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Under My Skin

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

UNDER MY SKIN

submitted by

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UNDER MY SKIN

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THE GREAT COSMIC NOTHINGNESS

There came the first explosion —
Time, energy, the universe,
Condensed and then shattered
Into an infinite number of fragments.

Since then, the whole world
Has been trying to put things
Back together. But every day
Another sock goes missing.
Another nebula disintegrates
Into the cracks of space, like dust
Settling into the floorboards.
And while another star forms
On the horizon, your bed
Is just as empty as the night before.

People should envy the sky.
It sits above it all. Moons never wonder
Why their husbands come home late
At night. And the stars never agonize
Over the unanswered crossword question.
The clue reads “something missing?”
Five letters, horizontal, unfilled.

I

MY VAMPIRE LOVER

I loved an undead thing,
A creature from the shadows.
Less real now than the feeling
Of ice on the back of my neck.

I never learned his face.
When he stood beside me
At the bathroom sink —
Me brushing my teeth,
Him brushing his fangs —
Only my face was there
In the reflection.
I imagine him tall,
And broad, with a strong jaw
And dark eyes and hands
With nails clawing
The inside of my skull,
Rummaging, for the parts of me
Still alive. Anything
He could consume.

When the air around me is silent
I think the white noise is him,
Invisible, his mouth open,
Waiting for me to expose
My throat. What haunts me
Now are the memories —
How I would offer up my blood
In worship, how greedily
He sucked it all away.

When I look in the mirror now,
My eyes wander to the emptiness
Where he once stood. It's just the same —
My face in the reflection, still alone.

HOMETOWN, USA

My heart lies under the concrete
Of a rundown gas station
That smells of ethanol and cigarettes
In the center of a small town
In the middle of rural nowhere.
There is a fluorescent OPEN sign
On the station's door. The *O* flickers.

From the diner on Main Street
The locals watch enraptured
Through the dusty windows
As the archeological team digs.
They wonder: why on Earth
Would someone bury her heart
In the gasoline-soaked dirt?

Now, in front of the white spire church
In the town square, I announce:
"Ten years ago I buried my heart
Under the gas pump where I first met her.
(Oh! How the sunlight illuminated her
Box-dyed hair! How the kohl
Around her eyes beaded in the corners
And left a black crust in the mornings!)
When she left, I swore to never love again.

But now I've changed my mind. Goodbye,
I hope to (never) see you all again.
If you wish to find me (don't),
I'll be in the mountains with my Love(r),
Befriending the bears and coyotes,
Bribing them with nuts and berries.
The animals will look at us with blank eyes."

One thing I'll miss: their stares.
The hungry eyes that venture out
On Tuesdays for meat bingo, the narrow eyes
Glaring at strangers in the grocery store

(cont.)

HOMETOWN, USA (cont.)

Down Aisle 8, a tunnel of canned soup.
The eyes that widened at a heart dug up
From the pavement during Saturday
Coffee with the guys from the VFW.
The eyes that droop at the end
Of Pastor John's sermons on Sunday,
That sleep half-open in the dark.

TRANSACTIONAL (ONE)

In a rented room I lay down
On starched white sheets
And let him pretend
That we were in love.

Late thirties, in decent shape,
He'd seemed like a good place to start.
But alone in bed, his eyes turned
From pale blue to sharp gray,
Glinting like a wolf's in the dark.

Nakedness wasn't required,
Only access to the holes.
Three was preferred.
Two could be managed,
One was "no deal."

We haggled over the price
Like fish salesmen at the market,
Deciding on the final cost
Of a good fuck.
When it was over
He handed me a napkin
From his takeaway bag,
£67, and a ticket for the Tube.

THE CULT OF BUSINESS

Before we begin,
Close your eyes.
Meditate.
Open your third eye
To the power
Of corporate thinking.

Close off the part of you
That smiles watching a child
Play in the rain.
Tune in to the vibrations
Of your brain's left half —
Logic is your God.
Forget people,
Only numbers exist.

Now, open your eyes.
See clearly for the first time —
Less is more
When it comes to paying workers.

Let your body float.
Untether yourself
From the lofty ideals
Of what men deserve:
Health insurance, lunch breaks, overtime.

