Trauma and Poetry: Memory, Image, and the Descriptive-Meditative Poem

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Abstract

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This essay explores how our memories become recurring images, and how, in a controlled setting, illustrating these difficult memories through both narrative and image can change the experience of our memories over time, and ultimately be one step along the road to healing. This essay also explores how the act of writing a poem does not always lead to healing, but can simply be a first-hand account of what it's like to live with traumatic memories. I will offer close readings of Anthony Hecht's "A Hill" and Emily Jungmin Yoon's "An Ordinary Misfortune" in order to demonstrate how poetry and its movements are well-suited to expressing the trauma survivor's experience.

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I. Introduction

I first began writing poetry as a way of understanding and releasing pain brought about by traumatic childhood experiences. My earliest poems unintentionally weaved memory and present time because my memories, often painful and unwanted, inevitably colored my everyday experience of the world. I felt trapped, wishing I could experience my life without the intruding presence of memory. As I began to work with a therapist, I learned a lot about how traumatic memory functions in the mind and body. I wanted to figure out why memories would surface spontaneously in my mind, and how to keep them from coming up at random. In this way, I wanted to learn how to heal.

When I began sharing my first poems with friends and in workshops, I felt as if my entire inner world were being exposed. My traumatic memories were too raw to be made into poems and shared with the world. Many years ago, I decided to keep my poetry and my trauma separate, a decision rooted in fear and shame. Submitting poems to workshop about surviving abuse was challenging on all fronts. I received feedback that my poems felt like essays or diary entries, that my stories were too vulnerable for poetry. This notion that poems could be too vulnerable completely threatened my idea of what poetry is and what poetry can do, or, as CA Conrad says, what poetry can "handle".

In an interview regarding her book *Indictus*, the poet Natalie Eilbert writes,

> I think often women, especially women of color and [gender non-conforming] writers, are asked to explicitly not write about the violences they've faced, because it doesn't 'make them distinct enough'— I've seen this recently in the poetry community, where it is not enough to survive the traumas of the body, you then have to worry about editors feeling fatigued by stories of that survival. (Arterian and Eilbert)

As I've come to know both poetry and trauma on an intimate level, it seems as if

something as nuanced as trauma requires an equally complex art form to accurately tell its story. I believe poetry and trauma are well-matched for both the poet and the reader. In my reading, I've discovered how difficult it is to write from this place of pain, how important it is to tell these stories, and how powerful these poems can be for readers, particularly readers who've experienced their own traumas.

In this essay, I will dive into the descriptive-meditative poem structure and discuss how this structure may be used as a skeleton for trauma poetry. I will provide a close reading of Anthony Hecht's poem "A Hill" using this framework. Then I will give a close reading of Emily Jungmin Yoon's prose poem "An Ordinary Misfortune", primarily using feminist philosopher Susan J. Brison's trauma theory as a backbone for my analysis. Through these close readings, I hope to learn how to bring together two very central parts of myself: trauma and poetry. I believe that these are both lifelong companions of mine that will join together and drift apart as time goes on.

II: Defining Trauma and the Traumatic Flashback

Trauma is defined by its persistent nature. It is both a mental and a physical response. It begins as "an emotional response to a terrible event," and in the long term, it transforms into "unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms" (Trauma and Shock). Sigmund Freud suggests that "the wound of the mind . . . is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth 4). He argues that trauma makes itself known not *during* the original event, but later on throughout the survivor's life, again and again in memories, emotions, and nightmares. Trauma, which begins as a singular event, ripples throughout the survivor's life in multitudes. In this way, time, "the linearity of which naturally erodes memory, is interrupted by the traumatic event, disturbing the integration of the past into a narrative [and] its assimilation into memory systems" (Walker). The trauma survivor therefore has a distorted sense of time, self, memory, and personal narrative.

