The Body as Text:

Trauma, Pleasure, and The Erotics of Queer Excess

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Creative Writing and Poetics

University of Washington

Abstract

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Critical paper engaging with texts about sexual violence and writing about queer sexuality and excess as a way out and through writing about trauma. This paper discusses texts including *Chelsea Girls* by Eileen Myles, *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch, *Valencia* by Michelle Tea, and other seminal works of queer and lesbian litearture. This paper discusses trauma theory through frameworks of embodied trauma as discussed in *The Body Keeps the Score*, *The Need for A New Trauma Theory,* and other works.

There is power in writing, re-writing, revising traumatic stories and histories, there is power in writing them. I write about trauma and then go for a walk, or pet my cat, or spend time with a friend and hold hands as we sit in the park, or go roller skating, engage with my body in the present tense and fill it with joy. This is the erotic, and what is fulfilling, and I write this, too: the pleasure of warm water on my body, the soft give of my cat's fur under my hands, skating backwards to pop music at the roller rink, kissing a new lover, falling into the arms of a friend. I want to hold this dissonance, the way my body holds this dissonance: I want to write the trauma, and reclaim this, and I want to write the joy, the erotic, to create a path forward: that trauma does not end a body of work, but creates new pathways, new ways of knowing, new ways of writing. My body is a body that has been objectified and harmed since childhood, but it is also a body that can bicycle for miles, a body that can move to music, a body that can dive into Lake Washington, a body that can love another body, and this – the erotic, the pleasurable, writing it, engaging with it, letting it live in and through my work – is power.

WHAT WE FIND UNSPEAKABLE

We have to start here, and I struggle with how to say this. The English language is imperfect. "I was raped" is passive; it puts the onus on the "I," the subject. It focuses the pain of the action – "rape," literally, "to steal," knowing, even as this word evolved, that it was not sex, but something far more intimate and sinister – on the "I," but so too suggests blame. "I" was raped. What was "I" doing? Wearing? Thinking? Existing? What did "I" do to incite "was raped?" How was "I" asking for it?

Okay: let's try, instead, "he raped me." This puts the onus on the "he," the subject. Now I'm the object, the object of desire, the object of violence, the object of someone else's want and taking. I am exactly that, but also more than it. It's named, but the naming is imprecise. The word itself is insufficient. "He" becomes the focus of the sentence – isn't this what "he" wants, to be the center? Does this give him a type of power, too, putting him at the center of the action?

There is the action, and there is the aftermath. The disempowerment, the overpowering, the violence and fear and freeze in the action, and then there is the driving home after. There is the painful act of undressing, there is cleaning up makeup, there is crying in the shower. "He raped me," and all the rest: Taco Bell napkins cluttering my car, crying outside the Wawa, self-harming in the Wawa bathroom, escaping through sex with strangers. I drive home and stop at the Wawa for a hoagie and ask the cashier, who sat behind me in Environmental Science when we were both seniors in high school, if he'd fuck me where they stack the dairy crates. He blinked, twice, said: "I think you should go home, Rachael." The metal of his emergency bracelet – he had a life-threatening peanut allergy – caught the gleam of the fluorescent lights above us.

These sentences are so deceptively simple. "I was raped." "He raped me."

I have rarely said these sentences as they are, in my life outside of my writing. I cloak them in suggestions and references and subterfuge. I get language for what has happened to my body from the writing of others.

As Claire Schwartz writes in the essay anthology *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture:* "I take a deep breath and settle back into my chair, posed to receive the new language I know she will give me to speak my experience. 'The victim must learn to make language tell her

own truth: he raped me.' I am devastated. I don't want to be made the object in my own retelling. 'I was raped,' I whisper. That, too, feels wrong. I set the book down on the table" (40).

My aesthetic, at this point in my writing, is for stripped-down, precise prose. I am struggling to find something aesthetically satisfying when writing about rape. "Rape" is exactly what it is, but it is a heavy word. The word has been used and used, is mired in legal connotation. Every other word for it is cloaked in subterfuge: violate, ravish, defile, plunder, pillage. I do this in my writing, too, refer to it as "sexual violence," side-stepping the actual label. It's such an ugly word that it's hard to say, hard to hold. I love beautiful, musical things; the very word, "rape," is so, so ugly. It is exactly what it is. This tension is essential. I cannot make "I was raped" pretty. I cannot make it musical. I cannot make it better. It is an awful, ugly thing, horrible, and is, and was, and will be. I have to call it what it is, write it as it is. This is something no one else will do or write for me. I have to write this. I don't know what else to do with it. Every day, I am so thankful to be a writer. Where else would I put this? Where else does it go?

Writing is the answer for working through trauma, at least, it has been for me: looking at it, again and again, fully and completely, in story after story. Hiding trauma under metaphor and subterfuge continues the unspeakability – let it be loud, and frightening, and scary. Let us speak truly and completely about what has happened to us, so we might share it, and learn from it, and grow together. "Rape" is an ugly word because it has to be.

From Lacy M. Johnson's *The Reckonings*: "It seems impossible to speak about rape… because of the widespread belief in our culture that rape is an aberration: a violence so unthinkable, so unfathomable, so taboo as to render it unspeakable. It is unspeakable, we are told, because respect for the sanctity and integrity of a woman's body is the norm. This is, of course, not the way most women have experienced their own bodies throughout history. For

most women, rape has been the norm and respect the exception" (68). It is impossible to quantify this idea of "most women": rapes reported to police are only a tiny fraction, and so many people who have experienced this keep it close and quiet and secret, so it is impossible to get a good idea of how common this is, especially historically. Anecdotally, almost every woman I know has a story of violence, large or small. I have only recently become aware that sustained, repeated, and violent sexual trauma is not commonplace – it is such a rooting aspect of my life that it feels hard to conceptualize a life without it – but small injustices, small objectifications, small violences, create a society and culture around sexual violence that enable it and allow it to flourish. My neighbor who catcalls me when I leave for the bus is not the same as my boyfriends who have raped me or men who have abused me, but this small action instills a level of fear, unsettledness in the body, a sense of being surveilled, that perpetuate a culture of sexual violence.

In *The Other Side*, Johnson's first book, a memoir largely about the memory of a man she loved and lived with kidnapping, raping, and attempting to murder her, she writes about the process of writing about the kidnapping: "I sit at the computer, in front of the window, my eyes on the grass, my fingers on the keys, and tears stream down my cheeks. I down whole glasses of scotch and crawl under the desk" (180). "There's only darkness lapping at the window. There's only an empty page on the screen. Only the story can bridge it" (181). The process of writing the unspeakable is not unlike picking at a fresh-healed scab, pulling back the skin to let something half-healed bleed again. Darkness hides and soothes. It is our job as a writer to find a light, shine it on what is waiting in the darkness. The story waits. The story grows. The story bridges.