The fog is lifting.
Now — divide your taxable earnings
Into offshore accounts,
Multiply shareholder benefits,
Subtract employee retirement plans.

In perfect simplicity
There lies the bottom line —
Money,
Nothing but money.
Keep adding money.

(cont.)

THE CULT OF BUSINESS (cont.)

Never stop adding money.

Even when your fingers ache with arthritis
And your bones creak with age,
You must hold up your hands
In worship of our most perfect sun —
A yellow coin of gold.

FRAT PARTY

The bass thuds through the cement walls,
Sending vibrations through my marrow.
My hips slither to the synthesizer.
A brother stalks across the dance floor,
His shoulders hunched, his chin down.

A school of guppies parting for a shark,
Girls shift away from him in pale swarms.
I feel his eyes on me like fishhooks.
I look to my friends swaying, drunk,
Seaweed floating in the ocean current.
I want to leave and catch some air
Outside this overcrowded basement.

Suddenly
Around my waist, I feel hands and fingers
Dig into my flesh. The hands run up
And down my sides, across my breasts
And thighs. And then they're gone.

I turn around, searching the empty faces.
Disoriented, alone, I scrunch my arms
Into my chest, pushing through
The dense cloud of beer breath and sweat
In search of a way out.

I look back as I leave. The thundering bass
Still reverberates through the cement walls.
The girls still sway in drunken schools,
And the brothers continue their hunt.

THE MARINE

I kneeled naked in front of him,
My chin touching my chest,
My hair a curtain around my face.
He sat down in front of me
And pressed his thumbs to my eyelids,
Mapping the hollows, tracing the lashes.
He said, "Whatever you do, don't look."

I nodded. A single tear slipped down
My cheek as he brushed my tangled hair
And trailed his fingers across my lips.
He whispered, "You have beautiful eyes.
I can tell even though they're closed."
His voice was like candle wax, thick
And warm. His fingers found my lids again.
Tenderly they grazed across my skin.

"When I was in Afghanistan, I killed a man
Just by squeezing his eyes into his head.
They popped like grapes. People don't understand
How easy it is to crush them, to just press
Until they burst, until the juices drip down
A man's chin, like drops of wine escaping
The open edges of a drunkard's mouth."

I pressed my cheek into his palm,
His hands were warm. "I miss it now."
He wrapped his fingers around my throat
And pressed hard, until I couldn't breathe.

I opened my eyes and saw a man
Desperately searching my face
For something he lost years ago.

DEPRESSION

You look past
What's there
In the mirror
In front of you,
Blurring your vision,
Staring hard.
You ask yourself:
*When will I start
To feel again?*

You sleep
On the floor
At night
Because you
Know you
Don't deserve
A bed.

You wrack
Your head
For tears
Frantically,
Like some idiot
Secretary,
Thumbing quickly
Through a filing
Cabinet, searching
For a file
She lost
Months ago.

All that you
Can feel
Are your lungs
Gasping
For air
As your body
Curls in

(cont.)

DEPRESSION (cont.)

On itself
And you wait

On the floor
For the sun
To rise
And warm you.

“AND YET GOD HAS NOT SAID A WORD!”

- “Porphyria’s Lover,” Robert Browning

Purple bruises bloomed
Down my neck
In the shape of his fingers.
A crimson line
Across my split bottom lip
Smiled back at me
In the mirror.

I never thought of it
As anything
Less than
His absolute
Devotion.

I felt so close to him.
Our secret.
I believed him
When he said he loved me.
There were gold flecks
In his muddy eyes
And stubble on his chin
That I could see
 When his arms caged me
 And his chest pressed me
 Against the wall.
 Pinned me

Like a squashed fly on a windshield
Pushed back and forth
By the wipers.

I deserved him —
In the deepest trench of myself
I knew that.

In the morning he would call me

angelic.

THE HUSBAND

In the third motel room that summer
He told me that he loved me.
I knew he was lying —
I could taste it on his tongue.
It dripped down the back of my throat,
Acrid and sharp, like the cheap coke
He'd sometimes give me.

"I love you too," I said.
A lie for a lie.

After sex, I liked to play
With his wedding band,
Twirling it around his finger,
Feeling the callouses on his palm.
He had a tattoo on his wrist
Of an anchor, in honor of his son
Who was two years younger
Than me.