One of the ways in which trauma rears its head throughout the survivor's life is through flashbacks, moments in which the survivor feels as if they are experiencing the traumatic event again in real time. Flashbacks can be immersive, intense, and even re-traumatizing for some. In the following section, I will argue that poetry — specifically the descriptive-meditative poetic structure — is particularly fit to depict, or even recreate, the experience of a traumatic flashback.

III: Flashbacks, The Descriptive-Meditative Poem, and Anthony Hecht's "A Hill"

M.H. Abrams was the first to identify and name the descriptive-meditative poem structure. As Abrams writes,

> The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (Abrams 1)

As noted in Corey Marks's essay "Descriptive-Meditative Structure," this structure was sometimes used by the Romantics to show "the power . . . of memory and imagination . . . with a sustained and involved meditation that imitates the winding motions of human consciousness" (Marks 124). Trauma survivors are all too familiar with the "winding motions" that accompany memory, mental motions that bring them back and forth between the present and the difficult past. As novelist and poet Jay Baron Nicorvo puts it,

> What those of us with PTSD experience, on a too-regular basis, is the *unwilling* suspension of disbelief. We encounter some stimulus and the past is dragged kicking and screaming into the present. During this psychological meantime—having perceived a familiar pattern and established some connectedness, however false—we have difficulty reestablishing our disbelief. (Nicorvo)

Identifying patterns between the past and the present is a large part of any writer's life, but this exercise of *patternicity,* as Nicorvo calls it, can be dangerous for trauma survivors; it can cause them to potentially spiral into traumatic memories that feel all too real. In many PTSD cases, for example, there is no difference between the sudden pop of a Fourth of July firecracker and the sudden pop of a gunshot that went off ten years ago. The act of writing, and thus remembering, can be detrimental to one's healing process if it is not done carefully and intentionally, and the descriptive-meditative structure is highly effective at depicting this experience of the past-made-

present. How, then, might poets use the descriptive-meditative poetic structure as a framework for healing if "meditating" on traumatic memory runs the risk of re-traumatizing?

I want to first exhibit how this descriptive-meditative structure closely mimics the *patternicity* that happens in the minds of trauma survivors on a daily basis. For the trauma survivor, the poem may begin with an initial description of a landscape — a person, place, thing, or scenario — that triggers a difficult emotional response. As Nicorvo notes, some trauma survivors encounter these "landscapes" on a consistent and persistent basis. In addition, the landscape is not always triggering in an obvious or straightforward way: each individual will be affected by different landscapes at different points in their lives, and the emotions behind each landscape are uniquely personal.

What follows the description of the landscape is the meditation: what memory does the landscape evoke? It is at this time that the speaker may undergo an emotional shift, and the language — both in the mind of the survivor and on the page — may change accordingly. The meditation explores the relationship between the immediate landscape and the traumatic memory: the memory where this emotional reaction first began, the seed of the trauma. There is an opportunity here for the survivor to heal through the meditation. As Susan J. Brison writes in her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self,* "by constructing and telling a narrative of the trauma endured . . . the survivor begins not only to integrate the traumatic episode into a life with a before and an after, but also to gain control over the occurrence of intrusive memories" (Brison 71). When these memories stay untouched in the mind, it is difficult for the survivor to heal on their own. By writing out the experience of encountering a landscape and thusly being triggered by a memory, the survivor can physically see the time and space that has passed between the past and the present. The meditation process can *prove* to the speaker that

time has passed, and that the memory is indeed a memory. This process is integral to the healing of any trauma survivor.

Then, the speaker returns to the current landscape with a renewed understanding of their present situation. The “re-description” takes this newfound understanding or perception of the traumatic memory, and integrates it into the speaker’s view of the present landscape. How has the scene changed now that the speaker has gone through this experience of memory? The re-description exhibits the aftermath of the meditation and “sets the central question of the poem in motion: why the difference between memory and perception? What are the implications of this difference? Clearly, the speaker has changed” (Marks 124). The difference between memory and perception — between past reality and present reality — is imperative in the writer’s healing process.