When Johnson released *The Reckonings*, I attended her reading at Politics and Prose in DC. I was barely twenty-two and in the past two weeks, I had been diagnosed with herpes that I

potentially contracted from a man who raped me and Brett Kavanaugh ascended to the Supreme Court. I walked to the bookstore, two miles downhill. I'd been walking so much, obsessively, all over DC, and my feet had erupted into blisters, which distracted me from the ache of herpes ulcers as they brushed against the seams of my jeans, reminding me of how not-mine my body had become. Johnson signed books at the end of her reading. I was so young when I came up to her with my books. I had not yet tattooed over my self-harm scars. They were still the first thing people noticed about me. They are always the first thing people notice about me. Johnson, herself, has two sleeves of tattoos, written about in *The Other Side* as ways to reclaim, but also to hide.

"I have a story like yours," I said.

There is a legacy, here, of victims – survivors – reaching hands through our writing to the people who come after us. There are people behind me who will find their own experiences in my words. It is my job to reach forward, to reach back, to the people who come before me, to the people who will come after. I am working on this essay and walk through my apartment, look at the spines of books I've carried with me cross-country. Many of the stories that have lingered with me are stories of people who have been raped, who have written about it, who reach out their hands toward me. This is the only way I know to make the world around me make sense, how to think through a problem: through writing, through reading.

I started to write about rape when I was a senior in college, just about to graduate. I broke up with the boyfriend I had most of college two months before I graduated. I started writing about him, hunched over my laptop in my warm, small bedroom, my desk pushed against a window, where I could see my housemates carry groceries in, bring their hookups and boyfriends

home, watch the sun bleed against the mountains. I couldn't write about this sober. Every day, I drank wine out of the bottle, blacked out, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote.

Before I wrote about this truthfully, I wrote about it at angles, afraid to look at it directly. I wrote stories about girls with difficult father figures. I wrote stories about girls who were angry, but never specified why. I wrote essays about my stepfather, but only with distance from myself: screaming at my mother, the catalogs of broken things he left in the wake of his rage.

Balaev writes of a need for a new trauma theory that allows for language and verbalization; that trauma happens to those who have access to language, not just in pre-verbal childhood, and through reading and writing about trauma we enter a conversation, which necessitates language. "Trauma in fiction produces three significant effects: the awareness of the multidimensionality of an extreme experience and particularly the social influences that shape the survivor's personality, the textual modeling of the social aspects of the individual's mind, and the ethics of reading that compel a compassionate correspondence between reader and survivor" (Balaev, summarizing Vickroy, 10). I struggle with the unspeakable. Surely what we see as unspeakable means, really, difficult to speak about, or hard to hear? We have to speak difficult things. We have to write difficult things.

Trauma leaves survivors, who can speak. We break these expectations of continued trauma, the legacies of repetition it leaves, through speaking what feels unspeakable, through communities that form around this unspeakability. Unspeakable means that, without speaking it, without sharing stories, it risks fading into obscurity and forgotten. Let us not forget trauma. Let it motivate and surprise us. I have heard people say that they would rather be dead than what I am, with a body as crime scene, but I disagree, so fiercely: I get to write about this. I get to make

sense of this, even if I never get there, I get to try. I get to take a reader through this experience and trust both of us to come out the other side. Death is an end-stop, but rape and trauma are commas, a pause, a break, but I, and we, keep going: "We rise up like spirits from the spectacle of degradation, our wholeness and purity in inverse proportion to the violation and fragmentation that we imaginatively witness/don't witness via the trope of the unspeakable" (Stampfl 19). Death keeps the unspeakable unspoken. Trauma leaves survivors, witnesses, and it is our responsibility to ourselves and to others to speak.

Stampfl writes of the unspeakable to engage with the real instead of the dissociative state necessary for speaking in theory: the emotional impact of Garbus visiting Poland and witnessing the place where her mother, a child-victim of the Holocaust, was tortured and suffered. Stampfl writes, "I seemed to discover in the unspeakable a kind of magic carpet, an instrument for passing smoothly and convincingly from the universal to the specific, for connecting with history – at last – while remaining firmly within the domain of literary study, and at the same time honoring the claims of both heart and mind" (19-20). Literary study, and other theoretical frameworks, can act as a belay while descending into dark, difficult topics: a way to connect back to the rest of the world, to plumb the depths and come back, but the real engagement is with the stories we tell. Stories bind us, stories inform us, stories move us: the theory is a framework, but the story speaks. Unspeakability is a core element of so much trauma. Stories like these have universals and specifics. There is the universal story, one that can apply to so many people. In my case: a teenage girl raped by an older man she worked with. Then, there is the specific, entirely mine, one instance of many: Rachael, age eighteen, daycare teacher, Steven, age twenty-four, senior daycare teacher, Stafford, Virginia, a hot day in July, rhododendrons and magnolias in bloom, a basement bedroom that smelled like mildew and unwashed sheets, the sound of the

PS4 home screen. Telling this story at the universal level speaks to many, but the specifics speak to the human. Details ground us in a story. Details ground us in what is real. I populate my stories with careful, attentive detail, something to hold on to.

Garbus is "engaged in a process of recovery crucial to her own psychological well-being" (20) and there is power in this for the writer, for the reader, for the mother who experienced atrocities in her own body. We have to speak these unspeakable things. It is how a victim heals and becomes a survivor, and we are social creatures, we heal in tandem and community, we are made to help support each other. Literature and writing are both exercises in empathy, and there is power in witnessing, in being witnessed. Reading and writing is accessing another world, seeing a new way of knowing: my writing shares a way of knowing, an aesthetic of knowing and experiencing.

Judith Herman writes of this unspeakability: "a conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them out loud" (1). These are stages of living through trauma; some people are locked into denying events that have happened to them out of a sense of self-preservation, a way of the brain keeping itself safe and sane. These defense mechanisms serve an important purpose, but when we are able, when we are safe, when we can: we should speak the unspeakable. We have to speak the unspeakable to prevent the unspeakable from happening again. I don't write for my own catharsis. I don't write to keep things secret. I write to share. I write to show. I write to become. I write to worry a wound. I write to scar.

