings for someone new.

I try avoiding these places thinking that by doing so I won't have to see his ghost. It never works. His ghost is in my apartment when I hear a strange noise that scares me and I remember I'm alone. It's in my blue eyes you said look like the sea. It's in my dreams. It's in the moment when I first wake, not remembering what happened, wondering why you're not next to me in bed. His ghost haunts me inside and out. He took my future and haunts my world. Let me go.

## **Sun Break**

And then one day I sat down at the lunch table at work, looked out the window, saw the sun had come out, and I was happy. It was as simple as that.

This work is dedicated to my thesis advisor, second reader, and my cohort. Thank you.