Of course the process of healing is not so cut and dried, and it is important to note that the descriptive-meditative process does not always lead to healing. As previously noted, one of the difficult things about trauma is that the past can oftentimes feel very much like the present. The “meditation” may, in fact, lead to an extended difficult period of reliving the traumatic event. Writing a descriptive-meditative poem will not be the thing that heals a writer from their traumas. The descriptive-meditative poem simply exhibits, or mimics, the long process towards healing that many trauma survivors must repeat again and again, with the help of a licensed therapist, in order to find relief from their suffering. Because trauma is both cyclical and deeply rooted, the “meditation” portion of the process usually has to occur many times in order to prove to the client that the past is actually the past.

As a veteran of the Second World War, the poet Anthony Hecht was familiar with the cycles of trauma and involuntary memory. In a 1999 interview, Hecht wrote, “I had what in

those primitive days was called a 'nervous breakdown,' and which today would be styled a 'post-traumatic shock syndrome.' It was arrogant and foolish of me to have supposed that my war experiences could be smoothly expunged by a couple of weeks of heavy drinking." Hecht "embeds traumas of both childhood and the war" in his renowned poem, "A Hill" (Yezzi). I'd like to argue that "A Hill" is a descriptive-meditative poem that embodies the difficult experience of Nicorvo's *patternicity* and does not, ultimately, lead to personal healing by the end of the poem. Hecht's poem begins,

> In Italy, where this sort of thing can occur,
> I had a vision once — though you understand
> It was nothing at all like Dante's, or the visions of saints,
> And perhaps not a vision at all.

Hecht opens the poem with a conversational tone. This section of the poem serves as a sort of preface to the descriptive-meditative structure that follows. The speaker addresses the reader with, "though you understand," as if he preparing to tell a story to someone specific and familiar. This suits the poem's structure; oftentimes, descriptive-meditative poems "speak to a specific listener" (Marks 125). The poem's speaker notes that "this sort of thing can occur" in Italy because it is a country rife with history and visionary literature. Hecht refers to Dante — who received and revealed visions of heaven in the *Divine Comedy* — and the saints in order to clarify that while the speaker's vision may seem mystical to readers, there is nothing otherworldly or miraculous about it. His vision is rooted in the reality of memory and history, and the speaker wants to ground us in this fact before we continue reading. For this reason, the speaker debates whether or not he can call his vision a "vision" in the first place. The speaker's experience of traumatic memory is sudden, powerful, and all-encompassing, but he struggles to find the right noun to describe what he's experienced.

The poem continues with the speaker exploring a piazza with his friends in the morning. This is where the speaker enters the "description" portion of the poem. Hecht writes,

> A clear fretwork of shadows
> From huge umbrellas littered the pavement and made
> A sort of lucent shallows in which was moored
> A small navy of carts. Books, coins, old maps,
> Cheap landscapes and ugly religious prints
> Were all on sale. The colors and noise
> Like the flying hands were gestures of exultation,
> So that even the bargaining
> Rose to the ear like a voluble godliness.

The speaker calls attention to the brightness of the day in his descriptions of the physical landscape, with images like "A clear fretwork of shadows," "huge umbrellas," and "A sort of lucent shallows". This brightness occurs in both the physical space and in the speaker's vision: the speaker is very much present in this bright space, and everything is very clear to him. The speaker describes the vendors' carts as little ships tied up in the shallow waters of shadow, creating a sort of calm, traversable landscape while perhaps foreshadowing the imminent experience of being out at sea, floundering. The mundane objects and actions of the landscape are intermixed with a sense of religiosity: the piazza sells "ugly religious prints," an image that depicts the cheapening and commodification of something that's intended to be holy; the "flying hands" of shoppers and passersby are "gestures of exultation"; and "even the bargaining" sounded "like a voluble godliness". The diction in this section is elevated, even when used to describe mundane, touristic things and actions. Because the speaker began the poem with a preface, so to speak, of the vision he encountered that day, his initial description of the landscape is not untouched by the vision he subsequently experiences. Even in this initial description, the speaker is aware of the vision that's to come, so we get the sense that the storyteller is observing

the everyday aspects of the piazza through a sacred lens, and choosing to highlight all that is holy.