As Bessel van der Kolk writes in *The Body Keeps the Score,* "traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships: with families, loved ones, AA meetings, veterans' organizations, religious communities or professional therapists" (212). When we speak the unspeakable, be this in a therapist office, over coffee with a friend, in an AA meeting in a church

basement, we hold each other. We see each other. We can support each other in our healing. We are designed to care for each other: the spaces between our fingers where another hand folds, neatly; the hollows of a shoulder perfect for a hug. Speaking and making art are distinct, but have similarities: while art-making is a way of making sense of things, adding structure and organization and committing to the work of revision and care, speaking is extemporaneous, entirely in the moment, and a way forward. We need both; I've needed to write and make art about it, to obsess over the details, to pour myself into something, before I can speak about it. When I write about rape, when I write the unspeakable, I find myself rereading my own writing, just for proof: I have been through this, and I will go past this, I will transform this into something true and skillfully written and mine, something I can hold in my hands, concrete evidence. When I speak in a PTSD support group, I speak because first I have written, and made sense of things, given events and feelings an order and a structure. Van der Kolk again: "The wiring of our brain circuits is devoted to being in tune with others. Recovery from trauma involves (re)connecting with our fellow human beings" (212). When we have been traumatized in relationships, it is difficult to allow that trust to build again, to reach out to another person and have faith that they will reach back. Writing, speaking, the unspeakable is an exercise in this trust: "if you've been hurt, you need to acknowledge and name what happened to you" (van der Kolk, 234). The writer asks for the reader to feel with them, to sit in this experience of selfhood and emotion.

I have been raped, assaulted, and humiliated; I have brought myself into situations where I knew I'd be harmed, and I was brought into situations against my will where harm occurred. I write this because I have to. I write this because I do not know who I would be without it. My trauma does not define me, but it does inform me, how I write, where my writing reaches.

Sometimes I worry that my writing is too focused on this topic, that my writer-self – wiser and smarter than my living, breathing, cognitive self – can't write themself out of this obsessive thought pattern. Maybe the easier option, the path of least resistance, is to accept it, to write myself around and around this axel. All writers have obsessions. Maybe this is, at least for now, mine.

I remember too much. I can't put it down. I am healing, at the same time. I take my trauma out of its box, run my fingers over it, the edges and worn-down corners of it. I look at it and know it is real and it is mine. I put it away but know it's there, and as I write it, maybe it can calcify, like a pearl or a kidney stone.

SELF-PORTRAIT THROUGH OBSESSIVE CONFESSIONS

I graduate college into a Trump presidency, move to DC, share a different house with different roommates. I write about my traumatized body while the man who bragged about "grabbing [women] by the pussy" sits not four miles away in the White House. On the Metro in the morning, commuting into the heart of the city, I look at the other women standing near me, wonder how many of us are carrying that same pain. I am writing for me, and I am writing for them, too, in hope that my writing can help give them language to understand what has happened, to offer an experience that can help them contextualize their own trauma the way writers who have come before me have offered that same certainty.

The day after the Kavanaugh hearings, when he is voted into the Supreme Court, I go for a long walk from where I live in Petworth down to Capitol Hill. In the upstairs seating area of a café, I write, next to protestors wearing all black holding signs that say *KAVENAUGH IS A*

RAPIST and *BELIEVE WOMEN*. I write: *I am no man's walking damage. I am more than a vessel for a man's need. My body and my words belong to me.*

My body and my words belong to me, and they belong to the people who come after me. They belong to the women sitting next to me in the café, carrying their own stories, remembering their own versions of Kavanaugh. I want them to belong to these people. The story is the bridge.

I grew up Catholic, atoning in confession booths, telling another person about my sins. I am confessing to you, the reader, that I have been harmed and I have been imperfect in it. I have loved people who have raped me, I have been trapped in a bedroom and frozen, and fawned, and dissociated as my body became someone else's, became an object, became raped. Is this a search for an answer? A search for absolution? I write in my apartment, my cat curled on my arms. You are reading at your kitchen table, or squinting at a laptop on a messy desk, or leaning back on a couch. You are holding my sins, my regrets and bad choices – every time I walked into that basement bedroom and knew what would happen, every time a man took what he wanted from me, every time I didn't say anything, every time I didn't leave, all the imperfections of victimhood, survivorhood – in your hands, witnessing, absolving. I want you to see me, the only way I know how, through writing and reading. The mistakes are part of the story, essential to speak. I can't stop writing about this.

Chanel Miller, the Jane Doe in Brock Turner's 2015 case, writes viscerally about her experience with the court system, with being a woman raped by a man with access to immense power and privilege. "...I realized surviving the assault had only been the first challenge. If I ever wanted to confront him, contest his side of the story, it'd have to be in court… He'd seen me as a body, but would attempt to destroy me as a person" (46). When I considered filing a police

report and pursuing legal action against a rapist boyfriend, sitting in the parking lot of a Methodist church, writing, still, always, frantic, writing, I thought about the many ways I would be disassembled in court. Neither I nor my rapist had access to privilege and power the way Brock Turner did, but I knew, immediately, instinctively, that my innocence would be questioned. I had a "promiscuous" past – the only way I knew how to be seen as a teenager was through my sexuality. I drank too much that year – of course I did, a coping mechanism – and imagined him weaponizing this on the stand. "In creative nonfiction, the author is unreliable as a result of memories being unreliable. Montaigne famously said: What do I know? I know what happened" (Vanasco 95). My proof was only in my testimony, in my writing, and I imagined myself, dressed to cover my tattoos, sitting in a witness seat, picked apart, imperfect victim. Whatever I was, whatever I am, looking for won't come in a courtroom. It comes through art-making, through writing. I know what happened, and I know I can write it.

"... I didn't want him to touch me, but he still did. I told myself it wasn't rape because we were in a relationship. It wasn't rape because I still loved him. It wasn't rape because I didn't fight him off. It wasn't rape because I stayed with him after. It didn't matter that I kept whispering no, no, no. It didn't matter that I sobbed the entire time" (Mártir 100).

I loved a man who raped me as I slept. My previous boyfriend heard me say no and pressed on regardless; this boyfriend didn't give me a chance to say no. I loved this person more than I thought I could love another person. I wanted to peel off my skin to be closer to him. We had so much sex, happy, consensual, loving sex, tender sex, kink sex, and this still happened, once a week or so, showing so painfully that rape is not about sex, but power, but control. I've written about both men, fiction and nonfiction, and the love complicates. Writing into this

complication, exploring it, prodding it, is the only way I know to make it feel mine, to access that power.

What is in a no that feels so powerful, so impossible? The characters in my stories are so passive. My mother was so frustrated by my passivity when I was a teenager. I am so frustrated by my own passivity as an adult. I moved across the country to start making my life mine for the first time. I am working so hard to get it under control. It still follows me, everywhere, every day. This is the only time my life has felt like mine. This is the only time my life has been mine. My life is mine, no matter the pain. My body and my words belong to me.

When I write this, is it believable? Is it believable that someone would let themselves be slaughtered like this, again and again and again? Is it? Are my characters? Are my stories? Am I?