He would always leave early
In the night, returning home.
But I would stay until dawn.

And when the summer sun rose,
Shining through the plastic blinds
In the morning, I would lay in bed
And tell myself more bitter lies.

DROWNING

The memory of his hands
Is a necklace made of chain
That tethers me to the floor
Of a swimming pool.
His phantom fingers drag
Me down for hours, days,
Years, as I struggle to tread,
Head barely above the water,
Choking on the chlorine
That floods my throat.

I succumb to the memory.
I let myself sink down
To the drain in the cement
At the bottom of the pool.
I try to make myself smaller,
Desperately contorting
My arms and legs, but
I can't fit through. My voice
Dissipates into bubbles
That float to the surface.

Finally, I drag myself up.
I wring my body like a wet beach towel,
Liquidating my ears, my head,
My toes, until all of me is puddled
On the concrete. When the summer sun
Finally evaporates my memories of him,
What will be left?

PLEASE DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION

To the marks on the right-hand thigh.

Note the artist's use of lettering,

See the nuanced

C

U

N

T

Scarred faintly into the flesh.

The artist used the mixed medium

Of self-hatred and a pair of scissors.

As we move through the exhibit

Spot the small 'w' on the ankle.

This piece is symbolic

Of the time she was most alone,

Most desperate to prove her affection

For him. (Note this effect was achieved

With the use of rather unconventional materials —

A sharp floss pick,

An idle summer's eve.)

Bring your gaze to the left.

Above the knee, observe

The use of straight horizontal lines,

Barely visible. The subtlety! The exquisiteness!

And as we look around the gallery

I'm sure your discerning eye

Will have noticed

The artist's most recent piece,

The culmination

Of her life's work:

An exploration of hope.

A blank canvas.

II

THE MAPLE TREES

In the bleak winter air
We stand, stripped naked,
Nothing left to us but grey bark.
Men axe at our flesh,
Harvest our syrup, our tears.
Drink them.

Yet even in the cold,
We know deep in our cores
That when the light returns
We will branch out again.
Then we will say:
Look, we have survived.
Look, how we still grow.

TO MY RAPIST

You are the reason
I am dead and buried.

You, the black tar
That seeped into my pores
And suffocated every cell
In my body, until
Nothing was alive.

You are the mortician
Who scooped out my insides
With a metal spoon
And reveled in the sight
Of my stiff muscles.

You are the worm
Inside my coffin
Eating away at me.
You devour the soft parts,
Gnawing my tongue.
Crawling down my trachea,
You lodge yourself
Inside my vocal chords.

Under the dirt,
Dead and buried,
I am crying out.

No one can hear me.

I make a promise:
I will gut myself,
Peel the memory of you
From the surface
Of each bone.
You will hear my voice
Resounding from beneath
The grassy ground.
I will live again.

MY OLD MAN, THE PLUMBER

His cuticles are caked with black gunk
That runs down the lines of his hands in dark rivers.
He washes them with the same putrid soap
He has used for the last twenty-five years.

As he rinses his hands in steaming water,
The light glints off the smooth surface of his scalp,
And I see the nicks dotting his bald head like stars.

He is a man of scars — callouses and tough skin,
Knuckles bloodied by pipe cutters
Or burnt by the soldering gun's blue flame.

As he dries his hands on the kitchen rag,
I can still see dirt crusted under his fingernails,
Deep in the nail beds.

He retreats to the living room, sits down
On the threadbare recliner. Turning on the TV,
He puts his feet up. As he channel surfs
I watch the day's work wash away,
Loosening his shoulders,
Relieving the crook in his neck.

And soon I hear his heavy snoring,
The sound of an honest day's work.

MY MOTHER, THE GHOST

Like an old house cat
My mother stalks the halls
With padded feet and dark eyes,
Pupils wide in the night.
Standing in the shadows
Of our kitchen window
She hears whispered words
Between my friends and me,
Laughing as we pass around
A joint on the porch.

Later, tears film over her eyes
As she floats above the linoleum,
Crepe skin and hollow bones,
Wordlessly observing me
As I carve a pumpkin on the table.
“I’m making pumpkin seeds,”
I tell her. She opens her mouth
As if to speak. A croak
Escapes her throat, as her jaw
Continues to stretch down —
A gaping black hole
In the center of her face —
Noiseless now.