The meditation portion of the poem comes on suddenly, and the speaker prepares us for the visionary moment. Hecht writes,

> And then, when it happened, the noises suddenly stopped,
> And it got darker; pushcarts and people dissolved
> And even the great Farnese Palace itself
> Was gone, for all its marble;

Here, we don't see the speaker reflecting on the landscape; rather, the landscape begins to disappear in order to make room for the speaker's memory to enter the scene. I argue that the "meditation" happens not in the form of conscious thought, but in the form of memory. In a way, the speaker is forced to "reflect" on the current landscape, literally reflecting his own memories onto the place. The memory is so enrapturing that it must consume the entire the physical moment. The piazza, which was once filled with bright light and shadows, is now getting "darker". This sudden shift in landscape is both utterly impossible and fully experienced by the speaker. This moment depicts, in great detail, the beginning of the speaker's flashback experience. Because trauma interferes with "homogenous time", Anna Walker writes, "the past returns repeatedly and intrusively through flashbacks in the form of auditory, visual and sensory hallucinations or dreams, sometimes precise, intensely clear and lifelike" and "accompanied by a full spectrum of sensory and emotional associations" (Walker). The intrusive nature of the flashback is heightened by the fact that there are no stanza breaks to separate the present landscape from the vision; one moment flows seamlessly into the next in the speaker's mind and on the page. The visionary hallucinations begin in the following lines:

> . . . in its place
> Was a hill, mole-colored and bare. It was very cold,
> Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.

> The trees were like old ironwork gathered for scrap
> Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,
> And the only sound for a while was the little click
> Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.
> I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a hedge,
> But no other sign of life.

The images that come in this section of the poem contain an entirely different tone and mood from the previous lines. The "warm sunlit piazza" has become "very cold, / Close to freezing". There was "a promise of snow," which is perhaps foreshadowing the difficult flashback that the speaker is about to face. In place of the "huge umbrellas" providing shade for tourists and shoppers, we now find trees "like old ironwork gathered for scrap," hard, cold, and utilitarian. The hodgepodge mess of carts selling and bargaining off "Books, coins, old maps, / Cheap landscapes and ugly religious prints" has now become a factory, a foreboding building representative of impersonal commerce, assembly lines, and bleak working conditions. The landscape was once filled with "colors and noise," but now there isn't even the sound of wind to stir up this cold, quiet moment. The sound of ice breaking beneath the speaker's feet invokes a sense of foundational disturbance; even the earth upon which the speaker stands is cracking. This calls the reader to recognize that the speaker's trauma is part of his personal foundations; much of his life was built upon the shaky grounds of trauma. In a letter to J. D. McClatchy, Hecht wrote of the hill as "an obsessive image or symbol—something from deep in our psychic life that carries a special burden of meaning and feeling for us." The hill, then, is a symbol of Hecht's childhood trauma, the image that has made itself permanent in his memory. He continues, "In my poem I am really writing about a pronounced feeling of loneliness and abandonment in childhood, which I associate with a cold and unpeopled landscape . . . I have always felt that desolation, that hill itself, is most powerfully expressed in an uninhabited natural landscape at its bleakest" (Yezzi). The image of a snagged piece of ribbon is indicative of this bleak emptiness:

people have come, gone, and left things behind. The ribbon, an object which may normally be found in a woman's hair, is now a ghost of human presence.

The speaker invokes all five senses to prove to the reader that, in his experience, all of this is actually happening; it is so vivid that he could not have made it up. The details unfold slowly and carefully, slowing time down. Continuing on:

> . . . And then I heard
> What seemed the crack of a rifle. A hunter, I guessed;
> At least I was not alone. But just after that
> Came the soft and papery crash
> Of a great branch somewhere unseen falling to earth.