"If they want it, they can take it. What you want or don't want is irrelevant." (xTx 119). Eventually, a girl who is taught to swallow her voice will never be able to find it again. This is where the real power lies, for the men who will tear through her. "If a boy treats you like you're special, it's probably because he wants to come and not because you are a treasure he discovered. You are not a treasure. You are a thing a boy can use to make him ejaculate. This makes sense because you already believe this at your core. You have been taught" (xTx 123). This direct address, the "you," is arresting, compelling. I have been the "you," so many of us, the "you." I find second person interesting to write about, particularly when writing nonfiction. Maybe this, too, is speaking the unspeakable, putting the weight of the narrative onto an imagined "you," neither me, the writer, nor you, the reader, but something between, and both. "You" invites imagination, connection, the lived experiences of the reader meeting the writer's presumption of

a “you.” This second-person perspective forces the immediacy of empathy, such a core tenet of writing and literature.

What of the first boys, mine? A boy who rubs against me when I am at my locker, age twelve. A boy who follows me around from place to place and stares at my breasts when I talk the moment I develop them. I am young when I do. Age ten. A boy who shoves his hand, rough, up my skirts and down my shirts. Age twelve. So many I don’t remember. I am steeped in this, percolated in it. Where does it end? What else is there for me to write about? My ontological experience of my body, this container of moving through time, is itself dispossessed, mired in rape and hands and men, so many men, so many boys. I am not special. I am not special, and that is why I must write about this.

WHATEVER “BRAVE” MEANS

“You’ll be called brave over and over, which you will hate. No one means for it to sound reductive, but it does. You worry that they don’t mean superhero brave, but cancer-brave, walk-the-plank brave” (Burns 175).

When I start writing about rape in my senior year of college, my professor writes in the margins: *this is very raw and very brave of you to write.* I take it as a sincere compliment, press the note close to my heart. Finally, I think, someone has seen me.

I am witnessing myself, my own rapes, the violence my body carries; though witnessing myself, I am witnessing others.

After this, when I have started speaking a little more and a little louder, brave starts to feel like a pejorative. What makes writing “brave?” Does it just mean: how much of a life can a person put on display?

When I write about this, I have to be okay with people reading it. My grandmother called me after the 2014 "A Rape on Campus" article came out on *Rolling Stone*. I was seventeen, maybe eighteen, a first-year at a women's college.

"I'm so thankful you're somewhere safe," my grandmother said. "I read that article and thought of you the whole time."

The article tore through me, destabilized me in a way I didn't have language for. I was newly away from an abusive home, finally eking out a life that felt like mine. I didn't say that I had already been that girl, in other contexts, that I would be that girl again. I still have so much trouble telling my family about my trauma. Let me be honest: I'm embarrassed by it. Trauma could have wrecked me. It has wrecked me. It will not wreck me forever. I will write about this. It is not brave of me to write. I simply, I only, I just have to, write about this.

"No matter how much I heal, the assault itself will always be a sad thing. I have to be okay with this. I have to stop rushing them to the part where the letters flood in. I have to hold a space for grief" (Miller 274).

This is where I struggle. When I write about this, when people I know read my writing about this, there often is a moment of pause where that grief lives. I would do the same with my students; I want to create a space to pause, acknowledge the vulnerable, painful thing they have offered me, and what a kindness, what a gift it is, to be trusted with something so vulnerable. I almost don't want this space for grief. I almost want to ask to not have it. The writing is the witnessing, and I want to thank the reader for walking through it with me, not the other way around. Writing says: see me. Witness me.

I want my assault to be seen. I want my rapes to be acknowledged. What I want, what is impossible, is for the men who have raped me to know what they've done, to have to walk

around with that knowledge without justifying it to themselves. I want them to carry it like I have to carry it. I want it to be as heavy for them as it is for me. I want them to read. I want them to know. I want them to face themselves on the page.

I want the people who know me and love me to love me and know me fully; this includes the rapes, the assaults. This includes the love. This includes making bread in my small studio kitchen, tossing catnip mice for my cat to play with, long drives, hikes, nights in playing video games, dancing in nightclubs. I want to be seen in all the prisms and detail I deserve. If there is nothing else, I can write this. I have to write this. It is the only thing I can do.

Let's take a moment. Let's sit with the grief. Invite it in, let it stay a while. It is part of the writing, too. Let its silence take up space.

WRITING THE QUEER FEMME EROTIC AS POWER

In "The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde writes about how, through reclaiming the erotic as a source of pleasure and movement, the "power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge" (1) is, at its heart, a sense of trusting the body, of letting the body guide us, to its senses of pleasure and justice and truth. I have been socialized as a woman and lived for years as a bisexual cis woman. I had sex for many years with cis men who saw me as a cis woman, and intimately felt "the distant/inferior position for [the erotic] to be psychically milked" (Sontag 1) where my sexuality, and especially my queerness, were not aspects of myself but used for the arousal of cis men.

Sex outside of the context of cis men, writing the erotic when it includes bodies and lives outside of this construction of sex and relationships we have societally sanctioned, gives rise to knowing bodies and experiencing pleasure outside of the expected. One key thread in books I

have read relating to the queer femme erotic is the exploration of what a body can do when freed from the limitations and expectations of feminine smallness and delicacy; *The Chronology of Water, Valencia, Acts of Service, Abandon Me, Chelsea Girls,* and *The Argonauts* all detail sex and the erotic as ways the body can be made more full: through sex acts, and also through the allowance of a body's want and excess. The excess is most salient in sex scenes, but can be found throughout, an allowance for the "too much"-ness of a person. Being an artist is engaging with the "too much," letting feeling and emotion be present, be loud, be uncomfortable.

A visceral passage that shows this excess well and was an early signifier of my own queerness and my body, as a femme body, as a locus of pleasure and desire, is in Eileen Myles' *Chelsea Girls:*

> I must fuck Robin. That was my job. She had the largest … cunt, vagina I have ever stuck my finger in. It was big red and needy. I stuck two three fingers in and fucked her and fucked her. I've always received complaints that I was rough but I felt like I could have been shoving a stick up this woman, a branch… she moaned and growled with pleasure. Such a woman, I have never met such a horny animal nor have I ever so distinctly serviced a woman before. Do you want my fist inside you. Anything she shrieked, anything. (68-69)

There is so much of Robin in this passage. Her body is overwhelming in its want, and this overwhelm is the point, and the pleasure. While heterosexuality and patriarchy profess ideas of women as small and pliant, Robin's pleasure is precisely about this excess – the pleasure comes from the excess, and the pleasure of the giver, the "I," comes from being part of this excess and servicing it. Queer femme sexuality (ideally) requires patience, an act of taking turns. There is no shame in Robin's want, no shame in her body: the act of pleasure, responding to the body's

needs, acting in response to that want with action instead of judgment, is a freedom of its own. So much of feminine sexuality is governed by "should"s – good girls *should* refuse their sexuality, except in the context of marriage, where women *should* submit to their male partners; good girls *should* be demure and prioritize giving pleasure over receiving it; good girls *should* be passive, and receptive, and express no desire outside of the fixed gender expectations of penetrator/penetrated. Here, the queer erotic takes back power by completely neutralizing all the *should* and instead cloaking sexuality in an intense, overwhelming need. Our bodies know what they need, to be full and pleasured and happy, and the erotic is allowing that need to be fulfilled; the erotic is re-learning, or learning for the first time, how to listen to that need of the body.