I look past her
At the blank wall
And wonder
If she’s really there at all.

THE GOOD DOG

The man who owned me before
Used to tug my leash too hard,
Kick me if I didn't obey fast enough.

Now I wander sidewalks whimpering,
Wishing he were here. But
You will be the one to fix me.

Or so I hope as I scratch at the porch door,
A starved dog waiting to be let in,
Whining for a bone, for anything.

In a rasping tone I call out, "See
How this man has broken me. See
How strong I am to have survived." See

How I sweep up the fragments of myself
And glue them back together,
Even though
I lose a small piece each time

To the dust in the cracks of the floor.

TRANSACTIONAL (TWO)

I'm afraid you'll think I'm ugly
For the things I've done.

How can I make you understand
What it felt like that first time

I was violated.
I lived in denial.

I defined myself by the terms
Set forth by those men: *slut, whore, cunt.*

I began to forget what it meant
To be loved.

How do I describe the things I begged for
Just to feel anything but numb?

Can you forgive me for my sins?
Be my priest. Hear my confession:

For two years, I gave myself away
Piece by piece, until only a husk

Remained — empty, passive, passed around
Like some hand-me-down sweater

Before being tossed in the garbage.
Will you absolve me?

My penance will be to love
And to be loved again.

PTSD

I used to throw myself into fits,
Violent sobbing and screaming,
Until my lungs were swollen and sore.
Now an emptiness,

An echo that sounds
Down an empty hallway —
That's what's left in my chest.
The fear lingers —
A black mold eating away at my life.

I wonder if when I'm old
He'll still be there,
The memory of him
Rolling around
Like a marble inside my skull.

Sometimes tears still well up,
But they never seem to fall.
I wish they would.
They would make it feel more real.

There are days when I feel happy.
But always, I feel him,
A sharp pain in my chest,
An extra rib under my skin.

THE MASOCHIST

It will be our own kind of love poetry —
The delicate chiming of my sobs, the quiver
Of my split bottom lip as I plead desperately
For more. It will be our special song —
The drumming of your palm against my flesh
And the low, uneven tone of my stifled breath.

I dream of purple lagoons, pools of blood,
In perfect pockets under my skin, deep bruises.
Staring at the blank canvas of my body,
I miss the violent blows that used to mar
My thighs and chest in scars that I'd explain
Away. I am an addict in withdrawal.
Please, if you love me at all,
Hit me.

THE WOMAN I LAY WITH

Her breath came quick
And shallow like the beating
Of a hummingbird's wings.
I trailed feather-light kisses
Down her velvet skin,
Across her breasts and the curve
Of her stomach, grazing my lips
Over the fine down
Covering her thighs.

In the morning sun, her tattoos
Seemed to dance across her skin
As we smoked a cigarette
In the rumpled bed sheets.
I stared at her naked body —
The gentle slopes of her hips,
The hazy halo of light shining
Through her ruffled hair.

The sun rose higher and higher.
And like the tide ebbing, fluid,
We took turns exploring each other
Until the moon surfaced on the horizon.

AFTERGLOW

The soft downy nook
Of your armpit and the fuzz
From your chest, tickle
My flushed red cheeks.
My sore lips, bruised
From your playful biting,
Rest against your skin.
The light shimmers
Off the slick sweat
Covering our bare bodies.
Cool air fans the heat
Radiating from your chest.
I breathe in the scent of you
As I feel your lungs exhale
And then expand under me.
In your arms, nestled deep,
I can hear your heart beat,
A deep thud in your breast.
Exhausted, satiated, I sigh
And you pull me closer —
The first man to ever hold me
Tenderly. Then I drift off
Into a sleepless dream.

IN DECLINE

“Call an ambulance.”

I dial the number and wait
In the back seat of the car.
Rain drums against the windshield
Like the sound of a madman
Beating his chest.

Frozen in time
I see my mother, her arm outstretched,
Reaching for the old man
Lying on the ground like God
Reaching out his hand for Adam
On the ceiling of a chapel.
She hooks her arms under him,
Cradling his torso as his legs fail again.

His wife bores her owl eyes into me.
Her red coat drips with raindrops,
Red beads like the blood
On her husband’s forehead.
A veil of gauzy white around her —
Her hair is saturated by the rain.
In her eyes I find nothing.