This section illustrates the culminating action of the flashback. The speaker is filled with uncertainty in this moment: he heard "what seemed" like a gunshot, and "guessed" that it was probably a hunter. This language of casual uncertainty illuminates the fact that the speaker is not really concerned about being shot by the rifle. It is not violence that he fears, but being alone. For the speaker, being in the company of an armed hunter is preferable to being alone. This section highlights the fear of abandonment — a more ambiguous loss like the "soft and papery crash / Of a great branch somewhere unseen" — that Hecht spoke of in his letter to McClatchy. Then, suddenly, Hecht gives us a stanza break.

> And that was all, except for the cold and silence
> That promised to last forever, like the hill.

This two-line stanza stands away from all that came before it, indicating another sudden shift in time. The vision has ended, but as the speaker says, it will never truly be over: it will "last forever" like the bleak, unmovable landscape.

The poem ends with a re-description as the speaker mentally returns to the Italian piazza. Hecht writes,

> Then prices came through, and fingers, and I was restored

> To the sunlight and my friends. But for more than a week
> I was scared by the plain bitterness of what I had seen.
> All this happened about ten years ago,
> And it hasn't troubled me since, but at last, today,
> I remembered that hill; it lies just to the left
> Of the road north of Poughkeepsie; and as a boy
> I stood before it for hours in wintertime.

The piazza returns back to normal in a matter of lines, and it isn't given much attention at the end of the poem. In re-describing the original sunny landscape, the speaker realizes that he can't fully return to it. He is affected by his vision "for more than a week," and probably even longer. Hecht understands that the effects of trauma can be lifelong. It is likely that traumatic memories will remain as static, and as persistent, as the hill. The speaker, "as a boy," was forced to stand and stare at the hill, this cold figure of loneliness, "for hours in wintertime". In this last clause, we can see how permanent the cold really was, and is. We are not given many details in regards to *how* the speaker was traumatized as a child, but the image of a boy left alone in the cold for hours indicates abandonment and neglect. Even after this experience of meditation — even after forming a narrative with a before and an after — the speaker notes that the hill is still there. And this is often the case for trauma survivors: experiencing a flashback only makes the memory of trauma grow stronger.

In order for the descriptive-meditative structure to provide a semblance of healing, the meditation must reassure the writer that the memory is indeed a memory, not a present-tense threat. How might the writer tread this delicate territory? Of course, in the case of "A Hill", the speaker did not choose to experience a traumatic flashback in the middle of an Italian piazza: the flashback was an unchosen and surprising vision that simply came to him. Healing cannot happen in the midst of an overwhelming flashback. In order to heal from trauma, these moments of reflection must be chosen, not spontaneous. The survivor needs to feel safe in their present

surroundings in order to, as Brison notes, construct a narrative of their life, a narrative that contains a *before* and an *after*. They must choose to tell their story, not have their story told to them. Perhaps, then, the descriptive-meditative structure, which relies often on spontaneous memory, is useful for depicting unprompted trauma flashbacks, but may not be the most useful framework for healing from trauma.

Again, I'm left wondering how one might use poetry to construct a useful narrative from their traumatic memories. Perhaps if the descriptive-meditative structure were altered slightly, it would prove itself to be a more useful instrument for this difficult task. Drawing on one trauma-healing therapy technique called Lifespan Integration, I would like to suggest that using the past-tense, rather than the present-tense, during the meditation portion of the poem could be a powerful way to keep the writer safe while exploring difficult memories. In Lifespan Integration Therapy,

> "the client 'views' a memory image for each year of their life. The Lifespan Integration technique causes memories to surface spontaneously, and because of how memories are held neurologically, each memory which surfaces is related to the emotional theme or issue being targeted … Seeing repetitions of the flow of time proves to clients that they have survived their pasts, no matter how traumatic. The timeline always ends in present time … The process of viewing repetitions of chronological memories … [helps] build an increasingly coherent and more broadly distributed map of self through space and time." (Pace)