Lorde writes of the same pleasure and joy in writing a poem that she has during sex, or dancing, or building a bookcase: "the erotic connection functions [as] the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (4). Living in a body, writing a body, with an erotics that have been stolen and co-opted and overwritten, with this sense of pleasure and joy, is an act of reclamation in itself. Lorde writes "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings," (5), especially for marginalized bodies. I think of how queer people will find each other in a group, how we magnetize: we exist in our bodies in a way that is different. We are, or we are trying to, saying yes to our deepest cravings. When a woman curls her body around mine at the lesbian bar, when we spin together and press our chests close, when I can taste her breath and we kiss in the throb of bodies, this is, this has to be, a yes.

While working in the same vein as Eileen Myles, and taking inspiration from *Chelsea Girls'* aforementioned scene, Michelle Tea also writes of an excessive queer femme erotic, a "yes within ourselves," in her semi-autobiographical novel, *Valencia*:

> The awkwardness of not knowing someone's body, I had no idea what to do. I shoved my fingers into her. You can do it harder, she said, and I did. These girls. I couldn't believe I wasn't hurting her… The vagina is not a delicate place, I was learning this slowly. I worked my hand into Iris, who sucked and chewed on the inky red heart [tattoo] that marked the place my real heart churned. She was so intense. *I feel like you're squeezing my heart,* she said. (50)

Because sex between women is already taboo and breaking societal norms, this also gives the freedom of losing the expectation that, when confronted with another person's body, we know exactly what to do: every body is different, and in queer femme sexuality – and queer sexuality across the board – there's a greater emphasis on asking the other person what gives them pleasure, and an acknowledgement that every body is different, every body experiences pleasure differently, and non-normative sex acts (acknowledging here that fisting has come up twice in three pages) to fulfill those sexual desires are welcomed, celebrated, and maybe even expected – that if a person is already breaking cultural norms and expectations by having queer sex, this allows for an experience and opening for further pleasure and exploration of a body. As in *Chelsea Girls'* passage, the animalism, the excess, overwhelms. The narrator in the passage is overwhelmed by the want and need of this woman, and engages this want, celebrates it, meets it. Words like "shoved," "worked," "churned," all show this effort, the engagement with another body, allowing two bodies to labor, to be serviced through labor. The "intensity" of Iris is not frightening, but wanted, even attractive: a queer femme erotics of excess, letting a person be "too much," and all that they are.

This, too, is a place where literature as a mirror to life is beneficial: reading and writing allow for a psychic exploration of sexuality, want, desire, and pleasure, that even if it is

disembodied and on the page, it gives a place to start, to explore, and to play: how rare it is, as an adult, to have a space to play. Sex parties are often called “play parties,” kink sex often called “scenes,” that there is space and allowance for play, experimentation, acting, and being a different version of ourselves in sex than we are walking through the world. Writing, too, has space for experimentation and play, to try and find new ways to express an idea, a thought, a feeling.

Societal expectations girls are taught emphasize delicacy, politeness, smallness; it makes sense that these lessons extend to our sexualities. But our bodies as sexual bodies are not delicate, not fragile; the vagina is a wonderfully fluid muscle, the clitoris exists exclusively and only for pleasure, and in writing, we can explore the limits, expectations, wants, and desires of these bodies, engage in a fusion of imagination and experience, play.

So much of sexuality is the desire to be consumed, and writing about sexuality is reflecting that longing through style and action. In my own writing, sex scenes are often fixed in a character’s head, using techniques of excess to show either a character’s scope of desire in queer sex or a lack of interest and dissociation in straight sex. The former, using excess and engaging with that excess, excitement in how much there is to enjoy, explore, and play; the latter, when writing closeted queer characters, showing the disengagement with the actions happening to the character’s body, the dissociation so present when we say no to the “yes within ourselves,” an act of lying, however cognizant or significant, to be easier, more pliable, and fit into the roles expected of femme people and our sexuality. A character denying their own queerness and lying to themselves about the kind of fulfillment they find is, in many ways, also denying themselves the freedom of expressing love and joy fully, and without that, a life isn’t as full, a knowing isn’t as complete, as it could be.

I am writing sex as a list of possibilities. To consider sex – the immense pleasure of it all! The incredible ways two or more (or fewer!) bodies can interact! All the nerve endings electric in the right circumstance! – as only cishet penetration is a disservice to so many bodies, to every body. Sex is, simply, a consummation of sexual desire. It is Lorde's "yes within ourselves." Trauma comes from the inverse, a "no" ignored or plucked away or stolen.

In Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water,* Yuknavitch writes about her own background of trauma and sexual violence:

> [Yuknavitch's father] rubbed my far arm with his big thumb in creepy circles… Then he narrated what boys would want to do to me, how they would put their dirty hands up my skirt and part my legs and finger fuck me. How they would reach inside my shirt and fondle my tits and grab my breasts. Suck them. How disgusting boys would be, their hands, their hot hips and breath, their wanting in and up. And what they would do with their dicks, me sitting there next to him on the couch feeling the heat of him touching his dick even without looking, my skin making pins, clenching my teeth inside my mouth, and him saying how I should say no, and how I could find the strength to say no by remembering I was his daughter, that he was the only man for me. (48 - 49)

She writes about this abuse in a very matter-of-fact, reported, measured manner, listed, as an inventory. The language is accessible, quotidian; so too is violence like this. It nests in homes, perches in childhood bedrooms. Yuknavitch writes about this with a sense of distance between what's happening next to her and her sensations in her own body: pain, through teeth-clenching, and a dissociation from the narration of things that are expected to happen to her body and the touch from her father, a syntactical distance from "far arm" and "big thumb," emphasizing the

smallness and tenderness of her in comparison to her father. This idea of belonging is so often corrupted: we have no choice, as children, but to belong to someone, and there is so little a child can do when the person we belong to harms us. This, of course, colors her attitude and ideas about sexuality, and has a long-lasting shadow.