He is a stranger reaching out
For her hand, no more familiar
To her than I am. I doubt
She even feels the rain
Pouring from the violent sky,
Drenching her head, falling
From each eyelash.

The man is wheeled into the ambulance.
She turns to my mother and asks,
“Where am I?”

Watching, I wonder, is this what love becomes

(cont.)

IN DECLINE (cont.)

When it grows old?

I get out of the car

And take her hand, feeling the thin bones,

The wiry tendons, and the fragile skin.

“It’s time to go now, grandma.” In her eyes,

I think I catch a glimmer of something.

But like a flash of lightning, it’s gone.

HSV-1

A spasm of pain shot up my spine
As I tossed in the sheets, damp
From our sweat and the humidity.
I moved down to the floor, afraid
That my twitching might wake you.

I curled up on my side
On the rough carpet, remembering
The image I had seen before
In the hand mirror: angry sores
Lined in white coronas,
Fissures running deep
Through the pink folds of skin.

How could anyone love me
This way? I cried
As the pain returned again
Like angry hornets relentless
In their stinging assault.

Finally I slept, miserable, alone.

I woke up to another eruption
Of pain. The gray light of dawn
Shone through my window.
Cradling my shoulders and knees,
You lifted me up into bed
And then pulled the curtains.
You whispered, "Sleep now."

And I slept.

THE COUPLE'S RETREAT

THE BED

Drunk, you stumbled out for ice.
Nested under the plush duvet,
Smoothing out the sheets,
I found your phone.

Like a warrior
Thirsting for blood, I pillaged
The screen. Reading message
After message until I found
What I was searching for: "Discrete
Friendship?" you asked her.

I threw your phone off the bed,
Sat up and sobbed silently.
You came back in with the ice,
Shirtless and oblivious.

Seeing my red eyes you asked,
"What's wrong?" You saw the phone
On the floor and suddenly

Cries, sharp and shrill as a hyena's laugh,
Burst from your lips. Wailing,
You threw yourself down on the carpet.

Your face, wet and red,
Fat tears sliding down your cheeks —
You might have been a worm writhing
On the pavement. The urge struck
To stomp you, crush you underfoot.

I threw the covers off.
Goosebumps on my legs
As I felt the cold tile floor
Of the bathroom underfoot.

(cont.)

THE BED (cont.)

I slammed the door.

THE BATHROOM

Looking into the bathroom mirror,
Am I an idiot? I asked.
An avalanche of sadness bore down.
I lay down in the bathtub, its cool white sides
Surrounding me like a porcelain womb.
I curled my legs up to my chest.

Does he still love me?

This must be how a star feels
When her only planet pulls away from her orbit
And runs off into space, chasing some distant moon,
Leaving her in the black galactic void.

Do I still love him?

When her planet returns
From his celestial dalliances
Does the star let him orbit her once more?
Or does she drag him into her,
Exploding him into dust, and find a way
To live in the unfathomable solitude of space?

I hear the sound of your howls outside the bathroom.

Rising from the tub, shaking,
I open the door.

THE CARPET

You are wearing only your briefs,
Naked and red, wailing like a newborn child.
The carpet beneath is stained dark with tears.

Warmth washes over me.
I kneel down beside you, speaking softly,
Stroking your back, shushing your cries.
You look up at me with wonder,
Tears like morning dew on your lashes.

“I still love you,” I whisper.

Exhausted, you hug my waist,
Nestling your head to my breast.
I can feel your body shaking.

We fall asleep entangled. A nightmare
Disturbs my sleep — a vision of me alone,
Searching for you. Suddenly awake
On the rough carpet, I hear you whimpering.

I hug you close. You sound afraid.
We both are.

THE CAR

You drive too fast. I hold the handle above
And pray that you don't kill us both.
Like the thin film of pollen on the windshield,
Residual anger coats my thoughts. I wonder,
Does love wipe clean the dust
That clouds our vision and makes it hard to see
Why we ever loved someone in the first place?

We travel down the highway in silence.
As I stare out the window the trees blur together.
My eyes lose focus. Did I make the right decision?

Your hand creeps to my thigh. Rests there.
Without thinking, my fingers lace themselves
Through yours. You slow. Driving the backroads,
We feel each pothole jostle us.