In Hecht's poem, the speaker goes from present moment, straight into a traumatic flashback, then back again to the present moment. This jerky movement across time and space creates a whiplash effect. For this reason, the speaker is unable to stop thinking about his flashback for weeks. He was caught off guard, and then required to return to reality in an instant. The Lifespan Integration technique proposes a more gradual method of facing traumatic memories, and could perhaps be applied to the making of a poem or, better yet, a series of poems. Repetition is germane to the Lifespan Integration technique; while one poem can explore the nuances of

traumatic memory, I believe a series or collection of poems could model Lifespan Integration more fully.

IV. The Aftermath of Trauma: Emily Jungmin Yoon's "An Ordinary Misfortune"

A common theme amongst the poetry of trauma is a dissociation from the self in the aftermath of trauma. The feminist philosopher Susan J. Brison notes that victims of human-inflicted trauma in particular "are reduced to mere objects by their tormenters: their subjectivity is rendered useless and viewed as worthless . . . The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others." She argues that without this belief, "one can no longer be oneself even to oneself, since the self exists fundamentally in relation to others" (Brison 40). Emily Jungmin Yoon exhibits this notion of dissociation in her book, *A Cruelty Special to Our Species,* a collection that reckons with the brutal history of sexual violence against "the "comfort women" of the Japanese Empire," girls and women who were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery in Japanese military brothels during World War II (Jungmin Yoon xi).

Emily Jungmin Yoon's prose poem, "An Ordinary Misfortune" begins with a list of staccato images: "Hunting ground with knife-ghosts. Clubbed raw. My body, ground down." These images are sharp and explicit, and they seem to indicate that the speaker is in grave danger, being hunted down and physically abused. These first three images avoid the use of past, present, or future tense verbs, creating an ambiguous sense of time, or, rather, stripping the images from time entirely. Despite this lack of a definitive timeline, the images feel immediate, as if they are happening right before the reader's eyes. Knowing the context of the collection, these are horrifying images even in their brevity, and their brutality contributes to their immediacy. Clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay writes, "Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs . . . with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments" (Shay 172). This understanding of traumatic memory can explain why the images feel so immediate to both the speaker and the reader, and why they are expressed as

terse, fragmented sentences. There is a marked tonal shift between the first and second lines of the poem. The second line is spoken in the present-tense:

> You'd think a former comfort woman would hate the Japanese. I don't. I
> hate men and I hate sex. I hate the sight of my son-in-law . . .

The speaker addresses the audience directly in this line and employs a more casual, almost resigned tone. This shift represents a shift in the speaker's mind: a shift from memory into the current moment. For the trauma survivor, memories often feel like they are happening in the present-tense. The shift from memory back to present-tense reality can be jarring, and Jungmin Yoon depicts this sudden shift seamlessly. Because it feels as if no time has passed, it is only logical that the speaker, who is constantly reliving memories of male-inflicted trauma, would continue to hate men into her adulthood and throughout her life. The speaker also makes a point of saying she does not hate the Japanese. Perhaps the category and identity of "Japanese" is a lot less present and demanding to the speaker than the categories of "men" and "sex". Men, on the other hand, are unavoidable in her public and private lives. As the poem exhibits, men and sex are everywhere, constantly triggering the speaker.