However, when she writes about sex with other women, the pleasure overwhelms, acting in contrast to the dissociation and distance of which she writes about trauma. The sexuality is an excess:

> Hours of woman on woman on woman whose regular lives didn't allow for such wild abandon. Sometimes Hannah's fist up my cunt Claire's mouth on mine or me sucking her epic tits. Sometimes Hannah on her stomach me up her ass with a strap on Claire behind me giving me a reach around – a skill she intuited. Sometimes Claire on all fours me and Hannah filling every hole licking every mouth rubbing her clit making her screaming making her entire corpus shiver her head rock back her woman wail let loose gone primal cum and shit stains and spit and tears. (144)

Even the syntactical construction of this passage is remarkable in its excess: a catalogue of sexual acts, allowances of the "wild abandon," where sex is the only space allowed for this freedom of expression in adult life, a space without the pauses of commas and periods, just the explosion of words on the page to reflect a wildness of experience. The idea of a woman gone loose is exactly the idea of the erotic I am proposing: the idea of primality, engaging with the body as it is, excessive and wanting and hungry, so often told to be made smaller and more polite and less, but the barrage of words, the ceaselessness of action, the ramping up to the end of this section: "I don't know how many times we came… it seemed unending" (145) where the endlessness and syntax of this scene, too, is a fever dream of activity.

The bodies on the page are not fixed into specific roles of penetrator/penetrated, active/passive, top/bottom; they move, fluid, in pursuit of pleasure, fullness, and all the sensations a body is capable of. Part of embracing the erotic is engaging with how these roles are fluid and slippery, so context-dependent: one person's pleasure can come from submission – I have noticed, while reading for this essay, that much of the work about the queer femme erotic is through searching for areas of submission with other women – but the same person can take a dominant role in a different context. In the above passage, all three women switch between dominance and submission, top and bottom. Because of the lack of division between penetrator/penetrated in queer femme sexuality, there is an allowance for this slipperiness and fluidity.

In my own writing, I tend to, with a few exceptions, write about dominance in the queer femme erotic. In so much of life, sex and otherwise, so many people are looking for someone to point the way and give us directions, to tell us exactly who, exactly where, and exactly how, to be. There is comfort in submitting to the desires, whims, and directions of another, but there is also so much self-empowerment that comes from being the one in charge, that a body so often relegated to passivity and expected to take on these roles of passivity, caretaking, and smallness is, too, capable of control, power, and dominance. I like this tension, and there's a lot to explore while writing about it: expectations of femininity and womanhood, expectations of sexuality, imaginings of kink, and gendered sexual roles.

When speaking of the erotic, even if taking the liberal, not-sex-specific view I take of the erotic, we must talk about sex, we must talk about how lesbian sex and lesbian bodies are negotiated through structures of heterosexuality. There is a perception, particularly among

straight people, and especially straight men, that because lesbian sex doesn't necessitate intercourse, the sex we do have is seen as lesser, or not even sex. Often, the only representation straight people have about lesbian sex is through pornography, which easily leads into fetishization of lesbians, bisexuals, and other women who have sex with women. As Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*, "the object… of lesbian-femme desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay" (167). My idea, as a lesbian, of the eroticism of a female body is necessarily different from the eroticism of a female body as perceived by cishet men. The eroticism of a female body as seen by another female body is destabilizing what both aspects, the body and the desire, mean; the scripts we are given for desire, given at an early and impressionable age, require a feminine dehumanization. These are aspects to consider while writing about the queer femme erotic: how different this longing and desire looks when it is between women, how to queer desire.

I would like to propose that our personal fulfillment and our sexual fulfillment are intrinsically linked, but through power structures and definitions of sexuality as "good" and "bad," we have separated them, but perhaps not inexorably, that a unification can take place through careful examination and development. While the idea of "experimentation" is often used to delegitimize queer people, especially lesbians and trans people, there is value in experimentation and trying on different forms and methods of sexuality; what could be wrong with trying to fulfill ourselves? Writing, too, is an exercise in this meaning-making and exploration, trying different selves, embracing the slipperiness and fluidity, and exploration. What could be wrong with allowing ourselves different ways of expressing our sexuality, this

center of so much of how we live, work, and learn? Reading and writing expand our ontological selves, new ways of knowing and seeing the world – imaginations and expansions. As writers, we collect experiences to write about them, to reflect on them and make them new again. Sex, the queer erotic, is being made new, again and again, baptized by every new body. My sex is queer, my desire is queer, my writing is queer, my aesthetic is queer, my erotics are queer; but more than that, *I* am queer.

WRITING THE EROTIC AS SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

Trauma disrupts a life, and long-term sexual trauma certainly upsets a sexual life, a way of conceptualizing ourselves as sexual beings, and our interactions with queerness. While trauma disrupts a healthy sense of sexuality, it also creates an opportunity for the traumatized person to write themselves an answer, for them to dig into this trauma and uncover something new.

Lidia Yuknavitch ends *The Chronology of Water* with a brief section titled "Wisdom is a Motherfucker." Wisdom only comes through life experience; it is hard-earned. She writes, "what happens when you swim back through your own past is that you find an endwall. The endwall for me is my mother and my dead baby girl. I learned it at the surface of my skin where it is written now through rituals of pain and pleasure" (291). Yuknavitch has waded, swam through pain and pleasure, memories of loss and terrible mistakes and trauma, and found an answer, only through this work and process of excavation. Writing can do this, find the endwalls. Queer sex is an important hinging point of pleasure throughout *The Chronology of Water,* and so is motherhood, and family, and people who have experienced trauma get to have this, too, and find joy and peace in the families, in the selves, we build ourselves, in the pasts we excavate and write through, in the futures we write ourselves.

When considering writing the erotic, there is the contention of sexuality as "obscene." As Sontag writes, "Obscenity, to Bataille, simultaneously revives his most painful experiences and scores a victory over that pain" (224); "He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don't know" (232). The obscene, itself unspeakable, can offer language to something that feels too immense to speak about – sexual trauma – and repositioning it in the context of sexuality and pleasure, eroticizing areas of the body and sexuality that have been broken and torn, can be a radical, revolutionary power in (re)claiming a sense of self and sexuality in the wake of significant sexual trauma. It is no accident that much of the kink scene is composed of people who have experienced sexual trauma, especially queer people; we have to give ourselves and each other the language and ability to rewrite and rewire, reclaim and recontextualize, what we have been through. The erotics – sexual and beyond sex – are where we can derive power, through writing our bodies and the pleasure of them, that bodies after experiencing trauma still experience pleasure, that we are not broken, wingless things, but full of life and pleasure. It takes time to get here, time spent writing about, thinking about, healing from, and engaging with sex: "that to write an awakened sex scene, one may need to be awake to their own sex" (Febos, *Body Work,* 48). Sex is necessary and human and messy and awkward, individual to each person, even the two or more people engaged in a sex act can be having wildly different experiences of the same sex act. The only truths we have are the truths of our bodies, and the only way I know how to access that is through writing it.