But our fingers stay curled tightly together.
We're close to home.

TO JACOB

Your breath is thunder in my ear,
Rumbling with each inhalation.
You cradle me in your arms,
The two of us cocooned in blankets.
I whisper softly that I love the rosacea
On your cheeks. How you holler
At the TV when the Celtics are on.

You tell me that you love my thighs,
How they chafe in the summer heat.
The birthmark on my back,
The coffee stain on my shoulder blade.

You pull me closer, say you love
How my eyes search each empty room,
Afraid that he might be there.
How sometimes I cry alone in bed
Because it feels cathartic. I tell you
That I've loved you since the moment
You confessed that when you were little,
Your stepmother locked you up in the pantry.

The pain you've buried still floats around
Inside you like shrapnel, stuck in the muscle,
Too close to the heart to excise.

I pet the stubble on your chin, say
I love that you are broken too.

THE TRUST WALTZ

Blindfolded, I waltz with you.
You lead, swirling me in your arms,
A kaleidoscope of lights
Searing through the thin felt
Across my eyes. Around us
The house is falling down.

As the ceiling beams collapse
We stumble over the rugs,
The warps in the old wooden floor.
Trembling, choking on the dust,
I try to ignore the sounds
Of old plaster and drywall
Crashing down around us.

I try to lose myself in the wild waltzing,
Spinning for hours until I am dizzy,
Lost.

You hold me tight to your chest,
Hand on the small of my back.
“Trust me,” you call over the noise.
The walls crumble away, windows
Shatter, floorboards disintegrate.
Still, we dance.

The music stops. Then silence,
Like a cool rag on my forehead.
You remove my blindfold.

Adjusting slowly, my eyes search.
At first, I see only us and the horizon.

Then everything comes into focus —
The sky is ripe with bright stars
And a full moon.
A cool breeze rustles my hair.
And together,

(cont.)

THE TRUST WALTZ (cont.)

We gaze up from our dark planet.

Afterword*

In the fall of 2018, I set myself a daunting task: no matter how hard it was I would finally find a way to write about my sexual assault.

All of my work on this thesis has been influenced by that experience and the years of pain that followed. I cannot think of a way to talk about my poetry without talking about these realities, and I do not think that anyone could fully experience my work without understanding the journey that has brought me to this moment. I have tried to organize the poems included in this collection so they tell a coherent narrative, the story of the last three years of my life.

My assault took place in the fall of my freshman year. I do not remember most of it. It is a difficult thing to talk about, and an even more difficult thing to write about. The poem “And Yet God Has Not Said a Word” was one of the first poems I wrote about that night. I chose to title the poem with the final line from Robert Browning’s poem, “Porphyria’s Lover,” which I first read in a survey literature class at Trinity. Immediately I felt connected to Browning’s poetry, which focuses so much on violence against women. His work is often disturbing, bordering at times on the grotesque. I am drawn to the ugliness of it and feel many of my poems were influenced by his aesthetic approach.

Another poet whose work has had a significant impact on my writing is Tracy K. Smith. I admire Smith for her ability to zoom in and out of her poems, playing with scale. As a bit of an astronomy geek myself, I found the cosmic nature of her poems in “Life on Mars” appealing; her influence can be seen in the first poem of this thesis, “The Great Cosmic Nothingness.” I was also attracted to Smith’s poems about the death of her father, the way she reflects on her relationship with him. These poems led me to write “In Decline” and “My Mother, The Ghost,” both poems about my mother. Like Smith’s father, my mother is a complicated character, her nature elusive, difficult to pin down. She is also a very reticent woman, an aspect of her character I find in myself — I am introspective and slow to share my feelings with others. These qualities led me to writing, which has given me a voice.

I chose poetry for my thesis, rather than writing a memoir or fiction, because poetry allows me to dig down to the root of my experiences, to find the common denominator, and bring it to the surface. My poems speak to my personal experiences, but they are also universal. They can be understood by someone from Texas, or California, or Canada. It is the universal nature of poetry which has always drawn me to it. Rita Dove summed up my opinion of poetry

* Trigger warnings: sexual assault, depression, suicidal thoughts.

quite neatly when she said, “Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful.” Poems have a different effect on the soul than prose; they settle deep in our souls and stick there.