The poem then moves into an eloquent metaphor of the body as a house. Jungmin Yoon writes, "I've been living a robbed house." The house here represents the speaker's self and all that it inherently contains: her body, her mind, and her spirit. The house was robbed long ago, back when the speaker was a comfort woman. It is important to note that Jungmin Yoon does not write, "I've been living *in* a robbed house." She omits the preposition "in", bringing the verb "living" even closer, physically on the page and metaphorically, to the object of the "robbed house". In addition, we are left to wonder why Jungmin Yoon uses the verb "living"; she could've just as easily said, "I've been a robbed house," or "I am a robbed house," in which case the speaker, or the speaker's body, *is* the robbed house. With this wording, there is no difference

between the speaker and her trauma; they have coalesced into one being. But instead, Jungmin Yoon chooses to emphasize the act of living itself. This verb choice forces readers to reckon with the fact that the speaker lives with her trauma at all times, and because she still contains a degree of separation from her trauma, she is painfully aware of "living it" in each moment.

The metaphor of the house continues to deepen throughout the poem. Jungmin Yoon writes,

> My room became unfit for children.
> How could I put a child in a haunted place . . .
> I found my daughters
> somewhere else. I love them with the longing of a house no one occupies.

The house has been robbed, and now it is empty, unoccupied by anyone, not even the speaker's own self. In the first line of this section, the speaker's "room" represents her womb, which has been "haunted" by the knife-ghosts which appear at the beginning of the poem. The speaker longs to love her daughters, but her lingering trauma has rendered her incapable. We can look to trauma theory to provide explanations for the dissociation that Jungmin Yoon's poem embodies.

One reason why survivors dissociate in the aftermath of trauma is because

> they lose the certainty that other persons 'will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I want to feel. At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down.' (1995, 126) (Brison 46).

In the case of Emily Jungmin Yoon's poem, the speaker's body, both physical and metaphysical, was permanently altered when she was sold into sex slavery, causing her to lose her trust in the world. In addition, Brison explains,

> Those who endure long periods of repeated torture often find ways of dissociating themselves from their bodies, that part of themselves which undergoes the torture . . . Some adult victims of rape report a kind of . . . separation from their former selves in the aftermath of the rape." (Brison 46-47)

We see this separation deepen towards the end of the poem as Jungmin Yoon writes,

> Every door is closed. 70 years and no one knows. No one who knows
> my past is alive. Girls at the comfort stations, we were all children then.

The ending of the poem reveals another integral piece of this speaker's life: she has never told her story to anyone. She has been carrying the weight of her sexual trauma all on her own. According to Brison's trauma theory, it is essential for victims to be able to share their stories with others who are willing to listen. Brison argues that in order to heal from trauma, "we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others" (Brison 51). The speaker in Jungmin Yoon's poem did not have this opportunity, and this fact is partially responsible for her inability to heal from her early traumas. This poem is proof that trauma survivors cannot simply relive their memories again and again in their own heads; these memories need to be written, spoken, shared, and processed with the help of supportive others.

Conclusion

I wrote this essay in order to discover how I might begin to write poems about my own traumatic experiences. As soon as I began my reading and research, I knew this process would challenge me emotionally and intellectually. At times throughout my research, I felt overwhelmed by all the trauma I'd been absorbing, and I had to even give up on certain texts that hit too close to home. But this is the process of trauma: we dig in, we expose old memories, we realize it's all too much, we take a step back, we breathe, and we dig in again, but this time a little gentler.

I've learned from both Hecht and Jungmin Yoon that imagistic memory operates both in the mind and on the page. Both poets weave moments of pure image with moments of narrative voice to convey what it's like to live with traumatic memory. Through Hecht's "A Hill," I've learned that the descriptive-meditative structure structure can be a useful tool to employ when writing about trauma, but its immersive qualities may be triggering. In order to counterbalance that effect, I look forward to writing a series of descriptive-meditative poem in which the meditations occur in the past-tense. Through Jungmin Yoon's "An Ordinary Misfortune," I've learned that a trauma poem's narrative does not need to be linear— it doesn't even need to exist within time as we know it. Trauma disrupts and alters time, and a trauma poem can do the same.

This essay has allowed me to understand how trauma and poetry can interact, and how much poetry can handle. I now feel better equipped to write about my own traumatic experiences: to introduce my poetry to my trauma.

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