Maggie Nelson writes romantically and lyrically about anal sex, a sex act often touched with judgment. "Instead the words I love you come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation

the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad," (1) a tender, loving declaration – the erotic. There are contradictions in this, the violence and domination of a kind of sex like this, and again, the idea of a femme erotic as submission. This, though, is a kind of sex that's wanted, and enjoyed, and sought after. "Sodomy" has its own distinction within the larger terms of sexual violence, maybe because there's an implication that it should be humiliating; here, Nelson takes the "should" and instead rewrites it into pleasure, into desire, into wanting. The idea of, or expectation of, humiliation is either part of the pleasure or not present at all; this is an act of pleasure, even in the dankness, the face smashed against the cement floor. Nelson writes the erotic into avoidance: "The key is training your ear not to mind hearing a person's name over and over again," (7) writing about avoiding her lover's pronouns, afraid to ask, because writing the erotic and living it is existing in a "we," a combined, where there is no "you," no "I," and certainly not the distance needed for a she, a he, a they. When the erotic is as strong as it is in *The Argonauts*, it does not separate, there is not the distance of *she fucked her* or *she fucked him,* it is simply the we: we fuck, we love, we are.

"I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking. I am interested in the fact that the clitoris, disguised as a discrete button, sweeps over the entire area like a manta ray, impossible to tell where its eight thousand nerves begin and end." (Nelson 85). The pleasure is worth it. The pleasure is reason enough. Our American culture, and the aesthetic deriving from it, has been so wired for *purpose,* for capitalism, for the work we do to have meaning. Sometimes getting fucked in the ass is getting fucked in the ass; sometimes domming a woman is domming a woman; sometimes writing pleasure is experiencing pleasure. The pleasure is the point.

My body has been raped and it has been abused. My body has bruised and healed and come back stronger. I have changed my body, starved-skinny as a teenager, softer as a college student, strong and capable in my early twenties, heaviest during the pandemic. It is strong, now, tattooed, scarred, hard-working, mine. It has known pain and it has known pleasure, and now, here, my life has the structure and stability I've never found anywhere else.

If I were to pluck twelve-year-old Rachael out of time, put her across the table from me in 2009, if I were to ask her where she thought she'd be in her late twenties, her answer would be easy: *a writer living in Seattle.* The twelve-year-old version of me had just moved into a home with her stepfather, who would ramp up his abuse first by inches and then by miles. She would only have writing and music to escape, and she knew that there was something special about it. I think about twelve-year-old Rachael all the time. I want to show her that we get to live this life we dreamed for ourselves. She got a brief glimpse of what this life could look like, living with an aunt in Capitol Hill, Seattle, for a summer, writing and exploring. That summer became a rooting point, a template of what a life could look like. I want to tell this Rachael that there is so much more for her than how men will corner her and press her until she is smaller and smaller and smaller. She will just have to trust me, and I will just have to love her, and give voice to our body.

Twelve-year-old Rachael wrote stories that were searching for something: I wanted to be loved, and I wrote stories where girls like me were loved. I wanted to be an adult living a busy, full life in a city, and I wrote stories where girls like me grew up into adults who lived what I daydreamed a city life would become. Writing can be wish-fulfillment, giving us ways to

determine our desires of every shape. This is not a sexual desire, but is, in some ways, an erotic one: it is giving shape to the body, giving it peace, pleasure, and maybe most importantly, safety.

I am writing to this girl, and I am writing for her. I am writing for that voice that so many men will try to silence, when she is four, when she is eight, when she is eleven, when she is twelve, when she is thirteen, when she is every age of a teenager, when she is in her twenties and submits herself to men. I am writing to tell her to hold on, we will get there, and I know the twelve-year-old version of me is writing to the older version of me, too. I know she's looking for me in her journals, in the stories she writes. I'm here. I've always been here.

It occurs to me, while washing dishes in my studio where I live alone, that this is the first time in my life where I haven't been trying to hide from an abuser. I'm safe here. I come home to my comfortable apartment, decorated exactly how I like, in thrift store art, in yellows and blues. There are no monsters in my closets. I am not afraid. I buy drugs rarely, self-harm only on occasion. A friend is coming over for dinner. I am baking bread. I have fresh flowers in a vase by the window. My cat sleeps in a sunbeam. Books stack on every surface. The bed is made. My neighbors laugh. I am filled with so much light, so much joy, and because of this, I start unknotting the pasts that burrow into my heart, my spirit.

The erotics of traumatized people are complicated, working at a couple of different levels. While we still want, and still feel that joy of pleasure and want, it complicates. The love-addicted, anorexic narrator in *You Exist Too Much,* who is bisexual, becomes obsessed with the excess of queer femme sexuality, and this obsession with excess overwhelms her. When thinking about sexuality: "she leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'I want to come in your mouth.' I

shivered at the thought of it, and smiled" (Arafat 147) – there, too, is the lingering of trauma, the desperation of control and needing something to hold. Arafat writes, "I was terrified at the thought of not having her, and I mistook the pain of losing control for love and compassion" (149). The sex in *You Exist Too Much* is obsessive, tinged with a deep fear of abandonment, and much of the novel is about love addiction – love addiction creating a trauma and unspeakability – and obsessiveness, obsessive sexuality, relationship obsessiveness, are often refractions of trauma. This is true in *You Exist Too Much,* even the title showing that this excess of the queer femme erotic can, too, be overwhelming, an intensity of feeling matched, in this novel, with the intensity of love addiction. The trouble with obsessing over trauma and sexuality is that sexuality will always exist, something with which a person needs to cultivate a relationship; in my bouts of sobriety from drugs and alcohol, I've learned that complete abstinence is extremely difficult, but at the same time, there is some ease in complete refusal. A person cannot disavow their sexuality like they can alcohol or drugs. The narrator in *You Exist Too Much* has to contend with her own obsessiveness and excess while still engaging with the pleasurable sexuality of excess, trying, often failing, to strike a balance. Trauma echoes in the decisions she makes.

This craving for the erotic has the potential to be transformative, to be a body instead of just possessing a body. There are a few schools of thought about how a person exists in a body, if the essence of a person is somewhere outside our bodies, but our bodies are a transport through time. We cannot exist separate from them, but they are also held with so much: trauma, but also the small indignities of a person, and we get to, we have to, write about them.

Is writing sex a way of controlling the uncontrollable? Control is pleasure.

Writing demands attention. Attention is pleasure.

In Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed*, the erotics of lesbian sexuality push against the narrator, Rachel's, eating disorder and codependency with her difficult mother. Rachel falls quickly and deeply in lust with Miriam, a woman whose body is everything Rachel fears hers will be, and is attracted to the perceived excess of Miriam's body. The appeal of erotic lust isn't far removed from the appeal of what we've been told is unacceptable: the erotics and appeal of transgression.