After I was assaulted, I tried to deny to myself what had happened for a very long time. As a result, for about two years, I struggled with severe depression. There were many times where I contemplated killing myself. This was a difficult chapter in my life not only for me, but also for my family and friends who witnessed my pain. Two poems here specifically reflect on that experience: “Depression,” which confronts what it was like to live with depression and the daily struggle I faced in finding the will to keep going, and “Please Direct Your Attention.” The latter is a special piece for me. It was inspired by a conversation I had with my mother in 2018, when I told her for the first time that I had self-harmed. For over a year I had lived in pants and long skirts, even in the summer heat, in order to protect her from seeing my scars; it was such a relief to finally tell her the truth. Thanks to the wonders of Mederma, most of my scars are invisible now unless you look closely. But I still know the exact details of each one: where it lies on my body, when and how I made it. I carry the memory of each one with me and collectively they are a piece of my identity, they make me stronger.

During the year after I was assaulted, as I struggled with depression, I began to try and find a relationship. My search was entirely unfruitful, as I dated two men who were incredibly abusive in different ways. The poem “My Vampire Lover” is about the first of these men, who I had an online ‘relationship’ with during my sophomore year. He was incredibly controlling and probably drove me deeper into the feelings of isolation I already had from my depression. The second man I dated had a profound impact on my life; he was an ex-Marine and a dad, and twice my age. The poems “The Marine” and “The Husband” are about him, and his aftermath can be seen in “The Good Dog” and “The Masochist.” It was during this time that I was drawn to masochism, as an extension of the self-harm I performed on myself. There was something cathartic in the pain. I think many survivors of assault must feel the same way; I had this craving for pain as a way to just feel *something*.

My junior year of college I studied abroad in London for the full academic year. I will remember that year for the rest of my life. It was my first experience living on my own, away from my family and friends in the United States. During the fall and winter months I had so many meaningful experiences connecting with new people and exploring new cultures and locations. For the first time in a long time, I felt happy. I was constantly busy with travelling and academic work, and I found joy in having my plate full. At the same time, it was during this time that I began sleeping with men for money. I think somewhere deep down I knew that I was not making the right decisions for myself, but I carried on in a kind of self-enforced abuse. The two poems, “Transactional,” explore this experience. The second “Transactional” was a cathartic piece for me to write because it required me to listen to the little voice in the back of my head, the voice who tells me that everything I have gone through has rendered me incapable of being loved.

In the spring that year there was a strike at my university in London. For almost two months my professors did not hold classes. During this period, I spent a lot of time by myself. It was during this period of isolation that I finally confronted my feelings about being assaulted and came to terms with my experience. And it was during this time that I learned how to find happiness in myself, how to be alone and still be content. Of course, I still have days when I am back in that dark place, but now I have equipped myself with the tools to manage these emotions.

After I returned home from London I began dating my current boyfriend. Much of the second half of my thesis focuses on my relationship with him. He is the first person whom I have ever had a public relationship with and the first man who treated me with respect and kindness. Some of the poems center on the bliss I felt when we first began dating; some of them focus on the trials we have faced in our relationship, including “HSV-1” and “The Couple’s Retreat.” The sheer number of poems I have included about our relationship in this collection are a testament to how influential his love has been in my life.

Returning home and starting a healthy relationship did not erase the memories of my assault from my mind. There are still moments when the memory bubbles up and I am forced to confront it again. “Drowning” and “PTSD” deal with these recurrent memories and my frustration in trying to rid myself of them. Unfortunately, I do not think I will ever wholly forget it.

The final poem I wrote for my thesis, “To My Rapist,” was cathartic to write. It is an acknowledgement of my past experience and a promise that I will not let it stop me from living my life. The final line from this piece — “I will live again” — encompasses the overarching theme of my works: the will to live again, despite undergoing traumatic experiences. Most of my poems touch on this theme in some way, whether by directly confronting the experience of my assault and its aftermath or by exploring what it means to live a full life afterwards. The last poem in the collection, “The Trust Waltz,” explores what it means to move on with my life, after everything that has happened. It ends with my partner and me looking out at the starry sky. Looking at the stars has always centered me: they look timeless, as if they have existed and will exist forever. This is one idea which has never failed to comfort me in life – the universe will always go on. No matter what happens.

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