About Rachel's desire toward Miriam, Broder writes: "I wanted to show the world how beautiful she [Miriam] was, to present a different type of beauty, and in doing so, to own part of her. I felt that if the world embraced Miriam, I'd be healing something in me – making amends with young Rachel" (117). Desire and the erotic longing of another person – especially a body troubled by what we are taught is transgressive, be that through queerness, through fatness, or through other methods of moving through the world – has the power of ownership. A beautiful, and dangerous, part of wanting another person is the feeling that they are yours, in some material and endless way, that the process of wanting someone is objectifying them, too. Objectification and eroticization between women has the complicated relationship of women experiencing deep erotic desire and also knowing the frustrating and dehumanizing aspects of being objectified. This is particularly true for people who have experienced trauma. Our bodies have been the locus of so much pain, so much ownership, that owning our own bodies feels complicated and difficult and can hurt when that ownership is enacted by another person. This doesn't stop us from wanting, and it shouldn't stop us from wanting. Being a sexual being is flush with complications and inconsistencies, and trauma deepens, complicates them even further. When we press into what sex looks like for traumatized bodies, we give the people who come after places to explore, places to test, to play, and expand, to write into these complications.

Milk Fed's sex scenes are intense and frequent. Both women give and receive pleasure, but Rachel particularly enjoys giving Miriam pleasure: "I ate her with empathy, the way I would want to be eaten… I wanted to work my tongue all the way down, taste the sludge of her, the deepest secrets. But I continued licking her as I would want to be licked: with tiny, fast strokes on her clit… I was fast and gentle. I was a hummingbird, a cicada, a flickering eyelid" (Broder, 218). We create a new language, in every sexual relationship, one that only the two or more people engaged in a sex act can speak. Sex is destabilizing, by necessity: it gives a body to things unsayable. Sex is the language of the body, speaking the unspeakable because it is older than language, what people have been doing as long as there have been people: having sex, wanting to have sex, and feeling complicated about sex. Feeling complicated about sex is one of the key differentiators a human has from other animals. But complications give us agency and capability; holding the complexity of it is part of the point, and can be part of the joy, and is certainly part of the pleasure while existing in the destabilizing language locus of sex, where we say things that cannot be true, and will never be true, but feel impossibly true in the moment.

Creating a language gives a voice to the unspeakable. Every communion with a lover, every impossible scenario we put ourselves into during sex, every fantasy we allow each other and ourselves, is a way to write a different story for our trauma. While trauma, especially repeated and childhood trauma, settles into our brains and bodies in a way we can rewrite and reprocess and rewire, it never really goes away; we have to find ways to live with it, live through it, thrive within it.

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE I AM STILL WRITING ABOUT THIS

I don't go into my writing expecting a certain audience, but I expect that people who have experienced similar trauma will find it, the way we magnetize toward each other. While those of us who have experienced trauma have similar experiences, I also want my writing to speak beyond just this experience: I want it to transcend.

While *My Body is a Book of Rules* centers a heterosexual experience of sexuality and trauma, I found this book at exactly the right moment: I had turned twenty-two that week, my bipolar disorder, not diagnosed until I was twenty-five, was worsening, I was self-medicating with drugs and alcohol on a daily basis, and I was absolutely ravaged from trauma. I read a lot that year, as I tried to find my place in the world, in my sexuality, in my mental health, all of which felt impossible. This book felt especially salient, as it in large part discusses the trauma resulting after Washuta's rape and her diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I read this passage, toward the end of the book, for the first time while sitting in the waiting room at a Planned Parenthood, so completely terrorized by memories of trauma that I could scarcely go an hour without being seized by flashbacks and panic. Washuta writes:

> ...I don't need to seal off the ordeal into a closed compartment – I moved through it. The wreckage of my early twenties looked like a battlefield littered with partners' bodies, and for years, I wielded my anger like a sword, making my hate count, keeping the gash open. With the rapist out of my world, I carried out those duels against myself, a poor sparring partner, beaten-down and humbled. In time, though, my sword became one like that of the archangels, their leftover armaments from the war in heaven. I expelled the demon. I carry the fiery sword. In battle, catcalled on a two-jacket night or urged upstairs after a date that needs to end, I will wrap my great wings around my brilliant body, clutch my celestial hilt, and quietly protect what's mine. (127)

Returning to this passage, six years later, shows exactly what I needed in that moment, to start the process of transcending. It would take a long time. It still takes a long time. Six years away from panic attacks in the waiting room of a Planned Parenthood, I am still trying to expel the demon and carry my fiery sword, in life, in writing. Sometimes my anger, almost always swallowed and turned internally, is so massive it threatens to consume me. This passage told me then, and tells me now, that this is a process, and that processes will create that transcendence: while there is no closure, there is continuation. There is, there has to be, writing. Every person has pain; the anger that comes from it is protective, worthy. This ability to refocus anger, to protect oneself, to make art out of it, transcends. Writing is a way to wrap the great wings around the brilliant body. Writing protects through making sense, applying order.

The attention to angels in this passage is significant: "be not afraid," say angels in the Bible, terrifying creatures, but angels are beautiful in their terror, in their alien-ness, in their difference from man. Angels in the Bible are wings and eyes, protection and witnessing, and becoming this, embracing this, our potential to shield ourselves and witness ourselves and others, is a step toward writing an empowered, full version of ourselves. As a writer, I'm interested in Biblical imagery and allusion, and here, a newness in this image, the embracing of the terror an angel can inspire, how terror is a beauty, an excess, of its own.

While working on revisions of this essay, I wrote in the margin of my notebook, *I should have written about video games instead!!!* It would have been easier. I never seem to choose the easier option. I like to labor. Writing about rape, writing about writing about trauma, is what came out – what needed to come out. Hard work is work worth doing. The writing knows. The writing is the answer. The writing is the transcendence. Writing trauma, yes, but also writing sex,

the erotic, the pleasurable, the embodied – above all, writing truth, in fiction and nonfiction. This is the way forward. Trauma does not get to hide and stay unspoken. We heal through sharing narratives, writing them, loving others and sharing our writing and stories with them.

I write because if I don't, where does this go? Where can I put this? I have been ashamed of so many of my coping mechanisms – starving, cutting, sex, drinking, drugs – but they have kept me alive, and for this, I am grateful. Now, I write. I still hold on to starving and cutting and sex and drinking and drugs, they are so persistent, they are so hard to let go of, but they don't let me grow. Writing lets me grow. Writing lets me reinvent, and revise, and re-become. I create a language, of sorts, in every essay, every work of fiction. It is mine and it is holy and it is mine, it is mine, it is mine. I write the language of my body and I write the language of my trauma and I will speak it, again and again, louder and louder. There is pleasure and joy in this body. We call a writer's work a body, too, as if it is something that breathes and bleeds and wants, and doesn't it? Mine does. My work breathes and bleeds and wants, and I breathe, I bleed, I want. My body and my words belong to me, and I am here, ready, present, writing.

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